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**Serve your own sentences:**  
**Incarceration in the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn**

Eleanor Rose Careless

Dissertation submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

September, 2018

University of Sussex

Eleanor Rose Careless

Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Modern and  
Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought

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### SUMMARY

This thesis is a study of the work of the British poet, artist, and activist Anna Mendelssohn (1948-2009). It intends to make an intervention in recent scholarship around the literature of the prison by focusing on Mendelssohn's poetic representations of incarceration. Specifically, it explores the ways in which Mendelssohn's poetry thinks with but also against theories and representations of the prison that have emerged over the last two hundred years, with a focus on the twentieth century. My research is heavily invested in an interdisciplinary and historicist approach, and responds to the call made by Angela Davis for a move beyond a strictly Foucauldian account of the carceral network to an understanding of the gendered and racialised aspects of the institution of the prison. The prison has long been an important site of literary production for writers, but little critical attention has been given to an experimental, women's literature of the prison. This study centres on the carceral poetics written by activist, Anglo-American women poets in the twentieth century. Archival material from three separate archives informs this project; the Anna Mendelssohn Archive; the Muriel Rukeyser Papers; and the Nancy Cunard Collection. This thesis is divided into five chapters which are arranged chronologically. Each chapter addresses a different site or matrix of incarceration that emerges in Mendelssohn's work. Chapter One discusses the camps set up in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War; Chapter Two discusses the Nazi concentration camp; Chapter Three the condition of the hostage, especially in the contexts of terrorist hostage-taking in the seventies; Chapter Four discusses Holloway Women's Prison in the seventies; and Chapter Five considers poetic representations of imprisonment in the nineties. This study identifies the emancipatory possibilities that an experimental poetics of the prison can create.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signed:

Eleanor Careless

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## Introduction:

### ‘I understand the trap of systems’

One of Anna Mendelssohn’s exemplary ‘prison poems’ opens with an excerpt from an Irish poem taken from the anthology *Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981), a collection of writings on the theme of Irish dispossession and colonial oppression. Published under the pen name of Grace Lake, the stanzas that follow are illustrative of the ways in which conditions of gendered constraint are inexorably productive of Mendelssohn’s poetic work:

a woman cries in the night between her innocent shoulders  
 mistress of her writing hand her arms her preferred feature  
 erasing the parts of her body that have long caused offence  
 but her mind was met by texts that held her  
 in space she could find nowhere else to control  
 [...]
 & she sings way out of human hearing in time to the time  
 [...]
 that the sky hold her in simple hard labour  
 that the text has been divided into single weights  
 that the burdens she is detailed to lift are the words of her former pages  
 that her body is all conjunction verb and boring  
 [...]
 one by one she forces herself to remember adjectives  
 can lift to a certain height her wrist gives way  
 she drops, she bends, she cannot bear this kind of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

The distressed woman in the poem is morphed with her writing-work, a cyborg creature consigned to ‘lift... the words of her former pages’. Her ‘preferred feature’, her arms, are the instruments of her writing and the remainder of her offending body is absent or erased or grammatically tedious. Neither those writing arms or ‘innocent shoulders’ are implicated in that ‘offence’. She is ‘held’ or imprisoned by texts and the sky, and the texts are also the weights she must lift — both prison walls and prison work. Under the strain of lifting word-

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Lake, *Tondo Aquatique* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997), [unpaginated]. Where texts I refer to below are unpaginated I have not provided a footnote.



weights, the woman figure collapses, physically as well as mentally unable to ‘bear this kind of poetry’. Writing is figured as a jailer, as a space that exerts ‘control’, in contrast to the woman writer’s lack of textual control. The woman’s control over what remains to her — a small part of her body, ‘her writing hand’ — seems premised on a temporal condition. ‘In time’ but ‘out of hearing’, this poem inscribes a state of incarceration that exceeds prison walls and extends as far as the sky, a state in which writing work, which here is women’s work, exists concomitantly as prison work. The sheer physical effort associated with processes of poetic composition in this lyric demonstrates how deeply language is imbricated with conditions of imprisonment in Mendelssohn’s poetry. This poem’s Irish preface indicates that this condition of imprisonment is not singular or biographical, but embedded in wider historical contexts; in her youth, Mendelssohn actively opposed British imperialism in Ireland as I shall go on to discuss in more detail. The pre-eminent *subject* of this poetry is the woman writer, embattled and incapacitated but also constituted by the ‘burdens she is detailed to lift’.

Linguistic imprisonment, gendered and racialised forms of imprisonment and the carceral constitution of the subject form the three central concerns of this study. This thesis is one of the first full-length studies of the British poet, artist and activist Anna Mendelssohn (1948-2009). Working at the margins of what is sometimes known as the ‘Cambridge School’, Mendelssohn’s work certainly shares many of this grouping’s collective qualities, such as political commitment, philosophical difficulty and linguistic experimentalism. Mendelssohn also worked at the margins of what has become known as experimental women’s poetry, a grouping which counts poets such as Susan Howe, Denise Riley, Maggie O’Sullivan and Lyn Hejinian amongst its vanguard. Bridging the ‘Cambridge School’ and socialist-feminist poetics, even as she worked at the edges of both communities, Mendelssohn’s development of the modernist lyric stands as an important counterpart to more documented contemporary writing. Her work has not been widely read or discussed beyond mainly East Anglian and Brightonian avant-garde and experimental poetry scenes. Between the 1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, Mendelssohn’s poetry

was published in a series of avant-garde magazines, small-press pamphlets, anthologies of experimental poetry and one full-length collection, *Implacable Art* (2000). In her lifetime her work received virtually no critical attention, with the exception of Andrew Duncan's pioneering review of her pamphlet *Bernache Nonnette* (1995) in which Duncan characterises Mendelssohn as a 'social poet', 'always writing against something being said', and a short discussion of her pamphlet *Tondo Aquatique* (1997) by Lucy Sheerman for *Jacket*.<sup>2</sup> In Mendelssohn's obituary, published in *The Guardian*, she is described by British poet Peter Riley as a 'poet like no other'.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2010, increasing critical attention has been given to Mendelssohn's work. In that year, Jon Clay considered her poetry's specifically *affective* lyric force and its capacity to disrupt traditional lyric readings.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, a number of essays appeared on her work: a short essay by Sean Bonney in the *Poetry Project Newsletter* which values Mendelssohn for her insistence 'on poetry as a specific mode of thought'; a special edition of *The Paper Nautilus* containing a selection of previously unpublished poems and two new essays on Mendelssohn's work, one by Connie Scozzaro on Mendelssohn's lyric selves, and one by myself on the operations of 'proof' in Mendelssohn's poetry; and a comparative piece by Esther Leslie which recognizes Mendelssohn's politically revolutionary use of language.<sup>5</sup> In 2012 the critic Barry Schwabsky acknowledged Mendelssohn – albeit in passing – as 'one of the most important poets' of her time.<sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn is included as one of the 'strong and

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache nonnette*, by Grace Lake', *Angel Exhaust*, 15 (Autumn 1997: Bizarre Crimes of the Future) <<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=13920>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2018]; Lucy Sheerman, 'See Sense: Embarking on a Reading of Jennifer Moxley, Grace Lake and John Forbes', *Jacket* 14 (July 2001) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/14/sheer-r.html>> [accessed 3 April 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Peter Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn obituary', *Guardian*, 19 December 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2009/dec/15/anna-mendelssohn-obituary>> [accessed 3 April 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 8, 43-48.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Bonney, "Minds do exist to agitate and provoke / this is the reason I do not conform" - Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 226 (February/March 2011), 17-19, p. 17 <<https://www.poetryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/n226.pdf>> [accessed 2 May 2018]; Connie Scozzaro, 'On "in the minority of one"', *The Paper Nautilus*, 2 (Cambridge, September 2011), 37-42; Eleanor Careless, "I shall not prove and neither shall I be proven": Anna Mendelssohn's *py*,' *The Paper Nautilus* (see Scozzaro above), 43-54; Esther Leslie, *Bouleversed Baudelaire: On Poetics and Terror* (London: Veer Books, November 2011), pp. 28-33.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Schwabsky, 'Time Out', *Hyperallergic*, 3 June 2012 < <http://bit.ly/195Ukh5>> [accessed 3 April 2018].

significant' examples of women's experimental poetry discussed in David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy's survey of *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain, 1970-2010: body, time & locale* (2013).<sup>7</sup> In a 2014 essay, Laura Kilbride gives an accelerated reading of *Implacable Art* alongside Ezra Pound.<sup>8</sup> In 2015, thanks to the sustained efforts of Sara Crangle, Mendelssohn's extraordinary archive was opened to the public at the University of Sussex. An essay by Simon Perril on *Bernache Nonnette* which examines 'the poet's relationship to society under Capitalist modernity' was also published in 2015.<sup>9</sup> In February 2017, the first academic symposium dedicated to her work was held at the University of Sussex, and Sara Crangle's keynote charted the continuities and (gendered) discontinuities between Mendelssohn and the modernist tradition of the accursed poet. A special issue on Mendelssohn's poetry is forthcoming in early 2019 from the *Journal for British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, edited by Vicky Sparrow and myself. Mendelssohn has also been an influence for contemporary British poets such as Sophie Collins, for whom she is 'an important poet of zero pretence'.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, Sparrow has discussed the poetics of secrecy in Mendelssohn's work.<sup>11</sup>

The critical discussion of her poetry so far has rightly established that Mendelssohn is a 'social poet' writing 'political poetry', and her work has been read through the lens of myth (Duncan), political radicalism (Bonney, Leslie), modernism (Crangle, Perril, Kilbride), and women's writing (Kennedy and Kennedy).<sup>12</sup> Multiple discourses surround and inform Mendelssohn's almost impossibly multivalent poetry. Given this multivalence, I want to avoid claiming a single, authoritative reading of her work. This thesis takes as its central

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<sup>7</sup> Christine Kennedy and David Kennedy, *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain, 1970-2010: body, time & locale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Kilbride, "'Real Games With Books': On Anna Mendelssohn and Ezra Pound", *News from Afar: Ezra Pound and Some Contemporary British Poetries*, ed. Richard Parker (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2014), pp. 185-94.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Perril, "'Kinked up like it wants to bark": Contemporary British Poetry at the tomb of the Poète Maudit' in *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today*, ed. David Nowell-Smith and Abigail Lang (New York/Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 95-109 (p. 98).

<sup>10</sup> Sophie Collins, *small white monkeys: On self-expression, Self-help and Shame* (London: Bookworks, 2017), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Vicky Sparrow, "'[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 (2018) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/biip.27>> [accessed 2 May 2018].

<sup>12</sup> Duncan, *Angel Exhaust*; Bonney, p. 18.

focus a discursive intersection in Mendelssohn's poetry: its inscriptions of incarceration. My approach is feminist-materialist, and responds to the call made by Angela Davis for a move beyond a strictly Foucauldian account of the carceral network to an understanding of the gendered aspects of the institution of the prison.<sup>13</sup> In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis makes a compelling argument for prison abolition. The prison, in Davis's account, exacerbates social inequities and reproduces the very conditions that lead people to prison. Rather than focusing on the prison as an isolated institution, Davis centres her study around the *prison industrial complex*, a term which refers to the wider economic and political systems that structure the workings of state punishment.<sup>14</sup> In her account of the economic logics that structure modern penalty, Davis builds on Marxist theories of the prison. These Marxist theories chart parallels between the emergence of modern forms of imprisonment and the rise of industrial capital and the commodity form.<sup>15</sup> Davis goes on to show how the proliferation of prison-building at the end of the twentieth century attracted vast amounts of capital to the industry, resulting in the privatisation of prisons on a large scale.<sup>16</sup> Like its military equivalent, the prison industrial complex 'generate[s] huge profits from processes of social destruction'.<sup>17</sup> Davis deepens and extends this economic analysis to show how racial ideologies, as well as capital, are deeply rooted in systems of penalty. Her discussion of the racialisation of prison populations focuses on the United States, and the reproduction of conditions of slavery after the Revolution via legal methods that included the convict lease system, Black Codes and debt peonage.<sup>18</sup> Racialised systems of penalty are not unique to the United States, as Davis points out.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, modern prison systems were 'instituted in Asia and Africa as an important component of colonial rule'.<sup>20</sup> In Davis's intersectional

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<sup>13</sup> Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 106.

<sup>15</sup> See Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939) and Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini, *The Prison and the Factory* (Totowa, N.J: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981); Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, pp. 12, 93, 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

analysis, gender – as well as race and capitalism – is central to an understanding of state punishment.<sup>21</sup>

For Davis, the ‘deeply gendered character of punishment reflects and entrenches the gendered structure of society’.<sup>22</sup> The modern prison, to give a foundational example, is premised on the confiscation of rights and liberties (such as the right to vote or to property) that historically women could not claim.<sup>23</sup> Separate women’s prisons emerged in the nineteenth century, and their highly gendered regimes were ‘devised to reintegrate criminalised women into the domestic life of wife and mother’.<sup>24</sup> These ‘feminised modes of punishment’ were highly racialised and ‘designed ideologically to reform white women, relegating women of color in large part to realms of public punishment that made no pretense of offering them femininity’.<sup>25</sup> Instead of exceptionalising women’s prisons, and allowing men’s prisons to function as the norm, Davis emphasises that men’s prison practices, as well as women’s, are highly gendered. Davis resists the application of a liberal, reformist conception of feminism to the prison system, by which women’s facilities are made ‘equal’ (that is, equally repressive) to men’s.<sup>26</sup> The form of abolitionist feminist inquiry Davis demands would question the imprisonment of men as well as women, and the larger socio-economic conditions that ‘allow male prisons to function as the punishment norm’.<sup>27</sup> For instance, rates of female incarceration have risen rapidly since the 1970s, and women’s prisons look increasingly like their male counterparts.<sup>28</sup> The end-game of gender equality cannot be the normalisation of the incarceration of women at the same, fast-increasing rate as men. In Davis’s argument, to address the gendered aspects of the prison is simultaneously to contest the prison as an ‘inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives’.<sup>29</sup> My study builds on Davis’s critique and extends its application to other forms and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

literary representations of incarceration. With Davis, I seek to avoid exceptionalising women's prisons by taking a highly intersectional approach, and foregrounding specific gendered and racialised structures that reproduce around the site of the prison. The paradigms of incarceration that can be found in Mendelssohn's poetry tend to be drawn from Europe. They concentrate around various historical, racial or gendered categories of oppression, with a focus on dissident writers and artists. The prison 'subjects' we encounter in her work are Jewish (via the concentration camp; 'the Jew is the least protected'), Spanish Republicans (in the 'open prison' of Franco's Spain), the Irish (via the introduction of internment in Northern Ireland), Russian poets ('Osip Mandelstam in England would have been murdered too'), artists ('i don't incarcerate artists') writers ('I have interred myself behind books') and women ('held in sexism').<sup>30</sup> Mendelssohn's carceral subject is refracted and multiple.

The prison has long been an important site of literary production for writers, from Boethius to Thomas Wyatt to Oscar Wilde to Antonio Gramsci, and prison writing has taken a range of literary forms: novelistic, autobiographical, theoretical, philosophical, poetical. Mendelssohn herself makes references to prison poets as far flung as San Juan de la Cruz, who wrote a long poem while imprisoned in a Spanish monastery in 1578, and Irina Ratushinskaya, a Soviet dissident poet imprisoned in the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> Writing of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who was 'tried [and imprisoned] for writing poems' in the 1960s, Mendelssohn claims that 'the psychological world (ideological) that I grew up in was almost identical'.<sup>32</sup> This study, however, limits itself to carceral poetics written by activist, Anglo-American women poets in the twentieth century. With Mendelssohn's published work at the very centre of this study, I make no claim to offer a comprehensive overview even of this limited category, but have been guided instead by connections and continuities with

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<sup>30</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, *Implacable Art* (Applecross, Western Australia and Great Wilbraham, UK: Folio and Equipage, 2000), pp. 72, 19, 23, 77 (henceforth *L4*); Grace Lake '1:3ng', *Gare du Nord: A magazine of poetry and opinion from Paris*, ed. Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley, 1.1 (1997), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to Peter Riley, 24 July 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/1; Lake, '1:3ng', p. 15. All references beginning "SxMs" refer to the files of Mendelssohn's correspondence housed in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive (1928-2013), University of Sussex Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton, UK.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Estelle Langley, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/29/3.

Mendelssohn's lyrical techniques, political commitments and poetic influences. My research builds on three main areas of related scholarship: firstly, the critical discourse around women, literature and incarceration; secondly, the prison and literary theory; and thirdly, poetry as a carceral medium. I will discuss these areas at greater length towards the end of this introduction. First, I will introduce some of the ways in which the three central themes of linguistic imprisonment, gendered forms of incarceration, and the carceral construction of the subject are treated in Mendelssohn's work.

The traces of the carceral are everywhere in Mendelssohn's work, as Sean Bonney has suggested.<sup>33</sup> But Mendelssohn's poetry is not exclusively concerned with the inscription of incarceration. Various subjects and discourses - motherhood, capitalism, modernism, psychoanalysis, feminism – loom large in and around her poetry. Esther Leslie has written of how Mendelssohn's indeterminate poetry is 'porous in terms of a super-absorbency of significance'.<sup>34</sup> Incarceration, then, is a recurring motif which surfaces in the form of psychic residues, rhetorical conceits, in lexical clusters, in the shape and interstices of certain poems and in numerous historical or cultural references, in forms figurative and in forms literal. The motif of carcerality intersects with other recurring discourses around authority, legality, violence, normality, the operations of language and subjectivity. For example, Mendelssohn defines her own 'attitude to Authority' as produced by the intersection with discipline, 'something I carry around with me and is simply the result of too much punishment'.<sup>35</sup> This is a poetics that understands, with Michel Foucault, that modern carceral structures and the 'proliferation of the authorities of modern judicial decision-making' produce the modern subject.<sup>36</sup> Foucault is speaking of the fragmentation of legal and penal powers between judges, psychologists, educationalists, prison officers and new social and medical knowledges that purport to reveal us to ourselves – a shifting and complex network of

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<sup>33</sup> Bonney, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Leslie, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Janet Todd, 6 October 1990, SxMs109/3/A/1/61.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 21.

power. As Mendelssohn wrote in a prison notebook, 'I understand the trap of systems'.<sup>37</sup> In 1976, the year after Foucault published *Discipline and Punish* in French and the year before it was published for the first time in English, another prison notebook records a prescient, if brief, critique of the modern prison:

I think we have too medieval an image of torture/ being sizzling iron bars/racks/thumb screws etc – tho I know that the electrodes and soundproof rooms are still popular methods of extracting 'information'. But here we have a very sophisticated cultured, logical system of allowing a slow, sifting-out process of prisoners in licence/as dogs on leads (who wants to be owned by the State? anyway) and all this grandiose humanitarian scheme means, is that your/my/our living time is thrown around by jugglers in pinstripes and egged on by a Man Eating Press... I do not know what it feels like to have the power to decide and control other peoples' lives.<sup>38</sup>

The modern 'humanitarian' prison is opposed to older, more spectacular techniques of punishment, and the modern 'cultured, logical system' of imprisonment operates through the bureaucratic control of 'time', reinforced by the power of the media, and touches not only the speaking 'I' but 'your' and 'our' time too. Not only the 'living time' of the prisoner herself but the 'living time' of other and collective subjects are shaped by the carceral system. Here, Mendelssohn is writing specifically about the process of parole, but this written fragment forms part of a larger conception in her work of the ways in which disciplinary processes shape the subject both inside and outside of the prison. These disciplinary processes are often highly gendered in Mendelssohn's carceral poetics. Her poetry repeatedly reminds its reader that it does not offer an intellectual account of carceral structures from the 'outside', but is itself an ex-carceral subject, always-already subjected to interrogatory, invasive, gendered procedures and surveillance. In the words of a poem from *viola tricolor*, 'I'm in the grip of a literary psychoanalytical gynaecology'.<sup>39</sup> The poem is here figured as vaginal, a surveilled feminine interiority that might recall prison cavity searches. These medico-disciplinary processes are figured again as highly gendered in a letter: 'does

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<sup>37</sup> Prison notebook, December 1974-December 1975, SxMs109/2/A/6.

<sup>38</sup> Prison notebook, January 1976, SxMs109/2/A/15.

<sup>39</sup> Grace Lake, 'Half', *viola tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993).



criticism level its clinical diagnoses at male poets the way it does at females?'.<sup>40</sup> Literary criticism is often conflated with the medico-psychoanalytical authorities identified by Foucault as part of the modern machinery that 'fragment[s] the legal power to punish'.<sup>41</sup> The critic, as well as the psychiatrist, is part of the Foucauldian network of capillary power.

Mendelssohn's inscriptions of incarceration mark a radical break from the lyric tradition typified by J.S. Mill's definition of lyric poetry as 'the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next'.<sup>42</sup> Mill's well-known formulation casts poetic expression as an emanation from the condition of carcerality in the 1833 version of his essay 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties'. In the 1867 revised edition, the carceral comparison is omitted, but remains latent in Mill's concept of poetry as '*overheard*': 'the peculiarity of poetry appears to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude... All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy'.<sup>43</sup> In Mill's formulation, poetic utterance is an end in itself, not a means to an end (of persuasion, or influence, or action), a disinterested expression of 'feeling' at one remove from the outside world. Mill's conception of poetry as the expression of (solitary) feeling is derived from the Romantics, for whom prison was a trope rather than a technique of power. Wordsworth famously took the 'prison unto which we doom/Ourselves' as a figure for the 'sonnet's scanty plot of ground', a space of relief from the 'weight of too much liberty' and thus no prison at all.<sup>44</sup> Coleridge, in 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison' also takes prison as a trope for transcendence and poetic creativity, finding that 'sometimes/Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,/That we may lift the soul...'.<sup>45</sup> Oscar Wilde, writing a century later from the lived experience of prison, sustains this aesthetic of separation between lamenting prisoner and listening reader, in highly regular, rhymed verse: 'I never

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<sup>40</sup> Letter to Drake Stutesman, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/60.

<sup>41</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> J.S. Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 350.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348-349.

<sup>44</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Nuns fret not...', *Selected Poems*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 83.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Coleridge, 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison', *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (London/New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 807.

saw a man who looked/With such a wistful eye/Upon that little tent of blue/We prisoners called the sky'.<sup>46</sup> In high contrast, Mendelssohn's experimental poetry keeps the structural operations of the penal system in view and eschews coherent, meditative lament for syntactic fragments and confrontational direct address: 'Serve your own sentences'.<sup>47</sup>

'Sentences' refer to syntactical units as well as prison terms, and Mendelssohn's poetic treatment of the 'sentence' demonstrates the degree to which language, too, 'fragment[s] the legal power to punish', and is itself subject to 'the trap of systems'. In her poetry, Mendelssohn's 'sentences' imply an alliance between sentence-making and authority, between language, gender and power. Sentences are crucial to the articulation of social order through the organisation of language, and as such are opposed to the linguistic disorder (symptomatic of hysteria) that is gendered feminine in our culture.<sup>48</sup> Patriarchal institutions such as the law depend absolutely upon the investment of power in sentences handed out by a judge. To issue the demand to 'serve your own sentences' in poetry is to reclaim and reconfigure the source of that incarcerating authority. However, statements of poetic reclamation are necessarily limited in their emancipatory capacity. Entanglement in inescapable sentences that reach beyond the prison walls and stretch backwards and forwards in time is a recurrent feature of Mendelssohn's poetry. The impulse to escape is part of the demand that her poetry places on her reader: 'I so don't want to be read by/ People who play war games, or don't allow poems to drift out of their windows'.<sup>49</sup> 'To drift out of... windows' is a form of escape, but the double negative of these lines invalidates escape as a possibility. Here as elsewhere, Mendelssohn's carceral poetics contests the Romantic, emancipatory capacity often ascribed to poetry and to constraint, and acknowledges that 'words won't break these walls'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', *The Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 136.

<sup>47</sup> *LA*, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> See Dianne Hunter, 'Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.', *Feminist Studies*, 9.3 (Autumn 1983), 464-488.

<sup>49</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Grace Lake, *Sneak's Noise: Poems for R.F. Langley* (Cambridge: Infernal Histories, 1998).

Why do we find a contestation of emancipatory poetics in Mendelssohn's work? In my argument, this contestation derives in part from traditions of Foucauldian and feminist thought, and in part from Mendelssohn's own lived experience. Mendelssohn was acutely aware of the persecutory and incarcerating power of language. Convicted of involvement with the guerrilla activities of the Angry Brigade in 1972, Mendelssohn served seven years in Holloway Women's Prison between 1971-1977. The Angry Brigade trial was the longest criminal trial of the twentieth century, although the considerable significance of this trial has been forgotten or glossed over in histories of the era, overshadowed in part by the rise of the IRA.<sup>51</sup> During the trial, her own writing constituted an important piece of evidence against her. Her handwriting was identified on a communiqué, sent out following a bomb at an army barracks, that protested the introduction of internment in Ireland. In her defence, Mendelssohn spoke eloquently of her opposition to Irish internment, arguing that this written statement 'had absolutely nothing to do with any explosion' and that 'it was internment which was important to me'.<sup>52</sup> Identification, too, is a source of persecution. For about twenty years following her release from prison Mendelssohn lived and wrote under the name 'Grace Lake' to escape the notoriety attached to 'Anna Mendelson'.<sup>53</sup> She closely associated the use of her given name with the constant struggle 'to leave this prison that my nightmares tell me I have been consigned to'.<sup>54</sup> Although interpretations of her poetry cannot be reduced to biographical readings, aspects of her trial and incarceration and a correspondent sense of linguistic persecution haunt and pervade her writing. In the remainder of this introduction, I will give a biographical introduction to Mendelssohn's life; briefly survey the history of literature and incarceration; and give an overview of the five chapters that follow.

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<sup>51</sup> For a succinct overview of these histories, see J.D. Taylor, 'Not that Serious? The Investigation and Trial of the Angry Brigade, 1967-1972', in *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956*, ed. Matthew Worley and Evan Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 30-47.

<sup>52</sup> Mendelssohn, opening speech in her defence, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5.

<sup>53</sup> In media and historical accounts, Mendelssohn's given name is inconsistently reproduced as either 'Mendleson' or 'Mendelson'. I have chosen to use the latter spelling.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to Peter Riley, 8 May 2000, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.

### **Anna Mendelssohn: a brief biography**

Mendelssohn, who was born ‘Anna Mendelson’, grew up in Stockport, Cheshire, and described herself as coming from a ‘very strict, working-class socialistic Jewish background’.<sup>55</sup> She studied at Stockport high school, where she became Head Girl, and went on to study English literature at Essex University (1967-69). Peter Riley’s obituary describes her as ‘both a brilliant and unruly pupil’.<sup>56</sup> Ed Dorn, the prominent Black Mountain poet, was a lecturer at Essex from 1965-1970, and there are a number of indications that Mendelssohn knew and was influenced by Dorn’s writing.<sup>57</sup> In 1968, with the rise of the student movement across Europe and in Britain, Essex University set the stage for some of its most significant protests and actions.<sup>58</sup> A speech given by Enoch Powell in Colchester in February 1968 was met with provocative protests that included setting off fire alarms and a ‘fizzing bomb’ during the talk.<sup>59</sup> In May 1968, the Essex Socialist Society organised a dramatic and high profile protest at a lecture given by a scientist from Porton Down, the government’s chemical and biological warfare centre. The university suspended three students as a result of the protest, and in response to the suspensions, Essex students and lecturers began an occupation which lasted until the suspended students were reinstated. Their direct action was proven to be highly effective, as ultimately the students won a clear victory and much fuller representation on university committees.<sup>60</sup>

Caroline M. Hoefflerle argues that the success of student agitation at Essex was due, to a large degree, to the fact that Essex was a new, non-traditional, innovative university, with a progressive reputation that attracted radical students and faculty.<sup>61</sup> Mendelssohn helped to

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<sup>55</sup> Riley, ‘Anna Mendelssohn obituary’.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> See Mendelssohn’s essay on Ed Dorn, 3rd November 1983, held in the Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Peter Riley Papers, MS Add.10013; and in a letter to Estelle Langley, Mendelssohn writes that ‘Many years ago a great poet was teaching the year above me at University’, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/29/3.

<sup>58</sup> Caroline M. Hoefflerle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 87.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-87.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

research the uses of chemical and biological warfare in Vietnam and Northern Ireland prior to the Porton Down protest, and travelled to France in 1968 to participate in the French May along with a large contingent of British students.<sup>62</sup> As Hoefflerle argues, by ‘confirming the legitimacy and power of student protest, the French May thus emboldened British students already active in their own movement’, and ‘seemingly minor incidents at Essex became magnified in importance as one more sign that the global student revolution had come to Britain’.<sup>63</sup> In court, Mendelssohn spoke of how, after the four-week Essex university strike in 1968 following the suspension of those involved in no-platforming, ‘it was very difficult to go back to normal’.<sup>64</sup> A short biography written by Mendelssohn and printed in the underground press in 1972 paints a rather different picture of her time at university: ‘2<sup>nd</sup> year in Essex... life reduced to petty intellectual games; attempts at student organisation... heavy power trips... Walked out of exams’.<sup>65</sup>

As well as the involvement of Essex students in the national movement against racism, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the French student movement, Essex was the scene for important moments in the women’s movement. During Essex University’s Revolutionary Festival in 1969, attempts by women activists to establish forums in which to discuss women’s liberation were constantly thwarted by male activists who interrupted and disparaged the politics of the women’s movement. Out of frustration at this state of affairs, the London Women’s Liberation Workshop was formed, a group which would go on to produce the leading publication of the women’s movement, *Shrew*.<sup>66</sup> The events at Essex also drew the attention of the French New-Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. In his surrealist documentary-film *British Sounds* (1969), there are several scenes depicting radical student activists at Essex, prominent among whom is a young Mendelssohn, wearing a broad-brimmed orange hat and penning alternative lyrics to songs by The Beatles. Riley

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<sup>62</sup> Mendelssohn’s opening speech in her defence, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5; Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counter-Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 277.

<sup>63</sup> Hoefflerle, p. 97.

<sup>64</sup> Mendelssohn’s opening speech in her defence, SxMs109/2/D/5.

<sup>65</sup> Stoke Newington Eight Defence Group, ‘Conspiracy Notes...?’, *Conspiracy Notes* [London: undated, c.1972].

<sup>66</sup> Hoefflerle, p. 165.

notes that ‘Mendelssohn had opportunities to go into film’ in the early seventies, perhaps as a result of her role in Godard’s documentary, but instead she turned her energies to political organising.<sup>67</sup>

After leaving Essex in 1969, Mendelssohn became involved in the squatting movement.<sup>68</sup> Richard Neville writes of how the ‘appalling paradox of 100,000 homeless people and 500,000 vacant homes – many of which were scheduled to remain empty for years – gave rise to the London Squatters’ Committees’ in the late sixties.<sup>69</sup> According to Gordon Carr, the lives of those involved with the squatting movement ‘were a continual fight, often physical, with authority’.<sup>70</sup> In Carr’s history, it was the influence of the Spanish anarchists which precipitated some of these young radicals from direct action such as squatting to acts of guerrilla resistance.<sup>71</sup> In Jonathon Green’s account, frustrations with the student movement, and the examples of the Weather Underground and the Red Army Faction convinced some radical student activists to drop out of university and become full-time revolutionaries.<sup>72</sup> Mendelssohn’s own accounts of this time are conflicting. In 1972, she wrote: ‘Back in England 1970. Worked with squatters and anti-election campaign, made some great friends – total commitment working/living with people, creatively, actively – Right on! - to here and now (yup)’.<sup>73</sup> Years later, Mendelssohn describes being ‘frogmarched off the Essex campus in 1970 by a fellow poet’, ‘handed over’, and ‘seized’ by an armed group.<sup>74</sup>

In ways that remain unclear, but which Mendelssohn always retrospectively describes as an ‘ambush’, a ‘capture’, or as being ‘taken hostage’, Mendelssohn’s involvement with the Angry Brigade began.<sup>75</sup> The urban guerrillas known as the Angry Brigade claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in London from 1970-1972. They

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<sup>67</sup> Riley, ‘Anna Mendelssohn obituary’.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010) p. 38.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Neville, *Play Power* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 51.

<sup>70</sup> Carr, p. 39.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p. 278.

<sup>73</sup> Stoke Newington Eight Defence Group, ‘Conspiracy Notes...?’.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Duncan, ‘nine fine flyaway goose truths’.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, a letter to Rod Mengham, 22 November 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

were a small, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist left-wing group who took aim at various representatives of the ruling class or establishment. Characterised by Green as ‘Britain’s contribution to that late-twentieth-century phenomenon: the student urban guerrilla’, they were more moderate than some of their European counterparts, such as the Red Army Faction.<sup>76</sup> Their actions were organised according to the tenet that ‘we attack property not people’.<sup>77</sup> No-one was killed or badly injured by Angry Brigade actions. In J.D. Taylor’s assessment, their activities were shaped around a prescient focus on industrial militancy and Northern Ireland, women’s liberation, and their refusal to align themselves with the organised Left.<sup>78</sup> John Barker, one of those convicted in the Angry Brigade trial in 1972, describes the Brigade as ‘libertarian communists’ who were acting in solidarity with the working class against the Heath government and capitalist exploitation.<sup>79</sup> They claimed responsibility for planting bombs that caused damage to targets ranging from symbols of sexism and capitalism — including the BBC van recording the 1970 Miss World Competition, and a boutique clothing store — to those opposed to the trade unions and Irish nationalism, such as the Minister of Employment and British army barracks. Each explosion was followed by a communiqué that claimed responsibility and established the political nature of these attacks.<sup>80</sup> The rhetoric of these communiqués is revolutionary and highly sectarian:

‘Fascism & oppression/Will be smashed’ (Communiqué 1)

‘British democracy is based on more blood, terror and exploitation than any empire in history’ (Communiqué 5)

‘the war will be won by the organised working class, with bombs’ (Communiqué 5)

‘If you’re not busy being born you’re busy buying’ (Communiqué 8)

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<sup>76</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p. 277.

<sup>77</sup> Communiqué 5, Carr, p. 239.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, pp. 30-47.

<sup>79</sup> John Barker, ‘*Anarchy in the UK* by Tom Vague’ <<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/4b8h98>> [accessed 9 July 2018].

<sup>80</sup> Taylor notes that determining the number of Angry Brigade communiqués is difficult, as none survive, and those that were published by newspapers were often differently worded. Carr collects fourteen, but Taylor identifies a fifteenth, p. 45.

'You can't reform profit capitalism and inhumanity. Just kick it till it breaks.'  
(Communiqué 8)

'The AB is the man or woman sitting next to you. They have guns in their pockets and anger in their minds.' (Communiqué 9)

'BOGSIDE, CLYDESIDE, JOIN THE ANGRY SIDE' (Communiqué 11)

'THE ANGRY BRIGADE ADVISES THE BRITISH RULING CLASSES TO GET OUT OF IRELAND' (Communiqué 12)

'Now we are too many to know each other... All we say is: the Brigade is everywhere.' (Communiqué 13)<sup>81</sup>

For Iain Sinclair, 'some of these texts, arranged in broken lines... prophetically allude[...] to the coming state of English poetry'.<sup>82</sup> Sinclair refers to the increasing influence of critical theory, psychoanalysis and political rhetoric upon experimental poetry at this time, and wryly notes that 'the Angry Brigade communiqués were the only small-press publications to be thoroughly reviewed and debated in the nationals'.<sup>83</sup> Sinclair goes on to claim that 'Mendelssohn's subsequent reinvention as the singular and distinguished poet/artist, Grace Lake, is perhaps a revelation of the nature of her political acts'.<sup>84</sup> Fiercely protective of her reputation, Mendelssohn vehemently refutes Sinclair's account, writing that 'Iain Sinclair has atrociously labelled me in *Lights Out for the Territory*'.<sup>85</sup> Sinclair does not appear to consider that the influence of psychoanalysis and political rhetoric on experimental poetry might be a legacy of literary modernism. Moreover, there is a stark contrast between the highly uncompromising rhetoric of Angry Brigade communiqués and the profound ambivalence of Mendelssohn's poetry that Sinclair's assertions do not take into account.

The Angry Brigade's high-profile bombing in 1971 of the house of Robert Carr, the Conservative Minister responsible for the Industrial Relations Bill, precipitated a large-scale police investigation into British counterculture.<sup>86</sup> Over the next year the police raided up to

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<sup>81</sup> Stoke Newington Eight Defence Group, *Conspiracy Notes*, 4 [London: undated, c.1972], pp. 2, 4, 8-11, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory*, first edn 1997, (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 27-28.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> Letter to Thomas Evans, 2 January 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/13.

<sup>86</sup> Maurice Weaver, 'Police beat bomb terror with courage', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1973, p. 2.



forty organisations including the offices of the *International Times*, the International Marxist Group and the International Socialists.<sup>87</sup> Communes and squats were also raided.<sup>88</sup> According to the radical newsletter *Conspiracy Notes*, a partisan and therefore not wholly reliable source, the police confiscated private address books, diaries and letters, and detained 'scores' of activists for questioning.<sup>89</sup> In order to cope with the scale of the operation, the Bomb Squad was formed, the original counter-terrorist policing force in Britain.<sup>90</sup> After following a paper trail of cheque fraud and various tip-offs, on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 1971 Anna Mendelson (then going by the name of Nancy Pye) was arrested along with Jim Greenfield, Hilary Creek and John Barker at 359 Amhurst Road, Stoke Newington, London.<sup>91</sup> In the days and months that followed, a further four (Kate McLean, Stuart Christie, Angela Weir and Chris Bott) were arrested on the same charge - conspiracy to cause explosions. Together, they became known as the Stoke Newington Eight.<sup>92</sup>

The nebulous nature of the Angry Brigade was a common sentiment at the time, expressed by both police and activists. In the words of the Special Branch: 'In calling it the Angry Brigade we're chasing a myth because there is no one organisation called the Angry Brigade. There is a theory that the Angry Brigade is a many-headed hydra'.<sup>93</sup> The Stoke Newington Eight Defence Group (SN8DG hereafter) concur with this police theory:

The Old Bailey Show gets on the road this June. It's going to be called 'The Angry Brigade Trial'. Yet they haven't caught the Angry Brigade so most of the cast won't be there. They haven't caught it because it's not a conspiracy or an isolated enclosed unit. It remains unknown because you don't have to sign a form to join it. The Stoke Newington Eight are the best the State can get to fit the bill. *They are eight examples of what it might be: militants who have been active in the resistance to the corporate state and in the revolutionary movement.*<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Taylor, p. 36.

<sup>88</sup> 'Bomb Squad Raids Homes in London', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 September 1973, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> SN8DG, *Conspiracy Notes*, 4, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> 'Bomb squad chief names two people Yard seek', *Times*, 8 December 1972, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> Carr, pp. 102-103.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 122-125.

<sup>93</sup> Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade* (London: Quartet, 1973), p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> SN8DG, *A Political Statement* [London: undated, c.1971-72], p. 4.

The energetic SN8DG supported those on trial through the dissemination of political pamphlets, organising prison visits, and providing political and legal assistance to those defendants who were defending themselves. Prison organising in the UK flourished in the seventies. Radical Alternatives to Prison (RAP) was founded in 1970, and following a series of prison disturbances, the Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners (PROP) was established in 1972. The prison abolitionist group RAP, in particular, was a politicising force amongst the mainstream reformist UK penal lobby.<sup>95</sup> The prison conditions of Brixton and Holloway were documented by the SN8DG in some detail, contributing to the growing debate about the legitimacy and purpose of the criminal justice system in the UK.<sup>96</sup>

The trial of the Stoke Newington Eight assuredly contributed to the increasingly critical discourse around criminal justice in the UK at this time. The trial began on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1972. Along with Creek and Barker, Mendelssohn defended herself in court.<sup>97</sup> Over the course of 111 days, watching 200 witnesses, and listening to three million words in transcripts, she would have become acutely aware of every aspect of the legal procedure.<sup>98</sup> The trial was sensationalised by the tabloids, although more sympathetic coverage was published by *The Guardian* and the underground press. In her opening and closing defence speeches, Mendelssohn distinguished between her deeply personal opposition to internment in Northern Ireland and the Brigade's 'uncalled for' and 'meaningless' militant rhetoric.<sup>99</sup> Much later, Mendelssohn referred to her lack of involvement in 'the AB communiqués bar 3 lines against internment written on command by an armed man'.<sup>100</sup> Throughout the trial Mendelssohn argued eloquently against the Industrial Relations Bill, British imperialism in Ireland and the use of chemical weapons, and insisted that 'we don't feel that there is any room or need for bomb attacks on Cabinet Ministers... although we might understand the

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<sup>95</sup> Mick Ryan and Tony War, 'Prison Abolition in the UK: They Dare Not Speak Its Name?', *Social Justice*, 41.3 (2015), 107-119 (p.111).

<sup>96</sup> See SN8DG, *Conspiracy Notes*, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Carr, pp. 130-131.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, p. 38.

<sup>99</sup> Mendelssohn's opening speech in her defence, SxMs109/2/D/5; Mendelssohn's closing speech in her defence, early December 1972, SxMs109/2/D/6.

<sup>100</sup> Letter to Lynne Harries, 24 January 1993, SxMs109/3/A/1/18/1.

feeling behind it... Our politics are certainly not the politics of bombing'.<sup>101</sup> The political arguments made by Mendelssohn and the rest of the defence during the trial were given short shrift by the prosecution, who insisted that the affair was a normal criminal investigation, and by the judge, who in his summing up felt it necessary to advise the jury that 'political trials are trials of people for their political views. We do not have them in this country'.<sup>102</sup> The defendants' political views, which formed the mainstay of the defence, were also evidence of complicity. Many years later, still contending with the blurred distinction between the Angry Brigade and the Stoke Newington Eight, between perpetrator and defendant, Mendelssohn makes frequent claims that her writing 'was not Angry Brigade writing... They attacked and I defended'.<sup>103</sup>

Along with Barker, Greenfield and Creek, Mendelssohn was convicted for conspiracy to cause explosions and given a fifteen-year prison sentence. Following a plea of clemency made by the jury, Barker, Greenfield, Creek and Mendelssohn's sentences were reduced to ten years.<sup>104</sup> The other four defendants were acquitted of all charges. *Time Out* covered the outcome of the trial with the headline: 'The Verdict of an Uneasy Majority'.<sup>105</sup> It had taken the jury more than thirty hours to come to a decision, and even then the verdict was not unanimous.<sup>106</sup> The evidence against Mendelssohn consisted of fingerprints upon a newspaper used to wrap an explosive device, and a handwriting match with the twelfth communiqué. Mendelssohn always insisted upon her innocence, and for the rest of her life disassociated herself in her poetry and other writing from the Angry Brigade whom she repeatedly called 'fascists of the left'.<sup>107</sup> The trial constituted Mendelssohn's most prominent involvement in the resistance movement, although her proximity to active political resistance continued within the walls of Holloway Women's Prison. Over the Christmas of 1971, during her nine-month-long pre-trial detainment, the inmates organised and secured

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<sup>101</sup> Mendelssohn's closing speech in her defence, SxMs109/2/D/6.

<sup>102</sup> Carr, p. 172.

<sup>103</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>104</sup> Carr, p. 177.

<sup>105</sup> *Time Out*, 15 December 1972.

<sup>106</sup> Carr, p. 175.

<sup>107</sup> Letters to Mengham, 3 November 1998 and 6 December 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

the release of one of their number from solitary confinement.<sup>108</sup> Writing in the *International Times*, Seymour Wilbur describes how ‘the day after the [SN8] sentences were announced, 600 people marched to Holloway in solidarity with Anna Mendelson and Hilary Creek... hundreds of prisoners answered from windows’.<sup>109</sup> Between 1971-76, a combination of repressive prison conditions and an influx of activists contributed to a spate of rooftop demonstrations, a hunger strike, window breaking, cell fires and other disturbances at Holloway.<sup>110</sup> The prison has a dramatic history; decades earlier, the suffragettes held within its walls famously went on hunger strike. The seventies, too, were a tumultuous time to be in Holloway prison.

In 1971, when Mendelssohn was first incarcerated, the treatment of women prisoners in Britain was on the verge of significant change, and Holloway Women’s Prison was at the heart of this transformation in penal policy and practice.<sup>111</sup> Old Holloway was built in 1852 as a mixed-sex prison, and became England’s first official designated women’s prison in 1903. One of 54 radial prisons built in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, Holloway was closely modelled on the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia. The Eastern Penitentiary was a prototype of the system of total solitary confinement, notoriously denounced by Charles Dickens as ‘immeasurably worse than any torture of the body’.<sup>112</sup> In 1968 the Prison Department took the decision to demolish Holloway Women’s Prison, the largest women’s prison in the UK, and rebuild a modern prison-hospital in its place. James Callaghan, the Home Secretary behind this extraordinary project of prison reform, voiced the therapeutic optimism which amounted to an official reclassification of female criminality: ‘[m]ost women in custody’, in Callaghan’s words, ‘require some form of [...] psychiatric treatment’.<sup>113</sup> The view that ‘women criminals are abnormal women’ represented

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<sup>108</sup> SN8DG, *Conspiracy Notes*, 1, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Seymore Wilbur, ‘The £1,000,000 Lie’, *International Times*, 144 (1972), p. 8  
<[http://www.internationaltimes.it/archive/index.php?year=1972&volume=IT-Volume-1&issue=144&item=IT\\_1972-12-14\\_B-IT-Volume-1\\_Iss-144\\_008](http://www.internationaltimes.it/archive/index.php?year=1972&volume=IT-Volume-1&issue=144&item=IT_1972-12-14_B-IT-Volume-1_Iss-144_008)> [accessed 10 May 2018].

<sup>110</sup> Paul Rock, *Reconstructing A Women’s Prison: The Holloway Redevelopment Project 1968-1988* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 184-5, 220.

<sup>111</sup> For a fuller account of Holloway’s transformation, see Rock.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 18.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted by Rock, p. 106.

the ‘sole conventional public discourse’ in the sixties.<sup>114</sup> Nowhere is this view more clearly illustrated than in the history of Holloway Prison. The aim was to install a rehabilitative penal regime based upon therapeutic principles that would treat its inmates not as prisoners, but as patients. The original castellated Victorian panopticon, with tiered galleries of cells in wings radiating from a central point, was replaced by ‘a string of small, linked, flexible spaces that would plot a moral career for the inmate’.<sup>115</sup> Due to considerable delays, the first buildings of the new prison were only opened in 1977. Mendelssohn would have spent the term of her incarceration in the old prison, even as building works and demolition went on *in situ*. The rebuilt Holloway was intended to act as the ‘hub of the female prison system’.<sup>116</sup> Ostensibly an alternative to a Victorian panoptical penal system, this project corroborated Bentham’s founding premise of ‘morals reformed [...] all by a simple idea in architecture’, in coalition with governmental, psychiatric and penal authorities.<sup>117</sup> Representatives from the Department of Health and Social Security and the Prison Department together made up the Holloway Project Group charged with overseeing the vast and costly implementation of the New Holloway.

There have always been far fewer women than men in prison.<sup>118</sup> This discrepancy between male and female rates of incarceration reinforced the founding assumption of the New Holloway: that female criminality was ‘abnormal’. The female prison population in Britain declined sharply through the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>119</sup> In the sixties, the

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<sup>114</sup> Pat Carlen, quoted in Rock, p. 75; Rock, pp. 71, 75.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 13.

<sup>116</sup> Tony Madan, *Women, Prisons and Psychiatry* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J Bowring (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 39.

<sup>118</sup> Women never made up more than 20% of the prison population in Britain between 1900-2012. Gavin Berman, *Prison population statistics* (House of Commons, 7 November 2011), p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Lucia Zedner, ‘Wayward Sisters’, in *The Oxford History of the Prison*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 359. Zedner claims that there were 33,000 women in prison in 1913, and 2,000 in 1960, but the first figure does not tally with parliamentary prison statistics, which record that there were about 2,850 women prisoners in Britain in 1913. See Berman, p. 7. Zedner’s figure – for which no source is given – is replicated in other criminological studies, suggesting a tendency to inflate and sensationalise rates of female imprisonment. Another recent parliamentary report does note that ‘the beginning of the 20th Century was a period when women made up a greater proportion of the prisoner population than at any time since. This is (presumably) a consequence of women being imprisoned for offences related to suffragette militancy’, Grahame Allen and Chris Watson, *UK Prison Population Statistics* (Commons Library Briefing, 20 April 2017), p. 6.

women's prison population was exceptionally small and non-violent, but Britain experienced a considerable growth in its prison populations from the mid-seventies onwards. The visible beginnings of a surge in the female prison population and the number of women committing violent crime was sufficient to turn the penal tide against reform and towards retribution.<sup>120</sup> According to Joanna Kelley, the Assistant Director of Holloway between 1966-74, the phenomenon of female terrorism that emerged in the seventies saw in the 'beginning of the climate of change' in British penal policy, and the decline of the rehabilitative ideal.<sup>121</sup> This is a large claim to make. The suffragettes, seen as 'terrorists' in their day, had been imprisoned in Holloway. But as the 'typification' of the female criminal was transformed and women prisoners began to 'appear more masculine in their statistical profile', Holloway's requirements became 'similar to those of a high security male prison', a trajectory that reinforces Davis's argument about changes to women's prisons in the United States.<sup>122</sup> I return to discuss the gender politics and the logistics of Holloway's transformation in chapter four.

For Mendelssohn, prison was a suffocating and debilitating experience. Accounts of her time in prison and of Holloway in the seventies can be found in her archive, and in newspapers, magazines and the underground press. In *Spare Rib*, Mendelssohn's co-defendant Angela Weir wrote a first-hand account of the conditions in Holloway in 1973:

The most nightmarish aspect of Holloway is the despair of the women. Every night you hear women sobbing and screaming, cell windows breaking. Every day somebody 'cuts themselves up', that is slashes their wrists or their arms. One woman who worked in the hospital wing a cleaner said she got so tired of mopping up blood in the bathrooms that she put up a notice saying 'Please mop up your own blood'.<sup>123</sup>

Weir writes, too, of the extreme isolation produced by the prison experience, of how '[w]ork in Holloway is women's work. Packing pencils or machining clothes', and the difficulty of

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<sup>120</sup> Rock, p. 63.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., pp. 179, 182, 189.

<sup>123</sup> Angela Weir, 'When the key turns', *Spare Rib* (May 1973), pp. 36-37.

acquiring writing materials, ‘presumably because the prison doesn’t expect women to write’.<sup>124</sup> Mendelssohn’s prison work, such as it was, took the form not of writing but of teaching and directing theatrical productions involving her fellow inmates. In 1997, Mendelssohn describes in a letter how ‘I worked very hard in prison with the Labour Governments [sic] permission and taught seven days a week for five years without a break’.<sup>125</sup> The Labour MP for Stockport (where her parents lived) advocated for Mendelssohn’s release on the grounds of her industriousness in the same breath as describing her prisoner-students as ‘prostitutes, dope smugglers and pickpockets’.<sup>126</sup> A *Guardian* article reinforces the connection between her industriousness and the signing of her parole papers in 1977.<sup>127</sup> There was considerable controversy in the press regarding Mendelssohn’s early release.<sup>128</sup> Various accounts, some sympathetic, some not, characterise Mendelssohn at the time of her release as ‘a broken and changed person’, ‘suffering from acute depression’, and with ‘all the stuffing knocked out of her’.<sup>129</sup> In Mendelssohn’s own words, a decade later:

I don’t even have a book out yet, and I feel as though most of my life has been spent in voluntary (hard) labour... I am very shaky at the moment... I started to have mild shaking fits in my last year in jail, whenever I was strip-searched and my cell searched without forewarning.<sup>130</sup>

‘[V]oluntary (hard) labour’ describes an interplay between agency and over-determination, and intimates how prison sentences endure beyond their formally allotted time. Here, Mendelssohn casts her post-prison-work as an unfolding from the condition of incarceration and its psychosomatic effects. Nominally released from carceral constraints, the poet finds herself marked and interpellated by the unwaged prison work she undertook as a means of bartering for her freedom. A close correlation is drawn here between writing-

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>125</sup> Letter to Marion Stenner Evans, 13-14 February 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/59.

<sup>126</sup> ‘Concern at impact on police and public of granting parole to Angry Brigade terrorist’, *Times*, 14 February 1977, p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> Malcolm Pithers, ‘Anna: leave me alone’, *Guardian*, 17 February 1977, p. 24.

<sup>128</sup> Conor O’Clery, ‘Angry Brigade release ‘no cause’ for IRA hope’, *Irish Times*, 15 February 1977.

<sup>129</sup> Clive Borrell, ‘Mr Rees defends Angry Brigade woman’s release’, *Times*, 15 February 1977, p. 2; ‘Breaking of Anna the Bomber’, *Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1977, p. 8.

<sup>130</sup> Letter to Butterfield, 2 March 1987, SxMs109/3/A/1/3.

work and prison-work, Mendelssohn's parentheses acting to indicate the embeddedness of penal labour within what would appear to be its opposite, voluntary labour. Mendelssohn's prison sentence did not come neatly to an end in 1977, but haunted her for the rest of her life. Her co-defendant Hilary Creek scotches the myth of rehabilitation in an interview published in 2002:

Anyone who says that prison rehabilitates people is insane... A long prison sentence completely stops you being able to lead a normal life. When I first came out I had to teach myself to do the most ordinary things, like going to the shops.<sup>131</sup>

As another ex-inmate interviewed by the Women and the Law Collective reminds us, the long-lasting trauma of incarceration is a form of debilitation: 'prison disables you'.<sup>132</sup>

Upon leaving prison, Mendelssohn returned to her parents' home in Stockport. Over the next few years, she started an art course at Sheffield Polytechnic and had the first of her three children. In about 1983 she settled in Cambridge to begin a degree in English Literature at St Edmund's College and had two more children. Initially, Mendelssohn lived in college halls, but subsequently moved from one friend's house to another. Her living situation remained precarious for the rest of her life, and she lost custody of her children after a bitter court case in the late eighties. The trauma of this loss marks her subsequent writing, and her biographer Lynne Harries relays how, by 1990, 'the Grace Lake who had wanted to make a new start as a young mother and an undergraduate had been defeated'.<sup>133</sup> In 1989, Mendelssohn failed her Finals exams, having ignored the question on the exam paper and instead written a 'tirade' against the lack of nursery provision in the university.<sup>134</sup> Riley records that 'she now devoted herself increasingly to poetry and art as the central and exclusive sphere of her existence', and developed an 'increasingly hermetic way of life',

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<sup>131</sup> Martin Bright, 'Look Back in Anger', *Guardian*, 3 February 2002  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2002/feb/03/features.magazine27>> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>132</sup> *Time and Time again: Women in Prison*, Dir. Nina Ward with Women & The Law Collective (1986).

<sup>133</sup> Lynne Harries, 'The Northern Debutante: A memoir of Anna Mendelssohn' (unpublished master's thesis, University of East Anglia, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



although she did participate in the Cambridge Conference for Contemporary Poetry on several occasions, and gave readings.<sup>135</sup> From the mid-eighties, small local presses had printed her work under the name of Grace Lake, and through the nineties Mendelssohn published four pamphlets with Rod Mengham's Equipage press and one with Involution press, as well as contributing poems to various anthologies, magazines and collections. At the turn of the century, she travelled to Paris by invitation to read with other English-speaking writers at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Her astonishing collection *Implacable Art* was published in 2000 thanks to the encouragement and perseverance of her friends, and a final pamphlet, *py.*, came out with Oystercatcher Press in 2009, the year that she died. She left behind her 'a room heaped to the ceiling with books, poetry manuscripts and drawings', a chaotic mass of creative material that is now collected in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive.<sup>136</sup>

### **Carceral Poetics**

The first of the three related areas of scholarship on which this study builds - the critical discourse around women, literature and incarceration - indicates some of the ways in which literary representations of incarceration are highly gendered. W.B. Carnochan considers the literature of the prison to be largely male.<sup>137</sup> Yet writing of and from a non-literal prison has been characterised as a uniquely female position by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who assert that '[d]ramatisations of imprisonment and escape are so all pervasive in nineteenth-century literature by women that [...] they represent a uniquely female tradition in this period'.<sup>138</sup> Drawing on spatial imagery of escape and enclosure in texts by Charlotte and Emily Brönte, Emily Dickinson, Anne Radcliffe, Jane Austen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman,

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<sup>135</sup> Letter from Harries to Mendelssohn, SxMs109/3/A/1/18.

<sup>136</sup> Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn obituary'.

<sup>137</sup> Carnochan, 'The Literature of Confinement', in *The Oxford History of the Prison*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 427-55 (p. 431).

<sup>138</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn [1<sup>st</sup> edn 1979] (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 85.

Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate how ‘women authors reflect the literal reality of their own confinement in the constraints they depict’.<sup>139</sup> In Gilbert and Gubar’s argument, real conditions of social constraint distinguish female images of imprisonment from the more metaphorical and metaphysical images of imprisonment found in texts by male authors, such as Lord Byron’s ‘Prisoner of Chillon’, who notes, philosophically, that ‘my very chains and I grew friends’, and regains his freedom by the end of the poem.<sup>140</sup> The female prisoners of male houses, male texts and their own gendered bodies, ‘confined’ in childbirth and relegated to domestic drudgery, seek escape in the ‘violence of the double’ — whether Jane Eyre’s madwoman in the attic, Gilman’s creeping woman behind the wallpaper, or Dickinson’s imagined ‘soul’ who ‘has moments of escape/when bursting all the doors/She dances like a bomb abroad’.<sup>141</sup> In *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller proposes the term ‘feminine carceral’ to describe the topos of imprisonment that circulated widely in nineteenth-century English novels predominantly — although not entirely — by women.<sup>142</sup> Miller also points out that isolating a ‘paradigm of female writing unwittingly risks recycling a feminine mystique’, and replicating the incarceration of the non-male in patriarchal contexts and binaries.<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, the literature of incarceration is inseparable from a consideration of women in history. I discuss the feminine carceral at greater length in chapters one and five.

Deconstructing the gendered aspects of incarceration must involve a consideration of the historical construction of female criminality and violence. Carol Smart’s inaugural study *Women, Crime and Criminology* (1977) examines and deconstructs pre-existing criminological frameworks, most of which uncritically confirm positivist sexual stereotypes.<sup>144</sup> Smart is wary, like Davis, of reinforcing a discrete area of ‘women’s criminality’, segregated from the main, male-orientated discourse on criminology. In the late

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<sup>139</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 87.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 85; Emily Dickinson, ‘512’ *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 250.

<sup>142</sup> D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), p. 168.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Carol Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology* (London: Routledge, 1977).

sixties, Smart identifies and critiques the mutual implementation by psychiatric theorists and political policy makers of a pathological model of female criminality, which presumed crime committed by female offenders to be ‘irrational, irresponsible and largely unintentional behaviour, as an individual maladjustment to a well-ordered and consensual society’.<sup>145</sup> In her recent study *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (2014), Amanda Third similarly argues that the ‘highly gendered’ discourse of terrorism overlays the discourse of feminism, writing that ‘the discourses that shaped the construction of the female terrorist in the 1960s and 70s - indeed, that called her into being - continue to constitute terrorism as a gendered phenomenon today’.<sup>146</sup> In an analysis informed by the work of theorists such as Smart and Third, the Holloway rebuild can be considered as an example of the response of a threatened social order to the disruptive potential of its ‘deviant’ female subjects. Both theorists draw out the parallels between the moral panic over the women’s emancipation movement and an increase in women’s participation in criminal activity.<sup>147</sup> Discourses around criminality, feminism and terrorism are explored in chapters three and four.

The second area of scholarship on which this study builds is the discourse around the prison and literary theory. The institution of the prison as we know it is barely two hundred years old, and this field of study is a comparative newcomer to the scene of philosophical critique. Histories of the prison only ‘began to appear in the 1970s’, the decade of what the poet William Aberg called ‘the prison renaissance’.<sup>148</sup> According to Bell Gale Chevigny’s introductory survey, prison writing ‘went out of fashion’ in the eighties, and only in the nineties was there a renewed interest in the study of prison literature.<sup>149</sup> Recent anthologies of prison writing in English with substantial, scholarly introductions include *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (1999), edited by Chevigny, *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>*

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<sup>145</sup> Cited in Valier, p. 131.

<sup>146</sup> Amanda Third, *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>147</sup> Smart, p. 34; Third, p. 38. Also see Zedner’s account of this phenomenon in *The Oxford History of the Prison*, p. 359.

<sup>148</sup> Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, *The Oxford History of the Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. vii; *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing: A PEN American Centre Prize Anthology* ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), pp. xv, xx.

<sup>149</sup> Chevigny, pp. xx, xviii.

*Century America* (1998), edited by H. Bruce Franklin, and *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to the Present* (2000), edited by Judith E. Scheffler.<sup>150</sup>

These introductions are closely informed by the work of the incarcerated writers who follow, and consequently foreground the state-enforced conditions of incarceration out of which these texts were produced. In a rare full-length study, *Writers in Prison* (1990), Ioan Davies stresses that in order to 'come to terms with prison as ideationally dominant it is crucial to begin with the prisoners' own texts'.<sup>151</sup> Other scholarly surveys, such as *The Oxford History of the Prison* (1995), which contains a chapter on 'The Literature of Confinement' by W.B. Carnochan, are less concerned with literal conditions of incarceration. For Carnochan, drawing on an Adornian concept of artistic creation as a 'breaking free', 'whether fictional or autobiographical, the literature of the prison concerns the interplay of constraint and freedom and therefore, analogously, also concerns its own creation'.<sup>152</sup> The themes and conditions of production of the literature of the prison, in this understanding, correspond to the emancipatory origins of creativity. Carnochan subscribes to the *figurative* emancipatory capacity of art, an aesthetic conception that risks overlooking conditions of *actual* freedom or constraint. What Carnochan calls 'the literature of confinement' is an 'overarching category' within which actual captivity or prison itself is a subcategory.<sup>153</sup> This study resists the tendency to take constraint, both in poetry and in theory, as a metaphor for freedom. The prison, in Mendelssohn's poetry and that of other prison writers, is a lived experience that is far from emancipatory, and stifles more often than it facilitates the possibility of creative expression.

Prison imagery also circulates in a vein of twentieth-century academic theory that deals with structuralism and its difficulties. This phenomenon seems to derive from Fredric Jameson's **seminal** work, *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), in which the structuralist model is dismantled and shown to be wanting. For Jameson, while structuralism aims to explain

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<sup>150</sup> *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to the Present*, ed. Judith A. Scheffler (New York: Feminist Press, 2002).

<sup>151</sup> Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>152</sup> Carnochan, p. 427.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

thought through linguistic models, it cannot account for itself *as* model, as a metalanguage describing language, and thus ‘remains prisoner to the dilemmas of Kantian philosophy’ – that is, the unknowability of the thing-in-itself.<sup>154</sup> Jameson’s title comes from an epigram attributed to Nietzsche: ‘we have to cease to think if we refuse to do it within the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt that asks whether the limit we see is really a limit...’.<sup>155</sup> The affirmative pessimism of this position figures ‘prison’ as a metaphorical condition. A line of successive theorists, from Gilles Deleuze to Maurice Blanchot to Rey Chow, articulate their philosophy of language via the figure or ‘Nietzschean motif’ of confinement.<sup>156</sup> Theory may grapple with a metaphysical form of imprisonment, but the modern prison system itself is constructed upon an abstraction of method. Foucault theorises that the shift from corporal punishment to modern forms of incarceration places a far greater amount of publicity upon the trial and legal processes that proceed imprisonment (rather than the spectacle of the scaffold).<sup>157</sup> This shift sustains the invisibility of prison system, removing punishment and its concomitant violence ever further from the domain of everyday perception, and making it less concrete and more abstract.<sup>158</sup> Questions of the relationship between theory and real conditions are very much at stake for this study. There are several examples of Mendelssohn’s own ‘accelerating aversion to artificial theory’, and a resistance to deconstructive, poststructuralist thinking in favour of a more deterministic feminist politics.<sup>159</sup> Chapters two, three and five consider questions of theory, poststructuralism and the prison in more depth.

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<sup>154</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 214, 109.

<sup>155</sup> Jameson, epigraph. Although this epigraph is repeatedly attributed to Nietzsche, David Lovekin explains in *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1991) that Jameson takes his translation from Erich Heller’s essay ‘Wittgenstein and Nietzsche’. In this essay, Heller loosely translates Nietzsche’s term *Zwange*, or constraint, into metaphor: ‘the prison-house of language’ – and Jameson’s much-cited book adopts and perpetuates this metaphor. Lovekin, p. 209.

<sup>156</sup> c.f. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 9-10.

<sup>157</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 9, 176-77.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>159</sup> Letter to Kate Wheale, 20 November 1988, SxMs109/3/A/1/64/1; Letter to Huk, c.1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/20/1.

The third area of theoretical discourse, poetry as a carceral medium, is a central topic of discussion throughout this thesis. Most of the nineteenth-century writers Gilbert and Gubar discuss are prose writers, with the notable exception of Emily Dickinson.<sup>160</sup> Mendelssohn, too, seems to take Dickinson as an exemplary writer of carceral poetics. In a prison notebook, a brief lyric jocularly titled 'LIGHT VERSE... Aafter Hemily Dickinson' [sic] begins with the Dickensian line '[h]aving no other Place – Left to Go.' and continues: 'THRU THIS WALL/THERE IS ANOTHER/AND THRU THAT/ANOTHER STILL', perhaps repeating the idea that the prison reaches further than the cell wall, or more prosaically, suggesting that there were lots of walls in Holloway.<sup>161</sup> A reference to 'fluttering Emily Dickinson as a kind of cherished flag' also surfaces in Mendelssohn's letters.<sup>162</sup> Carnochan finds that 'prison experience has not produced much poetry in English that has entered the canon', and claims that 'the literature of the prison [is] decisively, though far from exclusively, one of prose'.<sup>163</sup> In *Imagining the Penitentiary*, John Bender makes a case for how 'novels gave the penitentiary idea its dominant force'.<sup>164</sup> In Bender's analysis, the modern prison system validated its operations by assuming novelistic and narrative ideas of character as progressive and susceptible to reform. For Miller, novelistic form is itself inherently carceral: 'the genre of the novel *belongs* to the disciplinary field that it portrays'.<sup>165</sup> Even when 'the novel censures policing power, it has already reinvented it, in *the very practice of novelistic representation*'.<sup>166</sup> Miller's reading is highly Foucauldian, and rests upon the conception of a capillary network of power that traverses the realist novel in its recording of minute, seemingly irrelevant details all invested with potential significance. The practice of surveillance enshrined in the very form of the novel leads Miller to characterise this literary genre as the 'novelistic Panopticon'.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> It should be noted that a poem by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'In Duty Bound', is central to Gilbert and Gubar's discussion, p. 84.

<sup>161</sup> Prison notebook, July 1974, SxMs109/2/A/4.

<sup>162</sup> Letter to Butterfield, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/3.

<sup>163</sup> Carnochan, pp. 431, 436.

<sup>164</sup> John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>165</sup> Miller, p. 21.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

If the very form of the novel is suspect when it comes to attempting to think *beyond* incarceration, poetry suggests itself as an alternative, less bound by conventions of narrative linearity and realism and, to again quote Dickinson, ‘more numerous of Windows — /Superior — for Doors —’.<sup>168</sup> By virtue of its form, experimental poetry refutes novelistic conceptions of subjectivity and progress. But prisons, as we have seen, are present in the theory of the lyric. Taking up Mill’s contradictory figure of the poem as a ‘lament of a prisoner’, suspended between self-address and social contexts, Paul Morrison claims that ‘carceral possibilities... inform the canonical definition of the lyric’.<sup>169</sup> More recently, Virginia Jackson queries Mill’s characterisation: ‘Cell to cell, one prisoner to another, this form of [lyric] address is sustained by the pathos of solitary confinement — but who or what has imposed the sentence?’.<sup>170</sup> Not only does Mendelssohn’s poetry participate in a tradition of experimental poetics that seeks to dismantle the ‘canonical definition of the lyric’; her frequent use of direct address and appeals to her readers demonstrates an acute, at times painful, consciousness of ‘who or what has imposed the sentence’, of being constantly surveilled. This is the consciousness induced by the panopticon, within which, according to Miller, ‘it matters less that the inmates may at any moment be watched than that they know this’.<sup>171</sup> Presumably, this was a condition that Mendelssohn knew from her own experience. Around the central hub of the Old Holloway, where Mendelssohn spent the term of her incarceration, the tiered wings were laid out like a ‘great cartwheel’, ‘a single person could survey the whole prison from one spot’.<sup>172</sup> I would argue that the condition of knowing oneself to be watched is peculiar to poetry. The protagonist of a realist novel may be subject to minute ‘surveillance’ on the part of their author, but they cannot know this. Freed from the conventions of realist prose fiction, the experimental poetic subject *can* know this. In Mendelssohn’s poem ‘at the moment’, the poetic speaker understands their subjectivity as

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<sup>168</sup> Dickinson, ‘657’, p. 327.

<sup>169</sup> Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1996), p. 40.

<sup>170</sup> Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005), p. 130.

<sup>171</sup> Miller, p. 18.

<sup>172</sup> Rock, p. 21.

constructed via procedures of surveillance: ‘I don’t like the way I am/invented [...] they invent me. Public eye, private eye’.<sup>173</sup> The slip between ‘eye’ and ‘I’ suggests that the surveilling forces may not be the conventional detective, but perception more broadly, whether public and ‘outside’ or private and ‘inside’. The act of *knowing* oneself to exist in a panopticonic state is not in itself emancipatory, but such knowledge might generate a heightened consciousness of the modes and workings of carcerality. That carceral consciousness, inscribed in poetry, tends to reflect the historical specificities of its time. When Mill and the Romantics were writing, solitary confinement was considered to be a rehabilitating method of incarceration, which may go some way towards explaining the value they placed upon solitude and constraint.<sup>174</sup> Mendelssohn witnessed the demise of the panopticon and the rise of new, supposedly reformatory women’s facilities, but was also profoundly affected by the legacy of the concentration camp and other forms of specifically twentieth-century incarceration. Her carceral poetics do not simply inscribe the conditions of her own imprisonment, but include historical and intersecting forms of imprisonment from Nazi camps to the asylum.

## Methodology

My research reactivates the importance of the historical and political contexts out of which Mendelssohn’s poetry was produced. In so doing, I address a deficit in critical accounts of contemporary British poetry identified by the critic Robert Sheppard: ‘there aren’t enough histories’.<sup>175</sup> Sheppard is conscious of the risk that histories might flatten or reduce complex existences, but stresses that the need for such histories outweighs the risk. To obviate the risks Sheppard identifies, this study takes a feminist approach to history, ‘an elliptical traverse, a criss-crossing backward and forward’, and understands, with Wendy Brown, that ‘[i]f everything about us is the effect of historical accident rather than will or design, then we

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<sup>173</sup> *LA*, p. 66.

<sup>174</sup> See Guenther, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> Robert Sheppard, *When Bad Times Made For Good Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2012), p. 215.



are paradoxically both more severely historical and also more plastic than we might otherwise seem'.<sup>176</sup> The interplay between over-determination and plasticity is key to this study's treatment of Mendelssohn's life and the historical contexts that shaped that life, as they emerge in her writing. As part of the project of reactivating the historical contexts that surround Mendelssohn's work, my research also addresses a deficit of critical attention to genealogies of experimental women's writing in Britain. To address this deficit, I give a number of comparative readings that bring the work of more prominent poets to bear upon Mendelssohn's little-known work. The activist-poet Muriel Rukeyser is the subject of a comparative reading in one of my chapters. I also draw comparisons with the work of the lesser-known activist-poet Nancy Cunard, who was a significant poetic influence for Mendelssohn, and the innovative poet Jennifer Moxley, one of Mendelssohn's North American contemporaries. These poets constitute a deliberately transatlantic grouping, in part to reflect the well-studied American influence (from Frank O'Hara to Ed Dorn) on experimental British poetry in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and in part to bring the tradition of women's experimental poetry in the States to bear upon women's experimental poetry in Britain.<sup>177</sup> There are many other figures – Laura Riding Jackson, Ingeborg Bachmann, Ed Dorn, Barry MacSweeney, Denise Riley, Tom Raworth – with whom productive comparisons could be drawn. Cunard, Rukeyser, and Moxley remain the chief comparative figures in this study due to their poetic representations of imprisonment and gender.

I combine close historicist readings of Mendelssohn's poetry with archival research, and use critical theory to interrogate these approaches. In my incorporation of archival material, I respond to a recent and sustained archival 'turn' in feminism and queer theory as theorised by Kate Eichhorn (2013) and Carolyn Steedman (2001). Building on the work of these theorists, my archival research proceeds from the Derridean understanding that the

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<sup>176</sup> Griselda Pollock quoted in Giovanna Zapperi, 'woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art – feminist perspectives', *Feminist Review*, 105 (2013), 21-47, (p.25); Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 113.

<sup>177</sup> Kennedy and Kennedy, pp. 5, 22.

archive is an authorising apparatus, and remains conscious that to 'place a personal collection in an established archive remains a powerful authorising act'.<sup>178</sup> The process of archiving, then, holds particularly contradictory implications for a body of work such as Mendelssohn's, which constantly jostles with authority. This process of archival authorisation is understood by Eichhorn as an important legitimisation of 'forms of knowledge and cultural production that neoliberal restructuring otherwise renders untenable'.<sup>179</sup> In making visible what was otherwise invisible, in reactivating and amplifying voices from the past, the authority bestowed by the archive restores a degree of agency to otherwise forgotten subjects. The turn to the archive, in this view, represents a radical repudiation of the neoliberal narrative of progress, and opens up the possibility of a politics that turns to the past 'to unfix the terms of the present political situation'.<sup>180</sup> The reconfiguration of sources of authority, the restoration and negotiation of agency, the contestation of narratives of progress, and a deconstructive turn to the past are key to my materialist-feminist approach. Although the most obvious function of archival work is to uncover (often repressed) histories - a key concern of feminist and queer theorists - my archival research is wary of 'the [Freudian] desire to recover moments of inception, beginnings and origins', a form of pathological foundationalism that Derrida critiques in 'Archive Fever' (1994).<sup>181</sup> Equally, it is wary of ascribing authority to the materiality of the page, which for Derrida is only a surface trace rather than a foundational site of inscription.<sup>182</sup> The oscillation between psychoanalytical or material approaches to the originary authority of the archive constitutes Derrida's 'Archive Fever'. Feminist archival genealogies, however, seek to trace 'accidents, disparities, conflicts and haphazard conditions' rather than origins.<sup>183</sup> The cultural influences revealed by Mendelssohn's archive,

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<sup>178</sup> Carolyn Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida and Dust', *American Historical Review*, 106.4 (Oct., 2001) 1159-1180 (p. 1159); Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013) p. 15.

<sup>179</sup> Eichhorn, p. 10.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>181</sup> Steedman, pp. 1160-61.

<sup>182</sup> Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 9-63

<sup>183</sup> Eichhorn, p. 8.

for instance, have inflected my readings of her work, and led me to introduce Cunard as a comparative figure. It also must be said, given the focus of this study, that the archive is often figured as a place of ‘entombment’, a site where documents are preserved in ways that approximate conditions of incarceration.<sup>184</sup> Of course, rigorous methods of archival preservation also importantly *enable* access that otherwise would be impossible to obtain, legitimate knowledge that would otherwise be lost, enable the reshaping of hegemonic histories and restore the agency of non-hegemonic subjects. The archive is a place that approximates conditions of entombment, but also a space of opening up. Through a close engagement with the processes of composition and the cultural legacies that archival research makes legible, the historical and material contexts out of which the final published work was produced become visible. In this study, I treat this increased visibility as a form of opening-up, rather than a closing down, of proliferating textual references and meanings.

Archival material from three separate archives informs this project: the Anna Mendelssohn Archive, held at The Keep, Sussex; the Muriel Rukeyser Papers, held at the Library of Congress, Washington DC; and the Nancy Cunard Collection, held at the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas. The Anna Mendelssohn Archive, which is most central to this study, is a rich and varied holding, and the youngest of these archives. When Mendelssohn died, the dedicated efforts of a few close friends (Peter Riley, Martin Thom, Kate Wheale and Lynne Harries) ensured that her vast and extraordinary collection of manuscripts and drawings were preserved until Sara Crangle brought the archive to Sussex in 2010, thanks to the generous donation of Mendelssohn’s family. Although only a small portion of her writing was published during her lifetime, Mendelssohn was a prolific writer and artist. Her archive stands testament to the extent and urgency of this process of production: the thousands of poems and drawings held in her archive are scribbled on the dust jackets of books and in the margins of letters, seemingly on the first thing that came to hand. In addition to the thousands of unpublished poems and drawings, the archive contains over 800 notebooks, hundreds of letters, trial transcripts and an unfinished

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<sup>184</sup> Zapperi, p. 21.

memoir. In Mendelssohn's unruly archive, prose which blurs into poetry, poetry which blurs into drawings, and a huge amount of undated material presents an epistemic resistance to conventional archival categories and a challenge to the researcher. A document that starts out as a letter and dilates into poetry and cubo-Surrealist drawings resists clear-cut taxonomical divides, escapes singularity and offers an abundance of meaning.

Given the extensiveness of Mendelssohn's mostly unexplored archive, my focus has been on the correspondence, the prison notebooks and the trial transcripts. My reasons for turning to the correspondence, rather than the notebooks, the poetry drafts or the memoir, are fourfold: firstly, the large number of poets, editors, scholars and publishers who are among Mendelssohn's correspondents help to contextualise Mendelssohn's work, and this study is primarily concerned with larger historical contexts and networks; secondly, Mendelssohn's memoirs have already received some critical attention, as the subject, alongside her poetry, of a forthcoming article by Sara Crangle; thirdly, a focus on the correspondence delimits the otherwise daunting scale of Mendelssohn's archive; and fourthly, I contend that Mendelssohn's letters have a great deal to tell us about her relationship with her reader(s), and the formation of her lyric 'I', which is often conflated with her epistolary 'I'.<sup>185</sup> Unusually, the letters written *by* Mendelssohn far outnumber the letters written *to* her. This is a collection of unsent letters, some of them obviously drafts, some of them seemingly complete, dated, addressed and signed-off. They might be seen to represent a 'carceral' form of letter-writing, held and not released; but the suspension of communication represented by Mendelssohn's archived correspondence is not reducible to a single interpretation. Perhaps Mendelssohn had one eye on posterity; perhaps a resistance to being read; at times, it seems as if Mendelssohn's letter-writing was a therapeutic or cathartic exercise, at other times, they seem to act as rehearsals or catalysts for poems or drawings. As Eichhorn reminds us, archives are 'prone to produce multiple and conflicting narratives', and I treat these letters accordingly as suggestive, performative and provisional

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<sup>185</sup> Sara Crangle, 'The agonies of ambivalence: Anna Mendelssohn, La poétesse maudite', *Modernism/modernity* (forthcoming). Mendelssohn's letters are discussed at greater length in chapter 3.

texts.<sup>186</sup> Full as they are of anguish and trauma, they are also self-consciously literary; as one correspondent wrote by way of reply to Mendelssohn, reading her letter ‘was like being in a racinian tragedy’.<sup>187</sup>

My own experience of working in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive was one of recalibration, due to the constant adjustments I had to make to my own projected project. For instance, there is relatively scarce material documenting Mendelssohn’s time inside Holloway Prison. The archive holds twenty exercise and drawing books which Mendelssohn used during her incarceration, but many of the pages are blank, and any writing tends to be brief and unsystematic. These slim, barely-used regulation-issue notebooks rebuff the myth of the prolific and productive writer behind bars, epitomised by male authors from Oscar Wilde to Ezra Pound, Antonio Gramsci to George Jackson. In 1991, Mendelssohn wrote that ‘Prison debilitated my writing—’.<sup>188</sup> A 1975 entry in a prison notebook, half-journalistic, half-poetic, records the suffocating monotony of prison life that ‘debilitated’ Mendelssohn’s ability to write:

can’t do anything. can’t sleep can’t read  
can’t concentrate [?] battling for attention  
body screaming to move intellect impotent  
advice useless. Suffocated. Miserable.  
Makes me sad to unbearable. Want friends  
love, no more fear, care of [?]. Want sleep.  
What’s happened? mind a prey [?] blank.  
lack of stimulus. lack of everything.<sup>189</sup>

Prison life evidently debilitated not only Mendelssohn’s writing but her capacity to sleep, read, focus, indeed to think at all. Furthermore, in a draft of a letter from the late eighties Mendelssohn emphatically refuses the category of ‘prison poet’, complicating the premise of this thesis:

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<sup>186</sup> Eichhorn, p. 9.

<sup>187</sup> Letter to Andrew Duncan, 1999, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>188</sup> Letter to Harries, June 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/18.

<sup>189</sup> Exercise book December 1974 - December 1975, 6 January 1975, SxMs109/2/A/6.

do you think I learnt to write poetry in prison? I know that there are poets in prison... I don't like to be rounded-up and genre'd as a prison poet. I did not start writing in prison.<sup>190</sup>

To refuse the genre of 'prison poet' is to trouble assumptions of origins. Most of Mendelssohn's poetry was published in or after 1985, some years after her release, but Mendelssohn alludes to her 'early' pre-prison poetry more than once.<sup>191</sup>

A short poem published by the magazine *Frendz* on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1972 seems very likely to be a Mendelssohn prison-poem, but the authorship is not certain.<sup>192</sup> The author's name is given only as 'Anna', followed by the note 'eight months on remand'. Mendelssohn had been arrested in August, eight months previously, and had been refused bail whilst awaiting trial. The poem accompanies a call out in the magazine *Frendz* for grassroots radical prison reform organisers, and a double page spread on 'Holloway: From the Inside Out'. This is the poem by 'Anna':

#### A POEM

We imagined  
And now we want it.  
We imagined  
Not to know fear  
When people could move.  
We imagined touching  
As the stars and sky touch  
We imagined loving  
That would bear no description.<sup>193</sup>

This is a poem of imagined – and lost – hope. As yet, it is the only published poem we know of that could be attributed to Mendelssohn in the seventies, a bona fide 'prison poem' issued from behind the bars. If 'want' is read as 'lack', the poem suggests a lost utopia: 'We

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<sup>190</sup> Letter to Ian Patterson, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

<sup>191</sup> Letter to Harries, June 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/18/1; in a letter to Denise Riley, Mendelssohn claims that 'I began writing poetry in earnest in 1966', undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/51/1; letter to Noella Smith, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/58; and Mendelssohn refers to being in the middle of 'a vast lyrical metropolitan exequy's [funeral odes'] composition' in 1970 (see Duncan's review, cited above).

<sup>192</sup> 'Holloway: From the Inside Out', *Frendz*, 28 (26 May 1972), p. 8.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

imagined/And now we want it'. As well as mourning that loss, this slender poem also captures some of the content of that utopia – fearlessness, free movement, touching '[a]s the stars and sky touch' – although how they touch is not clear, given that the stars are suspended in the sky - and loving that exceeds its inscription in language. Conventionally enough, this lyric functions as the articulation of inarticulacy, as the expression of what cannot be expressed. The lingering hopefulness of this brief lyric stands in high contrast to the fierce, abrupt lines of much of Mendelssohn's later poetry. *If* this is a Mendelssohn poem, it might be tentatively suggested that the experimentalism and cynicism with which her published poetry is suffused was not characteristic of her 'early' poetry, and that carceral structures did, to some degree, 'form' her writing.

What else does the archive tell us about Mendelssohn's poetic writing prior to her release from prison? There are scraps of poetry as well as journalistic entries scattered through the prison notebooks, but these fragments are often whimsical and rarely developed at length. The lines 'prison wall: pigeon perch/Prison wall bigger than us' begin to play with scale and deflationary tactics.<sup>194</sup> 'The orders look like bars to me/They fix into the Wall/and once locked, stay locked' intimates an equivalence between speech acts and prison bars.<sup>195</sup> There is a fleeting assertion that 'la poesie est la liberte' but the notes that follow trouble the possibility of emancipation: 'LA PEUR C'EST UNE PRISON PLUS MAUVAIS QUE LA PRISON'.<sup>196</sup> The implication is that the prison reaches further than the cell walls. Another journalistic entry offers no further detail than 'Tied. Tired. Sick'.<sup>197</sup> What I have found overwhelmingly to be the case is that the themes suggested in these fragments from the archive find fuller expression in Mendelssohn's later poetry. Mendelssohn is not a 'prison poet' in the conventional sense; as far as we know, she did not publish what would usually be understood as 'prison writing' bar the single lyric discussed above. Her later published poetry frequently invokes carceral states that do not appear to

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<sup>194</sup> Prison notebook, 1974, SxMs109/2/A/3.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> 'Fear is a prison that is worse than prison itself', prison notebook, April 1974, SxMs109/2/A/9.

<sup>197</sup> Prison notebook, September 1974, SxMs109/2/A/5.

have any connection with her own imprisonment, from concentration camps to hostages. How, then, can the small portion of prison writing held in her archive be read in relation to her later work, which has multiple and diverse themes and concerns?

In order to orientate my approach to Mendelssohn's archive, I spent several months with the Muriel Rukeyser Papers, a longer-established collection with less fluid taxonomical borders. Rukeyser's extensive archive is as diverse as Mendelssohn's own, and contains a large amount of activist ephemera, such as petitions and pamphlets, trial transcripts and records dating not only from Rukeyser's own trial in 1972 but from the Scottsboro trial which she covered as a young journalist, prison writing, diaries, correspondence, newspaper clippings and poetry drafts. Police records loom at the edges of both Rukeyser's and Mendelssohn's archives: Rukeyser's recently released FBI file now forms part of the holding. In Rukeyser's archive, my focus was on her own trial transcripts and prison writing. I turned to Rukeyser with the aim of extending the feminist literary genealogy of which she is one of the progenitors.<sup>198</sup> As Jewish, women, activist poets, the biographical crossovers between Rukeyser and Mendelssohn are evident, although they lived a generation apart. Rukeyser was born on the cusp of World War I; Mendelssohn at the armistice of World War II. Their approach to the lyric, too, is contiguous. Rukeyser's long, fierce, loose lines anticipate Mendelssohn's own experiments with poetic form, and the fusion of the personal and the political is constitutive of their work.<sup>199</sup> Over the course of my research, it has become clear to me that figures such as Rukeyser, for whom prison is an important but not defining presence, are more appropriate comparative figures for Mendelssohn than more conventional 'prison poets' such as the Black Panther Ericka Huggins, who wrote directly from and about prison.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Anne Sexton famously memorialised Rukeyser as 'Muriel, mother of everyone'. Sexton quoted in Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana University Press, 1980), p. 389.

<sup>199</sup> Kertesz, p. 84; Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 147.

<sup>200</sup> Huggins' 'Poems from Prison' can be found in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Davis, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1971 (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 109-120.



The archive of the British poet and activist Nancy Cunard forms the last of my comparative archival sources. Cunard was an important influence for Mendelssohn, and for this reason I turned to Cunard's archive and poetry as something of a blueprint for Mendelssohn's own political and poetic commitments.<sup>201</sup> The Nancy Cunard Collection, another diverse archival holding, includes large amounts of journalistic material alongside pamphlets, poetry drafts, notebooks, photographs and letters. Drafts of poems, scrapbooks and newspaper articles relating to Cunard's reports on the vast camps set up in France to receive Spanish Civil War refugees in 1939 formed the focus of my research in this archive. Towards the end of her life, Cunard herself was 'incarcerated' not in a prison but in a psychiatric hospital, and her archive contains a small collection of her writings from this period. Initially, I anticipated that I would focus on her sanatorium writings, but this thesis has developed into a study not of poetry written directly *from* the state of incarceration, but poetry that inscribes legacies of carcerality. Imprisonment is a frequent trope in Cunard's early poetry and her first-hand accounts of the Spanish camps re-surface in later poetry drafts, but again, the prison is far from the sole subject of her work. In the 1930s, Cunard was deeply involved in the American Civil Rights Movement and worked on the Scottsboro trial case defence alongside a slightly younger Rukeyser. She was also immersed in French Surrealism, a movement which profoundly influenced Mendelssohn's poetry.<sup>202</sup> Cunard's primary role in transatlantic modernism crucially mediates my study of the American Rukeyser and British Mendelssohn.<sup>203</sup> The civil war in Spain crystallised all of their politics, and the praxis and poetics of resistance preoccupies all of their writing. Moving between these three archives has enabled me to draw lateral connections between non-literary documents (trial transcripts, journalism, correspondence) and the literary output of these three activist-poets. These findings reinforce the larger argument I make in my thesis

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<sup>201</sup> Mendelssohn intended to write her PhD on Cunard. Cunard's influence is discussed at greater length in chapter one.

<sup>202</sup> Nancy Cunard, *Selected Poems*, ed. Sandeep Parmar (Manchester: Carcanet, 2016), p. xv.

<sup>203</sup> Cunard, p. xi.

concerning the importance of the material conditions of poetic production, and foregrounds the textual and historical nature of these poetic records.

A number of smaller archives have also contributed to my research. The Mary MacIntosh Archive, the Peter Riley Papers, the *Time Out*, *Friendz* and *Spare Rib* archives, and the British Newspaper Archive have been invaluable sources over the course of this project. Finally, the National Archives hold police records relating to the trial of the Stoke Newington Eight that would have been pertinent to this study, but which are embargoed - despite the submission of Freedom of Information requests - due to the sensitive nature of those records. The archival research that informs this project has been instrumental in shaping and reshaping its trajectory. The challenges thrown up by the archive include various forms of impenetrability, whether because of official embargoes or the sheer bulk of available material; a resistance to fixed categories, particularly in the case of Mendelssohn's archive; the recalibration necessitated after discovering suggestive dissonances or conflicting narratives; the discontinuities, as well as connections, between archival material and published texts; and the continual tension between order and disorder represented by the feminist archive. These challenges have delimited my field of study and acted as a continual reminder that interpretations of multivalent archival material, and equally multivalent published texts, cannot be reduced to a single, authoritative reading.

## **Chapter overviews**

This thesis is divided into five chapters, arranged chronologically by historical subject. Each chapter addresses a different site or matrix of incarceration that emerges in Mendelssohn's work. Chapter One discusses the camps set up in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War; Chapter Two discusses the Nazi concentration camp; Chapter Three the condition of the hostage, especially in the contexts of terrorist hostage-taking in the seventies; Chapter Four discusses Holloway Women's Prison in the seventies; and Chapter Five considers poetic representations of imprisonment in the nineties. The poetry discussed in each chapter is

thematically rather than chronologically arranged, as Mendelssohn's work (especially the undated archival material) is not easy to organise into a chronological sequence. Discussions of some poems, such as the pluralistic lyric 'Chekhov's Twilight World' and the long, rich poem '1:3ng', overlap between chapters. The poetry pamphlets Mendelssohn published throughout the 1990s are treated relatively discretely: *Tondo Aquatique* (1997) is discussed at greatest length in chapter two, *Bernache Nonnette* (1995) in chapter three, *viola tricolor* (1993) in chapter four and *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue.* (1996) in chapter five.

# 1. 'reading me through Guernica': The Spanish Civil War Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn and Nancy Cunard

Taking Mendelssohn's appearance in Godard's *British Sounds* (1969) alongside a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* as its starting point, this chapter explores the shaping influence of the Spanish Civil War upon the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn and Nancy Cunard. In the work of both poets, the legacy of that war generated a shared resistance to left-wing melancholy as theorised by Walter Benjamin and Wendy Brown. I turn to the theories of Heather Love and Enzo Traverso for an alternative conception of the 'melancholy' that is traceable in Mendelssohn's and Cunard's poetry. The first part of this chapter draws out the formative links between the Spanish revolutionaries of the thirties and the student radicals of the sixties and seventies, in particular, the Angry Brigade. The Spanish legacy is articulated in Mendelssohn's poetry as a resistance to being 'read' through Guernica. Such resistance, I argue, is constitutive of Mendelssohn's poetics of refusal. The second part of the chapter considers the ways in which Nancy Cunard's poetry inflects and anticipates Mendelssohn's, through a discussion of Cunard's Spanish Civil War poetry and her journalistic writing on the detention camps set up for Spanish refugees in France. For both poets, representations of Spain are inextricable from representations of carcerality. Cunard's temporally fluid poetics, her expressions of political commitment in a modernist mode and resistance to canonical melancholia prefigures the temporal fluidity of

Mendelssohn's lyric and its articulation of affective continuities and discontinuities between historical states and sites of carcerality.

## 2. 'Nowhere short of Nuremberg': Forms of Witness in the Concentrationary Poetics of Anna Mendelssohn and Muriel Rukeyser

Following on from the previous chapter's exploration of the emergence of the 'camp' in Europe after the Spanish Civil War, this chapter is structured around Mendelssohn's and Rukeyser's inscriptions of the paradigmatic carceral structure of the twentieth century: the Nazi concentration camp. Mendelssohn's poetry is highly cognisant of the legacy of anti-Semitism, and of the continuation of those conditions of sociological modernity that enabled the establishment of the Nazi concentration camp. The consciousness of historical continuity in her poetry generates an attentiveness to potentially fascistic aesthetic influences and strategies, and to the hazards of writing poetry after Auschwitz. In my argument, I consider this attentiveness as a form of poetic witness. Such historical continuity finds further inscription in the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, who is also deeply concerned with the function of 'witness'. Rukeyser invoked her poetry and the postwar principle of individual responsibility as part of her legal defence in 1972. The invocation of that postwar principle, the Nuremberg Obligation, in the courtroom consolidates the connection between this postwar legacy and the political movements of the seventies. I argue that the interplay between Rukeyser's and Mendelssohn's concentrationary poetics compels a rethinking of poetic witness as a tactic of resistance.

## 3. 'a violent woman in the violent day': Gender, Terrorism and the British Left in the long 1960s

Taking its lead from Rukeyser's self-identification as a 'violent woman in the violent day', this chapter explores the disavowal of terrorist violence in Mendelssohn's poetry, where this

disavowal intersects with and is problematized by the contorted relationship between women and violence. Drawing on theoretical work by Adriana Cavarero and Amanda Third, this chapter argues that Mendelssohn's lyrical inscriptions of violence disinter a history of subversive femininity. There is a sustained and dissonant voicing of both victimhood and agency in Mendelssohn's poetry that resists gendered categories and critical synthesis. The figure of the hostage, an exchangeable carceral subject, is central to the theories of terror and the theoretical synthesis to which this poetry is adamantly opposed. Yet Mendelssohn's poetry frequently lays claim to the identity of hostage in another re-figuring of categories of victim and wilful subject. An exploration of the gender politics of the British Left in the seventies demonstrates how Mendelssohn's early commitment to the politics of women's liberation shapes her later poetic understanding and treatment of feminised subjects.

#### 4. 'I collect sentences': The Psychiatric Incarceration of Women in the 1970s

Through a close reading of Mendelssohn's 'sentences' and the psychiatrisation of Holloway Women's Prison in the seventies, this chapter considers the ways in which penal language coalesces with legal and social norms to produce its (gendered) subjects. Sentences are the linguistic vehicles that transport the defendant from courtroom to prison cell; they are a unit of grammar and a unit of time. Building on theoretical writing on language and law by Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Denise Riley, I argue that Mendelssohn's experimental poetic sentences denature their authoritative legal and grammatical counterparts. The temporal fluidity and playfulness of Mendelssohn's carceral poetics subverts (while operating within) conventions of social, temporal and canonical order. Returning to the transformation of Holloway Women's Prison in the seventies, the second part of this chapter explores how the position of women in prison caricatures the position of women in society. Against the background of psychiatric interventions and innovations such as the anti-psychiatry movement in the sixties and seventies, I examine Mendelssohn's response to the highly-gendered twentieth-century discourse of normality.

## 5. 'Heroines from a foreign landscape': Carceral Poetics in the 1990s

In order to open up the poetic genealogies that stand behind and around Mendelssohn's work more fully, this final chapter situates Mendelssohn's poetry alongside other carceral poetics of the nineties. In stark contrast to the 'uniquely female tradition' of writing prisons identified by Gilbert and Gubar in the nineteenth century, and to the 'prison renaissance' of the seventies, there is an absence of women writing prisons in the nineties. However, there are a number of poets who seem to share Mendelssohn's preoccupation with forms or terms of imprisonment, from Hannah Weiner to Fanny Howe to Jennifer Moxley. This preoccupation coincides with the rehabilitation of the universal lyric 'I' in feminist experimental poetry of the nineties. By way of conclusion, I discuss sequences of poetry by Mendelssohn and Jennifer Moxley which seem to revive the tradition of the feminine carceral, although both of these poets look backwards to historical instances of imprisoned women in order to do so. Intersections between temporality, gender, incarceration and witness coalesce in the form and content of these pamphlets. Their lyrical biographies generate a reflexive engagement with the past, participate in a collective aesthetic that derives from the tradition of Black prison writing, and speak to the gendered aspects of the prison as theorised by Davis.



## Chapter 1

### ‘Reading me through Guernica’:

#### The Spanish Civil War Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn and Nancy Cunard

Nationalist Spain was little more than an open prison for all those who did not sympathize with the regime.

- Antony Beevor<sup>204</sup>

The ‘legacy’ of this century’s civil war in Spain has affected my life at all times.

- Anna Mendelssohn<sup>205</sup>

### Part 1: Spanish backdrops to *British Sounds*

In Jean-Luc Godard’s avant-garde documentary *British Sounds* (1969), a group of Essex university students manufacture their own revolutionary sounds out of pop music.

Prominent among them is a young Anna Mendelssohn, her face just visible beneath a wide-brimmed orange hat, pen in hand. She is rewriting the Beatles’ blandly catchy single ‘Hello, Goodbye’ (1967) with more militant lyrics.<sup>206</sup> The throwaway dualities that characterise the song (‘I say “High”, you say “Low”, ‘You say “Goodbye”, I say “Hello”’) are reworked and politicised: ‘I’m a fascist and you’re a revolutionary’, Mendelssohn suggests to her musical collaborator, a young woman in large dark glasses with a guitar under her arm. The original line, ‘you say ‘yes’, I say ‘no’’, is altered to ‘you say “Nixon”, I say “Mao” and changed again, on Mendelssohn’s suggestion, to the more punning ‘I say “US”, you say “Mao”’. The

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<sup>204</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006), p. 407.

<sup>205</sup> Letter to Tony Frazer, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/14.

<sup>206</sup> Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1995), p. 219.



assembled students, some proposing alternative lyrics, some making radical posters, are shown working collaboratively against the bourgeois ideology of popular culture. A few frames later they turn their attention to the Beatles' controversial single 'Revolution' (1968), John Lennon's response to the growing calls for revolution amongst the once pacifist counter-culture of the late sixties: 'Count me out'.<sup>207</sup> The release of 'Revolution' coincided with the violent police suppression of Vietnam protests in the US, and was widely condemned by New Left radicals as a betrayal of their cause. 'Revolution' provided prime material for subversive re-mixing. To complement these scenes of radical creative praxis, a voice-over raises theoretical questions of how revolutionary images and sounds can oppose the images and sounds of capitalism.

What does *British Sounds* have to do with carcerality and the Spanish Civil War? On the surface, not all that much. For the Marxist critic James Roy McBean, the documentary constitutes 'Godard's first serious attempt to break bourgeois ideology's stranglehold on the cinema, to free the cinema from misguided and mystifying aesthetics'.<sup>208</sup> The central subjects are working conditions in Britain in the sixties, the pernicious effects of capitalism, the promise of a socialist revolution, sexual politics, and the dialectical relation between images and sounds. But there are hints of the larger, international contexts from which such 'British sounds' emerged. Amongst the images of factory lines, Essex students and a fist punching through a Union Jack, a reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* can at one point be seen, hanging on the wall of an otherwise bare room. *Guernica* was painted in response to the devastating German-led bombardment of Guernica in 1937. On a busy market day, the German air force (allies of General Franco) attacked the small Basque market town. The attack was a rehearsal for the Luftwaffe's new method of warfare, the Blitzkrieg. After the first round of shelling, the townspeople emerged from cellars and rudimentary air raid shelters only to be met with a fresh wave of fire. Many fled into the surrounding fields where they were strafed by fighter squadrons. Panicked livestock as well as civilians were gunned down. The town was then

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<sup>207</sup> MacDonald, p. 237.

<sup>208</sup> James Roy McBean, "'See You at Mao': Godard's Revolutionary British Sounds", *Film Quarterly*, 24.2 (1970), 15–23 (p. 17).

systematically carpet-bombed for two and a half hours, reducing its buildings to rubble and killing – according to the most recent estimates – between 200 and 300 of its inhabitants.<sup>209</sup> Accounts of the scenes that followed are apocalyptic. Guernica burned all night; entire families were buried in their own houses; cattle and sheep ‘blazing with white phosphorous’ ran through the blackened streets.<sup>210</sup> Despite nationalist denial of the bombing, widespread media reports of the atrocities provoked an ‘international wave of outrage’.<sup>211</sup> Picasso’s mural-sized painting depicts jagged, horror-stricken figures that include women, a bull, a horse and a soldier, all in monochrome shades of grey, black and white. *Guernica* was first exhibited in the Paris International Exposition of 1937, and subsequently toured across Europe in 1938. As Ian Patterson writes in his book *Guernica and Total War*:

Picasso’s painting in response to the bombing made Guernica the most famous image of total war, and articulated the terror of it so potently that the picture has become almost synonymous with a sense of outrage and condemnation. Merely possessing a reproduction of it in Spain during the Franco era was an imprisonable offence.<sup>212</sup>

The threat that *Guernica* posed to the reputation of the Franco regime consequently incurs the threat of incarceration. This threat would have been current at the time *British Sounds* was released: Francoist censorship laws persisted well into the seventies, and even Lennon’s seemingly innocuous ‘Imagine’ was banned in 1971.<sup>213</sup> In *British Sounds*, *Guernica* appears in a shot that slowly pans over the sombre faces of working-class men. Their increasingly heated talk is of the daily hardships of work on the factory line at the British Motor Corporation, although Godard’s camera never shows whoever is speaking, only the silent listeners, and so the voices remain disembodied. The scene is interspersed and overlapped with the same technique that Godard deploys throughout *British Sounds*: a voiceover dictating socialist history lessons in clipped, BBC accents to a young child who painstakingly repeats their

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<sup>209</sup> Beevor, pp. 231-32.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>211</sup> Ian Patterson, *Guernica and Total War* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>213</sup> Stephen Burgen, ‘Bad vibraciones! The pop songs Franco didn’t want Spain to hear’, *Guardian*, 18 Jul 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/shortcuts/2016/jul/18/bad-vibraciones-the-pop-songs-franco-didnt-want-spain-to-hear>> [accessed 12 Jul 2018].

words. Behind all of this, hung against bare white walls, the only artwork in a room otherwise occupied by serious men in dark clothes, *Guernica* looms in and out of shot. *Guernica*'s presence in *British Sounds* underlines a still-strong connection between the horrors of the Spanish Civil War in the thirties and British left-wing politics of the late sixties and early seventies.

From the accounts that exist, it is clear that the Spanish connection was formative for the politics and tactics of the Angry Brigade. Carr recounts how two of those convicted alongside Mendelssohn, John Barker and Jim Greenfield, 'and some of their friends' attended a meeting in London in February 1970 at which the principal guest was Miguel García García, a Spanish anarchist from the Civil War period.<sup>214</sup> Due to a long period in one of Franco's notorious prisons García had 'lost his voice' and Stuart Christie 'did most of the talking'.<sup>215</sup> Christie, who later stood trial as one of the Angry Brigade but was acquitted of all charges, had himself spent three years in a Spanish prison for his attempted assassination of Franco.<sup>216</sup> Carr claims that veterans of the Spanish Civil War such as García were a direct influence on the urban guerrilla groups that emerged in the late sixties. Groups such as the anarchist anti-Franco First of May Group were responsible for producing the first 'communiqués' 'to explain the reasons for a particular act of violence'.<sup>217</sup> Urban guerrillas such as the Angry Brigade in Britain, the Red Army Faction in Germany, and the Red Brigades in Italy also adopted communiqués to explicate their actions. During the Angry Brigade trial, the prosecutor made the case for a direct link between the First of May Group, the Angry Brigade and the machine gunning of the Spanish Embassy in London in December 1970.<sup>218</sup> One of the first Angry Brigade communiqués names Francoist Spain as one of its primary targets:

Fascism & oppression  
will be smashed

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<sup>214</sup> Carr, pp. 45-49

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>218</sup> Carr, p. 136.

Embassies (Spanish Embassy machine gunned Thursday)  
 High Pigs  
 Spectacles  
 Judges  
 Property

Communiqué 1  
 The Angry Brigade<sup>219</sup>

‘Spectacles’ refer to commodified societal relations as theorised in Debord’s influential text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Another early communiqué claims that ‘[w]e machine-gunned the Spanish Embassy last night in solidarity with our Basque brothers and sisters’.<sup>220</sup> In a recent interview, Barker himself corroborates Carr’s account, recalling that the skills the Angry Brigade needed to carry out their actions came ‘from the Spanish anarchist movement’ and ‘were passed on by word of mouth’.<sup>221</sup> The Spanish connection was an oral, informal and improvised inheritance.

Godard’s use of *Guernica* as a backdrop to conditions of class struggle construes Picasso’s representation of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War as a stimulus or prelude to political struggle in the late sixties. McBean does not note the presence of *Guernica*, but argues that the climactic scene in which *Guernica* appears is the moment at which ‘image and sound are completely in synch’ and the alienation of the worker under capitalism gives way to the possibility of political action.<sup>222</sup> The association between *Guernica* and political mobilisation has a long history. In Antony Beevor’s historical account, the bombing of Guernica in 1937 ‘gave the Republic its greatest victory in the propaganda war’ and marked a turning point in the war in terms of international sympathy for the Republican cause.<sup>223</sup> In 1958, the art critic Roland Penrose described the far-reaching legacy of *Guernica* ‘as a lasting protest against war’ which remained ‘valid even after the cause for which it had been painted had met with defeat’.<sup>224</sup> Despite the loss that *Guernica* represents, Penrose stresses the durability of its

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>221</sup> ‘The Angry Brigade, part 1’, *Working Class History* podcast, 7 Mar 2018 <<https://workingclasshistory.com/>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018].

<sup>222</sup> McBean, p. 22.

<sup>223</sup> Beevor, p. 240.

<sup>224</sup> Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 300.

expression of protest. In 2003, the UN was widely criticised in the press for covering up their tapestry reproduction of *Guernica* during a broadcast address by Colin Powell when he made the case for war in Iraq.<sup>225</sup> The history of *Guernica*'s production, reception and dissemination, like that of the Spanish Civil War itself, is a history of the tension between resistance and defeat, or to put the same idea in different terms, between energized political commitment and what Walter Benjamin and others have called 'left melancholy', which this chapter will go on to discuss.

What does the legacy of Guernica have to do with Mendelssohn's poetry? In a letter, Mendelssohn claims that 'the "legacy" of this century's civil war in Spain has affected my life at all times'.<sup>226</sup> The Spanish legacy surfaces repeatedly in her poems as well as her letters, and one of those poems raises the question of what it might mean to 'read' her poetry, as Mendelssohn herself puts it, 'through Guernica'.<sup>227</sup> I argue that 'reading... through Guernica', which is to read against Mendelssohn's own poetic proscription, illuminates aspects of this poetry's relation to history, to the radical politics of the seventies, to the literary canon, and to legacies of carcerality. The poet, journalist and activist Nancy Cunard is a key comparative figure in this chapter. Her writings, like Mendelssohn's, were crucially shaped by the Spanish war. 'Spain', she wrote in 1954, 'took hold of me entirely'.<sup>228</sup> As an experimental, modernist lyricist, Cunard is an important literary forerunner for Mendelssohn. Through the writings of both poets, this chapter explores lyrical inscriptions of historical loss and defeat in relation to the Spanish Civil War, and related 'melancholic' events. I argue that both Mendelssohn and Cunard resist the canonical tendency to figure the Civil War as an exemplary melancholic event, whether contemporaneously and in the immediate aftermath (Cunard) or during the seventies, when the political mood was heavily inflected by the legacy of that war, and through to the last decades of the twentieth century

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<sup>225</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'Picasso tapestry of Guernica heads to UK', *Guardian*, 26 January 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/26/picasso-tapestry-guernica>> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>226</sup> Letter to Frazer, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/14.

<sup>227</sup> *LA*, p. 103.

<sup>228</sup> Cunard, *Grand Man* (1954), quoted in Ford, foreword to *Nancy Cunard: Brave Poet, Indomitable Rebel, 1896-1965* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1968), p. vii.

(Mendelssohn). In order to demonstrate the far-reaching legacy of the Spanish Civil War, this chapter began by establishing the connections between the revolutionary aftermath of that war and the actions of the Angry Brigade in the seventies. After giving a brief history of the Spanish Civil War, I discuss Mendelssohn's own 'Guernica' poem, a key example of poetic resistance to canonical melancholy. I turn to theories of left-wing melancholy and the legacy of the Angry Brigade in order to frame and extend my reading of melancholic accumulation and resistance in Mendelssohn's poetry. Further examples of her poetic inscriptions of the war in Spain show that these inscriptions frequently intersect with representations of carcerality. The connection between Spain and carcerality is palpable too in Cunard's poetry and journalism of the Spanish Civil War, which similarly resists melancholic invocations of the defeat of the Popular Front. In Mendelssohn's poetry, that canonical resistance manifests itself as a refusal of a reifying form of melancholia, but nonetheless incorporates elements of 'left melancholy'. That refusal is expressed via lyrical irreverence, direct address, dense but elusive referentiality, and a complication of the notion of lyric witness. Cunard's resistance to canonical melancholy takes the form of a direct political commitment that transmits itself into her poetry via self-conscious inscriptions of witness and negation, and an insistence on the present and the material over the abstract. I argue that the marked contrast between Cunard's immediate and particularised inscriptions of the war and the more abstract work of her contemporaries, such as W.H. Auden, are structured along lines of gender. At a time when many Western commentators are warning of a return to the 1930s, it seems apposite to reconsider the political and poetic commitments and afterlives of that era, and the conflict that foreshadowed the conflicts that were yet to come: the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936 following the February election of a broad-based, left-wing coalition government, the Popular Front. While the outcome of this election was celebrated by left-wing publications across the Western world, there was much right-wing opposition to its programme of progressive reforms. Five months after the election, General Franco led a military rebellion against the elected Republican government

with the expectation of a rapid victory.<sup>229</sup> However, Spanish civilians took up arms and put down the rebellion in cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, and it soon became apparent that this would be a prolonged struggle. Franco appealed for help from the fascist dictatorships of Germany and Italy, and soon began to receive men and supplies. International aid for the Republicans was slower to arrive. When the support of Stalinist Russia did arrive, it proved problematic for the Popular Front in more ways than one. Russian involvement not only exacerbated divisions amongst the Republicans (a non-homogenous group of liberals, socialists, communists, anarcho-syndicalists and others); it confirmed suspicions, fuelled by nationalist propaganda, of the communistic tendencies of the Popular Front.<sup>230</sup>

Catastrophically for the Republicans, Britain and France adopted non-interventionist positions – an early example of the failure to resist fascism in Europe. Historians of the period concur that the refusal of the non-aligned European powers to sell arms to the Republic effectively gave support to Franco, whose well-equipped, fully trained soldiers eventually overcame the under-equipped and poorly trained Republican army.<sup>231</sup> By 1937 the Republicans were already losing the war.<sup>232</sup> The fall of Barcelona in January 1939 was followed by the fall of Madrid two months later, and Franco's subsequent victory. However, Beevor writes that the widely publicized brutality of events such as Guernica, the mobilization of writers, intellectuals and workers in the International Brigades, and the outcome of the World War that followed has meant that the Spanish Civil War is 'one of the comparatively few cases where the most widely accepted version of events has been written more persuasively by the losers of the conflict than by the winners'.<sup>233</sup> Eric Hobsbawm concurs that the 'world's memory' of this Spanish war has been written not by the victors, but by artists, writers and intellectuals on behalf of the defeated.<sup>234</sup> It is therefore a highly literary history, in which both novels and poetry have played a significant role.

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<sup>229</sup> Patterson, p. 10.

<sup>230</sup> Beevor, pp. 238, 250.

<sup>231</sup> Patterson, p. 12; Beevor p. 148.

<sup>232</sup> Beevor, p. 80.

<sup>233</sup> Beevor, p. 238.

<sup>234</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'War of ideas', *Guardian*, 17 February 2007

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/feb/17/historybooks.featuresreviews>> [accessed on 25 January 2018].

The majority of these writers, such as George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, Muriel Rukeyser, Simone Weil, W.H. Auden, Langston Hughes, Stephen Spender and Sylvia Townsend Warner, supported the Republican campaign. Many not only spoke out in support of the Spanish government, but went to fight for the Republicans in that other remarkable invention of the Spanish Civil War, the International Brigades. Over the course of the war between 32,000 and 35,000 volunteers from 53 different countries fought in the International Brigades.<sup>235</sup> For many of those who opposed the rise of fascism in Spain, ‘fighting and writing became inseparable’, and Upton Sinclair described the International Brigades as ‘probably the most literary brigade in the history of warfare’.<sup>236</sup> While the mobilization of the literati was significant, especially in terms of propaganda, the brigades were mainly composed not of intellectuals but of the working class, many of them communists.<sup>237</sup> According to the English writer Laurie Lee, Spain offered the ‘chance to make one grand and uncomplicated gesture of personal sacrifice and faith... we had found a new freedom, almost a new morality, and discovered a new Satan – fascism’.<sup>238</sup> The rapid intervention not only of German and Italian troops but of the International Brigades gave the Spanish Civil War an international character and turned it into a symbol of the growing worldwide struggle between democracy and fascism. But whatever idealism the Republicans and their supporters went into war with was challenged by the brutal reality of life on the frontlines. Terrible privations, atrocities committed on both sides, and political infighting contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment and demoralization.<sup>239</sup> Hobsbawm records how Simone Weil, on her return, ‘though patently disappointed, said not a word’ and how ‘Auden wrote nothing’.<sup>240</sup>

There are repeated references in Mendelssohn’s writings, prose and poetic, to ‘those who/Fought against Fascism for a Spanish/Republic’, to the ‘daughters of Spain’, to the

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<sup>235</sup> Beevor, p. 155.

<sup>236</sup> Lois Gordon, *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 215.

<sup>237</sup> Hobsbawm.

<sup>238</sup> Cited in Hobsbawm.

<sup>239</sup> Beevor, p. 333.

<sup>240</sup> Hobsbawm.



International Brigades and to the Popular Front.<sup>241</sup> A poem from *Implacable Art* demands 'how could I love you for reading me through Guernica', juxtaposing love and (total) war.<sup>242</sup> There is a clear case to be made for reading the politics and tone of Mendelssohn's poems through the lens of the legacy of that war – to read her, as it were, 'through Guernica'. In a letter to Tony Frazer, Mendelssohn writes:

the 'legacy' of this century's civil war in Spain has affected my life at all times. Many of those who fought on the Republican/loyalist side considered writing to be an untoward disclosure and we are still guarded in this respect.<sup>243</sup>

In these lines Mendelssohn conflates herself with the 'we' of 'those who fought on the Republican [...] side', suggesting a historical persistence or far-reaching affective legacy that continues to structure the feelings and expression of those who came after. 'Writing', that 'untoward disclosure', is inhibited by or vigilant to the legacy of that war. Mendelssohn appears to refer to the reluctance of those writers who returned from the frontline to voice their disillusionment and damage the Republican cause. The relation that is inferred between fighting and writing reflects the 'disproportionate success of anti-fascist mobilization among Europe's intellectuals' during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>244</sup> In the poem by Mendelssohn that resists being read through Guernica, the act of reading as well as writing is inextricable from the memory of the war in Spain:

I know. it sounds tendentious or is it sententious.  
Is this going somewhere? however he was a friend.  
it's different for a girl. we used to speak of  
how not to talk down to people. pity. I said  
i'll write a love poem. Make it up if necessary.  
Just a Jew. Why the same is done to me. Looks like.  
Don't kid yourself. There is no flashing. We close up  
Fast. Watch out for double flash backs.  
So you are angry with us.  
[...]  
How could I love you for reading me through Guernica.  
High blood pressure? No. Low blood pressure.

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<sup>241</sup> *LA*, pp. 102, 116, 103; '1:3ng', p. 16.

<sup>242</sup> *LA*, p. 103.

<sup>243</sup> Letter to Frazer, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/14.

<sup>244</sup> Hobsbawm.

Quick. Think of something to stop me.<sup>245</sup>

‘[H]ow could I love you for reading me through Guernica’ is both a provocation and a warning and, conversely, forecloses a reading *not* through Guernica. The line sets up a potential love-relation between the reader and the poetry. One possible reading is that the poetic speaker assumes that a reader will attempt to read them through the lens of the historical and aesthetic event of Guernica. This raises the question of why, in a poem otherwise evacuated of reference to the Spanish Civil War, a reader might be tempted to read ‘through Guernica’. What we do know is that a ‘reading through Guernica’ will foreclose the possibility of love. It may be that Mendelssohn, in this line, is critiquing the condition of ‘left melancholy’, an imprisoning condition described in Wendy Brown’s influential essay as a ‘Left that is [...] caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing’.<sup>246</sup> To read the invocation of ‘love’ in this poem as transformative would be to falsify her poetry: hers are not, by and large, poems of transcendent hope or transformative love. The ‘love’ of this poem is opposed to the ‘backward looking and punishing’ structure of desire described by Brown, but is invoked not as love itself but as its foreclosed possibility. The poetic speaker tells us that ‘I’ll write a love poem’ but does not classify this poem as one. The question of whether the possibility of love remains buried within its impossibility - ‘how could I love you’ - remains suspended.

Vigilance or guardedness, reminiscent of Mendelssohn’s letter to Frazer, is practiced but also punctured by this poem. We are told to ‘[w]atch out for double flash backs’, cautioned against – or kept alert to – abrupt cuts back into the past. The wordplay of the first line (and indexed ‘title’) of the poem, ‘I know. it sounds tendentious or is it sententious’, anticipates a reading of its ‘sounds’ as either partisan or moralising. What the ‘I’ might ‘know’ may refer to Vladimir Mayakovsky’s claim that poetry ‘is at its very root

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<sup>245</sup> *LA*, p. 103.

<sup>246</sup> Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholy’, *boundary 2*, 26.3 (Autumn, 1999), 19-27 (p. 26).

tendentious', given Mendelssohn's interest in twentieth-century Russian poets.<sup>247</sup>

Tendentiousness was unavoidable in the polarised contexts of wartime Spain. Robert J. Clements asserts that 'there were almost no poetic chroniclers of the war who were not driven to the Left or Right, as was every individual living within embattled Spain itself'.<sup>248</sup> The reference to tendentiousness remains suggestive rather than conclusive; the speaker swaps 'tendentious' for 'sententious', which derives from the Latin for 'sentence' or 'opinion', and is now synonymous with pompous moralising.<sup>249</sup> The ludic indeterminacy posed here generates a suspension of meaning. Affect is more stable than meaning in this poem. Its fierce, ludic colloquialism is anything but melancholic. The slight despair that does edge into 'how could I love you...' is counterpoised by abrupt line breaks, sheer rebarbateness and the final line, which demands that its own runaway velocity be immobilised, as if to avoid any 'untoward disclosure'. 'I know. it sounds tendentious' is a vehement, fast and obscure poem. It issues a directive on reading practice and then obfuscates the practice of reading. 'Guernica' overshadows these fragmented and seemingly discrete lines as one of the few concrete references that a reader can viably hold onto.

To which 'Guernica' is Mendelssohn referring? The typography of the line ('Guernica' is not italicised) suggests the town itself. But there is archival evidence of Mendelssohn's own reading of Guernica as *Guernica*. A 1981 notebook contains several pages of notes on Picasso's famous painting. Mendelssohn's notes demonstrate that her interest in *Guernica* is chiefly aesthetic, rather than historical. She is attentive to the exchanges and connections between artists, critics and theorists that surround the painting.<sup>250</sup> There is a brief analysis of *Guernica*, which describes how 'the figure of the woman at the extreme right side of the painting is drawn in relief: top half (torso) high-lit emphasizing agony through contrast'.<sup>251</sup> This note indicates an attention to how intense

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<sup>247</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How are verses made?*, trans. G.M. Hyde (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1990), p. 48.

<sup>248</sup> Robert J. Clements, foreword to Marilyn Rosenthal, *Poetry of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. xvi.

<sup>249</sup> 'sententious, adj.' *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2018) <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

<sup>250</sup> Notebook, 1981, SxMs109/4/A/17.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

affect might be generated by technical means. Mendelssohn was also reading *Guernica* ‘through’ Penrose’s study of *Picasso: His Life and Work* (1958). Mendelssohn is particularly interested in Penrose’s interpretation of the representation of the ‘enemy’ in *Guernica*. Her notes refer to ‘searching the horizon for the enemy – Penrose and the bull p. 303’. This is a reference to Penrose’s argument that the bull does not represent the enemy, as critics commonly assume. Instead, the depiction of this enemy is omitted, and what we see is the bull ‘searching the horizon for the enemy’ and the devastation that absent enemy has wreaked.<sup>252</sup> Mendelssohn does not seem fully convinced by this quasi-poststructuralist conclusion. ‘This is strange’ she writes, and notes that Penrose cites an interview by Jerome Seckler with Picasso in which Picasso states that ‘the bull is not fascism, but it is brutality and darkness’.<sup>253</sup> These notes show us that Mendelssohn was thinking critically about conflicting representations and interpretations of *Guernica* in the eighties. It would seem that Mendelssohn’s ‘*Guernica*’ refers not simply to the originating event, but to the transmission of that event over time via artistic representations and critical accounts.

We might extend Mendelssohn’s resistance to being ‘read through *Guernica*’ to the lyrical tradition in which ‘Spain’ itself becomes a cipher for grief or melancholy. The Irish poet Louis MacNeice wrote in 1939 that ‘Spain would soon denote/Our grief, our aspirations’.<sup>254</sup> In 1937, Auden ventriloquises ‘Spain’ in what is perhaps the best-known English poem of the war, and figures it as the ‘choice’ for ‘romantic/Death’:

‘What’s your proposal? [...]
   
...the suicide pact, the romantic
   
Death? Very well, I accept for
   
I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.’<sup>255</sup>

The correspondence between Spain and grief or martyrdom made by MacNeice and Auden affirms the dominant melancholic key of Anglo Spanish Civil War poetry – not to mention

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<sup>252</sup> Penrose, p. 303.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1939 (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>255</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Spain’ (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 9. Quotation marks in original.

the egotistical conflation of the lyric 'I' with an entire nation. Yet as its appearance in *British Sounds* implies, *Guernica* is not just a horror-filled image of Guernica or total war; the image 'has become almost synonymous with a sense of outrage and condemnation'.<sup>256</sup> This is why, despite the terrible losses of Guernica which presaged the decimation and ultimate defeat of the Popular Front, *Guernica* is emblematic of the assumed moral rectitude of the Left, or a galvanizing representation of what the Left fights against. Mendelssohn's resistance to being read through Guernica is a resistance not just to a historical backdrop of horror or to reductive reading practices, but to the melancholic durability of the event.

### 1.1 Left Melancholy

There are several ways in which Mendelssohn's poetry resists and incorporates elements of left melancholy, a concept that has been differently theorised by a number of influential thinkers. If, as theorised by Walter Benjamin, melancholic poetry is commodified poetry, Mendelssohn certainly resists such commodification.<sup>257</sup> Brown's political reading of left melancholy, mentioned above, calls for a turn away from melancholy and towards hope, a move that Mendelssohn's poetry also resists. Writing on queer affect, Heather Love makes a case for the reclamation of negative feeling and historical continuity which comes closer to Mendelssohn's own poetic practice.<sup>258</sup> Enzo Traverso's survey of left melancholy takes the Spanish Civil War as a paradigmatic example of such melancholy, and reconfigures melancholy as the source of a potentially mobilising political practice, constituted by its *refusal* to compromise or to identify 'with the enemy'.<sup>259</sup> Both Simon Perril and Sean Bonney note the 'complex relationship' to refusal articulated in Mendelssohn's poetry.<sup>260</sup> That relationship is frequently performative, and disavows the very histories that it invokes, as in

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<sup>256</sup> Patterson, p. 2.

<sup>257</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy', *Screen* 15 (July 1974), 28-32.

<sup>258</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>259</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>260</sup> Bonney referenced by Perril, p. 105.

Mendelssohn's 'Guernica' poem. Guernica is raised only to be refuted, the past recalled not in order to be sublimated but acknowledged and its difference suspended. As another poem puts it, "'This is not Spain'",<sup>261</sup> Mendelssohn's non-fetishistic invocation of the past signals, as I shall argue, not lyric melancholia, but a lyric of melancholic refusal which shuttles back and forth between past and present. Moreover, the conceptualisation of left melancholy as an *imprisoning* legacy is latent in both Brown's and Traverso's accounts, as I shall show.

Mendelssohn's poems similarly articulate the legacy of the Spanish war as a form of imprisonment derived from actual conditions of incarceration.

The tradition of left melancholy dates back to before the Spanish Civil War. In 1917, Freud published his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', in which melancholia – the continued attachment to a loved object, long after it has been lost – is distinguished from mourning.<sup>262</sup> While mourning is a transitional process that enables loss to be overcome, melancholy is a permanent pathological state in which the sufferer remains attached to the object of loss. The loved object may be a person or a more abstract category, such as a hope, a belief or a utopian vision. The founding text of *left* melancholy, however, is more preoccupied with poetry than psychoanalysis. 'Left-Wing Melancholy' is the title of Benjamin's excoriating 1931 review of Erich Kästner's book of poetry, *Ein Mann gibt Auskunft* (*Let's Face It!*). Kästner was a poet and satirist known for his highly realistic style and fidelity to the values of the New Objectivity, a German art movement of the 1920s that rejected romantic idealism and focused on the objective world. In his review, Benjamin diagnoses the demise of left-wing radicalism amongst the intellectual elite from political struggle to 'negativistic quiet', from 'a means of production' to an 'article of consumption'.<sup>263</sup> Kästner's poems, for Benjamin, typify the modish packaging of left-wing politics by and for the intelligentsia as an 'article of consumption'. Revolutionary aims and ideas are turned into commodities by this process of literary reification. As discussed above,

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<sup>261</sup> *LA*, p. 116. Quotation marks in original.

<sup>262</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), XIV (1914-1916), pp. 237-258.

<sup>263</sup> Benjamin, p. 30.

Godard's *British Sounds* attempted to resist such aesthetic commodification. In a similar spirit of anti-capitalist resistance, Mendelssohn's poetic work is work of felt necessity, not profit, and highly critical of 'consumption', which she parodies in a poem as 'consumption. sumption certainly'.<sup>264</sup> In a letter, Mendelssohn says that '[p]oetry was never a by-product for me'; and in another poem, 'these are poets critical of consumerism'.<sup>265</sup> It is not certain to which poets the latter poem refers, but the next line refers directly to the English poet and novelist Malcolm Lowry, whose work differed from that of more canonical modernists 'because of his own intensely subjective approach to writing'.<sup>266</sup> Such an approach would seem to be at odds with the New Objectivists, for whom the objective and prosaic was the 'source of the sublime or beautiful'.<sup>267</sup> John Roberts has written of how 'many of the New Objectivists failed to understand how compatible the aestheticisation of everyday objects is with the demands of commodity culture'.<sup>268</sup> For Benjamin, the movement of New Objectivity, synonymous with the left intellectual elite, 'take[s] as much pride in the traces of former spiritual goods as the bourgeois does in his material goods'.<sup>269</sup> The poetry of left melancholy, in Benjamin's judgement, remains at a distance from political action and from the means of production, reconciles difference where it should suspend it, and cushions the interests of the middle-classes.<sup>270</sup> Punning on his own critique of how Kästner's poetry packages melancholy as an article of consumption, Benjamin concludes that the inevitable product of such 'consumption' is flatulence. Left melancholy, understood in these terms, involves the loss of political praxis, whilst the empty shell of that praxis remains in cultural circulation, reified and co-opted by capitalist forms of consumption. Mendelssohn's vehemently avant-garde poetry is adamantly opposed to such melancholic reification.

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<sup>264</sup> *LA*, p. 133.

<sup>265</sup> Letter to Noella Smith, SxMs109/3/A/1/58; 'on challenge, positive attitudes and "les peintres cubists"', *viola tricolor*.

<sup>266</sup> Mark L. Hama, "'Whatever I Do, It Shall Be Deliberately': The Consul's Political Epiphany in 'Under the Volcano'", *South Central Review*, 22:2 (Summer, 2005) 59–77 (p.59).

<sup>267</sup> John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption* (Manchester, UK/New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 54.

<sup>268</sup> Roberts, p. 46.

<sup>269</sup> Benjamin, p. 30.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–31.

More recent theorists of left melancholy have been less concerned with its poetic incarnations, and more preoccupied with its political effects. Wendy Brown interprets Benjamin's 'left melancholy' as a condition that 'issues from some unaccountable loss, some unavowably crushed ideal, contemporarily signified by the terms *left*, *socialism*, *Marx* or *movement*'.<sup>271</sup> Writing in 1999, Brown reads 'left melancholy' both psychoanalytically and politically as something to be resisted.<sup>272</sup> A long chain of political defeats which include the 'literal disintegration of socialist regimes and the legitimacy of Marxism' constitute the lost objects of left melancholy, and the late twentieth-century 'crisis of the left' identified by Stuart Hall arises from the failure to respond effectively to these failures.<sup>273</sup> Although Brown does acknowledge the 'value or valence of sadness', she is more concerned with how the narcissism and self-absorption of left melancholy paralyses political mobilisation.<sup>274</sup> For Brown, to dwell nostalgically on the losses of the past is to forgo the possibility of political transformation in the present. 'What emerges', according to Brown, is a Left more attached to 'its own marginality and failure' than to 'hopefulness'.<sup>275</sup> Mendelssohn's dynamic poetry, most of which appeared during those decades that Hall described as imbued by the 'crisis of the left', certainly returns again and again to the past, but it is not a poetry of nostalgia or of transformative hope.

Heather Love offers an alternative response to the condition of melancholy. Rather than attempting to cordon off 'politically useful affects' such as hope, Love ventures that a 'persistent attention to useless feelings is all about action: about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible'.<sup>276</sup> In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Love centres the losses and damage of queer experience, and seeks to valorise feelings of backwardness, feelings that might include ambivalence, failure, antimodernism, victimhood and melancholia.<sup>277</sup> Despite her focus on feeling and psychic

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<sup>271</sup> Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', p. 22.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>273</sup> Hall quoted by Brown, *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>276</sup> Love, p. 13.

<sup>277</sup> Love, p. 146.



experience, Love resists psychoanalysis as a diagnostic – that is, problem-solving - reading practice.<sup>278</sup> Love stresses the importance of melancholic identifications with earlier history, and she critiques Brown for returning to ‘what is invariably invoked as the only viable political affect: hope for a better future’.<sup>279</sup> Instead, Love aims to ‘tarry[...] with negativity’ and ‘incorporate the damage that we hope to repair’.<sup>280</sup> Love’s insistence on the ‘importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury’ is a description that might be applied to Mendelssohn’s poetry, full as it is of historical debris.<sup>281</sup> The injuries that Mendelssohn’s poems cling to range from the suppression of voice to forms of incarceration and acts of physical violence. These injuries are often figured as personal, as in ‘[t]eeth are smashed for escaping a/hideous persecutor’, but frequently draw on histories of violence, such as ‘Osip Mandelstam in England would have been/murdered too’.<sup>282</sup> As a key example of why spending time with historical injury is important, Love cites the affirmative movement of gay pride, which seeks to resist the connection between homosexuality and shame. The inadvertent effect of such affirmative politics, however, may be to deny the ongoing and legitimate gay experience of loss and shame. Correspondently, Mendelssohn’s insistence on instances of historical injury affirm the ongoing trauma of these past events. Like Love, her poetry is concerned to track the continuity between historical injury and present structures of feeling.<sup>283</sup> The juncture between politics and feelings, the social and the psychic, and the individual and the historical, are crucial to Love’s argument. If individual grief can be amplified into social grievance, political action can be taken to address that grievance. Thus left melancholy is refigured by Love as an affect that can contribute to a political praxis, a reconfiguration that comes closer to Mendelssohn’s own poetic figurations of melancholy, which shuttle between the individual and the historical, the present and the past.

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., pp. 150, 23.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., pp. 149, 151.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>282</sup> *LA*, p. 67.

<sup>283</sup> Love, p. 20.

Most recently, in *Left Wing Melancholia* (2017) Enzo Traverso has addressed the changing condition of 'left-wing melancholia' during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Traverso argues that melancholy can be conceived as a form of refusal, in a theoretical corollary to Mendelssohn's poetics. Traverso draws on Benjamin's very different conceptualisation of melancholy in *Trauerspiel*, where 'the mournful exploration of the world reduced to a field of ruins [...] engenders a new vision', in order to conceive of a 'fruitful', mobilising form of melancholia as 'obstinate refusal' that stands apart from the depoliticised melancholy of the New Objectivists.<sup>284</sup> Traverso argues that melancholy can function as a form of political praxis because the 'experience of being vanquished contains an epistemological potential that transcends its cause'.<sup>285</sup> To illustrate the epistemological potential of the vanquished, Traverso points to the rich tradition of Marxist historiography written from the perspective of the defeated, from subaltern studies to works of historical materialism such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Unlike histories written from the perspective of the victor, these melancholic histories are compelled to rethink the past sharply and critically. This critical rethinking constitutes a 'dialectic of defeat' in which defeat catalyses new beginnings, learning and advancement.<sup>286</sup> Here Traverso draws on Rosa Luxemburg's famous proclamation, made in 1919 shortly before her death at the hands of the *Freikorps*, that '[t]he whole road of socialism [...] is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats [...] Today, as we advance [...] we stand on the foundation of those very defeats'.<sup>287</sup> In these accounts, melancholic attachment supplies the alchemy by which defeat or failure is transformed into triumph. The possibility of such alchemical transformation stalls, according to Traverso, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>288</sup> Traverso locates 1989 as the turning point after which the 'defeats of the revolutions of the twentieth century' become 'an overwhelming heaviness paralyzing the

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<sup>284</sup> Traverso, pp. 20, 48.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-36.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

utopic imagination' rather than a catalysing force.<sup>289</sup> The widespread destruction of socialist monuments after 1989 leads Traverso to describe history at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a 'landscape of ruins'.<sup>290</sup> The dominance of the figure of the victim is another factor that contributes to amnesia and obscures the twentieth century's 'legacy of liberation struggles'.<sup>291</sup> Traverso attributes this dominance to the 'quality and influence' of *the literary works* of the victims of concentration camps: 'the memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism', returning to Benjamin's notion of melancholy as a *literary* quality.<sup>292</sup> In the examples Traverso gives, and saliently for this study, the memory of the *prison* appears to erase the memory of resistance. There is a strong suggestion that an imprisoning melancholic legacy derives from the memory of *actual* conditions of incarceration. It is because victims remain 'the dominant feature of the globalization of memories in the early twenty first century' that the global memory of suffering overtakes hope, and thus 'melancholy [is] the dominant feeling of a world burdened with its past'.<sup>293</sup> The Spanish Civil War offers a paradigmatic example not only of a propensity to reduce history to a narrative 'in which there were only persecutors and victims' but of a willingly "amnesic" transition to democracy' based upon the *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting) after Franco's death in 1975.<sup>294</sup> According to Traverso, a transferral of feeling from the lost beloved object to a new object of love, from melancholy to hope, constitutes a political betrayal:

Successful mourning could also mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced with accepted capitalism. If a socialist alternative does not exist the rejection of real socialism inevitably becomes a disenchanted acceptance of market capitalism, neoliberalism and so on. In this case, *melancholy would be the obstinate refusal* of any compromise with domination.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., pp. 9, 44.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. p. 45; italics my own.

In an age of the collapse of utopias, the only way to sustain a socialist politics is to resist mourning and sustain melancholy as a mode of *refusal*. In this politicised guise, melancholy ‘is inseparable from hope’, and to look backwards is to focus on the potentialities of the past, not its flawed realisation.<sup>296</sup> When Mendelssohn’s poetry looks to the past, and in particular to the Spanish legacy, it does not do so in a mood of nostalgia or sublimation, but in a mode of vehement but often playful refusal. For the remainder of this chapter, I distinguish between ‘reifying’ forms of melancholia as theorised by Freud, Benjamin and Brown, and re-conceptualisations of melancholia as a potential form of political praxis or as anti-capitalist ‘refusal’, as theorised by Love and Traverso respectively. Reifying melancholy, as we have seen, is conceived as an *imprisoning* legacy that derives from actual conditions of imprisonment.

The imprisoning legacy of Spain haunts the bitter, whimsical poem ‘off the cuff’ from *Implacable Art*. Mendelssohn’s poetry, like that of many linguistically innovative poets, is dense with historical fragments. ‘[O]ff the cuff’ appears to mock this melancholic referential tendency through ventriloquised disavowals: “‘This was never France.’” “‘This is not Spain.’” “‘This is not Russia.’” “‘This is not/Portugal’” “‘This is not the Paris Commune’”.<sup>297</sup> While this expansive list has many possible implications, these are all sites of intense revolutionary, communistic and fascistic activity in the twentieth century, with the exception of the nineteenth century Paris Commune, whose specificity might well point to the relevance of the rest. Despite the subsequent unravelling into surrealistic variations (“‘This is not a frying pan.’” [...] “‘This is not a tooth; it is a beach.’”), the poem’s sequence of disavowals again forecloses the possibility of *not* reading ‘this’ through accrued historical sites and instances. The lyric negation of ‘off the cuff’ both acknowledges and *refuses* sites of potential melancholia. Only Spain, out of all these variations, is invoked more than once in the poem. We also encounter ‘daughters of Spain locked in/locked up/locked away’; and the determination to ‘give her a taste of Spain’. The incarcerated ‘daughters of Spain’ may

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., pp. 48, 52.

<sup>297</sup> *LA*, p. 116.

refer to the strict constraints placed upon women under Franco's regime. The familial relation recalls the comradely language of the Angry Brigade's First Communiqué: 'our Basque brothers and sisters'.<sup>298</sup> The carcerality here associated with the triply imprisoned 'daughters of Spain' forms part of a larger pattern in Mendelssohn's poetic inscriptions of Spain, as I shall go on to discuss.

The mode of refusal that marks poems such as 'I know.' and 'off the cuff' has been noted as a definitive mode for another pivotal political event which Mendelssohn experienced directly: the uprisings of May '68. For Kristin Ross, May '68 was 'above all else a massive refusal' of rigid social categories and dominant ideologies.<sup>299</sup> Mendelssohn travelled to Paris as part of an 'official revolutionary group' in May '68, a moment whose radical promise has often been cast as another failed revolution to add to the annals of left-wing melancholy.<sup>300</sup> Yet Mendelssohn's memory of May is bound up with hope. In a letter to the Essex academic Herbie Butterfield, Mendelssohn wrote that 'as I remember we could hold 1968 in the palm of our hand and say this is what we want for the future'.<sup>301</sup> According to Carr's history, the failure of May '68, metabolised into political promise, mobilised groups such as the Angry Brigade.<sup>302</sup> May '68 stands as another one of the formative connections between the Republican defeat in Spain and the activities of young radicals in Britain three decades later. Traverso reminds his reader that the uprisings of May '68 coincided with the decline of Francoism in Spain, in a suggestion of the contemporary hopefulness of the movement.<sup>303</sup> Traces of May '68 are detectable in a poem that addresses what is, for Traverso, the undesirable 'end of melancholia'. These traces suggest that May's ghostly presence might structure a non-commodifying form of melancholic refusal:

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<sup>298</sup> Carr, p. 237.

<sup>299</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>300</sup> Tom Clark, in his biography of Ed Dorn, notes that '[a] member of the small contingent of Essex academics [who] traveled to Paris [in May 1968] sent back a manifesto of sorts to the *Times* from the cross-channel ferry, advertising the expedition as a gesture of support for the "revolution." "He listed all our names – including Anna Mendelsohn who was later arrested with others for having a bomb in her house (can't remember what they intended to blow up)..."', from *Edward Dorn: A World of Difference* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002), p. 39.

<sup>301</sup> Letter to Butterfield, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/3.

<sup>302</sup> Carr, p. 23.

<sup>303</sup> Traverso, p. 12.

**it was an art** & is now a function,  
 if it does not work it is shot, his shirt  
 shot, space filled or designed to restore  
 the absence of sadness & the end of melancholia  
 [...]

this poem will arrive to sink  
 flat on the desperate pavements  
 the art of necessity paints of pavements  
 the art of aesthetic enlarges blood spats  
 the art of morality unites against immigrants  
 the jet set lives on its invisible maps.<sup>304</sup>

The undefined subject, 'it', has shifted from the realm of art to an operational role which, if not fulfilled, carries a high penalty. In this transformed 'space', there is no room for 'sadness' or 'melancholia', which are absent or ended. The reflexive turn to 'this poem', which is imagined as embedded on the 'desperate pavements' like a form of street art, brings a political topology to bear upon the invocation of melancholia. Poems sunk into pavements recall and rework the 1968 slogan '*sous les pavés, la plage*' (beneath the pavement, the beach). In this reading, '**it was an art**' figures the poem as a revolutionary slogan written in the language of détournement or derailment. Détournement was a technique of the Situationist Internationale (SI), who critiqued the increasing commodification of social relations under capital. The SI sought to undo social commodification through tactics that included détournement, or the appropriation and alteration of existing media (often advertisements or pop lyrics, as demonstrated by the Essex students in *British Sounds*). An ambiguity surrounds the figuring of the poem as revolutionary slogan, that is, as 'necessary' art. 'Necessity' is close to 'function', which is seemingly critiqued in the opening line of the poem. None of these nascent classifications of art (necessary, aesthetic, moral) are idealised or transcendent categories. Like Benjamin, Mendelssohn is critical of consumerist or bourgeois literary forms; the final category, 'the art of morality', is xenophobic, and the location of the wealthy 'jet set'. But although May '68 can be read as a formative context for 'this poem', and some melancholy attaches to its invocation of 'desperate pavements', its traces are not idealised or even concrete (no pun intended). The suggestion of '68 is

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<sup>304</sup> LA, p. 85. Bold type in original.

suspended but not confirmed, thus avoiding the poetic reification to which Benjamin objected. The snap of the unexpected rhyme between ‘spats’ and ‘maps’ signals the ‘end’ of that melancholic suggestion, which is nevertheless an enduring and shaping presence. ‘[I]t **was an art**’ self-consciously invokes what might constitute a betrayal, the ‘end of melancholia’. But traces of melancholy, in my reading, persist. The elusive inscription of that shadowy persistence operates as a refusal both of the vaunted ‘end of melancholia’ and the reification of the melancholic event. The lost hope of revolution is recalled, but rather than being fetishized, it is reworked in the Situationist tradition of *détournement*.

## 1.2 The Angry Brigade and its Afterlives

What is the relationship of the Angry Brigade, the trial of whom might be said to represent the main melancholic event in Mendelssohn’s life, to left melancholy? While May ’68 has endured and continued to ‘assert its eventfulness’, as Ross tells us in *May ’68 and its Afterlives*, historians have tended to either dismiss the Angry Brigade or cast them as exemplary of the failure of radical British politics, although more recent histories are beginning to revive the significance of their political agenda.<sup>305</sup> That failure is usually cast in terms of the repressive clampdown on the counterculture legitimated by the Brigade’s actions, and with reference to the Brigade’s failure to exact any concessions from the government. The perceived failure of the Angry Brigade is of a completely different order of magnitude to the failures of, to list some of the preeminent examples, the Paris Commune in 1871, communism after 1989, or the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War – although the Angry Brigade certainly saw themselves as taking up the mantle of such revolutionary moments, as communiqué six expresses: ‘We are celebrating the hundred years of the Paris Commune’.<sup>306</sup> But the failure

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<sup>305</sup> Ross, p. 1; Taylor, pp. 30-47; also see Joseph Darlington, ‘Cell of One: B.S. Johnson, *Christie Mahy* and the Angry Brigade’, *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde* ed. Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 87-102 (p. 87).

<sup>306</sup> Carr, p. 240.

of the Angry Brigade is particularised by its very different mode of resistance – urban terrorism – which was deeply influenced by the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.

It was not only the communiqué that the Angry Brigade borrowed from the Spanish anarchists. Carr speculates that ‘the “Brigade” bit smacked [...] of the Spanish Civil War’.<sup>307</sup> In a chapter on ‘Creative Violence’ that opens with a reference to the Angry Brigade, Anthony M. Burton writes of how ‘the sympathies and passions aroused by the Spanish Civil War revived anarchism in Britain, especially among intellectuals’.<sup>308</sup> Burton extends his analysis of the influence of anarchism through the New Left and finds it to be a motivating factor in urban violence. In the same chapter, Burton cites an interview given by Mendelssohn for a BBC Panorama documentary during the brief period that she spent out of prison on bail in 1971. Asked whether the Angry Brigade had changed anything, the-then Anna Mendelson replies: ‘it hasn’t changed anything. It hasn’t changed anything at all’.<sup>309</sup> Robin Morgan, in her study of the sexuality of terrorism, also cites this interview and reads Mendelssohn’s response as an unequivocal admittance of the failure of political violence.<sup>310</sup> Mendelssohn was outraged by her inclusion in Morgan’s study, on the grounds of its mischaracterisation of herself as ‘a militant revolutionary’.<sup>311</sup> Mendelson’s performance in the BBC interview suggests alternative possible conclusions to Morgan’s and Burton’s. Her manner is dry and deliberate, indicating a refusal to lionise the actions of the Angry Brigade or to fetishize their failure. Her other statements, such as ‘justification is a liberal notion’, suggest that the terms of the question – ‘has the Angry Brigade changed anything’ - are themselves inadequate to a form of radical politics that would eschew liberal concepts such as justification, success and failure. One of the slogans of May ’68 asserted that ‘no success is definitive in a capitalist regime’.<sup>312</sup> It may also be the case that ‘failure’ is the wrong criteria with which to evaluate the outcome of terrorist violence. Richard English’s recent study

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<sup>307</sup> Carr, p. 58.

<sup>308</sup> Anthony M. Burton, *Urban Terrorism: Theory, Practice and Response* (London: Leo Cooper, 1975), p. 30.

<sup>309</sup> Burton, p. 33.

<sup>310</sup> Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. 208.

<sup>311</sup> Letter to Evans, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/13.

<sup>312</sup> Ross, p. 69.



*Does Terrorism Work?* admits that the scholarship is starkly divided on this question but comes to the conclusion that terrorism is rarely ‘successful’ as such. With a few exceptions, the main aims of terrorist groups are rarely realised, whereas ‘state responses to terrorism almost certainly do more to shape the world and its politics than do non-state terrorist acts themselves’.<sup>313</sup> English’s insight is supported by Stuart Hall’s conclusion that while the Brigade’s intention was to raise public consciousness of state oppression, they ‘cemented in public consciousness the inextricable link [...] between the politics of the alternate society and the violent threat to the state’.<sup>314</sup> Their legacy was to legitimate an ‘intensification of police repression of dissent over the 1970s’, and to enable the establishment to reassert and consolidate social control.<sup>315</sup> Mendelson’s own response to the question of the success of the Angry Brigade re-casts failure, the founding concept of left melancholy, as a capitulation – due to its very terms – to the structures of domination that a radical politics would seek to challenge.

As one of the few extensive public utterances by any of the Angry Brigade’s alleged members, Mendelssohn’s poetry is an invaluable resource in reappraising the terms of this history.<sup>316</sup> In places, Mendelssohn’s lyrical record corroborates existing histories; but it extends these histories, too, to show how they are marked by instances of detainment both historical and current. For instance, in Mendelssohn’s long poem ‘1:3ng’, published in Douglas Oliver’s poetry magazine *Gard du Nord* in 1997, the failure of 1972 is aligned with previous failures of the Left – especially with the diffuse alliances represented by the ‘popular front’. Traces of left melancholy, or what the poem calls ‘resurrected snippets’, are everywhere in this poem. ‘They called themselves communists once’ recalls a time before the discreditation of communism, when avowed communists ‘told you the price of their

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<sup>313</sup> Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>314</sup> Stuart Hall and others, *Policing the Crisis: mugging, the state and law and order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 286.

<sup>315</sup> Taylor, p. 43; in addition, ‘[f]ollowing the trial, senior members of the judiciary in 1973 issued what is known as a “practice direction”’, Peter Hain, *Political Trials in Britain* (London: Viking, 1984), p. 146. For further discussion of the curtailment of jury vetting following the Angry Brigade trial, see E.P. Thompson, ‘Subduing the jury’, *LRB*, 8.22, 18 December 1986, 12-13; and introduction to Harriet Harman and John Griffith, *Justice Deserted: the Subversion of the Jury* (London: National Council for Civil Liberties, 1979).

<sup>316</sup> Here I have qualified a claim made by Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 146.

sweaters'.<sup>317</sup> The claim 'I am another Irina Ratushinskaya' aligns the poetic speaker with a well-known Russian dissident poet, imprisoned for 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda' in 1983.<sup>318</sup> Further on, the reader is told that the 'popular fronts are key factors'. '[P]opular fronts' may take many different forms, but within a twentieth-century Western tradition they primarily refer to the Popular Front governments of Spain and France in the 1930s. As discussed above, the election of the Popular Front government in Spain in 1936 was initially a victory for the Left, but that same Popular Front, its internal tensions and divisions, subsequently became a 'key factor' in its own fragmentation and defeat. The failure of the Popular Front government in France to intervene on behalf of the Spanish Republic arguably contributed not only to the defeat of its counterpart in Spain, but to its own collapse and the outbreak of World War II.<sup>319</sup> Mendelssohn offhandedly inscribes the 'popular front(s)' into her poetry in amongst a series of lines that deliberately warp any tendency towards strict linearity:

The popular fronts are key factors, most artists left, I mess about apparently,  
 producing an unfixed line  
 My perspectives are negligible, I give children time, & time should not be given  
 it should be taken  
 It's a skill I am told to observe the general march, this is one popular front, if  
 Rimbaud has ever

Crossed your eyes, notes squint, don't Waft Him out of Line he wants to be  
 drawn in, gradually,  
 Every Time, this makes no sense, I don't want to draw a portrait don't want to  
 [don't  
 Want to give him any more of my time, it's gradual absorption, into Legitimacy,  
 [a straight  
 Slightly angled vertical line, magnetic north, amen.<sup>320</sup>

<sup>317</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 14.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p. 15; Harrison Smith, 'Irina Ratushinskaya: Soviet dissident who turned captivity into poetry', *The Independent*, 12 July 2017 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/irina-ratushinskaya-soviet-dissident-who-turned-captivity-into-poetry-obituary-a7833391.html>> [accessed 25 Jul 2018].

<sup>319</sup> Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 202; and Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic 1914-1938*, trans. Antony Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 317.

<sup>320</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 16.

The point at which this lyrical record diverges from established histories is in the close correspondence drawn between the central role played by ‘popular fronts’ and incarceration. The ‘time’ that is ‘taken’ recalls the prisoner who is ‘doing time’ in their prison cell. In Foucault’s history of the prison, modern punishment (like capitalist economies) is exemplified by a timetable.<sup>321</sup> Against what may be the exodus of ‘artists’ (which may well recall the exodus of refugees from Spain in the thirties) or the predilection of artists to be *on* the ‘left’, Mendelssohn derives her own messy and ‘unfixed line’. In contrast with the grand historical moments implied by ‘popular fronts’ the ‘I’ of the poem aligns itself with insignificance, imprecision and a lack of seriousness. In keeping with this telescoping movement, the poem moves from popular fronts to the work of the caregiver (‘I give children time’) which is framed as perverse (‘time should not be given’). The ‘general march’ suggests a conformist majority which Mendelssohn characterises as ‘one popular front’ against which the rebellious figure of Rimbaud is thrown into relief. A few lines later, the ‘lines’ are crossed or transgressed: ‘They drove through the lines’.<sup>322</sup> ‘Lines’ and their fixedness, inclusions, constraints and direction preoccupy Mendelssohn here as elsewhere. ‘[D]emocracy requires a line’ states the poem ‘Franked’, published in Rod Mengham’s *Vanishing Points* (2004). The close and much-debated relation between democracy and legitimacy is invoked through the conjoining figure of the ‘line’ in both of these poems. To be drawn *into* ‘Legitimacy’ in the above lines from ‘1:3ng’ is to be drawn *into* line. The threat of ‘absorption into Legitimacy’ also recalls Mendelson’s BBC interview claim that ‘justification is a liberal notion’, and that legitimacy is not necessarily desirable. ‘Popular fronts’ form another kind of ‘line’, but, like the ‘unfixed line’, the ‘slightly angled vertical line’ and being ‘out of Line’, none of these lines – with the exception of ‘magnetic north’ – conform to strict linearity. The repetition of ‘line’ chimes with the repetition of ‘time’ throughout this extract, drawing an aural correspondence between form and carceral temporality. In this reading, ‘imprisonment’ can be equated with ‘absorption, into

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<sup>321</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 6-7, 152.

<sup>322</sup> Lake, ‘1:3ng’, p. 16.

Legitimacy', much as the Angry Brigade's inadvertent legitimization of the expansion of police powers precipitated Mendelssohn's own imprisonment.

None of these 'lines' of my own interpretation are fixed. To read Mendelssohn's elusive, ambivalent poetry is to be in the position of constant retraction. A few lines later, the poetic speaker declares that 'I am held in sexism. it was not a conviction it was a sentencing', shifting the imprisoning frame from the shadow of the popular fronts to systemic gendered discrimination. To be 'held in sexism' is to conceive of imprisonment again in quasi-Foucauldian terms, as an 'economy of suspended rights'.<sup>323</sup> As in 'I know.', the poem issues stringent directives to its reader: 'I so don't want to be read by/People who play war games, or don't allow poems to drift out of their windows'.<sup>324</sup> The preferred reader, then, is non-combative and content to allow their readings to remain unfixed. But the double negation ('so don't', 'don't') of these lines complicates a reading of what kind of reader is undesirable. Does the double negative cancel itself out? Once again, the poem's affect, a sort of ferocious reticence, is more stable than its multiplicity of meanings. 'I mess about apparently' adopts a familiar, retaliatory nonchalance. The repeated expression of rejection, 'I don't want [...] don't want to don't/Want', is another iteration of Mendelssohn's poetics of refusal. To write against, to counter hegemonic modes, to always be in the position of opposition, is not the sum total of Mendelssohn's lyrical refusal. Her lyric refusal grounds itself in the demand for readerly orienteering. Concrete historical markers, in the form of popular fronts or Guernica, are invoked but also foreclosed. Mendelssohn's poetry is full of ruins, or historical debris, but the grand melancholic narratives these ruins might bear with them are punctured by the irreverent ferocity of Mendelssohn's lyric, 'defacing tradition' like paint thrown across the face of a monument.<sup>325</sup>

In another poem that refers explicitly to the Spanish Civil War, the vehemence, refusal and irreverence of 'I know.', '1:3ng' and 'off the cuff' give way to anger and more conventional grammatical formulations. Recorded as 'I also wish to refer to my loathing' in

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<sup>323</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 11.

<sup>324</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 16.

<sup>325</sup> *LA*, p. 111.

the index, this poem faces the poem that asks ‘how can I love you for reading me through Guernica?’ Another instance of exceptional incarceration emerges in this poem, in the form of the Nazi labour camp:

I also wish to refer to my loathing of conformism  
& levelling, of nothing in other words,  
nothing apart from the grim grisly grey  
‘night and fog’ existence which climbed &  
pulled my own life certainly. Citing  
Kate O’Brien an Irish writer who was  
in Spain during the Civil War this century<sup>326</sup>

The ‘night and fog’ existence refers to Alain Resnais’ Holocaust film of the same name, which I will discuss at greater length in chapter two. The ‘loathing’ of the poem’s titular first line is juxtaposed to a far less emotive action, that of reference. This juxtaposition works both to satirise the more formal register; to expose the paucity of such austere functions of language in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust and of Spain; and to isolate and emphasise the forcefulness of ‘loathing’ through contrast. The poem does not settle into a single register. The grip the Holocaust exerts over the life of the speaker is abruptly followed by another term of reference: citation. To cite, in its original use, was to summon a witness to appear in a court of law. The cited witness here is Kate O’Brien, a radical Irish writer. O’Brien was a supporter of the Spanish Republicans and her travelogue *Farewell Spain* (1937) was highly critical of Franco.<sup>327</sup> She forms part of an extended genealogy of dissident female writers who are ‘cited’ or invoked in Mendelssohn’s work. These constellations of cultural figures and artefacts constitute Mendelssohn’s own ‘reading through Guernica’, in which the pseudo-confessional lyric is thickened and emulsified through the evocation of weighty cultural markers, and shuttles between the personal and the historic, the present and the past. The poem continues:

People are lecturing on the Spanish Civil War

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<sup>326</sup> *LA*, p. 102.

<sup>327</sup> Jane Davison, *Kate O’Brien and Spanish Literary Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 2. Two of O’Brien’s novels were also banned in Ireland for obscenity; Davison, pp. 15, 17.

Who have no direct experience of  
 Its aftermath. They are lecturing with  
 Impunity and they are also removing  
 The children of the children of those who  
 Fought against Fascism for a Spanish  
 Republic.

The poem's concern is directed at the circulation of the history of the Civil War some decades later – its 'aftermath'. Although it is not clear whether the 'lecturing people' are sympathetic or otherwise to the Republican version of events, the 'received history' of the Civil War that they are most likely to be delivering is that of the uncomplicated struggle of a democratically-elected government against a fascist military coup. As Hobsbawm reminds us, the history of the 'two Spains' is remarkable in that it was written not by the victors but by artists, writers and intellectuals, remembered as the lost but good fight.<sup>328</sup> Mendelssohn's 'lecturing people' may not be guilty of Fascist sympathies but of perpetuating the nostalgia, the 'left melancholy', for that lost fight. Arguably, Mendelssohn herself is trading on the faded glory of 'those who/Fought against Fascism for a Spanish/Republic': her own father went to fight against Franco as part of the International Brigades, and thus the 'children of the children of those...' are Mendelssohn's own children. Or are these ideological rather than biological 'children', those who formed guerrillas such as the Angry Brigade and took up the fight in solidarity with the Spanish anarchists? 'I also wish' traces a psychic continuity that emulsifies the past and the present – that is, brings them together while suspending their difference and thus avoids melancholic reification.<sup>329</sup> 'Impunity', the exemption from the injurious consequences of an action, recalls the historical amnesia that followed the end of the war in Spain. The 'loathing', refusal and withheld love that mark Mendelssohn's Spanish Civil War poems challenge that impunity. These poems are spaces of feeling, not of forgetting. In the final stanza, a connection is drawn between the legacy of the civil war and literature. The 'lecturing people' are condemned as 'synthesizers of Literature', suggesting that the seemingly contradictory 'direct experience' of the aftermath valued by the poetic

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<sup>328</sup> Hobsbawm. I am indebted here to conversations with Matthew Holman, who first drew my attention to Hobsbawm's writing on the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>329</sup> See Ross on the concept of 'generation', pp. 164, 204-208.

speaker stands against a literary synthesis that would elide rather than suspend difference. By 'suspend', I refer to the way that Mendelssohn's poetry draws different temporalities or positions into close proximity without flattening or collapsing their difference - for instance, in the resistance to being read through Guernica. To 'directly' experience what is already by its nature at one remove from the original experience, the 'aftermath', relies on a conception of an elliptical continuity between past and present that resonates with Love's theory of mobilising melancholy.

Historical continuities are articulated not just between past and present, but between related historical moments. As we have seen, the legacy of Nazism is brought into close proximity with Spanish fascism in 'I also wish'. The cut from one to the other is abrupt, marked by a caesura in the poetic stanza. 'Night and fog' evokes not simply the Holocaust but specifically the concentration camp at Mauthausen, where many members of the resistance were sent or 'disappeared'. Those resisters included French resistance fighters but also many of the Spanish Republicans who had fled to France for refuge after the end of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>330</sup> The immediate aftermath of the war saw a mass exodus of Republican refugees into France. Even as they fled, the refugees were subjected to continued aerial bombardment from the skies. Around 500,000 refugees crossed the French border in January 1939 alone.<sup>331</sup> In an attempt to accommodate this sudden influx, the French set up huge camps near the border where the refugees were detained in conditions that were allegedly worse than some of the Nazi concentration camps.<sup>332</sup> Many of these same camps were later used by Vichy collaborators as transit camps before Auschwitz, and some, such as the prison camp Vernet-les-Bains, were expanded to include Jews and other undesirables alongside the Spanish Republicans.<sup>333</sup> The continued persecution of Spanish Republicans in France under the Vichy regime is illustrative of how

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<sup>330</sup> '[B]ecause of pressure from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs [i]t is estimated that at least 10,500, or more probably, 12,000 Spaniards were sent to Mauthausen [...] Of the Spaniards incarcerated in Mauthausen, 80 percent had died by May 7, 1945', Louis Stein, *Beyond Death and Exile: The Spanish Republicans in France, 1939-1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 121-22.

<sup>331</sup> Gordon, p. 242.

<sup>332</sup> Beevor, p. 411.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.; Gordon, p. 242.

the Spanish conflict pre-figured World War II. Guernica was one of the first sites of rehearsal for the Blitzkrieg; the French detainment camps were a prototype of the Nazi death camps; and the disillusionment within Spain was part of a much larger disillusionment, as news of Stalin's purges and show trials trickled out of Russia, amongst those who opposed fascism in the late thirties.<sup>334</sup>

The intersection between these two conflicts, both generative of exceptional forms of carcerality, is a recurring facet of Mendelssohn's historically porous poetics. These intersections occur within but also between poems. The poem that is haunted by the Holocaust faces the poem that resists being read through Guernica. The concentration camp known as Mauthausen and 'republicans' are brought into contact in a poem which ends with the cynical line: 'intoning never again will it be'.<sup>335</sup> The failure to resist fascism is the continuum along which the two events are linked. The remnants of the Spanish resistance then resurfaced during the uprisings and guerrilla activities of the late sixties and early seventies, activities that vehemently opposed appeasement, amnesia and melancholic inaction. The shadowy carceral spaces with which Mendelssohn's poetry constantly contends occupy a broad spectrum, from wartime camps to peacetime prisons. These carceral spaces are distinct, but unified by practices such as detainment without trial, a practice deployed in the French detainment camps for Spanish refugees, the Nazi concentration camps, in the use of internment in Northern Ireland in 1971, and – on a rather different scale – in the months leading up to the trial of the Angry Brigade. As we have seen, Mendelssohn's Spanish Civil War poems are marked by instances of historical and current detainment, and by a concomitant refusal to ossify the past.

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<sup>334</sup> Peter Stanford, *C. Day-Lewis: A Life* (London-New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 154.

<sup>335</sup> *LA*, p. 50.



## Part 2: Nancy Cunard and Spain

As for Mendelssohn, the Spanish Civil War was one of the formative events of Cunard's life. In the words of her close friend Solita Solano, 'the greatest efforts and disillusion of her life were in the catastrophe of Spain'.<sup>336</sup> Driven by her commitment to anti-fascism, Cunard sent reports from the frontline to the *Manchester Guardian*, raised funds for the Republican cause, and gave aid to Spanish refugees after the war had ended.<sup>337</sup> Consequently, Cunard was keenly aware of the carceral legacy of that war. The continuum between the French detention camps for Spanish refugees and the Nazi concentration camps has been discussed by historians including Stein (1979) and Wachsmann (2015), but Cunard was one of the first to report on the 'inhumane conditions at the very internment camps that were later operated by Vichy collaborators'.<sup>338</sup> According to Lois Gordon's biography, her most 'historically significant reporting' followed Franco's victory in 1939 when 'very few journalists remained in Spain'.<sup>339</sup> Cunard stayed on and 'soon exposed in the [Manchester] *Guardian* France's tacit collaboration with Franco in maintaining concentration camps' where the fleeing Spanish Republicans were detained.<sup>340</sup> Involved her whole life in political activism, from the Spanish Civil War to the American civil rights movement to the French resistance, Cunard wrote what Sandeep Parmar terms 'fervent activist (at times anarchic) political poetry'.<sup>341</sup> In her own contribution to her widely-circulated pamphlet *Authors Take Sides* (1937), a survey of the attitudes of writers towards the Spanish Civil War, Cunard wrote that 'Spain is not politics but life. Its immediate future will affect every human who has a sense of what its facts mean, who has respect for himself and humanity'.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Hugh Ford, *Nancy Cunard: Brave poet, indomitable rebel, 1896-1965* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1968), p. 76.

<sup>337</sup> Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting femininity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 230.

<sup>338</sup> Gordon, p. 221.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Sandeep Parmar, 'Introduction' to Nancy Cunard, *Selected Poems*, ed. Sandeep Parmar (Manchester: Carcanet, 2016), p. xv.

<sup>342</sup> Cunard's own contribution to her questionnaire, *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (London: Left Review, 1937).

Cunard's emphasis on the 'immediate future' of the war manifests itself, too, in her Civil War poetry, which connects the horror of aerial bombardment, wartime privations, and border-crossings in Spain with the war that was about to sweep across Europe. In 1963, Cunard wrote that 'I have so many poems written on Spain that I wonder if they, in their different years, during and after, could not be done up into a volume'.<sup>343</sup> Such a volume was never completed.<sup>344</sup>

As a poet of the Spanish Civil War, Cunard has been long overlooked in Anglophone poetry anthologies. In Stephen Spender and John Lehmann's *Poems for Spain* (1939), there are no poems by Cunard.<sup>345</sup> Valentine Cunningham's Penguin anthology of *Spanish Civil War Verse* (1980) includes two poems by Cunard, and some of her translations.<sup>346</sup> Jim Jump's *Poems from Spain* (2006) again omits any Cunard poems.<sup>347</sup> Despite her own marginalisation from the anthological canon, in 1937 Cunard herself – a keen maker of anthologies – published a series of pamphlets of Spanish Civil War poetry, *The Poets of the World Defend the Spanish People!*, which included poems by Tristan Tzara, Langston Hughes, Louis Aragon, and Auden, amongst others. In 1949, a collection of Cunard's poems in French about Spain, *Nous Gens d'Espagne* (We People of Spain), was published by Imprimerie Labau. The very recent publication of Cunard's *Selected Poems* by Carcanet (2016) begins to address the deficit of attention to Cunard's poetic oeuvre as a whole, and includes a number of her Spanish Civil War poems, gleaned from individual magazine publications and from unpublished manuscripts. These include, but are not limited to, 'Yes, It is Spain', 'To Eat Today', 'Relève into Maquis' and 'Sequences from a Long Epic on Spain'. But Spain is present even in those poems that do not deal explicitly with the war itself. As Cunard writes in the 1964 poem 'To Douglas Cooper':

I shall go on, I think, writing always

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<sup>343</sup> Ford, p. 175.

<sup>344</sup> Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry*, p. 230.

<sup>345</sup> *Poems for Spain*, ed. Stephen Spender and John Lehmann (London: Hogarth, 1939).

<sup>346</sup> *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

<sup>347</sup> *Poems from Spain: British and Irish International Brigaders on the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Jump (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006).

About the Spain of yore, wherein my days  
 Burst into life, a-listen, and so thus saw  
 What never again shall be no more, no more...<sup>348</sup>

These lines retrospectively claim that it was in Spain that Cunard's political life began. The phrase 'burst into life' recalls John Lehman's description of how the Spanish war revitalised poetry 'as if a rock had been struck and a spring leapt out of it'.<sup>349</sup> Yet Cunard's exaggeratedly archaic register appears to pastiche a melancholic and backwards-looking lyricism. The parody is made more explicit a few lines later. In the same poem – 'inspired' by a New Year's card from her art critic friend Cooper – Cunard takes age and the passing of time as her subject.<sup>350</sup> Rather than ending with a 'dribble' or a 'drip', Cunard insists on a more hopeful, durable afterlife for herself and for Cooper, and does so through a parody of T.S. Eliot's famous poetic prognosis: 'you think we'll dribble to some 'dying fall'/'The poet wrote of?'.<sup>351</sup> To write irreverently about the durability of the melancholic event is equated with positioning herself against the poetic canon. As for Mendelssohn, the memory of 'Spain' is inextricable from processes of writing; although unlike Mendelssohn, Cunard's memory derives from direct experience. Cunard's play with negation, 'never again [...] no more, no more', parodies the idealistic notion of a 'war to end all wars' and infers a darker reality of historical continuity and repetition.

Mendelssohn was deeply fascinated by Cunard's life and work, and intended to make her the subject of her own PhD thesis. She describes Cunard's poetry in a letter to the Cambridge academic John Kerrigan as 'dashing and strange'.<sup>352</sup> 'Dashing' implies speed, as well as stylishness; 'strange' might refer to Cunard's unusual and experimental use of poetic form. In Kennedy and Kennedy's study of women's experimental writing, they suggest that Mendelssohn's poetry 'seems to look back to earlier generations' struggle for autonomous utterance'.<sup>353</sup> Cunard's unconventional poetry could well be described as a 'struggle for

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<sup>348</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. 185.

<sup>349</sup> Quoted by Nan Green, in Ford, pp. 171-2.

<sup>350</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. 185.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Letter to Kerrigan, undated [1989?], SxMs109/3/A/1/26.

<sup>353</sup> Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 147.

autonomous utterance’, but the absence of any book-length publications of her poetry (her last collection came out in 1923) until 2005 poses the question of where and how Mendelssohn would have accessed her work in the eighties. The most likely source is the Cambridge University Library, which holds copies of Cunard’s early poetry as well as anthologies such as *Negro* (1934). Given that Mendelssohn drafted her PhD proposal in the late eighties, it is unlikely that she knew Cunard’s later as-yet-unpublished or uncollected poetry – many of the Spanish poems among them – but she was certainly aware of Cunard’s wartime involvement, perhaps as a result of reading Hugh Ford’s biography. In a draft of her proposed PhD, which had the working title ‘Nancy Cunard: The Naming of Reality’, Mendelssohn wrote that she was:

concerned with highlighting the question of conformity/non-conformity in a search for an answer as to why N[ancy]C[unard] the poet, publisher and committed anti-fascist, should have ended her days in a mental asylum having been certified by her cousin and described by her doctors as suffering from persecution mania, whilst she was begging for pen and paper to write against all wars.<sup>354</sup>

The themes of incarceration, fascism and writing are prominent in this draft proposal. Mendelssohn stresses Cunard’s work as a ‘political activist’ and ‘anti-fascist’ as well as a poet. Her focus falls on Cunard’s psychiatric incarceration and correspondent questions of ‘conformity’, subjects that will be addressed at much greater length in chapter four in relation to Mendelssohn’s own incarceration. Incarceration is figured here as a form of censorship, a means of preventing Cunard from writing, somewhat idealistically, ‘against all wars’. Some of the drafts of poems Cunard did write during her incarceration in Holloway Sanatorium in 1960 are included in Parmar’s *Selected Poems*, but not all.<sup>355</sup> Parmar explains this exclusion by referring to Cunard’s own poetic instigation to ‘*Never* show unfinished work!’, and notes the ‘feverish’ and increasingly indecipherable quality of her work from

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<sup>354</sup> Letter to Kerrigan, undated [1989?], SxMs109/3/A/1/26.

<sup>355</sup> Parmar, ‘Introduction’ to Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxxv. ‘8AM Sonnet’ is reproduced on p. 202. ‘Notes to the Poems’ tells us this poem was composed in Holloway Sanatorium, p. 255.

1960 onwards.<sup>356</sup> The very titles of Cunard's sanatorium poems testify to the haste with which they were composed: '8AM Sonnet' was originally titled '8-8.8AM June 16' in its notebook version, and is followed by a note that reads 'standing at open window – straight off in 8 minutes'.<sup>357</sup> The sonnet itself describes the execution scene of a prisoner. In poetry drafts, Cunard explicitly and repeatedly refers to the sanatorium as a prison; 'Cell, Holloway Jail' is noted as the place of composition for the notebook version of the poem 'To Whom?'.<sup>358</sup> She had been arrested and detained by the police prior to being certified as insane by a cousin in order to facilitate her committal. Gordon records how Cunard's response to her incarceration was to write to her friends 'to protest the injustice and illegality of her commitment':

Drink has nothing to do with it... Fascism does... Damn Spain and all its doing... It goes back, I suppose to *Negro* and the Spanish War....<sup>359</sup>

Fascism, as Cunard insists, has everything 'to do' with her incarcerated state. For Cunard, as for Mendelssohn and young British radicals in the early seventies, the experience of her own incarceration is somehow fused with Spain.

There are aesthetic as well as thematic crossovers between Cunard and Mendelssohn's Civil War poems. Cunard's use of the witnessing lyric 'I', polyvocality, intertextual allusion, high and low forms of diction, avant-garde lineation, and her consciousness of affective afterlives prefigures Mendelssohn's own densely referential lyric.<sup>360</sup> The significance of the act of experiential witness is marked by Mendelssohn's dismissal, in 'I also wish', of those who 'have no direct experience of/the [Spanish war's] aftermath'. We see the development of Cunard's poetics of witness in a Spanish poem in which an acutely personal 'I' gradually assimilates the horror-filled realities of war. The

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<sup>356</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxxv.

<sup>357</sup> Nancy Cunard Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, Austin, Texas, box 1, folder 8. Subsequent citations will supply box and folder numbers thus (8.4)

<sup>358</sup> 8.4.

<sup>359</sup> Gordon, p. 344.

<sup>360</sup> Several of these qualities are listed by Parmar in her 'Introduction' to Cunard's *Selected Poems*, p. xviii.

distance between the realities of war and the speaking 'I' is articulated in 'Yes, it is Spain', a poem first published in *Life and Letters Today* in October 1938, but excluded from Spanish Civil War poetry anthologies:

What is a bomb?  
 Something I can't yet believe.  
 What is a tomb?  
 Something I can't yet see.  
 And what is a wound in its wounding,  
 And the shot cutting a vein and the blood coming  
 Out of an eye, say, stabbed – are these things too for me?<sup>361</sup>

Through the negative inscription of these signs of horror, the poetic speaker attempts to assimilate them, intellectually, visually and viscerally – to assimilate, in other words, 'direct experience', to witness at first hand. The gap between incredulity and the effects of war is narrowed in the next stanza through recourse to the last war Cunard lived through: the so-called 'La-Der-des-Ders', the war to end all wars. Presciently, the poem warns of 'the present Flanders-Poppy flaunting ahead towards the next one', situating the Spanish war as one of a long chain that reaches both backwards to the First World War and the Ethiopian crisis (which Cunard also covered as a frontline journalist), and forwards to the imminent Second World War.<sup>362</sup> 'You think this is something new?' the speaker demands. 'No; this too becomes Spain'. The unusual deployment of colloquial, direct, somewhat heckling address is common to both Cunard and Mendelssohn's poetry. The cynicism with which Cunard and Mendelssohn ('intoning never again will it be') treat the notion that the First and Second World Wars were to be the 'war to end all wars' is not unique, but nevertheless characteristic of their revisionist and sceptical poetic mode.<sup>363</sup> In Cunard's case, given that the Second World War had yet to break out, and that this poem was published after nearly two decades of 'plangent denunciations of war', this is a highly proleptic revisionism.<sup>364</sup> The

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<sup>361</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. 141.

<sup>362</sup> Gordon, p. 222.

<sup>363</sup> *LA*, p. 50.

<sup>364</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 5.

articulation of an elliptical continuity between a chain of historical events, characteristic of a mobilising form of melancholy, marks Cunard's Spanish poetry as it does Mendelssohn's.

After the uncertainty of the first, questioning stanza, the poetic speaker becomes more forthright and the poem accrues a host of historical debris. Declaring that 'I have not forgot my dead', the speaker invokes a melancholic refusal to let go of lost objects. This melancholy is immediately mobilised into vengeful action. There is '[n]o past pageantry of wan mothers and lovers weeping,/Ruined, undone for ever, that Spain cannot avenge'. The historical debris then becomes further flung: the dead men of literature, from Villon to Blake to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hugo, and Dante are called on for an 'answer'. That answer, anticipating Luxemburg and Traverso, is to build upon past defeats: "'Go,/Learn from the day's ruins and tombs" they say [...]"Every man to his battle [...]"this is yours [...]"Yes, it is Spain"'. History is mined and renovated, luminaries from the past invoked only to reiterate the urgency of the present. While 'Yes, It Is Spain' is dotted with archaisms, adjectivally heavy and interrupted by parentheses and frequent punctuated pauses, there are moments at which Cunard's prosody approaches the fierce, stark tenacity of Mendelssohn's. Cunard's line 'I'm of a mood tonight, boy, marked DO NOT TOUCH' generates its verbal force from its shift from long to short 'o's and its dragged metre, techniques very close to those found in Mendelssohn's line 'I also wish to refer to my loathing of conformism'. In its invocation of historical afterlives that reach into the present, its mobilised form of melancholy, and its sheer prosodic tenacity, 'Yes, It Is Spain' clearly anticipates poems such as Mendelssohn's 'I also wish'.

In addition to these prosodical similarities, both Mendelssohn and Cunard understand that the legacy of the Spanish war is a carceral legacy. As Cunard's sanatorium letter makes explicit, carcerality is closely linked to her memory of Spain. Mendelssohn's poetry, as discussed above, inscribes a close relation between carceral structures and the legacy of that war. Left melancholy, too, has been cast as an imprisoning political condition. Given the focus of this study, we need to ask: to what degree are these figurations of carcerality metaphorical? The poetry collected in Cunard's *Selected Poems* demonstrates how

the inscription of prisons in her work changes markedly over time. The 'prison' as an exemplary lyric trope is frequently invoked in Cunard's earlier poems, in lines such as 'prisoners of the sky or earth', 'in a prison still', 'Prisoner of yours', 'I have changed my prisons' or '[g]uessing what prison life must be'.<sup>365</sup> 'Answer to a Reproof', a poem from her first collection *Outlaws* (1921), declares that '[y]ou *shall* not prison, shall not grammarise/My swift imagination'.<sup>366</sup> With characteristic direct address, 'Answer to a Reproof' continues:

I challenge you  
Sometimes with jests, more often with real things<sup>367</sup>

Ludic and combative, Cunard's 'jest' give way increasingly to 'real things'. The 'toys' and defiance of *Outlaws* and even the sentimental lyricism of *Sublunary*, written around the time of Cunard's love affair with Ezra Pound in 1922, anticipate the more 'fervent, activist' poetics of the thirties and forties.<sup>368</sup> During these decades Cunard's poetry absorbed her experiences of the civil rights movement, the civil war in Spain and the plight of refugees, and the figurative prisons of her earlier writing are replaced with inscriptions of literal imprisonment. The close association between Spanish fascism and the proliferation of prisons is made clear in historical accounts of the period. Beevor records that 'Nationalist Spain was little more than an open prison for all those who did not sympathize with the regime', and that 'prison camps were set up all over the country'.<sup>369</sup> Louis Stein recounts how Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian novelist and ex-communist who had fought in the Spanish war and had been incarcerated in a Francoist jail for a time, found the conditions of the French camps to be 'worse' than 'Franco's prisons'.<sup>370</sup> Even more horrifying is Koestler's account of how thirty men 'who had previously spent time in Nazi concentration camps, including Dachau, Oranienburg, and Wolfsbuttel [...] were in agreement that with regard to food, accommodation and hygiene, Vernet [a French camp] was even below the

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<sup>365</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, pp. 27, 33, 53, 114, 178.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>369</sup> Beevor, pp. 407, 402.

<sup>370</sup> Stein, p. 73.



level of the German camps'.<sup>371</sup> Koestler's account dates from 1940, before the Nazi camps had begun their programme of mass extermination, but the comparison is stark. The literal prison camp appears in Cunard's writing during the Spanish Civil War, primarily in her journalistic writing.

Cunard's detailed, urgent despatches on the internment camps set up to receive the colossal numbers of Spanish refugees focus on the desperate exodus of refugees and the abominable conditions at the camps where so many of them were interned. A flurry of Cunard's reports on the camps were composed at the end of January and beginning of February 1939, as Franco's victory became certain and the influx of refugees suddenly increased. The chaotic scenes at the border are described by Cunard as 'Dantesque', and the camps as 'not fit to receive human beings'.<sup>372</sup> The work of documenting these conditions was risky and extremely physically demanding: Cunard walked with the refugees to Perpignan, despite 'persistent bombings overhead', and 'up to twenty miles each way to visit these camps'.<sup>373</sup> Many of her reports are centred on the illegality of the Spanish incarceration. A draft for the *New Times* titled 'Conditions in Spain today' dated 8<sup>th</sup> May 1939 stresses the lack of trial afforded to the inmates of Collioure and ends by describing the camp as 'the biggest scandal of illegal detention that France has ever known'.<sup>374</sup> A piece on Collioure dated 15<sup>th</sup> May 1939 is titled 'France --- A first Fascist Jail', aligning carceral structures with political ideology.<sup>375</sup> Amongst the typed and handwritten drafts held in Cunard's archive, the handwritten material conveys the material conditions of the camps most urgently with hastily scrawled titles such as 'A DAY IN THE HELL OF COLLIOURE'.<sup>376</sup> One of these handwritten accounts begins 'I am a fugitive from the hell of Collioure', and describes how 'I slipped into a group of 'working prisoners' outside the prison, described as a 'New Bastille', in order to gain entry'.<sup>377</sup> Once inside, the 'fugitive'

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>372</sup> 'Contrasts on French Frontier', *Guardian*, 3 February 1939, p. 15; 'At a Refugee Camp', *Guardian*, 10 February 1939, p. 6.

<sup>373</sup> Gordon, pp. 221, 248.

<sup>374</sup> 1.8.

<sup>375</sup> 1.8.

<sup>376</sup> 1.8.

<sup>377</sup> 1.8.

overheard a lieutenant tell Spanish officers: ‘you are in a prison but you are also at the same time in a camp you won’t be getting any kind of a trial’ [sic]. The elision between ‘prison’ and ‘camp’ is explicit. Cunard also mentions the prison camps *within* Franco’s Spain, writing that ‘[i]t is supposed that the devastation of Spain will be rebuilt by an army of convicts. There are six very large camps near Barcelona’.<sup>378</sup> It is noticeable that the *printed* versions of Cunard’s articles in the *Manchester Guardian* omit some of the more emotive language and graphic details that are present in the drafts. The printed article on ‘The Camp at Argelès’, for instance, omits many details from the draft article held in the archives, details which include the insufficient provision of food, water, fuel and sanitary arrangements; the fate of a group of Cubans, one of whom is in dire need of medical treatment; the refusal to grant access to aid organisations; and a description of the interned Spanish ‘parked like cattle’.<sup>379</sup> The reasons for such omissions can only be surmised: length restrictions, concerns over publishing unverified information, the urgent haste with which Cunard was sending out her reports. Cunard’s equivalent articles for Sylvia Pankhurst’s *New Times* are more candid and richer in detail.

## 2.1 In the camps

The incidents Cunard witnessed as a journalist resurface in her poetry. Parmar draws attention to the frequent exchanges between Cunard’s war journalism and her poetry, and the ‘reportage quality’ this lends her poems.<sup>380</sup> The draft of the article written for the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Times* on the camp of Argelès offers one such example. The draft reports on the fate of the Cuban International Brigade, and details how Cunard was taken ‘to see a Cuban mulatto lying on a rigged-up iron bedstead who is almost unconscious from fever and who cannot speak. It is getting very cold already at 4.30’.<sup>381</sup> This encounter

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<sup>378</sup> 1.8.

<sup>379</sup> ‘The Camp at Argelès’, *Manchester Guardian*, 9 February 1939.

<sup>380</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxxi.

<sup>381</sup> 1.8.

never made it to print in the *Guardian*, and is mentioned only briefly in the *New Times* article ‘Terrible Conditions at Perpignan’.<sup>382</sup> However the Cuban ‘almost unconscious with fever’ is reprised in a draft of a poem held in Cunard’s archives, ‘ARGELES --- (after Consul) (THE CUBANS)’, which recalls a Cuban ‘mulatto’, ‘deep in his fever-trance/’The February gale raking the February shore./’The Cubans led me to see what it could be/’Unconsciousness... I gazed a while on that unmoving form’.<sup>383</sup> The poem is dated January 1963, and appears to be part of Cunard’s long project ‘Sequences from a Long Epic on Spain’ which she worked on into the last years of her life. Part of ‘Sequences’ is published in Cunard’s *Selected Poems*, but not the poem-draft ‘ARGELES’. There are a number of drafts of poems on the camps (such as ‘IN THE CAMPS’ and ‘Exodus and Camps’) held in Cunard’s archives which draw on journalistic notes that date back to 1939.<sup>384</sup> These poems are clearly unfinished, but they share a preoccupation with the dilution or mistransmission of the act of witness over time. In ‘ARGELES’ there is the speaker’s speechless ‘gaze’; ‘IN THE CAMPS’ the reader is contemptuously told that ‘to some profit you could get out your binoculars’, and in ‘Exodus and Camps’, Cunard records how ‘I that mutely saw them have kept their words’.<sup>385</sup> The act of recording experiences and voices other than her own, first in the immediate form of journalism, later in the more meditative form of poetry, is characteristic of Cunard’s Spanish Civil War writing.<sup>386</sup> The more emotive poetic inscriptions of the camps expand upon Cunard’s journalistic accounts, and press harder on the question of witness. The distance between observing subject and observed object that is so often collapsed in Mendelssohn’s poetry (for further discussion of this, see chapter two) is maintained by Cunard’s poetic speaker, whose self-professed ‘gaze’ tends towards the melancholic reification of ‘that unmoving form’. While the immediacy of the newspaper report gets lost in ‘ARGELES’, where the speaking, gazing ‘I’ comes between the reader and the faceless Cuban subject,

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<sup>382</sup> ‘Terrible Conditions at Perpignan’, *New Times and Ethiopia News*, 18 February 1939, p. 1.

<sup>383</sup> 2.7.

<sup>384</sup> 2.7.

<sup>385</sup> 2.7.

<sup>386</sup> Anne Donlon, ‘Things and Lost Things: Nancy Cunard’s Spanish Civil War Scrapbook’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 55.2 (Summer 2014), 192-205 (p. 202) and Parmar (‘Introduction’ to Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxxii) concur on this point.

there are other Spanish War poems by Cunard which retain more of that immediacy. By ‘immediacy’, I refer to the definition given by Sylvia Townsend Warner, a friend of Cunard’s, and another woman writer of the Spanish war: ‘One is conscious of a happening, of something taking place under one’s very nose’.<sup>387</sup> Or, in Parmar’s insightful analysis, ‘Cunard’s textual strategies [...] place the sufferer at the heart of her writing [...] Never does her own strong political will upstage real, lived experience’.<sup>388</sup> Immediacy stands as a counter to abstraction and the melancholic reification of the subjects of poetry.

‘To Eat Today’ (1938), one of the two poems published in Cunningham’s anthology, is a pre-eminent example of such textual strategies of immediacy and writerly self-effacement. It could be considered Cunard’s ‘Guernica’ poem in that it recounts ‘the cruelty of the indiscriminate aerial bombing of civilians’.<sup>389</sup> The poem evokes horror via the immediacy of the everyday: ‘[t]hey come without siren-song or any ushering/Over the usual street of man’s middle day’.<sup>390</sup> A note above the poem details that ‘in Barcelona today’s air-raid came as we were sitting down to lunch after reading Hitler’s speech in Nuremburg’. The theme of eating is not limited to Cunard’s own interrupted lunch, or the woman who, along with her treasured small stock of salt and oil, was obliterated by the bombing. The poem also wonders, of the bombers, ‘do you eat before you do these things,/Is it a cocktail or is it a pousse-café?’ and ventriloquizes an imagined bomb-pilot’s anxiety, while still airborne, over whether ‘we [are] going to eat today, *teniente?*’. The poem returns at its end to the ‘simple earth’ where there are ‘[f]ive mouths less to feed tonight in Barcelona’. The poem’s preoccupation with eating is rooted in the lived conditions of wartime Spain. Food shortages in Barcelona were acute by 1938. Beevor records that ‘[f]ood queues were worse than ever and women were killed and maimed during the bombing raids because they would not give up their places’ and that by ‘1938 the death rate for children and the old had

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<sup>387</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner, ‘Women as Writers’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 107 (1959), 378–386 (p. 382).

<sup>388</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxxii.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

doubled'.<sup>391</sup> Following her second visit to Barcelona, Cunard herself started a food campaign through the *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald*.<sup>392</sup> Even more than 'Yes, it is Spain', the prosody and subject-matter of 'To Eat Today' insists on the immediacy of this horror. Cunard's use of language is spare and unrelenting, and the closing line makes the urgency of conveying this present horror clear: 'Europe's nerve strung like catapult, the cataclysm roaring and swelling.../But in Spain no. Perhaps and Tomorrow – in Spain it is HERE'. In her poetry, as in her early newspaper reports, Cunard 'warned repeatedly that the events in Spain were a prelude to another world war. Spain today would become France tomorrow'.<sup>393</sup> The horrific event of aerial bombardment, in Cunard's poetics, becomes not melancholic but mobilising. In the previously unpublished poem 'Réanville', Cunard explicitly refers to 'Guernika bombed,/And later thousands felled, entombed/All in a day, now here, now there,/Throughout the world, the roaring world', again insisting on the mobilising presentness of the event, rather than the paralysing loss it represents. There is nothing new about war poetry that sets out to warn: Wilfred Owen wrote in 1918 that 'all a poet can do to-day is to warn'.<sup>394</sup> But as Cunard's actions went beyond that of warning, so her poetry goes beyond the expression of warning and – in other Spanish war poems, which I will shortly discuss – inscribes a life of active resistance.

Cunard's insistence on the here and the now, on an energised, politicised 'Today', might be read as a counter to poems such as Auden's 'Spain' (1937). 'Spain' has been called 'the most important poem in English on the Spanish Civil War' and was first published by Cunard's own press as part of her Spanish Civil War poetry series.<sup>395</sup> Auden's poem is tripartite, divided into '[y]esterday all the past', 'to-day the struggle', and '[t]omorrow, perhaps the future [...to]-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs'.<sup>396</sup> An invocation of 'the poor in their fireless lodgings' is far more mannered and distant than

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<sup>391</sup> Beevor, pp. 331-32.

<sup>392</sup> Jane Dowson, *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 52-53.

<sup>393</sup> Gordon, p. 222.

<sup>394</sup> Quoted in Spender, *Poems for Spain*, p. 8.

<sup>395</sup> Gordon, p. 230.

<sup>396</sup> Cunningham, p. 97.

Cunard's description of the woman with her 'salt and half pint of olive'. Like Cunard, Auden ventriloquises a voice – the abstracted voice of a nation, rather than bombers, or dead writers – that arrogantly declares 'Yes, I am Spain'. The poem ends, with desolate cynicism, '[t]o-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death', '[t]oday the makeshift consolations', and, finally, '[t]he stars are dead'. In Auden's poem, 'today' is associated not with urgency and renewed political commitment, but with cynicism and despondency. Cunningham writes in his introduction to *Spanish Civil War Verse* of Auden's 'refusal to connect – it amounts to a debilitatingly inhuman standoffishness – [this] is clearly what is wrong with [Auden's] poem "Spain"'.<sup>397</sup> Despite this judgement, Auden's 'Spain' opens the anthology. Stephen Spender (a friend of Auden's) was kinder, writing that 'the poet has confined himself to an abstracted view [...] the element of personal experience and direct emotional response is rigorously excluded' which makes for a 'remarkable interpretation of the issues and implications of the struggle in Spain'.<sup>398</sup> This 'remarkable interpretation' was the vision of the war as a revolutionary situation – but Auden later repudiated the politics of the poem and prohibited its reprint for several years.<sup>399</sup> This is a poetics diametrically opposed to Cunard's: 'War is not abstract', as she wrote to Ezra Pound in 1946.<sup>400</sup> Poetic immediacy is the counter to that reifying abstraction.

Other critics explain the non-committal of Auden's 'Spain' differently. Auden also went to Spain to support the Republicans during the war, and 'returned to England thoroughly disheartened by his experience of the Republican left'.<sup>401</sup> Cunningham, too, balances his assessment of Auden's poem with the acknowledgement that its lack of political commitment is symptomatic of a more general sense of failure and loss amongst the Left at the end of the thirties.<sup>402</sup> A stunningly sexist narrative of the period holds that

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Gordon, p. 230.

<sup>400</sup> Quoted by Parmar in her introduction to Cunard's *Selected Poems*, p. xvii.

<sup>401</sup> Sean C. Grass, 'W. H. Auden, from Spain to "Oxford."' *South Atlantic Review*, 66.1 (2001), 84–101, p. 86.

<sup>402</sup> Cunningham, p. 73.

the Spanish Civil War was a crucial event, indeed the crucial event, in the history of the young men of the Left in England in the 1930s. At its beginning, in 1936, they were raised to a pitch of highest enthusiasm. At its end, with the fall of the Republic in 1939, their disillusionment was complete.<sup>403</sup>

This history entirely fails to account for the many ‘young women of the Left’, such as Cunard, Warner, Nan Green and Valentine Ackland. Such an omission indicates the extent to which responses to the war, critical and poetic, are gendered. Warner herself might explain the contrast between the immediacy of Cunard’s verse and the abstraction of Auden’s as a gendered distinction. In ‘Women as Writers’, Warner argues that immediacy is a quality most frequently found in the work of women writers, not as a consequence of their gender, but of their social contexts.<sup>404</sup> The very exceptionality of the woman writer, who ‘got into literature by the pantry window’ rather than by the well-trodden road of literary tradition, generates the writerly quality of immediacy.<sup>405</sup> A stylistic ‘immediacy’ is joined up, in the case of Cunard, with continued political commitment to real rather than abstracted conditions. Rather than succumbing to disillusionment, Cunard worked for and supported the Spanish Republicans long after the end of the war. She travelled to Spain throughout the 1950s, rescuing prisoners and smuggling them to France, delivering clothes and money, and even engaged in guerrilla action herself:

According to several commentators, it was said in the late 1940s that Nancy was literally waging war in Spain: ‘She took . . . lessons in dynamiting’; a second observer reported that she was ‘involved in smuggling arms from Toulouse across the border’ and ‘was learning about explosives.’ A third described how she descended ‘for months at a time to pursue some complicated political plot with a community of exiled Spanish Republicans.’ Although Nancy was arrested as a subversive on some of her trips, as the *Guardian* editors feared, she remained undaunted in her goals.<sup>406</sup>

She continued to work on ‘Sequences from a Long Epic on Spain’ and a 1957 typescript of an untitled book on Spain, described as ‘written in a sort of “interval” between past and

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<sup>403</sup> Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier* (1966), cited in Grass, p. xviii.

<sup>404</sup> Warner, p. 383.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>406</sup> Gordon, pp. 310-11.

future', can be found in her archives.<sup>407</sup> Her scrapbook, *Cosas de Espana: 1936-46* (Things from Spain) documents through photos, notes, sketches and poems the whole length of the war and the immediate aftermath. Anne Donlon sees Cunard's scrapbook as 'bracketing a decade that encompasses the war and Republican exile', a necessary corrective to what Jessica Berman diagnoses as 'the rigid division of Civil War narratives into contemporaneous and retrospective' which can 'keep us from seeing continuities and dialogues between and among these writings'.<sup>408</sup> Noting that the scrapbook ends with a postcard that reads '*les amis de l'Espagne Republicaine aide a la Lutte Clandestine, Mai 1946*' (the friends of Republican Spain help the Underground Struggle) Donlon concludes that this material object is 'no melancholy reflection on the war[;] it presents the Republican effort as ongoing'.<sup>409</sup> In a letter, Cunard herself writes, astonishingly, that amongst the hundreds of exhausted soldiers crossing the border in 1939, there was 'no [...] sense of defeat'.<sup>410</sup> Nan Green, in her memory of the war, recalls the 'Spaniards and the men of the International Brigades who, though defeated, would not accept defeat and fought on'.<sup>411</sup> To refuse defeat is to take up the position of melancholic refusal, and sustain political commitment.

The afterlife of the Spanish Civil War in Cunard's alternative history is not defeatist but guerrilla. Her 1942 poem 'Spain', part of a book of unfinished poems called 'Passport to Freedom', announces that 'Spain is guerrilla/Into the hills gone, where no *guardia* can follow'.<sup>412</sup> 'Spain' refigures defeat as hope through the metaphor of an underground river:

Write... of little water drops making a river  
And the river subterrene, the fuller for the damming.  
Write... of revolt and revenge, and waiting,  
Of planning and the sporadic *golpe de mano* on the mountain<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> 1.2.

<sup>408</sup> Donlon, p. 200; Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 190.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>410</sup> Gordon, p. 248.

<sup>411</sup> Ford, p. 171.

<sup>412</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. 190.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.



Cunard's lyrical combination of modernist techniques, close attention to prosody and very direct expressions of political commitment is highly unusual, and taken up – if in more encoded forms – in Mendelssohn's development of her modernist, highly politicised lyric. *Golpe de mano* refers to the surprise attacks mounted by Spanish guerrillas in Francoist Spain during and after the Second World War. Known as the Spanish Maquis, or members of the resistance, these civil war veterans fought with the French resistance and are celebrated in Cunard's poem 'Dordogne', where 'today the *maquisards* are on the *causse*' (a limestone plateau characteristic of the region), the 'red heart turned into armed fists against [...] Vichy [...] Salut, best of peoples [...] we shall meet again'.<sup>414</sup> In a note appended to the poem, Cunard writes:

*Maquisards*: Those who have taken to the *maquis*, to the wilds; in this cause the *causse* - to defy the Nazis' and Vichy's order to go to forced labour in Germany. Today thousands are in the *maquis* in various parts of France, many of them in the Limousin, the region around much of the Dordogne river. Often they have defeated the armed guards, German and Vichy, sent to bring them in by force. They are organised, helped by the population of whatever region they are in.<sup>415</sup>

The Maquis are celebrated again in Cunard's 'rousing battle cry' of a poem 'Relève into Maquis', a criticism of Vichy France's 'relève' or exchange policy: 'Into Maquis: a hidden camp of partisans, francs-tireurs, guerrillas/"Refractories to law and order" Vichy calls them'.<sup>416</sup> Cunard's poems acknowledge injury as well as indefatigable hope. Spain is '[s]cored over and over with pain', a 'palimpsest' of historic damage.<sup>417</sup> 'You will want to look back', Cunard's poetic speaker tells their interlocutor. But historic damage is perceived as continuous with the possibility of 'rising again', and the poem 'Spain' articulates this continuity as 'time is a train,/ *our* train'.<sup>418</sup> For Cunard, Spain is 'the past' but also the present, 'today', 'here', an ongoing event.<sup>419</sup> Her Spanish war poems are poems of mobilised

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., pp. xxxiv, 125.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

melancholy, full of the historical damage which, brought trenchantly back into the present, they want to repair.

## 2.2 underground rivers

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which Mendelssohn's experimental lyric is shaped by a tradition of politicised, modernist poetry for which the Spanish Civil War was an exemplary and formative event. Writing such as Cunard's, with its greater immediacy and resistance to immobilising melancholy, comes closer to the concerns and techniques of Mendelssohn's lyric than the more abstract and melancholic writing of canonical modernists such as Auden. The elliptical temporalities of these poets might be read as an evasion not only of reifying melancholy but of established, canonical temporalities. The temporal continuity of Spain in Cunard's poetry, long past the end of the war, parallels the psychic longevity Cunard's sanatorium letter ascribes to Spain. A couple of years later, the last coherent letter Cunard wrote to her friend Nan Green reiterates the long reach of the war: 'so you see Spain will have done something to me again'.<sup>420</sup> That same psychic longevity pervades Mendelssohn's lyrical genealogies, of the 'children of the children of those...'. Many of these genealogical references refer obliquely or directly to her father, or through her father, to herself. In one letter she writes of the 'underexposed victimization' of relatives of International Brigade.<sup>421</sup> In another letter, to the then-Poet Laureate Andrew Motion, Mendelssohn takes care to point out her father's involvement in Spain against Franco.<sup>422</sup> The long shadow cast by the father, however, is more often than not cast by the non-biological fathers of modernist and literary tradition, from T.S. Eliot to Alfred, Lord Tennyson.<sup>423</sup> The seemingly irrational assertion that 'Spain has everything to do with it', that somehow Spanish fascism *incarcerated* Cunard, and that its carceral structures

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<sup>420</sup> Ford, p. 176.

<sup>421</sup> Letter to Henry/Joyce Jones, 3 November 2002, SxMs109/3/A/1/24.

<sup>422</sup> Letter to Andrew Motion, c. 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/38.

<sup>423</sup> For a fuller discussion of the presence of the father in Mendelssohn's poetry, see chapter four.

continue to pervade and threaten Mendelssohn's poetry, is absolutely bound up with an understanding of time as cyclical and non-linear. To resist being 'read through Guernica' is to resist assimilation into the patriarchal, melancholic canon.

Mendelssohn's own ongoing political commitment, and the melding of this commitment with a modernist reconstitution of the non-literary as literary text, is expressed in one of her later poems, 'Rearranged Letter to Thomas Evans':

alienated response friendly to fascists if on the liberation of  
Paris I am I know why I would have only fought them in  
the Resistance<sup>424</sup>

The political identity of the speaking 'I' is here located in the idealised resistance of the anti-fascist era – an identification not with the victim, but with those who were on the offensive. Affirmative anachronisms feature too in Mendelssohn's poem 'Silk & Wild Tulips', which opens '[a]fraid of my father's power'.<sup>425</sup> Here too there may be an allusion to Eliot's 'dying fall' in the line '[a] report, repeated pondering fall'. Spain is not invoked in this poem, but many of the motifs that are associated with that conflict are present. 'The war continues to charr the air with shot speech', runs one line, figuring tattered language as the product of battlefire or perhaps aerial bombardment. 'The most beautiful poems speak to us,' the poem continues, 'Yet we know they were written in the wrong country at the wrong time/When poets were forced to cross borders...'. The enforced exile of poets might refer to any number of the dissident poets who appear in Mendelssohn's work: Anna Akhmatova, Irina Ratushinskaya, or Federico García Lorca, to name just a few. To be written at the 'wrong time' might imply that there is a 'right time', except that the poems written in the wrong time are already 'the most beautiful'. 'Silk & Wild Tulips' records the *continuation* of conflict in language, or 'shot speech', and confounds historical idealisations.

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<sup>424</sup> Anna Mendelssohn, 'Rearranged Letter to Thomas Evans', *onedit*, 1  
<<http://www.onedit.net/issue1/anna/anna.html>> [accessed 5 June 2018].

<sup>425</sup> Grace Lake, *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1996).

There is an important disparity between the times in which Cunard and Mendelssohn were writing, and there are discontinuities as well as connections between their poetry. While both poets break down and re-vivify reifying forms of monumentalisation, Mendelssohn lyrically vandalises such monuments and does so with distinctive prosodic vehemence. Destroyed monuments, post-1989, constitute Traverso's melancholic 'landscape of ruins'.<sup>426</sup> Cunard's 1937 poem 'Pamiatnik – memorial of bittersweet' establishes Spain as a 'seam of defeat' as well as a 'zone of continuation':

This is the place  
Of indescribable expression, like the look on the face of a certain morning.  
[...]  
This is the place of near-despair, the crucible of world-sorrows.  
This is the place  
Of the news-letter bleeding out a lynching;  
Cell of ferocity, seam of defeat, zone of continuation.  
This is the place of Spain-my-Spain—  
These agonies, laced with individual sorrows.<sup>427</sup>

'Pamiatnik' is Russian for 'monument'. The 'place' of this poem is Spain-as-monument, a monument to collective and individual 'sorrows', blending the personal and political. Parmar has written of how Cunard's poetry 'blurs the personal and political in a way that anticipates postwar protest and feminist poetry especially'.<sup>428</sup> Mendelssohn's poetry too has been described as 'equally invested in mixing the personal and political'.<sup>429</sup> An example of this can be found in her rather different lyrical treatment of the monumental site of successive French revolutions, the Colonne Vendôme, at the end of her poem '**sudden joustings**':

...marking existence by memoria  
in public places. Indiscretion the heart of wit.  
Thieved my papers. Ha! The switch to public  
accountability. Pay. Pay back Courbet. Pay—  
Pay for his death. Pay for the Endless  
Sick Guilt Stabbing malaise of the Vendôme.  
Pay. Pay for a Lamb. Pay the Gambler. Damn You.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Traverso, p. 44.

<sup>427</sup> *Poems of Nancy Cunard: From the Bodleian Library*, ed. John Lucas (Nottingham: Nottingham Trent Editions, 2005), p. 489.

<sup>428</sup> Cunard, *Selected Poems*, p. xxi.

<sup>429</sup> Kennedy and Kennedy, p. 147.

<sup>430</sup> *LA*, p. 127. Bold type in original.

The Colonne Vendôme was erected by Napoleon I, torn down by the communards in 1871, and re-erected in 1873. The artist and prominent communard Gustav Courbet was accused of toppling the monument, and was fined and sentenced to six months' imprisonment. After his release, the French authorities demanded that Courbet pay the vast costs required to rebuild the column in annual instalments. Struggling with alcoholism and the recent deaths of his mother, son and sister, Courbet died the day before the first payment was due. Mendelssohn's poem vengefully invokes the voice of a debtor ('Pay.') against Courbet's very debtors: 'Pay back Courbet. Pay—/Pay for his death'. Rather than capitulate to melancholic memorialisation, the lyric demands compensation for historical defeats - here, the fall of the Paris Commune, as represented by the 'Sick Guilt Stabbing malaise of the Vendôme' and the death of one of its leading figures. The immobilising effects of the invocation of paradigmatic sites of melancholy are opposed by the poem's repeated, rhythmic, mocking, redoubling movement: 'Pay. Pay back'. Rather than monumentalising the Commune, Mendelssohn's irreverent lyric valorises an alleged destroyer of those monuments.

The affective afterlives of the Spanish Civil War find a unique record in Cunard and Mendelssohn's experimental poetics. The psychic longevity ascribed to the Spanish war in the temporally fluid poetics of both poets permits the reader to see submerged continuities and connections between historical events. Even when these lyrical transcriptions are splintered and obscure, they transmit the mobilising durability of old revolts and old resistances. While Cunard, often more didactic than Mendelssohn, wanted 'to awaken an indifferent world to the horrors of the time' with her poems on the war, Mendelssohn's poetry repeatedly responds to any suggestion of *readings* of melancholy and failure with tenacity, irreverence, and ferocity.<sup>431</sup> This is a ferocity that nevertheless owes a great deal to Cunard's influence and legacy – the moments of active anger ('DO NOT TOUCH') mingled with her more conventional memorialisations ('the crucible of world-sorrows'). In Mendelssohn's own 'river subterrene' poem, titled 'underground river', there is the merest

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<sup>431</sup> Gordon, p. 228.

suggestion that Cunard is being invoked, as a 'white horse [...] heading onwards at wildest speed/with the eyes of an ocean liner's lights'.<sup>432</sup> Cunard, before she was disinherited, was the heiress of the Cunard shipping line. An inheritor of Cunard's political and poetic commitment, if not of her privilege, Mendelssohn's 'Cunard' poem is a poem of 'outraged principles/that could never be outraged enough/searching for fuel for outrage'. The effort to transmit a sense of outrage is ongoing.

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<sup>432</sup> *LA*, p. 81.

## Chapter 2

### 'Nowhere short of Nuremberg':

#### Forms of Witness in the Concentrationary Poetics of Anna Mendelssohn and

#### Muriel Rukeyser

National Socialism lives on, and even today we still do not know whether it is merely the ghost of what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death, or whether it has not yet died at all, whether the willingness to commit the unspeakable survives in people as well as in the conditions that enclose them.

- Theodor Adorno<sup>433</sup>

I am revisited by Auschwitz perpetually

- Mendelssohn<sup>434</sup>

#### Part 1: swastikas in the post

The menace of anti-Semitism, exemplified by Nazi Germany, is historically more distant from Mendelssohn's poetry than the political upheavals of the seventies but no less embedded in her work. The legacy of Nazism, like that of the Spanish Civil War, is closely connected to the politics and activism of the seventies. As Alex Houen has argued, the fascist legacies across Europe helped to produce the urban guerrillas of the seventies who saw themselves as fighting against this legacy.<sup>435</sup> In the words of Michael Baumann of the 2 June movement, a left-wing German urban guerrilla group, '[t]hose same people who gassed German Jews, they harass you because of your hair'.<sup>436</sup> In letters and poetry, Mendelssohn's

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<sup>433</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 89-103 (pp. 89-90).

<sup>434</sup> Letter to Langley, 5 October 2003, SxMs109/3/A/1/29/1.

<sup>435</sup> Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 205, 214, 215.

<sup>436</sup> Quoted in Houen, p. 215.

Jewish identity is constantly located as a source of ongoing persecutory anxieties, described in Mendelssohn's own words as 'my hang ups as a Jewish poetess of distinctly modernist tendencies'.<sup>437</sup> These two characteristics – Jewishness and modernist tendencies – are, as we shall see, closely intertwined. The legacy of Nazism is everywhere in *Implacable Art*, from accusations of 'nazi girls' to 'anti-semitic practises', 'the labour at Mauthausen', 'you reminded me of nazis', 'Nowhere short of Nuremberg', 'the Celts don't love Judaism', 'Germanically inspired' exonerations of 'filthy racism', 'the Jew is the least protected', 'Polish Russian/relations have had a painful history. I was in the pain of that history', 'Concentration camp styles', and 'the grim grisly grey/"night and fog" existence which climbed &/pulled my own life certainly'.<sup>438</sup> Yet Mendelssohn rarely refers directly to the horror of the Jewish genocide itself, and the death camps where the exterminatory programme of the Final Solution was carried out. Instead, her poetry records traces of what I shall call the concentrationary, that is the carceral legacy of the Nazi labour camp, and the political, social and economic conditions which facilitated the establishment of those camps. According to Nikolaus Wachsmann, in his recent landmark study of the concentration camps, they 'embodied the spirit of Nazism like no other institution in the Third Reich'.<sup>439</sup> As this chapter will show, Mendelssohn's poetic record of the concentrationary corresponds closely to theoretical advances on interpretations of the camps and their legacy. More than that, her highly self-conscious poetry complicates what it might mean to record or witness.

As noted in the previous chapter, the "night and fog" existence' to which Mendelssohn alludes may refer to Alain Resnais' Holocaust documentary, *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956). Resnais' documentary is named after the *Nacht und Nebel* Nazi decree of 1941 which implemented a programme not to kill but to 'disappear' members of the resistance in the occupied territories. The aim of the decree was to obliterate the existence of these political deportees 'as civil or juridical subjects while living on in that knowledge of effaced

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<sup>437</sup> Letter to Mengham, 11 June 1998, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>438</sup> *LA*, pp. 32, 46, 50, 56, 64, 71, 72, 78, 80, 102.

<sup>439</sup> Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camp* (London: Little Brown, 2015), p.5.



existence' in concentration camps.<sup>440</sup> It may be that Mendelssohn refers to the original *Nacht und Nebel* rather than the mediating artefact of Resnais' film; there is archival evidence of her interest in histories of the Holocaust.<sup>441</sup> The letters NN were painted on *Nacht und Nebel* prisoners' jackets to mark their status as the 'disappeared', 'the nebular class of those otherwise lacking classification'.<sup>442</sup> A 'night and fog' existence', then, refers to a carceral existence of state-managed effacement. Mauthausen, also referenced in a poem from *Implacable Art*, was a concentration camp where many of the *Nacht und Nebel* prisoners were sent, and from which many of Resnais' key images were drawn.<sup>443</sup> The 'NN' included Spanish Republicans, French resistance fighters and other political opponents. One of the survivors of Mauthausen was the *Nacht und Nebel* prisoner and Surrealist poet Jean Cayrol, who published a book of poems titled *Poèmes de la Nuit et du Bronillard* (1946) and wrote the spoken text for Resnais' film. *Nacht und Nebel* prisoners were treated with utmost brutality, as Evelyn Le Chêne records.<sup>444</sup> The *Nacht und Nebel* decree bears out Primo Levi's assessment of the primary purpose of the concentration camp system as 'the shattering of the adversaries' capacity to resist'.<sup>445</sup> Mendelssohn's identification with the 'disappeared' resistance is stressed again in a lyric from *Implacable Art* that begins 'I have been made of no. n° certainly. No no/No one non person, anon, nothing, nada [...] an nn.'. <sup>446</sup> '[A]n nn.' not only reinscribes the fateful letters 'NN'; it is also one letter short of 'Anna', recording self-obliteration through Nazi legislative shorthand. That identification with the victims of the Nazi camps extends beyond the lyric 'I' to the epistolary 'I'. 'I am still recovering from the Second World War', claims one letter.<sup>447</sup> In a rare reference to a Nazi death camp, another letter claims that 'I am revisited by Auschwitz perpetually', invoking what Max Silverman

<sup>440</sup> Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance* (New York/Oxford: Berghan Books, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>441</sup> Letter to Mengham, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>442</sup> John Mowitt, 'Cinema as a Slaughterhouse of History', *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance* (New York/Oxford: Berghan Books, 2011), pp. 238-257 (p. 248).

<sup>443</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Death in the Image', *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance* (New York/Oxford: Berghan Books, 2011), pp. 258-301 (p. 275).

<sup>444</sup> Evelyn Le Chêne, *Mauthausen: the history of a death camp* (London: Corgi, 1973), pp. 123-5.

<sup>445</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1989), p. 38.

<sup>446</sup> *LA*, p. 107.

<sup>447</sup> Letter to Evans, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/13.

calls concentrationary memory: ‘de-individualised, de-temporalised and de-spatialised’.<sup>448</sup> Mendelssohn is not the first writer to identify explicitly with the victims of the camps.<sup>449</sup> Her poetic formulations register the ongoing legacy of the camps with more nuance than her letters, through verbs such as ‘climbed & pulled’ which suggest a far-reaching, clinging afterlife.<sup>450</sup>

The first part of this chapter considers how the legacy of the concentration camps continue to constitute Mendelssohn’s lyric subject: ‘I have been made of no’. The concentration camp is an exceptional site of imprisonment, and symbolic of the failure of resistance to ongoing strategies of normalisation. By virtue of its very existence, the camp testifies to the political state of normalised exceptionality that was successfully realised under the Nazi regime. The continuation of those conditions that enabled the establishment of the camps, identified by Holocaust scholars as the state of normalised exceptionality, the failure of resistance and a scientific culture of positivism, preoccupy Mendelssohn’s inscriptions of the concentrationary.<sup>451</sup> These intimations of a hazardous historical continuity take a more specific and concrete form in the seventies, when Mendelssohn considered herself to have been ‘exceptionalised’ at the hands of the British state.<sup>452</sup> Her consciousness of the legacy of the concentrationary is not only political but aesthetic, and an awareness of the complicity between modernism and fascism shapes Mendelssohn’s modernist, anti-fascist poetics. Using archival material to trace Mendelssohn’s own intellectual engagements with resistance studies and critical theory, I explore her response to Theodor Adorno’s famous assertion that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz.<sup>453</sup> Yet

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<sup>448</sup> Letter to Langley, 5 October 2003, SxMs109/3/A/1/29/1; *Concentrationary Cinema*, p. 201.

<sup>449</sup> See Yevgeny Yevtushenko, ‘Babi Yar’ (1961), in which the poet writes that ‘I am each old man slaughtered, each child shot,/None of me will forget’, trans. George Reavey, *Holocaust Poetry*, ed. Hilda Schiff (London: Fount, 1995), p. 94.

<sup>450</sup> Cary Nelson has written of the inherent belatedness of much Holocaust poetry. Nelson, ‘Teaching and Editing at World’s End: Collective Trauma and Individual Witness in American Holocaust Poetry’, *American Studies*, 57.2 (2012), 221-244 (p.222).

<sup>451</sup> See *Resistance Against the Third Reich*, ed. Michael Geyer and John W Boyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 15-140, and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>452</sup> Letter to Janet Todd, 6 October 1990, SxMs109/3/A/1/61.

<sup>453</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, *Prisms*, trans. S. and S. Weber (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997), p. 34.

over the last few decades, the historical omnipresence of World War II has given rise to a vast body of Holocaust poetry – a body of work which, in the words of Cary Nelson, is ‘founded upon its own impossibility’.<sup>454</sup> Mendelssohn did not write Holocaust poems as such, but traces of the concentrationary are dispersed through her poetry. Her strangely prescient ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ chimes with theoretical advances on the interpretation of the Holocaust, and bears an elliptical and reflexive form of witness to the enduring presence of certain fascistic structures of modernity.

In the second part of this chapter, I turn to Muriel Rukeyser’s own poetics of witness, which both prefigure and contrast with Mendelssohn’s. Like Mendelssohn, Rukeyser did not write Holocaust poems as such, but the legacy of that atrocity runs through her work. Rukeyser’s own Jewishness and her commitment to the Nuremberg Obligation deeply shapes her own political and poetic commitments in the seventies, and she considers her own imprisonment (a consequence of her political commitment) as symbolic of the failure to resist. In 1972, Rukeyser used her poetry as part of her own legal defence in court, whereas Mendelssohn insists that ‘poetry has no role to play in courts of law’.<sup>455</sup> The poetics of witness that develop out of Rukeyser’s political commitments and experience of imprisonment are optimistic, future-orientated and tend towards the emancipatory, in contrast to Mendelssohn’s scepticism towards a political role for poetry, inscriptions of inescapability, and highly ambivalent ‘poetics of witness’. Bringing Rukeyser’s concentrationary poetics into contact with Mendelssohn’s compels a rethinking of the function of poetic witness, which has its theoretical origins in the discourse of the twentieth century.<sup>456</sup> In the previous chapter, I noted that ‘to cite’ was to summon a witness in a court of law in relation to Mendelssohn’s poem ‘I also wish’. In this chapter, Rukeyser’s citation of her own poems in court effectively ‘summons’ poetry as a witness. Following Shoshana Felman’s work on law and literature and Adorno’s lyric theory, I consider Mendelssohn’s

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<sup>454</sup> Nelson, p. 230.

<sup>455</sup> Letter to Mengham, 6 December 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>456</sup> *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001*, ed. Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu (London: Norton, 2014), p. 3.

and Rukeyer's forms of poetic 'witness' in their aesthetic, cultural, political and judicial contexts. Both poets approach questions of witness through the performance of speechlessness, the articulation of historical continuity, and identificatory slides that raise questions of their own. I argue that the interplay between their concentrationary poetics allows us to think productively about the ambivalence of witness as a tactic of resistance.

Firstly, I want to return to the long poem '1:3ng' as a means of demonstrating how the subject of the previous chapter, the Spanish Civil War, intersects with inscriptions of the concentrationary, and to give an example of Mendelssohn's invocation of speechlessness as a form of witness. In addition to its melancholic references to 'popular fronts', '1:3ng' contains a number of explicit references to 'swastikas', 'camps', 'fascism', anti-Slavic sentiment ('he [...] calls me a slav'), genocide ('anxious that not one survivor should remain') and to those who 'wear stars on their jackets'.<sup>457</sup> While not long by the modernist measure of Ezra Pound's 'Cantos', the 144 lines of '1:3ng' make it the longest known published Mendelssohn poem. The obscure title, '1:3ng', refers by Mendelssohn's own definition to 'the point on the piano where three strings change into one (for the lower octaves)'.<sup>458</sup> Composed entirely in tercets, it is one of the more formally regular of her poems. It is a poem about writing and writers, linguistic violence ('large writing hitting me', 'destroy a poem'), gendered discrimination and an aesthetic of rebellion: 'I dipped my head in bleach and walked out pawing the pavement like a wild animal'.<sup>459</sup> The poem navigates its subject matter through a kind of bathos, that is, through lapses from a high to low register. References to Louis Althusser and Marx are spliced with colloquialisms.<sup>460</sup> The poetic speaker warns that '[t]hey use society and any old word, to dump people into joke camps', triangulating the social, the linguistic and the carceral.<sup>461</sup> The black humour of 'joke camps' is reprised in Mendelssohn's ludic framing of the poem in a letter headed '1:3ng', which contains the surrealist 'joke': 'q. why does the minim escape a. because it has more time (this

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<sup>457</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', pp. 14, 15, 17.

<sup>458</sup> Letter to Oliver, c. 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.

<sup>459</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', pp. 14-15.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

is not the only answer').<sup>462</sup> '[T]his is not the only answer' may refer to the fact that a minim, amongst other things, may be a musical note; a standardised drop of fluid; or the Talmudic term for a heretic.<sup>463</sup> The conflation of Jewishness and musical temporality coheres with Mendelssohn's epistolary identification with the Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn, whose music was banned under the Third Reich.<sup>464</sup> The dark bathos woven into '1:3ng' functions to indicate the insidiousness of fascist structures, which may not always manifest itself explicitly in stars on jackets but in 'any old word'.

The pervasiveness of the Nazi legacy is most strongly suggested by the following lines from '1:3ng':

To gag me until the unwitnessed moments return & then smash  
Into my empty purse & hound me out with resurrected snippets of Pound & Eliot.

I worry about increasing literalism. my own incapacity to distinguish between  
enemies & friends

The fact that some of my teachers openly espoused fascism.

The fact that I did not know what to do about the threats & the swastikas in the

The fact that I am not allowed to live. The fact that it is easy to use fascist literature  
[post  
[to

Destroy my imaginative power. The fact that the women are waiting to take away

The fact that there are no central climaxes in contemporary music.<sup>465</sup>  
[my womb

Here we have linguistic violence that derives from the imbrication between literary modernism and anti-Semitism. The threat of gagging or strangling haunts Mendelssohn's writing, as mentioned in chapter one. In 1996, a biographical note describes being 'threatened with strangulation'.<sup>466</sup> In *viola tricolor*, voicelessness is conjured as a reflexive menace, as in 'I have raced around myself like a maypole in the act of self strangulation'.<sup>467</sup> Violent voicelessness in the form of 'choking' marks the first line of '1:3ng', and confessions

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<sup>462</sup> Letter to Mengham, 26/7 November 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>463</sup> *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder (London: W.H Allen, 1970), p. 1346.

<sup>464</sup> Letter to Evans, 30 December 2004, SxMs109/3/A/1/59.

<sup>465</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 15.

<sup>466</sup> Lake, *Conductors of Chaos*, ed. Iain Sinclair (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 184.

<sup>467</sup> 'Ordered into Quarantine', *viola tricolor*.

of an inability ‘to make my voice into words that were wanted to fill in the lines’ and of ‘saying nothing’ run through the poem.<sup>468</sup> There is a ‘choking’ aspect to Mendelssohn’s expressions of witness. The threat of being denied a voice preempts the violent ‘return’ of ‘unwitnessed moments’, counter-intuitively suggesting that a Freudian return of the repressed – or ‘unwitnessed’ – is contingent upon this silencing. Fragments of ‘Pound & Eliot’ are weaponized by the traumatic return of these ‘unwitnessed moments’, with the implication that the threat is canonical, but additionally, given the poem’s inscription of ‘swastikas’ and ‘fascist literature’, political and racial. Pound is well-known for his fascist sympathies, and Eliot’s anti-Semitism has been widely discussed.<sup>469</sup> Together, they represent two of the most canonical figures of Anglo-American modernist poetry.

The complicities between fascism and modernism are the subject of a growing body of scholarship.<sup>470</sup> Roger Griffin argues that fascism must be understood not only as a reaction against modernism but as a variant of modernism. In Mark Antliff’s argument, modernist concepts such as avant-gardism were integrated as agents of fascist transformation.<sup>471</sup> Merry M. Pawlowski situates her collection of essays *Virginia Woolf and Fascism* (2001) within the emerging scholarly consensus that fascism is an extreme manifestation of modernism.<sup>472</sup> Mendelssohn would have been aware that her publisher Rod Mengham co-edited, with Jana Howlett, *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939* (1994) which connects avant-garde movements and political violence in the early 1900s with the resurfacing of the ‘close relationship between violence and experimental art [...] from the 1960s onwards’.<sup>473</sup> *The Violent Muse* is part of the

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<sup>468</sup> Lake, ‘1:3ng’, pp. 17, 14.

<sup>469</sup> See Christos Hadjiyiannis, “We Need to Talk About Ezra: Ezra Pound’s Fascist Propaganda, 1935–45”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2015, pp. 112–126; and Walter A. Strauss, “The Merchant of Venom? T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism,” *South Central Review*, vol. 14, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 31–44.

<sup>470</sup> See, for example, Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>471</sup> Mark Antliff, ‘Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity’, *The Art Bulletin*, 84.1 (March 2002), 148–169.

<sup>472</sup> *Virginia Woolf and Fascism*, ed. Merry M. Pawlowski (London: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>473</sup> Jana Howlett and Rod Mengham, *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 3.

scholarly turn from the assumed opposition between modernism and fascism (founded on the Nazi condemnation of much – but not all – modern art as ‘degenerate’) to the radical revision of that ‘postwar complacency’ over the last three decades.<sup>474</sup> There is another conflicting line of thought which has long connected the elitism of modernist writers with fascism. For Michael H. Whitworth, Bertrand Russell’s remarks in 1956 that D.H. Lawrence’s political outlook “‘led straight to Auschwitz” [...] sounded the keynote for many critics investigating the politics of other modernists’.<sup>475</sup> Via Mengham, we may then assume some familiarity on Mendelssohn’s part with theories of modernism’s fascist complicity. Nevertheless, she repeatedly and explicitly identifies as a ‘modernist’ poet.

How might the ‘unwitnessed moments’ of ‘1:3ng’ relate to a fascist legacy? In her discussion of the Eichmann trial of 1960, Felman supplies a reading of the victim that situates this paradoxical relation between (forced) silence and ‘unwitnessed moments’, if these are understood to signify an unwritten history. ‘History’, writes Felman, ‘by definition silences the victim’ who has ‘no language of his own’.<sup>476</sup> Coming to voice is no simple matter of removing the immediate cause of oppression, for the victim’s voice has to overcome the continued legacy of an oppressor’s silencing. The line from ‘1:3ng’ above stresses the transitive verbs (gag, smash, hound) that act *upon* the speaker, in effect muffling the speaker-victim’s own account of the subsequent damage – the return of trauma, her empty purse. Then again, the victim’s accusation resides in the strength given these verbs, which articulate or bear witness to the violence being committed. The struggle to come-to-voice enacted here, in defiance of being gagged or silenced by a literary history contaminated by fascism and anti-Semitism, foregrounds the narrative of the victim. Felman equates witness with speech, and finds the most significant outcome of the Eichmann trial to be that ‘the mute bearers of trauma’ became the ‘speaking subjects of history’, via a new language that allowed the Jewish victims to emerge from linguistically imposed subhumanity

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<sup>474</sup> Antliff, ‘Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity’, p. 148.

<sup>475</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, *Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 142.

<sup>476</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 125-126.

in an ‘unprecedented legal narrative of private and collective trauma’.<sup>477</sup> The articulation of voicelessness in ‘1:3ng’ then functions, paradoxically, to witness the violence of its own silencing.

In the above extract from ‘1:3ng’, Mendelssohn’s poetic perception of the multiple ways in which fascism might manifest itself are expressed as a list of anxieties or ‘facts’. Each anxious ‘fact’ additionally contributes to the ‘increasing literalism’ which heads this list of anxieties. These concerns escalate from the promotion and circulation of (Nazi) fascism to a prohibition placed on life itself, and run down to the less threatening ‘fact’ that there are ‘no central climaxes in contemporary music’, although this modernist musical aesthetic is clearly proximate to the threat of fascism. The belligerence of these ‘facts’ contrasts with the speaker’s assertion of her own ‘incapacity’, her lack of (factual) knowledge, lack of agency, lack of vitality, and the denuding of her creative and reproductive capacities. The anaphora of these lines aligns positivist ‘fact’ and ‘literalism’ with fascism, in opposition to the persecuted creativity of the female speaker. There is a literary genealogy to these alignments. Virginia Woolf associates the fascism of Mussolini’s Italy with ‘unmitigated masculinity’, and considers ‘the effect of [fascism] upon the art of poetry’ as deathly to creativity.<sup>478</sup> Pawlowski locates a ‘feminist resistance to fascist ideology’ and the development of a theory linking gender to fascism in Woolf’s writing.<sup>479</sup> Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is not concerned with questions of gender, but establishes the link between literalism or positivism and fascism in his major intervention *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), which finds that the conditions that made the Holocaust feasible arose from a scientific culture of positivism, and that those conditions have not receded.<sup>480</sup> ‘The Holocaust’, writes Bauman, ‘left the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, intact’.<sup>481</sup> Mendelssohn’s opposition to sociological practices is articulated in ‘1:3ng’ as ‘Artists do not go IN to others’ lives./Not

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<sup>477</sup> Felman, pp. 126, 130.

<sup>478</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Orlando: Harvest, 1989), pp. 102-103.

<sup>479</sup> Pawlowski, pp. 10, 6.

<sup>480</sup> Bauman, p. 3.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., p. 85.



with social science'.<sup>482</sup> For late Foucault, 'the possibilities of the social science' are double-edged: 'at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorise a holocaust'.<sup>483</sup> For Adorno, the fact that

fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.<sup>484</sup>

These very possibilities and conditions constitute Mendelssohn's 'hang ups as a Jewish poet of distinctly modernist tendencies.'

Why is '1:3ng' so concerned to register or acknowledge its own 'incapacities'? '[M]y own incapacity to distinguish between enemies & friends' might be read as a saving incapacity, for this lack of distinctiveness collapses the totalitarian division of the world into 'friend' and 'foe'.<sup>485</sup> As Tracy B. Strong puts the same idea, 'underlying the state is a community of people [...] a "we" that, as it defines itself necessarily in opposition to that which is not, presupposes and is defined by conflict. It derives its definition from the friend/enemy distinction'.<sup>486</sup> This distinction and the distance it supplied, in the findings of several studies, was a vital component in facilitating the Nazi genocide.<sup>487</sup> Modern representational order, too, based on binaries and concomitant othering, made – and continues to make – genocide thinkable.<sup>488</sup> Then again, this line might be read as a blurring of the borders between friends and enemies, a hazardous incapacity that might alienate friends and mistakenly befriend hostility. And as with the inability to distinguish according to established binaries, the poetic incapacity to *do* anything about 'swastikas in the post' is a paradoxically saving incapacity, in that it registers rather than disavows one of the most

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<sup>482</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 17.

<sup>483</sup> Foucault cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998), p. 3. As Franklin M. Littell demanded: 'What kind of a medical school trained Mengele and his associates?' (quoted in Bauman, p. 29).

<sup>484</sup> Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', p. 98.

<sup>485</sup> Wachsmann, p. 8.

<sup>486</sup> Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), p. xv.

<sup>487</sup> c.f. Bauman, pp. 155-156, and Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974), pp. 121, 39.

<sup>488</sup> Third, p. 114.

troubling legacies of World War II: the ongoing failure of resistance. Mendelssohn reaffirms the difficulty of confronting this legacy in poetry in a letter to Peter Riley, describing ‘the trouble with the “Nazi” strand’ as ‘precisely that you can’t identify it or isolate it. and thus defend against it’.<sup>489</sup> This position echoes that expressed by Adorno in his essay ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, where he writes that ‘I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy’.<sup>490</sup> Mendelssohn’s understanding of the survival of fascist tendencies is Foucauldian. The fascist ‘foe’ cannot be isolated and identified, but infiltrates social and political structures more minutely. Mendelssohn stresses the importance of recognising this persistent presence when she writes that ‘the anti-Semitism that flourished in 1967 and 1968 onwards has been acknowledged in other European countries but not this one’.<sup>491</sup> ‘[S]wastikas in the post’ stands as a compressed image of the pervasive potential for Nazism that continues to circulate within Western modernity.

### 1.1 Between normality and resistance

The eighties and nineties, when Mendelssohn wrote and published most prolifically, saw a surge in academic studies of the Third Reich. According to Wachsmann, the Eichmann trial of 1961 rekindled scholarly interest in the Holocaust and early studies began to appear in the sixties and seventies as ‘remembrance gave way to scholarship’.<sup>492</sup> Resistance studies are central to scholarship around Nazi history and the Third Reich. In 1998, Mendelssohn was reading *Resistance Against the Third Reich* (1994), a collection of essays which emerged from a Chicago conference that ‘came at the tail end of a veritable boom of national and international conferences on the subject of German resistance in particular and of European resistance against the Nazi regime in general’.<sup>493</sup> For the editors, the fact that ‘resistance

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<sup>489</sup> Letter to Peter Riley, 27 August 1999, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/2.

<sup>490</sup> Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, p. 90.

<sup>491</sup> Letter to Evans, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/13.

<sup>492</sup> Wachsmann, p. 12.

<sup>493</sup> Letter to Mengham, 1998, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1; Geyer and Boyer, p. 1.

remained the exception (and not just in Germany) was evident to everyone'.<sup>494</sup> Resistance, in this reading, consists of 'making exceptional what most everyone desperately wanted to be normal'.<sup>495</sup> One of the volume's stated aims is to redress the 'weakness of the common characterisation of the Nazi regime as "exceptional"', and consider instead the normalisation of the exceptional as the great success of the regime.<sup>496</sup> Bauman anticipates this argument, asserting that 'every "ingredient" of the Holocaust – all those many things that rendered it possible - was normal', devoting a chapter to the 'Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust'.<sup>497</sup> Frank Trommler's essay 'Between normality and resistance' from *Resistance Against the Third Reich* explores how the Nazi regime realised a state of normalised exceptionality, under which concentration camps, Nuremberg Laws, ghettos, and eventually the death camps flourished alongside the 'scripted normalisation' (promises of cars, travel, economic prosperity, the formation of segmental alliances) of the Aryan population.<sup>498</sup> Several historians strongly refute the idea that the majority of German people did not know about the camps.<sup>499</sup> Hannah Arendt coined her famous phrase 'the banality of evil' to describe those, like Eichmann, who were the representatives of such widespread normalisation.<sup>500</sup> And to again defer to Adorno, 'the German resistance movement after all remained without a popular base, and it's not as if such a base was magically conjured up out of Germany's defeat just like that'.<sup>501</sup> The failure of past resistance extends into the present. In addition to the evidence of Mendelssohn's reading around resistance studies, there is evidence that she began to write a historical work titled *The Resistance*.<sup>502</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that Mendelssohn's poetic register of the Nazi legacy and the ongoing

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<sup>494</sup> Geyer and Boyer, p. 9.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>497</sup> Bauman, p. 8.

<sup>498</sup> Frank Trommler, 'Between Normality and resistance', *Resistance Against the Third Reich*, ed. Michael Geyer and John W Boyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 119-140 (pp. 122-3).

<sup>499</sup> c.f. Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p. 295; and La Chêne, p. 72.

<sup>500</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 252.

<sup>501</sup> Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', p. 92.

<sup>502</sup> Letter to Robin Blackburn, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/2.

failure of resistance echoes the evolving scholarship around resistance studies and the 'Third Reich'.

We see this in Mendelssohn's lyric inscriptions of the concentrationary, which articulate the 'continuities of the Nazi regime beyond the collapse of the Nazi state'.<sup>503</sup> The 'camp', in Mendelssohn's poetry, is present in terms of its traces and embeddedness rather than as an exceptional subject. There are no poems 'about' the camp; the camp is woven into the fabric of Mendelssohn's writing, rather than treated as an isolated and discrete entity. For instance, the incongruously titled poem 'wrap yourself in jam jeunesse' ends with the following inscription of the camp:

it must be breathtaking to be  
unconfined & universally progressive.  
boiled beneath the labour at Mauthausen  
our blood has travelled our line  
in quarters where the icy stems  
poison the vats in the dictats  
intoning never again will it be<sup>504</sup>

The unmistakable sarcasm of 'it must be breathtaking' implies that an identification with notions of freedom and progressiveness are delusional. The sarcastic tone darkens with the reference to Mauthausen, a camp where *Nacht and Nebel* prisoners were incarcerated, as previously discussed. The poem imagines a grisly lineage that begins 'beneath the labour' of that camp, the labour undertaken by those 'disappeared' and marked as NN. Le Chêne records that the labour at Mauthausen – working in the nearby quarries – was 'notorious for its high rate of human mortality and for its unbelievably harsh conditions. One of the forms of punishing prisoners in Auschwitz was to send them to the quarries of Mauthausen'.<sup>505</sup> The 'icy stems' that contaminate the 'dictats' (an imposed decree or harsh penalty), stand in high contrast to the heated image of 'boiled' blood. The alliteration ('boiled beneath', 'blood') and the internal rhyme ('vats' with 'dictats') consolidate the contrast between the

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<sup>503</sup> Geyer and Boyer, p. 10.

<sup>504</sup> *LA*, p. 50.

<sup>505</sup> Le Chêne, p. 65.

subject matter (the legacy of Nazi atrocities) and poetic mode (sardonic, sing-song). The arch use of the verb ‘intoning’ in the last line indicates the poetic speaker’s cynicism towards the postwar cliché that ‘never again will it be’, which recalls Adorno’s diagnosis of how remembrance degenerates into caricature while enabling conditions endure.<sup>506</sup> The syntactical ambiguity over the spoken source of that ‘intoning’ may also be deliberate: ‘dictats’, the only possible grammatical subject, might refer back to the decree that incarcerated members of the resistance at Mauthausen, or might refer forwards to those authorities that solemnly declare that such horrors will never be repeated. The same source of totalitarian authority, in other words, is responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust and simultaneously disavows the possible reoccurrence of those horrors. The concentrationary past weighs heavily on Mendelssohn’s poetic present.

There are important parallels between Mendelssohn’s condensed account of how ‘our blood has travelled our line’ and accounts of historical continuity in the theories of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben is one of a group of leading scholars who argue that proliferating states of exception – the legacy of early twentieth-century fascism – have seemingly become the rule.<sup>507</sup> Judith Butler, for example, borrows from Agamben to assess the processes which exempt prisoners in Guantanamo from their most basic legal rights.<sup>508</sup> Agamben argues that political *norms* are revealed and produced through the matrix of the *exception*.<sup>509</sup> This is a departure from Foucault’s regime of the norm, and its problematic exclusion of the capacity for resistance within such regimes, which I discuss at greater length in chapter four. Conversely, states of exception (extra-legal powers of detention, for example) can defamiliarise the normative states (legal powers of detention, for example) of which they are the obverse and supply a foothold for resistance. Furthermore, Foucault analyses prisons and hospitals, but does not consider concentration camps, one of the most

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<sup>506</sup> Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, p. 98.

<sup>507</sup> Paul A. Passavant, ‘The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben,’ *Political Theory*, 35.2 (2007), 147–174 (p. 148); Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 12.

<sup>508</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>509</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 1-2, 40.

significant forms of modern incarceration. Agamben takes the concentration camp to be paradigmatic of the state of exception, 'the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule'.<sup>510</sup> Preeminent among such camps are the Nazi *Lager*, which operate 'outside' (the etymological sense of 'exception') of the normal juridical order, but are paradoxically included within the juridical order through this very exclusion.<sup>511</sup> In other words, as the camps became normalized, 'the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception'.<sup>512</sup> The carceral structure of the Nazi *Lager* is the site where the condition of Agambenian 'bare life' is realised:

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realised, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. This is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen.<sup>513</sup>

The *homo sacer* is someone who stands outside the law. In Agamben's genealogy, 'bare life' and 'political existence' were historically distinct, but with the advent of the biopolitical age, where new technologies of power ever more minutely manage human life processes, biological life becomes ever more politicised.<sup>514</sup> The paradigmatic carceral space of the camp, and its biopolitical subjects, are the blueprint for the states of exception that proliferate throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>515</sup>

How do fascist tendencies continue to manifest themselves in Britain, the country where Mendelssohn finds the least acknowledgement of such tendencies? Stuart Hall isolates 1971 as the year in which law-and-order panic in Britain became institutionalised as an 'exceptional' form of the state.<sup>516</sup> The vanguardism of the Angry Brigade contributed to the drive towards 'the exceptional state' under the Heath government which mobilised the

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<sup>510</sup> Passavant, pp. 153, 155; Agamben *Homo Sacer*, p. 168.

<sup>511</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 167.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>514</sup> This, for Agamben, 'constitutes the decisive event of modernity', *Homo Sacer*, pp. 4, 6.

<sup>515</sup> President Bush's 'assumption of this title ['Commander in Chief of the Army' after September 11, 2001] entails a direct reference to the state of exception', Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 22.

<sup>516</sup> Hall and others, p. 282.

law to quell domestic conflicts in England and Ireland.<sup>517</sup> The second edition of *Policing the Crisis* reassesses its own characterisation of the early seventies as an ‘exceptional moment of the state’ in Britain.<sup>518</sup> Continuing coercive measures over the last three decades stand as evidence that this exceptionality, far from being temporary, is instead deeply institutionalised in the form of anti-social behaviour orders, stop-and-search procedures, imprisonment of suspected terrorists without due legal process, the use of ‘kettling’ in policing of demonstrations, and the continuing rise in prison populations. Nonetheless, ‘the procedures of representative government continue’ alongside resurgent crises of law-and-order and the ongoing normalisation of coercion, or as it is put in *Policing the Crisis*: ‘the practices of coercion that were emerging in the 1970s have been everywhere extended, deepened, and, so to speak, put on steroids’.<sup>519</sup> As we have seen, Mendelssohn registers states of exceptionality in the form of the camp, as well as the ways in which states of exceptionality constitute their subjects. ‘I am not claiming uniqueness or exception’, Mendelssohn wrote to her Cambridge supervisor decades after her release, ‘but I have been exceptionalised’.<sup>520</sup> Here, she refers to her conviction as part of a group that had, conversely, aimed to exceptionalise what was considered ‘normal’. The failure of that act of resistance, epitomised in the trial of the Stoke Newington Eight, inflects Mendelssohn’s pessimistic conception of exceptionality and witness.

## 1.2 *Tondo Aquatique*

A number of poems from the pamphlet *Tondo Aquatique* (1997) are concerned with states of carceral exceptionality and the legacy of World War II. There is a suggestion that the pamphlet as a whole evokes the political state of exception. Mendelssohn describes *Tondo Aquatique* in terms reminiscent of ‘1:3ng’, as ‘an evocation of the minim... not a noose or a

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<sup>517</sup> See Hall and others, pp. 268-320.

<sup>518</sup> Hall and others, p. 395.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>520</sup> Letter to Janet Todd, 6 October 1990, SxMs109/3/A/1/61.

loophole or a fascist logo'.<sup>521</sup> More prosaically, 'Tondo' refers to a circular work of art. Splicing these two definitions together, we might align the circular motif hovering over the poems with the *minim*, rather than with capture, escape or political symbol. The *minim*, as discussed above, may be a musical note, a standardised drop of fluid, or, according to the book of Jewish law, a heretic. *Tondo Aquatique* is an 'evocation', then, of one who stands outside Jewish law: an outlaw, *homo sacer*. In the opening lyric, the speaker exists in states of figurative incarceration and finds 'my solitary condition/surrounded', wishfully, by 'rivers and valleys' rather than 'press reporters'.<sup>522</sup> An expression of emancipation is bracketed by a state of naturalised (or normalised) imprisonment: 'we escaped but not to the houses where... confinement essentialised'.<sup>523</sup> The absence of a verb means that a reader cannot know *when* confinement was essentialised; instead, confinement is timelessly essentialised, or naturalised, in this formulation. Confinement – with its gendered etymological traces of confinement in pregnancy – is also figured in the same poem as a state of 'inanimation', of inhibited movement. The poem with which this study opened, 'Is es ar', imagines a state where the poetic subject is imprisoned by 'texts that held her', and escalates to a more total state of imprisonment in which 'the sky hold her in simple hard labour'.<sup>524</sup> In a poem titled 'A grace note', the poetic speaker is emphatic that 'the police have nothing to do with poetry, nothing' precisely because the 'police' are inside rather than outside (in the position of *homo sacer*) the normal legal order:

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, without a black-out  
frame of covered freedom innocent or not.<sup>525</sup>

'A grace note' is not only a musical notation, which would seem to characterise the poem it titles as a non-essential ornament; it plays on the pen-name under which Mendelssohn

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<sup>521</sup> Letter to Mengham, 3 November 1998, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>522</sup> 'Erato', *TA*.

<sup>523</sup> 'we escaped...', *TA*.

<sup>524</sup> 'Is es ar', *TA*.

<sup>525</sup> 'A grace note', *TA*.



published *Tondo Aquatique*, Grace Lake, and the notion of grace as salvation in high contrast with the ‘covered freedom’ of ‘judicial procedures’. Poetry is figured here as ‘outside the law’, situated in biopolitical space. To associate with ‘Poetry’ entails giving up the rights of the political subject who is included within the ‘normal’ legal order and has access to ‘judicial procedures’. To give up that access is to be outside the law, where ‘Poetry’ is located, in this lyric. ‘A grace note’ articulates the border-lines between ‘legitimate’ subjects such as the police, who shore up the existing political order, and the exceptional subjects who stand outside that order. Here, Mendelssohn reaffirms poetry’s separation from the judicial, and implicitly rejects any equivalence between poetic and legal forms of witness.

Another *Tondo Aquatique* poem returns to one of the concerns of ‘1:3ng’: not knowing what to do about the swastikas in the post. World War II haunts the individual subconscious and aesthetic decisions of the speaking ‘I’ of this poem:

I don’t know which colour to choose. the blue I dreamt is untranslatable.  
 I sense the rote of priorities. Food. Clothes. Shelter. Culture. Art.  
 Bound around the room in fixed photographs dishes are slammed down.  
 Another flash kidnap. Strings tied enough to burn in to  
 The ingratitude I have been told that I have shown  
 Exposition: Ingratitude. I am returned to the bowing and scraping  
 Sans violin. The monstrous regimen throws back its jaws.  
 It has now become Hell in full scenario. “You were always vile”  
 Which I knew. Which is why there is no reply plunged up to my  
 repetitive role syndrome. the word is enough. I fit in.  
 But the problem remains. How without the second world war  
 Can I possibly in the presence of relentless realism get it right.<sup>526</sup>

Bookended with ontological questions of dreams and reality, these lines open with a problem of aesthetics and close by bringing historical conflict (specifically, World War II) to bear upon the question of ‘which colour to choose’. The ‘blue I dreamt’ conjures Joan Miro’s surrealist painting-poem ‘Photo: This Is the Colour Of My Dreams’, an empty canvas save for the word ‘*Photo*’ opposite a patch of blue with ‘*ceci est le couleur de mes rêves*’ painted beneath. The Surrealist notion of *peinture-poesie* which eroded the distinction between art and literature, image and text, is disrupted and stalled, in this lyric, by the

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<sup>526</sup> ‘I don’t know which colour...’, *TA*.

‘second world war’. On the level of syntax, the disclaiming ‘I don’t know’ of the first line does not resolve, and reemerges in the query of the last two lines. But the eighth line, where the volta of a Petrarchan sonnet would conventionally fall, answers the first line with the affirmative ‘Which I knew’, although this affirmation swiftly returns to the *absence* of response: ‘Which is why there is no reply.’ Optimistic resolution is not a given in the ‘presence of relentless realism’. Prosodically and discursively, ‘relentless realism’ recalls ‘repetitive role syndrome’ a few lines back, terminology suggestive of a pathologising positivist diagnosis. Domestic stereotype veers around the edges of this diagnosis, too: ‘dishes are slammed’, and ‘plunged up to my’ suggests elbows, in grease or soapy water, but in fact morphs to ‘repetitive role syndrome’, and an expression of conformism: ‘I fit in’. The immediate dilemma of ‘which colour to choose’ is deflected by the more pressing requisites of ‘Food. Clothes. Shelter.’ There is a strong suggestion in the penultimate line that this aesthetic ‘problem’ is related to or even caused by the ‘second world war’. Aesthetics – in this case the choice of a colour – runs aground upon World War II’s exacerbation of ‘relentless realism’.

In my reading of this poem, a colour dilemma stands in some sort of circular relation to World War II. Colour, of course, often acts as a synonym for race, and although the race at hand – Jewish – now predominantly passes as white, for many centuries Jewish ‘whiteness’ has been violently distinguished from non-Jewish whiteness. Post-World War II, Jewish assimilation greatly increased but ‘Jews were still far from considering themselves categorically white’.<sup>527</sup> The complexities of Jewish racial politics are foregrounded in much of Mendelssohn’s work, as in ‘I don’t know’, where colour indecision seems to derive from the legacy of World War II. To be collapsed into whiteness (‘I fit in’) is another kind of erasure, and the near-invisibility of Jewish ‘colour’ deeply problematises a sense of self-identity which must be at odds with its outward presentation. But the aesthetic and racialised impasse of ‘I don’t know’ does not resolve, and the questions which bookend this poem tie that moment of fracture directly to the ‘second world war’.

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<sup>527</sup> Third, p. 127.

Such an impasse recalls Adorno's landmark essay, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', and its much-quoted injunction that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.<sup>528</sup> Mendelssohn refers to this statement when she writes that 'as a Jewess I am not allowed to compose, if Theodore Adorno's "No poetry after Auschwitz" is to be obeyed'.<sup>529</sup> Most often read as a provocation rather than an empirical claim, interrogating what Adorno might mean by 'poetry' may clarify the claims that are being made here. In the later essay 'Lyric Poetry and Society', Adorno writes that 'lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism'.<sup>530</sup> Writing on different discussions of the relation between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust, James Schmidt proposes that 'lyric', for Adorno, is any language that is not 'reduced to a mechanical instrumentality that serves existing powers'.<sup>531</sup> Schmidt's reading is supported by Adorno's suggestion that modernism saw the 'contradiction between poetic and communicative language reach[...] an extreme'.<sup>532</sup> Thus lyric poetry, despite its germination in atomistic individualism, contains the potential to register the carceral and totalising ideology of modernity diagnosed by Adorno and Max Horkheimer in non-instrumentalising and non-judicial forms.<sup>533</sup> Such a definition of lyrical language recalls Mendelssohn's assertion that poetry stands outside judicial procedure, and that there is no correspondence between poetic and political language: 'poetry is not legislature'.<sup>534</sup> To acknowledge the failure of resistance and register that incapacity instead in poetry that fractures conventional communicative practices is not to transcend the seemingly inescapable structures of modernity, but to foreground their inescapability.

As I argued earlier, Mendelssohn's poetry is highly conscious of its potential function as 'witness', or as the subjective expression - to rework Adorno - of the particular social antagonisms of Britain in the 1970s. We see this in a dense prose poem from

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<sup>528</sup> Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', p. 34.

<sup>529</sup> Letter to Jude Windle, 1 September 2008, SxMs109/3/A/1/68.

<sup>530</sup> Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature: Volume 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 45.

<sup>531</sup> James Schmidt, 'Genocide and the limits of enlightenment', in *Enlightenment and Genocide, contradictions of modernity*, ed. James Kaye and Bo Str  th, (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 89.

<sup>532</sup> 'Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 44.

<sup>533</sup> Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society'.

<sup>534</sup> Letter to Patterson, 20 February 1989, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

*Implacable Art*, ‘basalt’, which cross-wires a cultural history of activism, policing, incarceration and anti-Semitism:

basalt. basalt. two sculptured heads. hongrie 1956. tanks. fire. hatred.  
disturbing the peace. It’s a filthy world. Archeological perception reveals  
gunpowder deposits & so-called insanity. A woman artist does not Need  
the insidious interference of any woman who tells me what I know. Un  
paleturier. The painting caused dismay. I question that dismay although  
not in a protracted fashion, not giving birth to a mangrove, the confronta-  
-tion between the artist & the authorities of white needlework results in  
the artist being locked up without paint, water & paper. It was only the  
first painting & I was not thinking specifically of the Mangrove which was  
the site of a riot which I did not witness but which was famous for the  
brutal & corrupt police in that area of West London which was being  
gentrified.<sup>535</sup>

This fractured lyric moves swiftly from the revolutionary events of Hungary in 1956 via the incarcerated artist to the Mangrove Nine, Britain’s most influential Black power trial which ran for fifty-five days in 1970. The significance of this trial was not limited to issues of race. Correspondences proliferate between the Mangrove Nine and the Stoke Newington Eight (SN8) trial, not least because the same defence lawyer, Ian Macdonald, represented seven of the Mangrove Nine and, a year later, Jim Greenfield, allegedly of the Angry Brigade.<sup>536</sup> In both cases, the main charge was of conspiracy, and several of the defendants chose to represent themselves. The SN8 defence mobilised itself for a politically symbolic trial of which the Mangrove Nine trial stood as the most recent forerunner.<sup>537</sup> As with the SN8, the Mangrove Nine defence aimed to convince the jury of widespread police malpractice and harassment, and were successful in demonstrating substantial evidence of racism in the policing of the Black community and, moreover, that the police had conflated activism with criminality.<sup>538</sup> Taylor has written of further shared strategic hallmarks, ‘such as a rigorous scrutiny of the jury for bias, and an incisive attack on the credibility of police witnesses’.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> *LA*, p. 71.

<sup>536</sup> On the ‘Mangrove 9’, see ‘The Mangrove; just a chapter in a 400-year story’, *Time Out*, 24-30 Dec 1971, pp. 6-7.

<sup>537</sup> SN8DG, *Conspiracy Notes* [1], pp. 1, 7.

<sup>538</sup> Taylor, p. 38.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

Where all nine Black power activists charged with conspiracy to incite riot were acquitted, however, only four of the eight SN8 defendants walked free. The poetic speaker performatively disclaims ‘thinking specifically of the Mangrove’ which has already inserted itself in cryptic and coded forms. ‘[U]n paleturier’ suggests the French word ‘paletuvier’, which translates to mangrove. The specificity of ‘[b]rutal & corrupt police’ bears clear correlation to the outcome of the trial, but there is a continuing insistence that this testimony is at one remove from ‘the site of a riot which I did not witness’. Lyrical testimony here takes the form of encrypted traces, and a refusal which doubles as an acknowledgement – another example of Mendelssohn’s ‘choking’ or contorted mode of poetic witness. This disavowal of the function of witness appears to be rooted in the problematic implication of the poetic with the political or the fascistic.

In ‘basalt’, the speaker-witness is a ‘woman artist’ who faces the threat of incarceration and the confiscation of her painting materials. The recurrence of *Tondo Aquatique*’s colour dilemma further on in ‘basalt’ then recalls the earlier confiscation of paint as well as being inflected with issues of race, following the apparently incidental recall of the Mangrove Nine trial:

I don’t talk to the police except never, the solicitor calls in the police because I do not want my house raided when I am alone with my little children. But this goes down to the point, and is enmeshed in the Nietzschean Will of the Baudelaire’s determination to declassify the Jewess from the functioning economy in Academia and in the Arts, for every secretary & receptionist looks Aghast at the Colour. This colour is avoiding my decision making properties.<sup>540</sup>

The spectre of modernism, here represented by Baudelaire and Nietzsche, again encroaches on Jewish, feminine creativity. The anti-Semitism of Nietzsche and, to a lesser degree, Baudelaire, is the source of some scholarly controversy.<sup>541</sup> In what way do these influential modernists ‘declassify the/Jewess’? It is suggested that she is excluded from a cultural

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<sup>540</sup> *LA*, p. 71.

<sup>541</sup> See, for instance, Robert C. Holub, *Nietzsche’s Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Brett Bowles, ‘Poetic Practice and Historical Paradigm: Charles Baudelaire’s Anti-Semitism.’, *PMLA*, 115. 2 (2000), 195-208.

economy on the basis of her 'Colour'. Somehow, the ambiguously threatening and protective role of the police is 'enmeshed' with this cultural exclusion. The 'colour' which is capable of reducing administrators to a state of shock precipitates an incapacity to decide or to choose, and strongly recalls the colour dilemma of 'I know'. In 'basalt.', that dilemma appears to be related to the bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms that facilitated the Holocaust.<sup>542</sup> A sense of ongoing discrimination leads the poetic speaker to a final indictment of conformity and cultural assimilation:

This was another perverted tactic to exonerate filthy racism, to conform. It isn't shocking, or even remarkable. It is Germanically inspired. What happened to me in Germany? I was advanced on by a nurse with a hypodermic needle. She Was directing it to my skull. I ducked. 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 racist abuse. The Jew is the least protected. People simply start to speak in that mock-Jewish way. "If you can take being in quod, you can survive anything." Thanks.<sup>543</sup>

'Quod' is slang, taken from the Hebrew, for prison. This a loaded loan-word from a language whose speakers have spent much of their history in ghettos, prisons and camps. The term reappears in another *Implacable Art* poem, which begins '**they** get their own way/told him he had been in quod', again aligning the Hebrew word for prison with coercion, especially linguistic coercion.<sup>544</sup> The ventriloquised final line of 'basalt' distances the poetic speaker from the assumption of a historical, Jewish resilience. Mendelssohn recalls the hazards of normalisation here, in her equation between 'exonerat[ing] racism' and conformity, and the sardonic insistence that '[i]t isn't shocking, or even/remarkable'. The poem appears to draw an uncompromising association between Germany and the inhumane medical experiments conducted during the Third Reich. This association is followed by an apparent non-sequitur: the critique of 'insensitive' authoritative language which signals that the hypersensitive register of the poem is non-authoritative. '[P]ositions of authority' are

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<sup>542</sup> See *Concentrationary Cinema*, p. 23, and "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", p. 90.

<sup>543</sup> *LA*, p. 71.

<sup>544</sup> *LA*, p. 115. Bold type in original.

themselves a source of persecutory anxiety, historically inflected by the preceding ‘Germany’ anecdote. The enduring condition of the Jew as unprotected even by the ‘radical’ authorities, and as the perennial carceral subject, is critiqued both as a political reality and as self-fulfilling ‘mock-Jewish’ caricature. ‘[F]ilthy racism’ is an ongoing and pervasive concern for Mendelssohn throughout *Implacable Art*.<sup>545</sup> The multiple intersections between anti-Semitism, fascism, carcerality and literature are articulated as a postwar legacy that persists in the policing strategies of the seventies and in the lived and inherited experience of the speaker. Mendelssohn’s poetry bears a hypersensitive form of witness to a long history of persecuted Jewry and ‘filthy racism’. But as well as articulating the continued circulation of the conditions out of which Nazism arose, her poetry inscribes the limits of its function as witness, and the failure more broadly of postwar art to avoid implication in the highly compromised realm of the political.

## Part 2: Muriel Rukeyser and the poetry of witness

Like Mendelssohn, the American poet Muriel Rukeyser was Jewish, and acutely conscious of the complexities of this inheritance. As she wrote in an essay for the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, ‘my themes and the use I have made of them have depended on my life as a poet, as a woman, as an American, and as a Jew’.<sup>546</sup> Janet Kaufman, among others, has detailed the ‘aesthetic and moral centrality’ of Jewishness to Rukeyser’s work.<sup>547</sup> The same can be said of Mendelssohn, who as we have seen was fiercely insistent upon her Jewish identity. Although Rukeyser grew up at a distance from organised Judaism, her poem ‘To Be a Jew’ (1944) was adopted into the prayer books of both the American reformist and reconstructionist Jewish movements. Other

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<sup>545</sup> In ‘this is what you are told’, an apparent reference to one of the few German resistance movements, the Edelweiss pirates, bisects an accusation of ‘Racial hatred’, *LA*, p. 91. In another poem, ‘racial hatred’ brackets the phrase ‘the occurrence of writing...’ *LA*, p. 118.

<sup>546</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, ‘Under Forty’, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 7 (February 1944), pp. 4–9.

<sup>547</sup> Janet Kaufman, “‘But not the study’”: Writing as a Jew’, *How Shall We Tell Each Other Of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), pp. 45–61 (p. 45).

Jewish poets such as Denise Levertov, who travelled with Rukeyser to Vietnam in 1972 at the height of the Vietnam War, also offer generative comparisons. But the themes of war and socio-political conflict that so mark the entirety of Rukeyser's oeuvre come and go in Levertov's writing.<sup>548</sup> By virtue of the contexts from which she wrote, Rukeyser's poetry was both generated by and generative of social antagonism. Rukeyser rarely lets her reader forget that 'I lived through the first century of world wars'.<sup>549</sup> Critics frequently describe her highly political poetry as a mode of social protest. Repeatedly, Rukeyser 'put her body and her writing alike on the line', and was surveilled and imprisoned for her ideological commitments.<sup>550</sup> In her own words, her poetry sets out to 'resist, fail, and resist', and this mode of resistance stems directly from a conception of what it means 'to be a Jew in the twentieth century'.<sup>551</sup>

As noted above, Rukeyser attempts to integrate the poetic and legal functions of witness in her writing and in her activism. Rukeyser was an active campaigner throughout her life, and placed under FBI surveillance for forty years, but it was not until 1972 that she was criminally prosecuted for her activism. Accused of obstructing the passage of senators during a lie-in anti-Vietnam War protest outside the Senate along with other luminaries of the era including Noam Chomsky, Richard Avedon, Jon Voight and Mrs Leonard Bernstein, Rukeyser stood trial and was handed a short-term prison sentence. Notes from her archive reveal that during the trial, she listed the aforementioned 'poem from Jewish prayer books', along with others, as part of her official defence for her actions.<sup>552</sup> The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet taken from her ten-poem sequence 'Letter to the Front', which articulates the horrors of the Spanish Civil War alongside those of World War II. It reads:

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<sup>548</sup> Anne Dewey, 'The Art of the Octopus: The Maturation of Denise Levertov's Political Vision', *Renascence*, 50 (1998), 65–81.

<sup>549</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, 'Poem', *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* ed. Janet E. Kaufman & Jan F. Herzog (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), p. 430.

<sup>550</sup> 'Introduction', *How Shall We Tell Each Other Of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), p. xv.

<sup>551</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 243.

<sup>552</sup> Box I:58 folder 1, Muriel Rukeyser Papers, 1844 – 1986, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Subsequent citations will supply box and folder numbers thus (I:58, 1).



To be a Jew in the twentieth century  
 Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,  
 Wishing to be invisible, you choose  
 Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.  
 Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:  
 Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood  
 Of those who resist, fail, and resist: and God  
 Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still  
 Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.  
 That may come also. But the accepting wish,  
 The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee  
 For every human freedom, suffering to be free,  
 Daring to live for the impossible.<sup>553</sup>

Rukeyser wrote these lines at the height of the Nazi genocide in 1944. Critics have read this as an address that ‘tethers Jews to a life of resistance’, an inevitable consequence of their status as ‘history’s tragic survivors’.<sup>554</sup> Moments of despair are projected — as in the universal helplessness of ‘God reduced’ to a ‘hostage among hostages’, and the concomitant extinguishing of salvation. But despite the ongoing holocaust, this is a poem of hope, premised upon the identity of Jewish victim as a gift, which ends with a utopian vision of a contract in which this victim-identity conversely acts as a ‘guarantee’. To ‘take full life’ is an aspiration that resonates throughout Rukeyser’s work, as in ‘Ajanta’, first published in 1944, where she writes of ‘[w]anting my fullness and not the field of war’.<sup>555</sup> For Reginald Gibbons, this opposition ‘defines the terms of her life-long artistic project’.<sup>556</sup> In ‘Letter to the Front’, ‘full’ is reiterated; to accept the gift of Jewishness is to ‘take full life. Full agonies’. This poem admits the paradoxical struggle of this identification while demanding that it be made, and enacts this struggle in prosody. The endstopped lines tug between the finality of ‘the death of the spirit’ or its alternative - ‘full life’. Even in the midst of the Holocaust, when to be Jewish was to be

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<sup>553</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 243.

<sup>554</sup> Herzog and Kaufman, pp. 47, 60.

<sup>555</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 207.

<sup>556</sup> Reginald Gibbons, ‘Fullness, Not War’, *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), pp. 101-109 (p. 102).

the ‘perennial accused in a lynch justice’, Rukeyser locates Jewishness as a source of resistance, and articulates the urgency of admitting a painful history.<sup>557</sup> Her poetry participates in the same mobilising form of melancholy which characterises the Spanish Civil War poetry of Cunard and Mendelssohn. Rukeyser’s political and poetic preoccupations are co-extensive with those of Cunard; both were reporters for the Scottsboro trial in the early 1930s, and Rukeyser was in Spain when war broke out in 1936. Those first days of the war form the subject of her poem ‘Mediterranean’ which remembers Spain in ‘continual poetry’.<sup>558</sup> Rukeyser’s poetry on Spain proved ‘continual’ indeed: as Rowena Kennedy-Epstein has documented, Rukeyser would write about the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath for over forty years, ‘creating a radical and interconnected twentieth-century textual history’.<sup>559</sup> That interconnected history, or ‘continual poetry’, encompasses Spain and World War II and links these wars to the conflicts of the 1970s.

Rukeyser’s involvement with the anti-Vietnam War movement in the seventies drew heavily on the legacy of World War II. The anti-war literature contained in her archive stands testament to the extent of this involvement. From the War Resisters’ League to RESIST to Redress to the Project Nuremberg Obligation, Rukeyser’s role in the resistance movements was definitely ‘as a poet’.<sup>560</sup> Records of fundraising poetry readings bear this out. A letter from Florence Howe thanking Rukeyser for her participation in a 1969 RESIST poetry reading which raised \$3500 claims that ‘wherever you go you raise more than money’.<sup>561</sup> Another letter dated 1972, this time from the Project Nuremberg Obligation committee, stresses that ‘[y]our action is involving others beyond intellectual agonizing’.<sup>562</sup> Furthermore, Rukeyser unapologetically used her poems as part of her formal legal defence, calling them up as if they were witnesses:

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<sup>557</sup> Felman, p. 119.

<sup>558</sup> Rukeyser, ‘Mediterranean’, *The New Masses* (14 Sept, 1937), 18-20, p. 20.

<sup>559</sup> Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, “‘Whose fires would not stop’: Muriel Rukeyser and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1976”, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 43.3 (2013), 384-414, p. 384.

<sup>560</sup> I:58, 2.

<sup>561</sup> I:58, 2.

<sup>562</sup> I:57, 7.

I am a poet and in my poetry have expressed my objections to the illegal acts of my government in Vietnam and my understanding of the Nuremberg obligation which I followed on June 27. Some of the poems expressing these beliefs are 'Delta Poems', 'Bringing', and 'Ten Elegies'.<sup>563</sup>

The 'Delta Poems', from her 1968 collection *The Speed of Darkness*, refer to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, and describe the death of the Vietnamese at the hands of the Americans. 'Delta Poems' were first read at 'Angry Arts Week', which was held in New York in 1967 and brought together artists and writers against the Vietnam War. 'Bringing', collected as part of the 1973 collection *Breaking Open*, was first published alongside poems by other poets in *Green Flag* (City Lights Books, 1969), and invokes a youthful resistance to 'a system of war and rewards'.<sup>564</sup> Its repetition of 'resist resist' recalls the refrain of 'To Be A Jew'. 'Ten Elegies' presumably refers to Rukeyser's *Elegies* (1949), a much larger body of work, which encompasses the plight of Spanish refugees, 'stations of swastikas', and a 'century of betrayal'.<sup>565</sup> Rukeyser described her *Elegies* as '[t]en poems whose development is based on growing connections of images and process, over a period of ten years'.<sup>566</sup> The use of the interwar *Elegies* as part of her defence indicates the extent to which the legacy of World War II shaped Rukeyser's activism in the seventies. The judicial agency Rukeyser appears to assign her witness-poems is lent extra weight by the concentrationary history they invoke.

In addition to these named poems, Rukeyser drew on writings and speeches by the lawyers Telford Taylor, a principle prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, and Richard Falk, a vocal proponent of the Nuremberg Obligation, material from Sarah Lawrence College 'teach-ins', the war journalism of Wilfred Burchett, the Vietnamese poet Kim Van Kieu, readings from the 'Angry Arts' series and other readings against the war, anti-war meetings and rallies, and more of Rukeyser's own writing — her book of essays, *The Life of Poetry* (1949), *The Speed of Darkness* as a whole, and the 'Jewish prayerbook' poem — to further

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<sup>563</sup> 'Affidavit in support of motion for reduction of sentence', 1:57, 2.

<sup>564</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 498.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 315.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 616.

support the case of the defence.<sup>567</sup> Rukeyser's insistence upon the political contexts and legal function of her poetry is invoked alongside other extenuating factors which include having draft-age sons, ill-health and, overarching all, the Nuremberg Obligation. The Nuremberg Obligation was developed by the International Law Commission of the United Nations in 1945 to codify the principles underlying the postwar Nuremberg trials in the 1940s. These trials introduced the concept of international criminal accountability, and set out guidelines to determine what constituted a crime against humanity following the revelation of Nazi atrocities. Although formulated in the forties, 'no official attempt has been made to apply the Nuremberg Principles to the concrete circumstances of violent conflict'.<sup>568</sup> For Richard Falk, an anti-war activist and Professor of International Law at Princeton, it was activists, rather than institutions, that kept this idea of accountability alive through the Cold War.<sup>569</sup> Individual commitment to the Nuremberg Obligation, as Rukeyser's experience and writings show, was very much a case of resistance as ongoing struggle, as 'resist, fail and resist'.

The Vietnam war files in Rukeyser's archive contain many invocations of the Nuremberg Obligation. In a statement before sentencing for another act of anti-war protest in 1972, one of Rukeyser's Redress comrades attested that 'the basis of my plea of not guilty rests upon the Nuremberg Principles passed in 1946 and to which the United States was one of the principal authors'. The Nuremberg Obligation is defined as an individual responsibility and a 'legal obligation to take action to halt the commission of war crimes'.<sup>570</sup> The writer goes on to remind his listeners of Roosevelt's 'message to the German people in 1944, urging them to collect evidence of the criminal conduct of their leaders and reminding them that their higher obligation to law and humanity take precedence over their blind,

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<sup>567</sup> I:57, 5.

<sup>568</sup> S. Andersson, 'A Nuremberg Perspective on the Trial of Karl Armstrong', *Revisiting the Vietnam War and International Law: Views and Interpretations of Richard Falk* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 287.

<sup>569</sup> Richard Falk, *The Declining World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 123.

<sup>570</sup> 'Statement upon Sentencing', 6 July 1972, I:58, 1.

sheep-like obedience to the Nazi government'. A marked-up unsigned letter draft in Rukeyser's archive touches upon the practical difficulty of invoking Nuremberg:

After World War II, our government took the lead in saying at Nuremberg that soldiers and civilians alike had an obligation not to carry out criminal acts, even those ordered by their government or by military authorities. [...] We know the laws we're talking about are rarely enforced because no one is more powerful than the authorities who are breaking them, but even so, we think this 'Nuremberg Obligation' raises some very real questions for us, as well as for you.<sup>571</sup>

The Nuremberg Trials were themselves a partial, not fully enforceable form of justice, as it would have been impossible 'to try all or even most of the Nazi offenders [...] the organised bureaucracies that the Germans had created and harnessed for war-making and then occupation relied on the participation of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of culpable persons'.<sup>572</sup> '[R]esist, fail and resist' then stands, proleptically, for an almost impossible legal obligation. In her court statement, Rukeyser claimed that

My only defence is the Nuremberg obligation. For a long time the pictures, the reports, the poems from Vietnam have made it clear to me that the horror of the war has gone too far to bear; and the people to whom I listen have told me that the war is a horror that is also illegal. These are crimes that we may stand against, according to the decision at Nuremberg; that means for me that I must stand against them.<sup>573</sup>

Added by hand to this typewritten document is the superscript: 'My lying down in the Senate building cannot be separated from my obligation'. Among those 'people to whom I listen' is the lawyer and academic Richard Falk. Rukeyser quotes Falk's argument from *The Vietnam War and International Law* (1968):

the wider logic of Nuremberg extends to embrace all those who, knowingly at any rate, participate in a war they have reason to believe violates the restraints of international law.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> I:57, 7.

<sup>572</sup> Jonathan A. Bush, 'Nuremberg: The Modern Law of War and Its Limitations', *Columbia Law Review*, 93.8 (December 1993), 2022-2086 (p. 2026).

<sup>573</sup> I:57, 5.

<sup>574</sup> Richard Falk, *The Vietnam War and International Law*, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), II, p. 150.

Falk's book was published in the same year as Rukeyser's 'Delta Poems'. The terms of the Nuremberg Obligation, in these concurrent definitions, turn upon concepts of passive participation, liability, 'war crimes', responsibility, knowledge, and the active, public opposition that Rukeyser calls 'stand[ing] against'. Standing against, for Rukeyser, means direct action, protest and a poetry of witness. For Rukeyser, to write poetry – such as her 1938 'Book of the Dead', a protest against working conditions for miners – is to participate in direct action.<sup>575</sup> In order to fundraise for the anti-war movement, as we have seen, Rukeyser gave poetry readings. In order to defend herself in court for taking direct action, Rukeyser cites her own poetry. The way in which poetry and protest are closely bound up in Rukeyser's writing and activism contrasts with Mendelssohn's own experience of direct action, which – as far as we know – was wholly separate from her poetic work. As if to reinforce this separation, Mendelssohn is emphatic that her poetry has nothing to do with the law. Her letters contain such statements as 'I don't think poetry has a role to play in courts of law' and asks 'when did trials have anything to do with Poetry?'.<sup>576</sup> Mendelssohn appears to take the view that the merging of poetry and law represents the lamentable but unavoidable failure of post-Holocaust aesthetics. Yet fragments of both Mendelssohn's and Rukeyser's experience of trial and imprisonment re-emerge in their later poetry.

## 2.1 Between poetry and the law

Rukeyser's poetic citation of her own trial inverts the process by which she 'summoned' her poetry as evidence. During the trial, Rukeyser issued the following statement regarding her relation to violence:

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<sup>575</sup> Shoshana Wechsler has written of how Rukeyser's documentary poem 'The Book of the Dead' (1938) 'erases the boundaries between art and document, lyric and epic, pen and camera, naming and heroising the exploited and forgotten in an extended and self-reflexive act of witness'. Wechsler, 'A Mat(t)er of Fact and Vision', *How Shall We Tell Each Other Of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), pp. 226-240 (pp. 226, 230).

<sup>576</sup> Letter to Mengham, 6 December 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

I think of myself as a violent woman who tries each day to be non-violent one more day. I am non-violent, although I have been swayed into some wars... <sup>577</sup>

Rukeyser vitally acknowledges the component violence within non-violence. Such violence was latent within the committed activist movement.<sup>578</sup> Her choice of the phrase 'violent woman' surely carries the intent to shock - even to threaten - her persecutors.<sup>579</sup> An insistence on a politics of non-violence is evident in political notes in Rukeyser's archives.<sup>580</sup> Her courtroom statement later makes its way into a poem from *Breaking Open* (1973) which begins: 'Waking this morning a violent woman in the violent day' and ends 'I will try to be non-violent one more day [...] in this violent day'.<sup>581</sup> In the poetic formulation, 'violent' is appended to 'day' as well as 'woman', an important contextual qualification. Likewise, 'I mourn, I lie down, I grieve', the closing line of Rukeyser's court statement, appears in the titular poem of the same collection, 'Breaking Open'.<sup>582</sup> Rukeyser states that the lie-in was intended to symbolise the 'stillness and death' of the casualties of that war.<sup>583</sup> Not only does Rukeyser introduce her poetry into the courtroom; legal statements are transferred into poetry. The exchange between the literary and the non-literary can be tracked through Rukeyser's oeuvre, in an affirmation of her much-quoted statement that 'poetry extends the document'.<sup>584</sup>

By bringing her poetry into the courtroom, by integrating poetry into the realm of the law as a form of witness, Rukeyser establishes a different set of contexts for the reception of that poetry. Living as she did through the McCarthy era, a time when many

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<sup>577</sup> I:58, 1.

<sup>578</sup> A year later, Karleton Armstrong stood trial for an act of violent resistance against the war in Vietnam that accidentally caused the death of a research physicist, Robert Fassnacht. Andersson, pp. 287-299.

<sup>579</sup> Mendelssohn likewise asserts that 'I am extremely frightened of violence and my poetry does not direct itself towards violence and neither do I', SxMs109/3/A/1/3; and 'I am a pacifist. I don't fight, I resist' in a letter to Oliver, 9 Dec 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.

<sup>580</sup> II:18, 15.

<sup>581</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 471; the editorial annotations note that 'In a public reading in 1969 [...] Rukeyser commented humorously, "I think of myself as a violent woman who tries like the members of AA; I try not to be violent one more day."', *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 626.

<sup>582</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 521.

<sup>583</sup> I:57, 2.

<sup>584</sup> Rukeyser, *U.S.1* (New York: Convici, 1938), p. 146.

American writers were surveilled and prosecuted for their writings and their politics, her poetry was more likely to be produced as implicating rather than exonerating evidence. Rukeyser's FBI file reveals details of her poetic publications, and even attempts analyses of her work. In one example, the special agent concludes that 'her symbols of revolt are imaginative'.<sup>585</sup> The summation the FBI file provides of her early publications, and the compilation of reviews of these publications, amounts to a scholarly bibliography. In a reversal of Rukeyser's terms, the FBI's bureaucratic document 'extends' her poetry far beyond its usual contexts. A political climate in which poetry counts as incriminating evidence is a climate in which poetry is unavoidably political. For Rukeyser's poetry to conversely extend the document amounts to an act of political resistance and an extended act of witness. What is the effect of transferring words of witness from legal to poetic contexts? For Felman, 'the banality of evil is not psychological but rather legal and political', and so while 'Law distances the Holocaust. Art brings it closer'.<sup>586</sup> In other words, the Holocaust (for which we can also read other atrocities) 'becomes today accessible[...] precisely in this space of slippage between law and art'.<sup>587</sup> The lie-in action Rukeyser undertook, and its subsequent inscriptions in poetry, is a powerful example of this slippage. Questions of speechlessness are also closely related to this action: a Project Nuremberg Obligation document headed 'The Reasons Why' quotes author George Plimpton, who understands the symbolic act of lying down before the US representative body as a way of demonstrating that 'there are no more words'.<sup>588</sup> In a draft of her court statement, Rukeyser echoes Plimpton, writing that 'there are no more words'.<sup>589</sup> To invoke the exhaustion of language is to echo the words of Holocaust survivors, for whom 'the language is exhausted', as well as witnesses of the immediate aftermath, who 'have no words'.<sup>590</sup> There is an important difference, of course, between performative speechlessness, and the

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<sup>585</sup> I:53.

<sup>586</sup> Felman, pp. 107-108.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., pp. 107.

<sup>588</sup> I:57.

<sup>589</sup> I:57.

<sup>590</sup> Odd Nansen and Edward R Murrow, quoted in Wachsmann, pp. 16-17.



speechlessness of the survivor. But the speechlessness of one can represent, if not replicate, the other. The witnessing attestation that 'there are no more words' resurfaces more nihilistically in Mendelssohn's most explicit Holocaust-poems, which frequently invoke 'nothing', as in 'No one non person, anon, nothing, nada [...] an nn' and 'I also wish to refer to my loathing [...] of nothing'.<sup>591</sup> Echoing the fraught legacy of Holocaust writing, both Mendelssohn's and Rukeyser's inscriptions of the concentrationary are torn between the conflicting imperatives of testimony and silence.

Rukeyser then transposes the symbolic speechlessness of her lie-in action to poetry, as in the following extract from the 'Delta Poems' cited in her 1972 defence:

Of the children in flames, of the grown man  
His face burned to the bones, of the full woman  
Her body stopped from the nipples down, nursing  
The live strong baby at her breast  
I do not speak.

I am a woman  
in a New York room  
late in the twentieth century.  
I am crying. I will write no more.-- <sup>592</sup>

Here, war victims are illegible, unspeakable subjects of which the poet claims she 'does not speak' and will 'write no more', another way to say 'there are no more words'. This is the only stanza in 'Delta Poems' to make graphic reference to the fate of Vietnamese war victims, and it is framed by a more abstract narrative of a boy and girl, walking 'in the delta country' before they are killed, and 'killed again', and then 'printed' onto 'green leaves' and 'the sky'. For Kertesz, the poet shows herself to be 'intensely conscious of her art arising from a matrix of horror'.<sup>593</sup> Evident in the astonishing shift from Vietnam War victims to the woman writing is the 'diagnostic largeness of vision' which Wechsler attributes to Rukeyser's political poetry.<sup>594</sup> In stark contrast to much of Mendelssohn's writing,

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<sup>591</sup> *LA*, p. 102.

<sup>592</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, pp. 426-427.

<sup>593</sup> Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 318-9.

<sup>594</sup> Wechsler, p. 226.

Rukeyser's syntax is simple and direct, and lacunae are made explicit. The lyric speaker first describes then denies the description of these war victims, individuated by age and gender. The figure of the 'full woman' not only re-inscribes the word 'full' that forms a key component of Rukeyser's pacifist poetic-political vision, but suggests pregnancy. This suggestion is refused by the next line's blunt diagnosis - that this female body is 'stopped from the nipples down'. The embodiedness of this female victim is foremost, as are the reproductive aspects of that body. The specificity of 'nipples' and 'full', against the blankness of 'grown man' and 'his face', emphasises the depth of the damage done to this body. This damage is emphasised still further by the high contrast between this 'stopped' maternal body and the 'live strong baby' whose vitality seems already compromised by the harm that surrounds her. In this instance, while Rukeyser appears to draw upon the patriarchal convention of deriving maximum affect from the plight of the most vulnerable and subordinate persons (women and children), the escalating adjectival final clause is brought to an abrupt halt by the disavowal of this matter as lyric subject: 'I do not speak'. Enumerating these victims in outline functions as an indication of what is unspeakable, defining the content of Rukeyser's stated lacunae. The ongoing catastrophe to which this poem bears witness is rendered through the refusal to speak. Yet there is a greater degree of control and agency to Rukeyser's speechlessness which contrasts with the choking voicelessness of Mendelssohn's lyric 'I'.

The significance of Rukeyser's assertion that the lyric speaker is not prepared to find the victimhood of the Vietnamese an available subject for poetry lies in a previous history: the history of the Holocaust, the source of the much-cited Nuremberg Obligation. It is therefore through a (not-yet enshrined) law that Rukeyser recalls the Jewish dead alongside contemporary war victims, in a draft of her courtroom statement:

Our time looks at us with the eyes of living and the eyes of all the dead of the camps, the fields, the craters, and wasted cities; and the eyes of children, children of us all.

I will stand against the huge horrors of the war in Asia with my whole life, as the Nuremberg obligation demands of me. I remember not only my fellow Jews but the dead of all the wars of my lifetime...

I try every day to renounce violence, and I have not killed, I have not hurt; but there are no more words, and the horror must be stopped now. I am here to bear witness, to protest and to make life – most of all. To leave traces on the earth, of the work for peace.<sup>595</sup>

Rukeyser's declaration that 'I remember[...] my fellow Jews' is reworked in another draft of her 'Statement Before Sentencing', which states that 'we[...] stand with our generation who died in the wars and camps of Europe, and with the generation of our sons and daughters who have resisted the crimes of war'.<sup>596</sup> The legacy of the concentrationary, as Rukeyser's trial documents and poetry make clear, deeply shapes the social activism of the seventies. Rukeyser's invocation of the Nuremberg Obligation finds expression *between* law and art, between a dissident legal action, and the poetry which registers – that is, bears witness to – the unspeakable subject of that dissidence. In the face of the judicial failure to enshrine its own precedents in the form of the Nuremberg Principles, Rukeyser keeps those principles alive through direct action and enshrines them in poetry.

From the unspeakable 'full woman' to 'I am a woman', the lyrical shift Rukeyser performs in 'Delta Poems' demonstrates an intersectional understanding of the spectrum of victimhood, one which encompasses a recognition of the oppressed other who is not only the woman poet, or the persecuted activist, but the civilian victims of geographically and historically distant wars — while avoiding (via a demonstrated awareness of the risk of) the maudlin objectification of these subjects. As Adorno would have it, under all 'individual lyric poetry' runs a 'collective undercurrent'.<sup>597</sup> Critics concur that Rukeyser's poetry 'challenges the fracturing of a political poetry from what some may view as private poetry and posits instead a world of poetic and political, personal and public, merging'.<sup>598</sup> For Gibbons, Rukeyser 'contextualises the psychological interiority which is the source of poetry

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<sup>595</sup> I:57, 5.

<sup>596</sup> I:57, 5.

<sup>597</sup> 'Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 45.

<sup>598</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. xxxvi.

within the social and political moment that partly shapes and constrains individual thought and action'.<sup>599</sup> For Janet Kaufman and Anne E. Herzog, Rukeyser's lifetime of political commitment constitutes 'what we now call the "poetry of witness"'.<sup>600</sup> A series of notes in Rukeyser's archive supply an example of such direct witness:

I was in Hanoi last month to set up a translation project authorised by PEN so that Americans and Vietnamese could work to understand each other. With Jane Hart and Denise Levertov, I stood at the bedside of a war-shattered boy in the Bach Mai hospital, already bombed once [and] I made a vow. I will call on all Americans in the name of our Nuremberg obligation...<sup>601</sup>

With witness, for Rukeyser, comes responsibility. The commitment to bring the war home manifests itself not only in social action but in poetry. Rukeyser's 'Delta Poems' reverts from its unspeakable subjects to the lyric 'I', impotent but available, in the small space of 'a New York room' – a way of bringing the war home. This space is both individual and collective, and directs the poem's address towards the many inhabitants of New York rooms, an anonymous, 'collective undercurrent' whose only specificity is the fact of their gender. Juxtaposing a truncated, would-be emotive description of foreign casualties with the unadorned coordinates of the female speaker, Rukeyser disallows a reductive ethnographic approach to the oppressed 'elsewhere', in an act of self-effacing solidarity and resistance. This is a lyrical mode that understands its subjects to be part of a plurality, each 'I' part of a 'We', in conjunction with a politics that insists that 'there is no "us" and "them"'.<sup>602</sup> Adorno finds that 'lyric poetry is the aesthetic test of that philosophical proposition' that subject and object are not rigid and separate poles; and that this capacity, to balance the claims of identity and otherness, of self and the world, is a self-reflective quality peculiar to lyricism.<sup>603</sup> Rukeyser's 'Delta Poems' seem to fulfil this premise by modifying their evocations of the other with candid descriptions of the lyric speaker, averting imminent objectification

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<sup>599</sup> Gibbons, p. 107.

<sup>600</sup> Herzog and Kaufman, p. xiv; also c.f. pp. 45, 60.

<sup>601</sup> I:57, 5.

<sup>602</sup> 'We present ourselves as hostages', signed by Rukeyser, Andrea Dworkin and Allen Ginsberg, 1:58, 1.

<sup>603</sup> Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 44.

through the self-conscious expression of difference. This is the definition of poetic witness for Maurice Blanchot, who writes that the poem of witness 'belongs to the other'.<sup>604</sup>

In Mendelssohn's poetry a more ludic fluidity between subjects and objects, or 'flipping over subject potential', is frequently in play.<sup>605</sup> The poem 'I object.' performs a grammatical transfer of agency between noun and verb: 'I was the object of her hatred. I object/to being hated'.<sup>606</sup> This microcosmic substitution replicates itself on a larger scale in Mendelssohn's frequent identification with (often persecuted) historical figures. In '1:3ng', there is the speaker's claim that 'I am another Irina Ratushinskaya', the Russian dissident poet. In 'I also wish', the speaker identifies with the victims of the camps. '1:3ng' also rebukes the appropriation of Jewish experience. The line '[t]hey wear stars on their jackets' is closely followed by the injunction: 'don't pretend that you went through what others went through'.<sup>607</sup> Even as Mendelssohn's poetry shuttles between its subjects, it arraigns the appropriation of experience. As mentioned in chapter one, a similar contradiction is at work in 'I also wish', where those '[w]ho have no direct experience of [the Spanish Civil War's] aftermath' are contrasted unfavourably with those who are the 'children of the children of the International Brigaders, despite their own remove from 'direct experience'. Directness, for Mendelssohn, often takes the form of lineage or intergenerational trauma – as in the 'blood' which has 'travelled our line'. But an underlying inconsistency cannot be explained away. At times, Mendelssohn demonstrates an acute consciousness of exploitative appropriation; at others, her poetry is blind to its own appropriations. Nevertheless a fluid play between subject and object is sustained throughout her work, which, at its best moments, is highly intersubjective.

These questions of witness, as we have seen, are closely bound to questions of speechlessness. For Felman, the Jewish victims at the centre of the Eichmann trial were crucially granted the status of witness and thus released from the silence which history

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<sup>604</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1995), p. 135.

<sup>605</sup> *LA*, p. 37.

<sup>606</sup> *LA*, p. 22.

<sup>607</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 15.

always and continually bestows upon the victim. Wachsmann, however, contests the notion that survivors were stunned into ‘collective silence’, with reference to the ‘maniacal compulsion to witness’ described by Primo Levi.<sup>608</sup> Nevertheless, the experience of the victim, for which Felman’s purposes is the victim of the Holocaust, is inaccessible until the legal articulation of the prosecution overcomes the speechlessness imposed by their Nazi oppressors. The trial itself, in Felman’s reading, produced a ‘conceptual revolution in the victim’.<sup>609</sup> A series of testimonies, given by camp survivors, uniquely translated private trauma into the public, legislative space of the courts. Felman concludes that while the Nuremberg trials established the concept of crimes against humanity, the Eichmann trial set ‘an unprecedented legal narrative of private and collective trauma and an unprecedented cultural and historical citation for the future’.<sup>610</sup> This future-founding legal narrative resonates with what Sascha Pöhlmann has termed Rukeyser’s ‘future-founding’ poetics.<sup>611</sup> To establish Rukeyser’s poetry as ‘future-founding’, Pöhlmann draws on the visionary, communal and optimistic qualities of her work, on its consistent making of new beginnings, and on the frequent characterisations of Rukeyser herself as an important predecessor of the women’s movement in twentieth-century poetry.<sup>612</sup>

Where Rukeyser looks to an inspirational shaping for future time, Mendelssohn’s writing more cynically refigures its histories. A reading of Mendelssohn’s own Nuremberg lyric, ‘serpentine swallow bracken potash arboretum’, illustrates a more critical and pessimistic impulse at work:

Nowhere short of Nuremberg nervy with stolen  
sources, yet no-one stands by the laws of diplomacy that have always  
distinguished between culture and politics. “Too recent”, “Round heel”  
even there there is a hint of literary consciousness. For twopence a tube. I  
don’t want to scrape the flesh from Rembrandt’s hand. People stop reading  
when armies march into bookshops & requisition stock. Then they feel  
insecure being educated in advanced buildings in intellectually deprived

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<sup>608</sup> Wachsmann, p. 11.

<sup>609</sup> Felman, p. 126.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>611</sup> Sascha Pöhlmann, *Future-Founding Poetry: Topographies of Beginnings from Whitman to the Twenty-First Century* (Rochester, New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), p. 205.

<sup>612</sup> Pöhlmann, p. 204.

environments. Structures try to mock them. And what would you do if you were them? Progress is infinitesimal which doesn't mean that it stands for its own proud symbol. The brush stroke stopped short of the canvas. Poor, helpless men read of relinquishing no-one. If humanity were curt there would be no holes in modern sculpture, in modern walls being fought over to press for instantaneity; grouting your own dark lights.<sup>613</sup>

The blocky prose of this poem, made up of short, abrupt sentences interspersed with more convoluted lines, is similar in style to 'basalt.'. The nihilistic co-ordinate '[n]owhere' does not reach as far as 'Nuremberg', as 'short of' indicates lack or failure. In a continuation of the nihilistic register, and a confirmation of the history of the Nuremberg trials, 'no-one' upholds the 'laws of diplomacy' formulated during those trials. In this poetic formulation, the function of those 'laws' is to reinforce the distinction between art or culture and the political. The 'stolen sources' might refer to Nazi art theft, one of the many crimes that underwent trial at Nuremberg in the 1940s. Or, it may refer to the poem's own borrowings, anticipating the desire not to 'scrape the flesh from Rembrandt's hand'. Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Good Samaritan* was one of the first paintings looted after the Nazi invasion of Poland.<sup>614</sup> The coalition of these historical references suggests a desire to avoid a fascist aesthetic. 'Round heels' refers idiomatically to a promiscuous woman, and because it is framed by speech marks takes on the status of an accusation. Promiscuity, under the Third Reich, was attributed to the 'sexually impulsive and insatiable Jewess'.<sup>615</sup> The 'literary consciousness' associated with this accusation might refer to the literary means by which this idiom works: a kind of synecdoche, by which 'round heels' stand in for an entire figure. Mendelssohn makes a similar association in a draft of a poem-drawing from her archives, where the line 'entartete art was defined as tarty' captions what looks like the sketch of a framed picture.<sup>616</sup> Mendelssohn here aligns 'entartete' or 'degenerate' art (banned under the Nazi regime) with promiscuity, deflating censure with irreverent wordplay and aligning fascist censorship with sexual repression.

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<sup>613</sup> *LA*, p. 64.

<sup>614</sup> William Lee Adams, 'Saving Europe's Art from the Nazis', *Time*, 25 August 2009 <<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1918349,00.html>> [accessed 6 Aug 2010].

<sup>615</sup> Wachsmann, p. 235.

<sup>616</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

The quasi-narrative that follows incorporates elements evocative of the Nazi regime, from the confiscation and censorship of ‘degenerate’ literature to avant-garde architecture. In alignment with the general disillusionment with progress and civilisation following the revelation of Nazi atrocities, the poetic speaker is cynical about the value of progress.<sup>617</sup> The ‘brush stroke’ that falls ‘short of the canvas’ recalls the state of being ‘short of Nuremberg’, here refigured as an instrument that never gets put to use, or which fails to reach as far as it should. Mendelssohn expresses less faith in the efficacy of law than Rukeyser. The ‘modern sculpture’ and building processes with which the poem closes sustain its engagement with questions of aesthetics and their politicisation. In a more nuanced exploration of the claim that ‘poetry has no role to play in courts of law’, Mendelssohn’s Nuremberg poem troubles the divide between culture and politics, art and law, and consequently its own mode of representation. Her poetry indubitably incorporates political subject matter and in this instance re-casts that subject matter in aesthetic terms by which the Nuremberg Obligation becomes a brushstroke that falls short of a canvas. But Mendelssohn’s poetry does not envisage a coalition or transfer between art and the law, and instead casts the postwar legacy as a failure in terms of a ‘falling short’ which is figured as both legal and aesthetic. What for Rukeyser is a source of resistance is for Mendelssohn a source of failure. Her ‘Nuremberg’ lyric understands the legacy of the war as deeply cultural as well as political, and thus cannot share in Rukeyser’s optimistic investment in an emancipatory role for poetry.

## 2.2 Breaking Open

Following the failed attempt to defend her actions by invoking the Nuremberg Obligation, Rukeyser spent thirty days in the Women’s Detention Centre, Washington D.C. A record of Rukeyser’s short prison term exists in a ‘prison notebook’ held in her archive. Rukeyser chose imprisonment over a small fine, writing to a friend that ‘I am trying to say something

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<sup>617</sup> Wachsmann, p. 15.



with my person by serving this sentence'.<sup>618</sup> Her 'short sentence' is a source of shame, according to the entries in her prison notebook: 'a token sentence, so short, so short', she writes.<sup>619</sup> Prison protocol is consequently warped for Rukeyser. As she voluntarily gives herself up, she is handcuffed and told that 'it's a formality'. Once in prison, she is treated with 'extreme kindness' by the guards who express sympathy with her cause, and ask her 'You the poet?'. With knowing naivety, Rukeyser records how 'the fact that they say they don't think I should be here at all is a great help. Do they say it to everyone?'. She notes the widespread use of sedatives and the equally sedating effect of the television in prison; the filthy conditions; the 'painful lack of privacy'; 'cement walls with grooves to look like blocks'; and most humiliatingly, a strip-search which causes the poet to 'weep'. Rukeyser considers her imprisonment to represent her own failure of resistance. Rukeyser finds herself 'facing prison', she writes prior to starting her sentence, 'for not having stopped the war'. Perhaps it is her acute awareness of her own position as an elite prisoner with a light sentence which leads Rukeyser to fill most of her prison notebook with notes on the other inmates, particularly a young black woman who has been incarcerated on the charge of murdering her child. Judging by the number of addresses and numbers associated with this young black woman in the prison notebook, Rukeyser went to some lengths to try and secure support and legal advice for her fellow inmate. This experience resurfaces in the long poem 'Breaking Open', which draws directly from these notes:

Going to prison. The clang of the steel door.  
It is my choice. But the steel door does clang.  
The introversion of this act  
Past its seeming, past all thought of effect,  
Until it is something like  
Writing a poem in my silent room.

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In prison, the thick air,  
still, loaded, heat on heat.  
Around your throat  
for the doors are locks,

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<sup>618</sup> I:58, 1 (28 September 1972).

<sup>619</sup> Prison notebook, November 1972, I:32.

the windows are locked doors,  
 the hot smell locked around us,  
 the machine shouting at us,  
 trying to sell us meat and carpets.  
 In prison, the prisoners,  
 all of us, all the objects  
 chairs, cots, mops, tables.  
 Only the young cat.  
 He does not know he is locked in.

~

In prison, the prisoners.  
 One black girl, 19 years.  
 She has killed her child,  
 and she grieves, she grieves.  
 She crosses to my bed.  
 “What do *Free* mean?”  
 I look at her.  
 “You don’t understand English.”  
 “Yes, I understand English.”  
 “What do *Free* mean?”<sup>620</sup>

The prison stands at the heart of the poem, which is characteristically expansive, and encompasses ‘Asia and New York’, the lie-in action (‘we go to Washington as if it were/Jerusalem’), the trial (‘the jury said Guilty, Guilty, Guilty/Guilty, Guilty’), and the atrocities of Auschwitz, which are linked to the atrocities of Vietnam, as things that ‘[r]ational man has done’.<sup>621</sup> The poem ends with its eponymous image of emancipation: ‘breaking open’. While Rukeyser is concerned not to overdramatise her experience of imprisonment (‘It is my choice’), her poetic account of the prison is far more literal than Mendelssohn’s. ‘Writing a poem’ is cast as strangely synonymous with going to prison, or ‘the introversion of this act’, which might refer to ‘my choice’ or to the ‘clang of the steel door’.<sup>622</sup> ‘I try to turn my acts inward and deeper./Almost a poem.’, the poetic speaker tells us in the stanza preceding the prison stanzas. ‘Breaking Open’ posits that the inward-turning process of writing poetry is comparable to a self-imposed imprisonment, drawing a potentially problematic equivalence between a creative solitude (from which art breaks free) and the solitude of carceral confinement. Such an equivalence comes close to Adorno’s

<sup>620</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, pp. 524-525.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 521-529.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*

definition of ‘artistic creation’ which ‘originate[s] in the empirical reality from which it breaks free’.<sup>623</sup> W.B. Carnochan considers Adorno’s figuring of creativity as a ‘breaking free’ to be part of a ‘culture that understands artistic creation as an act, forever being repeated, of release from constraints’.<sup>624</sup> *Breaking Open* was Rukeyser’s first publication following her prison sentence, and appears to align itself with this Adornian conception of poetic composition – a conception that this study contests.

The following ‘prison’ stanzas complicate this conception of emancipatory creativity through their reference to the ‘other’, whether that ‘other’ is the ‘young cat’ who is unaware of his imprisonment, or the figure of the ‘black girl’ who asks the poet: ‘What do *Free* mean?’. The exchange between the poet and the young woman establishes that the question of freedom cannot be reduced to a lack of linguistic competence. Rukeyser’s inclusion of the ‘[o]ne black girl’ and her ungrammatical speech is highly appropriative. The incarcerated black woman is deployed as a sensational literary shorthand, recycled for poetic purposes. Here, there is no self-conscious admission that the poet cannot ‘speak’ of the other. However, Rukeyser does not add to the young woman’s words with her own. They are transcribed directly from the prison notebook and left unadorned. To some degree, Rukeyser gives voice to her fellow inmate without superimposing meaning on her words. Yet the shaping frame of the poem acts as a form of ‘adornment’, which might lead us to ask – do the poetics of witness always have a supplementary element, beyond that of recording? And does that supplementary element obscure or reify the witnessed ‘other’? The question of what ‘Free’ means is evidently a problem that is tied to lived realities. A young cat who does not *know* he is in a prison – who has no concept of the American penal system – is effectively free. A well-established poet and activist who has connections, a short sentence, and the capacity to render the experience of carcerality in poetry is ‘freer’ than a young black woman charged with murder, who is without connections (as seems clear in Rukeyser’s prison notebooks) and subject to the highly racialised workings of the American

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<sup>623</sup> Carnochan, p. 381.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid.

prison system. Scheffler finds that ‘women prison writers’ often ‘radically blur’ the categories between political and non-political prisoners.<sup>625</sup> She argues too that women’s prisons are paradigmatic of women’s place in society, and thus for a woman being *in* prison leads to the realisation that she is always a prisoner; ‘she does not share the luxury of verbal play with the word “*freedom*” that male prison writers **enjoy**’.<sup>626</sup> But the ‘black girl’ of Rukeyser’s poem is not only constrained by virtue of her gender, but by virtue of her race, another vital factor in her miscomprehension of what it means to be ‘free’. The highly disproportionate targeting of African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos by the criminal justice system in the U.S. has ‘led many to consider all inmates of color to be “political prisoners”’.<sup>627</sup> Studies of the racialized aspects of the American prison system have powerfully demonstrated its rootedness in conditions of slavery.<sup>628</sup> Rukeyser gives us no answer to the question ‘what do *Free* mean’, perhaps in tacit admission of the multiple constraints experienced by a young black woman incarcerated in the U.S. in the seventies.

However, given Rukeyser’s Jewishness (a significant factor in her persecution by the FBI) the racial politics of her prison poetry do not fit neatly into a black/white dichotomy. The history of Jewish whiteness and assimilation in the U.S. is highly complex.<sup>629</sup> The 1930s, when Rukeyser began publishing her poetry, were the ‘high tide of American anti-Semitism, a time when Jews were not assigned to the white side of the American racial binary’.<sup>630</sup> As this chapter’s discussion of *Tondo Aquatique* has already noted, it was not until the postwar period that North American Jews came to be considered as white.<sup>631</sup> Yet despite an increasingly dominant perception of Jews as white, many Jews experienced their ‘whiteness’ ambivalently, especially those who were active within the highly racialized Movement of the seventies. Rukeyser’s poetic cross-wiring of prison experience in 1970s America with the

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<sup>625</sup> Scheffler, p. xxxiii.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., p. xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>627</sup> Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 100.

<sup>628</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, pp. 27-35.

<sup>629</sup> For a full-length discussion of Jewish assimilation in the U.S., see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and what that says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>630</sup> Brodtkin, p. 2.

<sup>631</sup> Third, p. 123.

history of the Nazi camps establishes a continuum between temporally, spatially and geographically distant forms of carcerality, but in so doing risks obscuring important differences between them. Mendelssohn's more cynical poetics similarly risk obscuring differences between the speaking 'I' and the victims of the camps. Nevertheless, there are poems that demonstrate a greater consciousness of that hazard, such as Rukeyser's 'Delta Poems' and Mendelssohn's 'basalt', via their performances of speechlessness, self-conscious depiction of the other, and acknowledgement of their own subjective positioning.

The legacy of the concentrationary shapes the poetry and the politics of Anna Mendelssohn and Muriel Rukeyser. There are many poets, from Paul Celan to Jean Cayrol to Ingeborg Bachmann, whose poetry was more directly shaped by this legacy. But Rukeyser and Mendelssohn bring this legacy into the last quarter of the twentieth century. Mendelssohn, in particular, contends with the belatedness of this legacy. These two poets are, in important ways, very different: Rukeyser, the American patriot and pragmatist, with her ongoing political commitment and optimistic vision for peace, justice and 'full life', and Mendelssohn, deeply affected by her early and aborted involvement in activism, whose poetics are not visionary but biting critical and contradictory. Ever alert to threats real and imagined, Mendelssohn's poetry is vigilant but also playful, drawing on resources of dark humour and mockery to keep 'joke camps' and 'that mock-Jewish way' constantly in its sights. Rukeyser's more earnest poetics track continually between 'catastrophes of modernity', between the legacy of World War II and the activism of the seventies. The sheer ambition of Rukeyser's vision – moving from the Mekong Delta to New York, from Auschwitz to Washington – is paralleled by Mendelssohn's own expansive identification with historically and geographically distant subjects ('an nn.', 'pulled at my life certainly'). The criss-crossing backwards and forwards in the work of these poets is a movement of temporal fluidity that cycles between, rather than reifying, historical events. A fluidity of medium exists too, between the literary and the non-literary, whether those mediums are Rukeyser's poetry and courtroom notes, or the contexts of Mendelssohn's own trial and her poetry. The juxtaposition of far-flung historical or geographical events in the poetry of these

poets takes a modernist technique and makes it political. Where Rukeyser's form of poetic witness merges the poetic and the legal, Mendelssohn's concentrationary poetics are highly sensitive to the fascistic tendencies or entanglements of modernist texts and artworks. In forms judicial and forms aesthetic, Mendelssohn's and Rukeyser's poetry brings the legacy of the concentrationary to bear on the activist movements of the seventies. Rukeyser's more direct acts of witness demonstrate a self-consciousness and reflexivity that Mendelssohn's poetics of refusal is capable of extending still further. The ambivalence with which Mendelssohn's poetry treats the function of witness articulates a wariness of such functions, which remain embedded in the same systems of legality and bureaucracy that appeased, enabled, and failed to resist fascism.

### Chapter 3

#### 'A violent woman in the violent day':

#### Gender, Terrorism and the British Left in the 1970s

[A]nd what are the effects on feminism, and political activism more generally, of a discourse that privileges the cross wiring of feminism and terrorism to establish and secure the Otherness of both the female terrorist and the feminist, within the representational economy of [the] late 1960s and early 1970s?

- Amanda Third<sup>632</sup>

#### Part 1: The disavowal of violence

There are many ghosts that haunt and trouble Mendelssohn's work, not least amongst them the ghosts of her involvement with radical activism, political violence and the law in the late sixties and early seventies. Whether consciously summoned or appearing involuntarily like the return of the repressed, these ghosts unsettle and disturb the disavowal of violence that is everywhere in Mendelssohn's writing: '[a] woman is accused of aggressive behaviour', 'this is not a poem to hit in the eye', 'as though I accosted anyone', 'My poetry is not the harmful type'.<sup>633</sup> Irruptions of violence in Mendelssohn's writing often take on a more specific form: that of terroristic violence, of which Mendelssohn stood accused in 1972. The deployment of narratives of terror for political purposes in Britain escalated during the seventies in response to groups such as the Angry Brigade, with whom Mendelssohn was convicted of conspiring, and the IRA. Although rarely invoked in her poetry, Mendelssohn's letters return again and again to the insistent denial of her involvement with terrorism.

Deeply anxious to disassociate herself and her own writing from the spectre of terrorist violence, Mendelssohn's correspondence reveals her attempts to make such a dissociation clear to her circle of literary friends. Writing to her former university tutor

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<sup>632</sup> Third, p.55.

<sup>633</sup> *LA*, pp. 84, 98, 49, 78.

Herbie Butterfield, she protests against those who ‘bandy about my name as “The Angry Brigade Girl”’.<sup>634</sup> A letter to the poet and critic Andrew Duncan declares that ‘[m]y writing was writing. It was not Angry Brigade writing [...] They attacked and I defended’.<sup>635</sup> In a letter to the editor and poet Wendy Mulford, she writes that ‘I don’t want any of my writing to come to light because I don’t want to be linked to the Angry Brigade or to terrorists [...] past or future’.<sup>636</sup> The fear of ‘coming to light’ is generative of her often fugitive poetics, described as a double movement in the poem ‘Art made me thin’: ‘when there is/fear of retribution it flies to the light/or falls silently to the pitch dark’.<sup>637</sup> To her Cambridge publisher, Rod Mengham, Mendelssohn writes in a tone that verges on satire, ‘please don’t think of me ever as either a criminal or a terrorist I was wrongly convicted and the matter should have been handed over to the United Nations Standing Committee on Hostage Taking by Guerrilla groups’.<sup>638</sup> There is no such committee: the coinage is characteristic of Mendelssohn’s darkly humorous formulations, which fiercely critique both bureaucratic liberalism and the failures of the organised left. As discussed in my introduction, a thwarted readership is constitutive of these letters. Drafted but unsent, they constitute writing held in a state of suspension, communication withheld from a recipient. Yet another letter insists that ‘I’m extremely frightened of violence and my poetry does not direct itself towards violence and neither do I’, in an indication of the fraught equivalence between the poet and her poetry.<sup>639</sup> To her close friend Lynne Harries, Mendelssohn reiterates that ‘I am not violent and opposed to violence’.<sup>640</sup> There is even a psychosomatic allegation in another letter to Harries that ‘violence makes me blackout’.<sup>641</sup> Through a provisional and performative epistolary medium, Mendelssohn positions herself as a victim, not a perpetrator, in relation to the violence of which she stood accused.

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<sup>634</sup> Letter to Butterfield, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/3.

<sup>635</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>636</sup> Letter to Mulford, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/39.

<sup>637</sup> *LA*, p. 42.

<sup>638</sup> Letter to Mengham, 22 November 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/34.

<sup>639</sup> Letter to Mengham, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>640</sup> Letter to Harries, 27 December 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/18.

<sup>641</sup> Letter to Harries, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/18/2.



Why might Mendelssohn's mechanism of disassociation be termed 'disavowal', rather than simply denial or repudiation? Disavowal has psychoanalytical as well as more general applications. Generally, disavowal may be taken to refer to a refusal or repudiation of acknowledgement or association, and derives from the Anglo-Norman for 'unlawful'.<sup>642</sup> In a Freudian sense, 'disavowal' refers to 'a primary defence consisting of a radical repudiation' of external reality.<sup>643</sup> The specific mode of defence represented by disavowal is closely related to issues of gender, in that it 'consists of the subject's refusing to recognise the reality of a traumatic perception – most especially the perception of the absence of the woman's penis'.<sup>644</sup> For Freud, the primary object of disavowal, then, is the feminine. As Alan Bass explains, Freudian disavowal is 'newly understood to create a split in the ego, such that the ego both acknowledges a piece of reality and rejects it and then oscillates between the two states'.<sup>645</sup> Not only is the feminine denied; there is a recognition of the 'absence' at the heart of the feminine, and this perception of absence produces the anxiety that catalyses denial. As Hélène Cixous has pointed out, 'psychoanalysis [...] as with all the "human" sciences [...] reproduces the masculine view, of which it is one of the effects'.<sup>646</sup> It is likely that Cixous influenced Mendelssohn's own views on Freud.<sup>647</sup> Duncan has noted how her poetry is 'suspicious of the fashionable critical discourses of its times', discourses that include 'the style of Marx and Freud'.<sup>648</sup> As argued in the previous chapter, Mendelssohn was deeply engaged with the theoretical discourses around the Holocaust at the end of the twentieth century. She appears to approach Freud with a more critical and feminist eye. In a letter to the psychiatrist Sally Mitchison, Mendelssohn complains that Kristeva 'doesn't demolish Freud to such an extent as other feminists. It's [Kristeva's]

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<sup>642</sup> 'disavow, v.', *OED Online*.

<sup>643</sup> J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p. 119.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>645</sup> Alan Bass, *Difference and Disavowal: The Trauma of Eros* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>646</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer 1976), 875-893 (p. 884).

<sup>647</sup> Cixous' work formed a prominent part of Mendelssohn's library. I am indebted to Peter Riley's notes on Mendelssohn's library for this information. Private email correspondence, 15 Dec 2010.

<sup>648</sup> Leslie, p. 30; Duncan quoted in Leslie, p. 30.

biggest problem, the personal pronouns, universal males he, him, ubiquitous...'.<sup>649</sup> In the poem 'Naturalia', the speaker sardonically refers to a '[f]ixation with psychology underlined, advance on Sigmund Freud'.<sup>650</sup> Mendelssohn objects not only to the male-centricity of psychoanalysis, but to the flattening effects of theory (as the second part of this chapter will discuss) and the complicity between the social sciences and the penal system (the subject of chapter four). Indeed, Mendelssohn equates psychology unfavourably with terrorist studies, complaining of the 'glare and exposure to personal examination to psychologists and sociologists and experts in terrorism'.<sup>651</sup> For these reasons, I do not use 'disavowal' in a strictly Freudian sense. However, as traces of past use inhere in language, I take 'disavowal' to infer a degree of acknowledgement as well as of repudiation.

Psychoanalysis is only one of many framing discourses that surround and inform Mendelssohn's work, and I shall treat it as such: as a frame, not an explanation. My aim in this chapter is to explore the often fraught relationship with violence which surfaces in Mendelssohn's poetry and other writings. I focus on Mendelssohn's representations and invocations of gender and violence within the British Left in the late sixties and early seventies, which I track and reconstruct through the writings and theory of Adriana Cavarero, Amanda Third, Jean Baudrillard, Sheila Rowbotham and Jonathon Green. Rather than adhere to a hegemonic definition of 'terrorism' as a form of indiscriminate non-state violence, I follow Third's deconstructive approach and take 'terrorism' to be a 'discursive construct'.<sup>652</sup> By this, Third means that what counts as 'terrorism' is usually defined by its audience (terrorism as a signifying practice) and its consonance with the interests of the state – that is, by the dominant, authoritative discourse.<sup>653</sup> Consequently, if terrorism is conceived as a construct with no stable meaning, then the female terrorist can be understood as posing a threat not only to social structures but to practices of *signification*.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>649</sup> Letter to Mitchison, 13 April 1986. SxMs109/3/A/1/37; Mendelssohn refers to Kristeva's problematic tendency to follow Freud and Lacan in presuming the subject of psychoanalysis to be male, especially in her early work.

<sup>650</sup> *LA*, p. 133.

<sup>651</sup> Letter to Peter Riley, 16 July 1988, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/2.

<sup>652</sup> Third, p. 12.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 19.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 1.

In the first part of this chapter, I show how Mendelssohn's disavowal of terrorist violence typifies the contorted relationship between women and violence, a central concern of feminist approaches to terrorist studies. Her poetic inscriptions of violence draw on the feminist revisionist mythology which has been incorporated by poets and critics in order to demystify the exceptionality of the violent woman. I then discuss Mendelssohn's own knowledge of and response to theories of terror – in particular, to those of Jean Baudrillard. In the second part of my chapter, I consider Mendelssohn's identification with a specific category of victim, the hostage. I take the condition of 'hostage' to be a specific carceral state, and examine the relation between the hostage, the state and the contradictory sexual politics of the seventies. I conclude with a reading of the poem-as-hostage, and by exploring the exchange between Mendelssohn's biography and her poetry. I argue that the uniqueness of Mendelssohn's poetic voice lies in its reclaiming of agency without relinquishing an identification with the hostage-victim - a poetic corollary of Sara Ahmed's 'wilful subject', persecuted but insubordinate.<sup>655</sup> Victimhood and agency co-exist like two notes of a chord or a sustained dissonance in Mendelssohn's poetry. My historicist reading does not treat Mendelssohn's poetry as autobiography, disguise or fabrication, but, at Mendelssohn's own instigation, re-attaches the poem to its 'makers', as I will go on to explain.<sup>656</sup>

Disavowal extends beyond Mendelssohn's lifelong defence of her innocence to the perpetual anxiety that her poetry will be read as 'terrorist' poetry.<sup>657</sup> In another unsent letter to Mulford, Mendelssohn writes that 'I have an absolute horror of my poetry being misread as having any connection with the contretemps I might be remembered for'.<sup>658</sup> Misreadings, then, are produced *by* the spectre of terroristic violence, and the conflation of the biographical with the literary. The possibility of this textual afterlife produces a secondary 'horror', tantamount to a loss of consciousness or 'blackout'. As a critic, to contravene these pleas to posterity is to participate in the production of this 'horror' and to commit a form of

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<sup>655</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Wilful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 1-2.

<sup>656</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated (c.1990), SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>657</sup> 'I am Innocent', letter to Mengham, 3 November 1998, SxMs109/3/A/1/34.

<sup>658</sup> Letter to Mulford, 20 August 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/39.

hermeneutic violence. The risk of being misread is certainly heightened by Mendelssohn's experimental, innovative poetry, which rarely offers its reader much in the way of explanation. 'My poetry' is as much the subject as it is the object of acts of misreading; the object in that it is very often misread as the expression of a romanticised political radicalism, and the subject in that misreadings are created and perpetuated by the poet and her poetic strategies.<sup>659</sup> Yet there is invitation as well as resistance to biographical readings of both letters and poetry. There are frequent, flickering points of contact between her biography and her poetry, from titles that allude to the main actors of the 'contretemps' from which Mendelssohn wishes to disassociate her poetry, to descriptions of being on trial and in prison. There is a suggestion that the poem 'To a Green Field', for instance, is addressed to Jim Greenfield, who stood trial alongside Mendelssohn and who was, according to press coverage of the trial, her lover.<sup>660</sup> Among the many references to carcerality embedded in Mendelssohn's poems, there are instances that seem to allude to the poet's own prison term: 'I do not run the prison system [...] I collect sentences'.<sup>661</sup> Writing in 2007 to her close friend Estelle Langley, Mendelssohn asks: 'Please bundle my letters together Estelle - it needs to be known, the ambush of the late sixties, the capture of the early seventies...'.<sup>662</sup> Positioning herself against violence in the same breath as positioning herself against wholly self-referential aesthetics, Mendelssohn writes in response to a review of her work that '[w]hat I hate is people being hurt, damaged, brutally violated, killed, what I also Hate is the scary way that Poetry is detached from its makers'.<sup>663</sup> Here again, Mendelssohn conflates her own position in relation to violence with her poetry. I will argue that the 'makers' of

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<sup>659</sup> For a different application of a similar concept of misreading, see Raphael Ingelbein's study *Misreading England: Poetry and Nationhood since the Second World War* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 3-4. Ingelbein draws on and revises Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence which is 'based on the idea that poems can often best be analysed as misreadings, that is as productive distortions of or reactions to other texts', p. 4.

<sup>660</sup> Arnold Latham and Richard Wright, 'The Angry Brigade', *Daily Express*, 7 December 1972.

<sup>661</sup> *LA*, p.54. Mendelssohn's poetic references to her post-prison life are more explicit, as in the poem 'zinzolin' where the poetic speaker is 'push[ed] into high courts to have our/children pushed away from us' (*LA*, p.121). There are even moments of I-do-this-I-do-that poetry, as at the very end of '1:3ng', where the speaker tells us that 'I am about to sit down to translate Gisèle Prassinos' 'La Table de Famille'" (p. 17). Mendelssohn's translations of Prassinos can be found in her archive, SxMs109/6/C.

<sup>662</sup> Letter to Langley, 2 February 2007, SxMs109/3/A/1/29/2.

<sup>663</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated (c.1990), SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

Mendelssohn's poetry are plural, and include not only the poet but the social, cultural and political conditions that – avowed or disavowed – shape and thicken her work. My own (mis)reading of Mendelssohn is complicit in the horrification of her work, but simultaneously responsive to the call *not* to detach 'Poetry' from its makers, or from 'the violent day'. In my (mis)reading of Mendelssohn, both resisted and invited, repeated disavowals of violence signify a simultaneous acknowledgement and rejection of the ghosts that haunt and horrify her work.

### 1.1 The Moonlighter's Cell

A historicist approach suggests clear reasons why Mendelssohn's writing is haunted by violence. As discussed in the introduction, one of the key pieces of evidence used to convict Mendelssohn was the identification of her handwriting on an Angry Brigade communiqué known as the 'Moonlighter's Cell' which accompanied an explosion on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1971 at the Territorial Army Centre in Holloway. This communiqué indicates the Angry Brigade's commitment to the Irish republican cause. The twelfth in a series, the 'Moonlighter's Cell' lambasts capitalism, imperialism and the repressive actions of the British state, with a focus on the introduction of internment in Ireland a few days before its issue. Its rhetoric is uncompromising and unambiguous:

Over 5,500 refugees, 2,000 homeless, over 20 dead in 2 days, 230 imprisoned without charge or trial, the six occupied counties of Ireland are terrorised by the gunmen in khaki. This war of terror is carried out in the name of the British people. THIS IS A SLANDEROUS LIE. The British Imperialist Campaign in Ireland is waged only to safeguard the fat profits of a few rich pigs and power crazy politicians. We warn all unemployed brothers and sisters.

Do not be fooled by the army recruiting campaign. [...] To any unemployed worker thinking of joining up we ask you one question: —WHICH WAY WILL YOU POINT YOUR GUN WHEN THE OFFICERS ORDER YOU AGAINST THE PEOPLE OF YOUR OWN TOWN?..

Who will you shoot when your parents, brothers and sisters are in sight of your gun?

The British boss class has lined its pockets with the accumulated profits of 700 years of exploitation of the Irish working people.

Now they are killing to defend these profits.

THE ANGRY BRIGADE ADVISES THE BRITISH RULING CLASSES TO GET OUT OF IRELAND AND TAKE THEIR PUPPETS (LYNCH,

FAULKNER, ETC) WITH THEM.

ANGRY BRIGADE  
MOONLIGHTER'S CELL  
POINT YOUR GUN<sup>664</sup>

The charge of 'terror' is forcefully laid at the door of the British state. The 'moonlighter's cell' of the sign-off presumably refers to a guerrilla agrarian organisation in eighteenth-century Ireland, known more usually as Whiteboys or Levellers but also as Captain Moonlight.<sup>665</sup> The Whiteboys, who defended the rights of tenant farmers, also sent out notices ahead of their night raids. A connection between the Levellers and an anarchist tradition might explain their inclusion at the end of this communiqué; the Angry Brigade nodding towards their roots in anarchist actions and philosophy.<sup>666</sup> The Irish connection extends beyond the theatrical rhetoric of the communiqués. Trial transcripts that record Mendelssohn's cross-examination of Commander Bond, the head of the Bomb Squad, in September 1972 corroborate her sense of solidarity with the incarcerated Irish republicans, with the additional emphasis that *writing* a political document is not tantamount to violent action. 'I want to say and repeat again and again that as far as I am concerned and was concerned at that time this statement [the Moonlighter's Cell communiqué] had absolutely nothing to do with any explosion,' said Mendelssohn.<sup>667</sup> She continued:

Internment — rounding people up, putting people in camps, was more important to me than seeing somebody coming around to our flat with a stamp which said Angry Brigade Moonlighters Cell and stamp it on the bottom. It was internment which was important to me. [...] [The Moonlighter's Cell communiqué] is the only piece of evidence in my handwriting which I can see could be construed in some way as to be relevant to this charge of conspiracy. And that is the way that I answer it.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> Carr, p. 246.

<sup>665</sup> Richard Golt, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 50.

<sup>666</sup> Burton, p. 19.

<sup>667</sup> Mendelssohn, opening speech in her defence, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5. Walter Laqueur records that 'in the early 1960s, the Spanish Anarchists had established a terrorist underground with the help of some British and French comrades. Toward the end of the decade, the Baader-Meinhof faction, the Valpreda group in Italy and the London "Angry Brigade" came into being'. Laqueur, *Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 204. For more detail on the anarchist connection, see Carr, pp. 45-49.

<sup>668</sup> Mendelssohn, opening speech in her defence, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5.

A similar assertion is repeated in her closing speech: 'I wrote that little bit on the end' which represented 'my feelings about the situation in Northern Ireland and my feelings about the act that the British Government had committed itself to by allowing and instructing internment to take place'.<sup>669</sup> Mendelssohn is emphatic that she was motivated not by violence but by a resistance to carceral structures. She adds that 'I didn't like the rhetoric of some of the passages', namely, those that called for military actions and self-armament. 'That seemed to be uncalled for', she told the court, 'in a statement of protest on internment'.<sup>670</sup> Much later, Mendelssohn refers dismissively to 'those stupid gob-stopper communiqués that They used to write'.<sup>671</sup> It was this piece of politically avant-garde writing, along with a set of fingerprints on a magazine found in a bag that had contained a bomb, that saw Mendelssohn convicted.<sup>672</sup> 'The Moonlighter's Cell' forms part of the constellation of forces that haunt her writing processes and produce a fugitive, persecuted poetics.

Mendelssohn revisits the dangers of and violence associated with writing, even writing in jest, in her memoir: "'Writing is dangerous" [my father] said [...] it took me a long time to believe him'.<sup>673</sup> She relays an anecdote in which the young Anna Mendelson, in a moment of whimsy, typed up a document claiming that an 'Intercontinental Ballistic Missile' was buried in the back garden at Amhurst Road. At what she terms the 'Show Trial', '[t]hat piece of paper was produced against me in court [...] Thus I finally understood what my father meant'.<sup>674</sup> The 'dangers in writing' are revisited again in the poem 'This is the reason' from *Implacable Art*.<sup>675</sup> Its opening line, 'This is the reason why I do not conform', announces the poem as some form of defence, a series of solemnly stated 'reasons'. 'Reasons', characteristically, morph into accusations, complaints 'of being '[i]nterrogated... until one is too weak/to move' and pursuit. The final stanza opens with the enjambed

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<sup>669</sup> Mendelssohn, closing speech, December 1972, SxMs109/2/D/6.

<sup>670</sup> Mendelssohn, opening speech, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5.

<sup>671</sup> Letter to Windle, SxMs109/3/A/1/68.

<sup>672</sup> Carr, p.136.

<sup>673</sup> 'One of the Forever Damned?', 1987-88, SxMs109/1/B/1/41. I am indebted to Sara Crangle for drawing my attention to this part of Mendelssohn's memoirs in her article 'The agonies of ambivalence: Anna Mendelssohn, La poétesse maudite', *Modernism/modernity* (forthcoming).

<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

<sup>675</sup> LA, p. 84.

declaration that the ‘dangers in writing are inherent./Why it is dangerous to criticise the Establishment/Openly’. The ‘dangers in writing’ are in close proximity to questions of ‘Why women are discussed in terms of knickers’, the threat of violence never far from issues of gender. These dangers are illustrated by a series of sardonic statements that belie the assertion of the ‘inherent’ danger of writing: ‘Why what amuses the Establishment/is the Bad Use of language and Sex.’, ‘Why it is important not to lose control/Of one’s own mind’, ‘Why Literature/Frames novices’. Being ‘framed’, or falsely accused, is figured as a literary act. Yet the poem ends, characteristically, on a note of critical rebuttal: ‘Framing is a sociopolitical act’. In this poem, as in Mendelssohn’s memoir, the danger associated with writing lies in its capacity to be used as incriminating evidence. To assert that such incrimination is ‘sociopolitical’ is to attribute the ‘dangers in writing’ not to an innate quality, but to the contexts and discourses within which that writing circulates. In 1971, the year of the Moonlighter’s Cell and the incident to which Mendelssohn’s memoir anecdote presumably refers, those contexts were increasingly defined by instances and narratives of terroristic violence.

When ‘terror’ does emerge in Mendelssohn’s published poetry, it does so fleetingly, cloaked in equivocal and slippery language: ‘it never is freedom to please those who choose to terrify’, ‘to terrify the air’, ‘the influence is less detrimental than terror’, ‘change that to terror’ and ‘under perpetual terror’.<sup>676</sup> The difficulty of naming terroristic violence has been discussed by Adriana Cavarero, who writes that

as violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language [...] While violence against the helpless is becoming global in ever more ferocious forms, language proves unable to renew itself to name it; indeed, it tends to mask it.<sup>677</sup>

In *Horrorism*, Cavarero tackles the critical cliché that terrorism ‘is today a word as omnipresent as it is vague and ambiguous, its meaning taken for granted so as to avoid

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<sup>676</sup> *LA*, pp. 5, 49, 59; ‘concilia’, *Bernache Nonnette*.

<sup>677</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 2.



defining it'.<sup>678</sup> In its place, she proposes that 'horror' replace 'terror', an act of radical re-naming that seeks to centralise the perspective of the victims rather than the perpetrators of modern violence. As Cavarero explains, terror and horror have 'distinct etymologies, physics, and aims'.<sup>679</sup> Etymologically, terror comes from the Latin verb for trembling and the Greek verb for fear. This etymology encapsulates the physics of terror, its 'instinctual mobility'.<sup>680</sup> In Cavarero's words, 'terror moves bodies, drives them into motion'.<sup>681</sup> Conversely, 'horror' comes from the Latin and Greek verbs for paralysis and immobility. In an essay on poetics and terror in the poetry of Mendelssohn and Sean Bonney, Esther Leslie describes the state of cultural reification diagnosed by Adorno 'after Auschwitz' as a form of paralysis: 'Everything rigidifies'.<sup>682</sup> In Leslie's Adornian account, contemporary poetry has to contend with this state of rigidity or induced immobility – a state of horror, rather than terror. Leslie reconsiders the question of how to write poetry that is not either complicit or obsolete 'after Auschwitz' and points towards Bonney's 'revolutionary poetics', which resplices the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard, as an alternative.<sup>683</sup> Leslie's argument echoes Cavarero's assessment that 'language proves unable to renew itself' in the face of contemporary violence, and foregrounds the need for a mode of representation (in Leslie's argument, a poetic mode like Bonney's) that can counter the immobilising effects of horror.

For Cavarero, horror has the face of a woman. The mythological figure of the Medusa is taken to be emblematic of contemporary violence, not only for her horrifying appearance that has the power to turn her viewers into stone, to immobilise, but because she is a woman. One of the distinguishing features of 'horrorism' is the increasing number

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<sup>678</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>679</sup> Cynthia Weber, 'Encountering Violence: Terrorism and Horrorism in War and Citizenship', *International Politics and Sociology*, 8.3 (2014), 237-255 (p. 243).

<sup>680</sup> Cavarero, p. 5.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Leslie, p. 37. Cavarero also warns of the hazards of writing 'poetry after Auschwitz', writing that 'the ample and articulated array of theoretical perspectives that, during the twentieth century, chose to reflect on horror in an aestheticizing vein, often inspired by the sadomasochistic scenario, is particularly disturbing. After Auschwitz, shame, along with repugnance and disgust, are decidedly ill-suited to the disenchantment of pure theorizing.' p. 39.

<sup>683</sup> Leslie, pp. 38-39.

of women who perpetrate indiscriminate acts of violence – namely, suicide-bombing.<sup>684</sup> The horror produced by the figure of the violent woman, as Cavarero explains, derives from the deep-rooted conception of women as care-givers. Another harmful woman, Medea, offers further illustration of the feminine or maternal source of horrorism. In killing her own children, Medea wilfully harms those that she cares for, and thus represents the ‘generative nucleus of horror’.<sup>685</sup> Cavarero is not alone in locating ‘horror’ where women and violence intersect. During the seventies, rising numbers of women were seen to be engaging in terrorism, leading H. H. A. Cooper to identify a ‘new breed of female terrorist’ even more ‘ruthless’ and exceptional than her male counterpart.<sup>686</sup> Tellingly, Cooper also invokes the Medusa to characterise the monstrous threat posed by the female terrorist, and avers that the ‘woman as terrorist’ must be ‘dealt with after the fashion of the Gorgon’.<sup>687</sup> For Amanda Third, however, this ‘newness’ is a construct to which accounts of terrorism are especially prone. Third argues that the female terrorist, as well as rupturing a feminine ideal, gives expression to fears that have long haunted Western imagination of a subversive femininity, and ‘undermines steadfast gender determinations’ – masculine as well as feminine.<sup>688</sup> The perceived psychological exceptionalism of the female terrorist terrorises social order in a way that a male terrorist cannot, even when acting with the utmost violence.<sup>689</sup> In Third’s argument, there is no ‘new breed’ of violent women in the seventies, only the disinterring ‘of [a] history of subversive femininity that dominant cultural proscriptions of Woman seek to disavow’.<sup>690</sup>

The figure of the violent woman, or the feminine object of violence, generates some of the most powerful but also some of the most contradictory moments in Mendelssohn’s work. ‘Is she a woman?’, asks the poem ‘1:3ng’. ‘If so [...] Worse, much

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<sup>684</sup> Joanna Bourke, ‘Review: Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29.1 (2011), 187–190 (p. 187).

<sup>685</sup> Cavarero, p. 27.

<sup>686</sup> Third, p. 38; H.H.A. Cooper, ‘Woman as Terrorist’, in *The Criminology of Deviant Woman*, ed. Freda Adler and Rita James Simon (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1979) pp. 150–157 (p. 151).

<sup>687</sup> Cooper, pp. 152–53.

<sup>688</sup> Third, p. 40.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid., pp. 43–44.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

worse than any of them, but not a killer, worse because of writing'.<sup>691</sup> Mendelssohn mimics and deflects what *The Daily Mail* described as the 'peculiar ruthlessness of [the Angry Brigade] women' away from violence and onto writing, as if recalling the incriminatory writing of the Moonlighter's Cell communiqué.<sup>692</sup> A mythic genealogy of violent women, from the Apocryphal Judith who decapitates Holofernes, to the mythical epitome of maternal violence, Medea, are invoked in Mendelssohn's poetry and form part of a larger *avowal* of a history of subversive femininity.<sup>693</sup> Medea is invoked in the poem '**in medéa mé**' from *Implacable Art*. '**in medéa mé**' can be approximately translated as either 'in the midst of me' or 'Medea within me':<sup>694</sup>

**in medéa mé**, dismounted, dead country, 'it's a risk,' has to Pronounce  
the initiative annunciated, tell memory tell the past understatement.  
was socially 'known' in umbrage. awarded against, wallflower  
spooled back to lictorage, 'it could have been correct,' the tower  
coleridge guarded me akin to ancient leaves against relayed interviews  
of masks applauded by black nights of schott sequins on iced stone,  
steady; another twelve races adjacent, notice smooth, templar  
white drinking vessel, a mug shot for a serillian word, must I? must?  
must I thump my breast, before stepping over the kerb, must I be curbed?

States of mobility and immobility are poised against one another prosodically and thematically: 'before stepping over the kerb, must I be curbed?'. As the poetic line is repeatedly 'stopped' by rhetorical questions, so the poetic speaker anticipates being stopped in a spatial sense (at the protective kerb of a road) and in the more sinister sense of constraint, restriction or control. The verb 'to curb' belongs to an already gendered discourse. In William Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio concludes that '[t]his is a way to kill a wife with kindness,/ And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humour'.<sup>695</sup>

<sup>691</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 14.

<sup>692</sup> Jane Gaskell, 'The frightening cult of the violent woman', *Daily Mail*, 26 March 1973, p. 6.

<sup>693</sup> Judith appears in 'Bernache Nonnette', Lake, *Bernache Nonnette*; Medea in *LA*, p.4. Also see Marina Warner, *Monuments & Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985) for a revisionist account of how Freud 'saw Medusa's head as a symbol of female castration and consequently an instrument of terror for men,' p. 110; and *Laughing with Medusa: Classical myth and feminist thought*, ed. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>694</sup> *LA*, p. 4. Bold in original.

<sup>695</sup> William Shakespeare, *Taming of the Shrew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), IV.1, 17.

Being curbed was a punishment traditionally meted out to women.<sup>696</sup> As Lynda E. Boose has shown, the bizarre form of punishment known as the Scold's Bridle was designed to 'curb' women's speech, and is 'a practice tangled up in the cultural discourse about shrews', or unruly women.<sup>697</sup> The historical violence associated with curbing women may explain the poetic speaker's claim, a few lines later, that 'i could only show you/how violent you were'. The form that that 'showing' takes is the repetitive rhetorical reference to being 'curbed'. In line with Cavarero's evaluation of Medea as the 'generative nucleus of horror', Mendelssohn's 'Medea' poem invokes feminised states of immobility. Yet those threatened states of immobility are directed towards women, not enacted by them. The figure of an immobilising woman precedes the sequence of demands that fiercely resist further immobilisation: 'must I? must?'.

Gilbert and Gubar tell us that some of the 'best known' poetry by women in the twentieth century 'openly uses [...] traditional figures of patriarchal mythology', as evinced in poems by Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Louise Bogan and Anne Sexton.<sup>698</sup> These mythological figures are not only used but parodied and reinvented, in a spirit that is both 'revisionary and revolutionary'.<sup>699</sup> The predominance of this poetic strategy in the seventies paralleled the emergence of feminist revisionist mythology, exemplified by Cixous' influential essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976).<sup>700</sup> A turn in more recent feminist scholarship to the mythological figure of Antigone aims to recuperate a model of subversive feminist politics that is highly applicable to Mendelssohn's own invocation of Medea. In *Antigone's Claim* (2000), Judith Butler discusses how the myth of Antigone represents the transgressive powers of female speech – powers which provoke curbing. There is a cultural association, too, between Antigone and the contemporary figure of the terrorist woman.

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<sup>696</sup> For more on 'these brutal instruments that carry with them a silenced women's history', see Lynda E. Boose, 'Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42:2 (Summer 1991), 179-213 (p. 209).

<sup>697</sup> Boose, p. 199.

<sup>698</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 90. To this catalogue, we might add Sylvia Plath, Denise Riley, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, who also invoke mythical figures in their work.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid.

<sup>700</sup> For a more detailed overview, see Heidi Morse, 'Feminist Receptions of Medusa: Rethinking Mythological Figures from Ovid to Louise Bogan', *Comparative Literature*, 70.2 (1 June 2018), 176-193 (pp. 179-180).

Karen Beckman recalls how ‘at the height of the Baader-Meinhof crisis in the 1970s, [Antigone] was described by a character in the collectively directed *Germany in Autumn* as “a terrorist woman”’.<sup>701</sup> Antigone’s transgression was to commit an act of civil disobedience by burying her brother in defiance of her uncle King Creon’s decree. Butler reads the terms with which Antigone claims her transgression as constitutive of her feminist defiance of the state: ‘I say that I did it and I do not deny it’.<sup>702</sup> ‘What gives these verbal acts their power’, Butler argues, ‘is the normative operation of power that they embody without quite becoming’.<sup>703</sup> Antigone’s defiance draws on the language of authority, but is turned against that authority, much as Mendelssohn defiantly puts the question of curbing to the would-be curbers in ‘**in medéa mé**’. The threat of ‘curbing’ is articulated in a demanding tone that expresses the embattled form of agency characteristic of Mendelssohn’s poetry. In a development of the poetic trend identified by Gilbert and Gubar, and the political strategy identified by Butler, Mendelssohn does not merely invoke a mythological figure. ‘**in medéa mé**’ redeploys and thus contests the language of gendered constraint.

In my reading of Mendelssohn, ‘Medea within me’ stands for the horror hidden within the feminine, and retrieves a degree of agency from the disempowered position of the would-be curbed victim. A retrieval of agency is central, too, to Cavarero’s argument. Countering the tendency to cast violent women as victims of manipulation or other coercion, Cavarero argues that female perpetrators should not be absolved of agency. Bound up with this tendency to deny the agency of violent women is the seemingly progressive recuperation of the ‘specificity’ of female violence from universalising or synthesising theoretical practice.<sup>704</sup> Increasing critical attention is now being given to redress ‘terrorism discourse’s overwriting of specificity in favour of a universal understanding of “female terrorism”’.<sup>705</sup> Yet Cavarero finds in this often sympathetic ‘restoring of personal

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<sup>701</sup> Karen Beckman, ‘Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters, and Twins: Building Relations in the Wake of the World Trade Center Attacks’, *Grey Room*, 7 (Spring 2002) 24-39 (p. 25).

<sup>702</sup> Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>704</sup> Cavarero, pp. 103-104.

<sup>705</sup> Liz Sage, ‘The Impossible Terrorist: Women, Violence and the Disavowal of Female Agency in Terrorism Discourses’, *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*, 4.1 (May 2013), 46-84 (p. 46).

histories' an accompanying 'absolution' of the violent act, a dissolving, again, of agency.<sup>706</sup> 'Medea within me' codes a history of subversive femininity that might advance us further towards the demystification of the 'phenomena' of the terrorist woman. Violent women, as these classical references make clear, are not a new phenomenon. Characterisations of women as typically passive and non-violent are belied by the mythological genealogies resurrected by feminist scholars and writers. To evoke a 'Medea within' is to disavow singularity and lay claim to a long-denied agency. The denial of that agency, and the exceptionality and 'monstrosity' associated with violent women, props up those discourses that would reduce women to the role of either victim or monster. '**in medéa mé**' admits both a long lineage of violent women and the violent measures taken against the threat posed by the non-conforming, unruly woman. This is Mendelssohn's version of Rukeyser's more explicit identification as 'a violent woman in the violent day'. In a fragmented but forceful expression of threat and resistance, 'must I? must? [...] must I be curbed?', both sources of potential violence are inscribed.

## 1.2 Unanswerable questions

The characteristic mismatch in Mendelssohn's poetry between the centralised figure of the victim and the tone of embattled agency is much in evidence in one of the few published poems that refers directly to 'terror'. Recalcitrance or non-compliance marks the second stanza of 'and Waterloo Westminster':

your people are strangers therefore why do you ask me my name?  
as though you know me, or knew me, and now I have changed  
into something you worked your whole lives for, my silence.  
as though my silence ensured your ratios remained  
to docket a ducat or two, spare change from venetian coffers.  
as though the cosmetic we once spoke of was now a microshadow  
in a palette of grains. celebrating the words I was reticent to claim  
now broken and left for sand to blow over them.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> Cavarero, p. 104.

<sup>707</sup> *LA*, p. 57.

Naming here is held in counter-intuitive relation to recognition. Strangers surely *would* ask for each other's name; the first question is a non-sequitur. Transformation is the complicating factor at work: these very strangers have effectively transformed the speaking subject beyond recognition through the imposition of 'my silence'. What sounds like a gagging order – another form of curbing – 'ensures' balanced quantities and surplus. The poem suggests that 'my silence' is profit-making, even as it posits speechlessness as the product and process of structural capitalism. During her trial, Mendelssohn spoke of the 'prison system which is geared to sap your energy and *silence any desire*, both physical and mental'.<sup>708</sup> Another moment of speechlessness is recorded during Mendelssohn's cross-examination by the state prosecutor. When asked what she said upon being confronted by the police with the explosives allegedly found at her address, Mendelssohn replied – echoing Antigone – 'Nothing'. When asked why she said nothing, she adds: 'I couldn't get any words out of my mouth'.<sup>709</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, Mendelssohn's poetry's 'complex relationship to refusal' has been noted by more than one critic.<sup>710</sup> '[A]nd Waterloo Westminster' rearticulates an inability to answer and the silencing produced by interrogation and imprisonment from the same position of embattled defiance, an over-determined but also deliberate, politicised refusal to speak or to name.<sup>711</sup> Recognition remains out of easy reach, as the speaker refers to events and exchanges outside the temporality of the poem (what 'we once spoke of'). 'Cosmetic' functions so as to blur the distinction between object and subject: the cosmetic, the powder compact? Or the cosmetic, the superficial? 'Microshadow' and 'palette of grains', with their intimations of both artistry and the natural, keep both possibilities in play. 'Grains' also reaches back to the governing rhyme of 'name', which echoes through 'changed', 'remained', and 'claim'. Naming and its phonic cousins are

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<sup>708</sup> 'Stoke Newington Eight, 3 on Bail, 5 In Custody', *Time Out*, 4-10 February 1972, p. 5. Italics my own.

<sup>709</sup> 'Is the Angry Brigade Relevant?' *Time Out*, 27 October-2 November 1972, p. 9.

<sup>710</sup> Perril, p. 105.

<sup>711</sup> Politicised 'because Western culture is constituted by a phallic morphology [...] a woman [...] is effectively silenced, deprived of agency before she has even uttered a word', Sage, p. 70-71.

suspended through the stanza in a loose matrix of sound, a construction that gives little away (why, or how, has the subject been silenced?) but does not relinquish the question: ‘why do you ask me my name?’. The poetic speaker’s silence here paradoxically resists a gendered form of silencing. In a letter, Mendelssohn writes of girls in the sixties who act ‘like dumb shows’, and mimic ‘male language as though it issued from themselves, to be guided into danger and left to die, to be hauled out of prison cells and shot for the actions of their captors. There was nothing Golden about it’.<sup>712</sup> In the letter form, the gender politics of speech and their violent consequences are exaggeratedly explicit. In the form of a poem, the categories of silencer and silenced are not gendered and consequently de-essentialised. Mendelssohn’s poetry diffuses the taxonomies and universalisations of her prose. The extent to which political and aesthetic refusal are intertwined is suggested in an analogy made by Mendelssohn between the artist Egon Schiele, who was incapable of ‘articulating to the Austrian police when he was arrested’ and herself as a ‘practising poetess’ who ‘could not articulate my distress either’.<sup>713</sup> The silence which is the result of persecution or oppression becomes a poetic and a political strategy, a mode of encryption.

At the end of the first stanza, with Ozymandias-like gravitas, the speaker imagines their unclaimed words as ruins in the sand. Are these the unpublished words of poetry? Or the detritus of the refusal to supply a name, a fixed referent? It is that same silence that, at the beginning of the next stanza, seems to have been found ineffectual as a preventative measure against a monstrous, feminine incursion:

that will not halt the entrance of any vile witch,  
 & with these troubles to engage a few ropery characters  
 drawing small rings above ears for their bullets to go,  
 reality has always sighed, by evoking suicide  
 shows that its knowledge of beauty froze far below  
 perhaps, the influence is less detrimental than terror,  
 & the theories wrong. everything works counter to memory  
 so that there are not answers to questions of a personal nature<sup>714</sup>

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<sup>712</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> *LA*, p. 58.



This third stanza is syntactically more fragmented than the second. Line endings are enjambed or paused rather than stopped. 'Sighed' is rhymed with 'suicide', with another rhyme on 'go' and 'below'. Amongst this nascent lyricism, the 'vile witch' and 'ropey characters' seem out of place. Neither does the syntax do much to explicate their presence: the lack of end-stopped lines, floating referents and personified abstractions such as 'reality has always sighed' generate a swim of images and ideas. In such a swim, the relation between 'terror' and 'influence' remains elusive. We are led to ask, whose influence? What influence? Influence is an in-flow, that is fluidity, in contrast to the frozen 'knowledge of beauty' of the previous line. Immobilisation is present, too, in the close and confusing proximity of 'characters' marked and condemned to death. Is there a cover-up at work? Assassination masked as suicide? Might the lyrical disjunctions operate as red flags, indicating cracks in the smoothing processes of silencing? If we read 'characters' as individual letters, rather than role-playing persons, the circles drawn for bullets become metaphorical, a sign of the imminent decimation of the particles of language.

The stanza's final provocation, that 'the theories' are 'wrong', is juxtaposed against or with an expression of universal efficacy: 'everything works'. This is a form of efficacy that works *against* or *counter to* rather than *with* its objects. While the reader's eye or ear might anticipate counter-*terrorism*, at this juncture what 'works' is counter-*memory*, a historical amnesia or a psychological repression that supplies no answers: 'Everything works counter to memory/so that there are not answers to questions of a personal nature'. Questions without answers are a recurring motif in *Implacable Art*. In 'to any who want poetry to give them answers' the reader is told 'a poem does not give precise directions'.<sup>715</sup> Another poem issues the same prescription: 'directions are not given in poetry'.<sup>716</sup> In an autobiographical fragment, Mendelssohn associates answers or solutions with political violence. 'Solutions are just another form of violence - State violence or revolutionary violence', she concludes,

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<sup>715</sup> *LA*, p. 34.

<sup>716</sup> *LA*, p. 9.

following an account of her time as a ‘revolutionary’, the time when ‘I thought I had all the answers’.<sup>717</sup> ‘Solutions’ are haunted too, for Mendelssohn, by the Nazi legacy of the Final Solution. The resistance to memory manifested as resistance to answers embeds itself within Mendelssohn’s poetics, further confounding the would-be reader and the question of naming, of securing some form of biographical or individual referent. However, there is a return in the final stanza to the deeply personal lyric ‘I’ with references to social workers (as recorded in the introduction, Mendelssohn’s children were taken into care), a threadbare existence, and place names that simultaneously orient and disorient the poem:

I can’t cope with all these social workers & state administrators.  
 Look my coat is threaded thin, I’m not robust,  
 I don’t know where life ends and dreams begin  
 Only I can see that I am confined  
 By hideousness that plays with equal quarter  
 As though the Danube were the Thames and Waterloo Westminster.<sup>718</sup>

The final line aligns synthesis (of one river or part of a city with another) with a ‘confining’ ‘hideousness’ which recalls the opening stanza’s account of how ‘I walk through a city and am thankful for its name./for it helps me to know its extent its élan’.<sup>719</sup> Names, as the infiltration of French words like ‘élan’ remind us, accrue layers of historical sediment that may or may not be recognised. Waterloo names a part of a city, a Belgian town, and a decisive historical battle which shaped European history and British nationhood. What we are left with may not be answers to ‘questions of a personal nature’ or a name, but with an admission of lived conditions of unanswerability: ‘I don’t know where life ends and dreams begin’. Poetry that ‘does not give directions’ participates in those conditions of answerability that refer back to theories of terror.

Linguistic recalcitrance, or the refusal of questions and withholding of answers, operates outside a given terrorist logic of response and recognition. Gayatri Chakravorty

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<sup>717</sup> Untitled fragment, c. late 1970s, SxMs109/1/B/1/5. I am again indebted to Sara Crangle for drawing my attention to this extract.

<sup>718</sup> *LA*, p. 61.

<sup>719</sup> *LA*, p. 57.

Spivak has written of terrorism's 'unanswerability', and describes the war on terrorism as a 'cruel caricature of what in us can respond'.<sup>720</sup> As Spivak has argued, directionlessness or the refusal to answer might break cycles of terrorist and counterterrorist violence, which otherwise feed on a continuous circuit of unthinking response. To refuse to answer is to break that circuit. Spivak's study of 9/11 has been read by Liz Sage as an attempt to 'formulate a means of responding to the seemingly unanswerable'; for instance, in Spivak's insight that a 'response not only supposes and produces a constructed subject of response, it also constructs its object'.<sup>721</sup> As Sage argues, it is this insight that offers an escape from cycles of terror-counterterror that depend upon 'a binary understanding of what constitutes a response that will ensure that terrorist violence is met with state-sanctioned violence'.<sup>722</sup> The binary logic of terror-counterterror constitutes and reifies stereotypes of the 'terrorized subject and the terrorist object' as long as the circuit of response remains resolutely binary. The poetic speaker refuses not only to respond, to supply an answer, but the object-position constituted by being known or recognised. Can we speak of a 'terrorist subject'? To sustain unknowability and assert that 'there are not answers' might begin to generate such a possibility. As Joseph Luna writes in a recent essay on contemporary poetry, 'unanswerable questions compel speculation on what is not in order to make it possible to think so'.<sup>723</sup> Here I argue against Duncan's conclusion that Mendelssohn 'has found the perfect answer', despite concurring with his insight that Mendelssohn 'and most of the [innovative] poets who began' in the seventies 'attack[...] official knowledge'.<sup>724</sup> To sustain 'unanswerability', in Mendelssohn's poetry, is to refuse the horror of reification.

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<sup>720</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Terror: A Speech after 9/11', *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, 31.2 (Summer 2004), 81-112 (p. 81).

<sup>721</sup> Sage, p. 47; Spivak, p. 82; Sage, p. 48.

<sup>722</sup> Sage, p. 48.

<sup>723</sup> Joseph Luna, 'Unanswerable Questions', *Chicago Review*, 60:04/61:01 (September 2017) <<http://chicagoreview.org/unanswerable-questions/>> [accessed 13 September 2018].

<sup>724</sup> Duncan.

## Part 2: The hostage

Why should a reader of Mendelssohn's work dwell upon the brief reference in 'and Waterloo Westminster' to 'theories of terror'? My reasons are biographical and intellectual. Mendelssohn was aware of the burgeoning theoretical interest in terrorism. In the late eighties, she attended a lecture on terrorism given by Mengham at the University of Cambridge as part of the 'Avant-Garde series'.<sup>725</sup> Mengham's lecture discussed the Symbionese Liberation Army (revolutionary American urban guerrillas active between 1973-75), Gerard Richter's Stammheim series (depicting the imprisonment and deaths of members of the far-left militant Baader-Meinhof gang), Douglas Oliver's *Diagram Poems* (which depict a series of raids carried out by the Marxist Tupamaro urban guerrillas of Uruguay) and the Angry Brigade.<sup>726</sup> As mentioned previously, there is reason to suggest that Mendelssohn would have been aware of Mengham and Howlett's edited collection *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939* (1994). Around this time, Mengham published Mendelssohn's *viola tricolor* (1993) and *Bernache Nonnette* (1995) pamphlets under his Equipage imprint and they were in regular contact. Moreover, in a letter that directly references Mengham's lecture, Mendelssohn rails against 'terrorist experts' in general, and Jean Baudrillard in particular, casting his own intellectual position as 'terrorist'.<sup>727</sup> Despite the strong working relationship between publisher and poet, the threat of identification or synthesis haunts Mendelssohn's experience of Mengham's lecture. In reference to Mengham's discussion of the Angry Brigade, she writes that 'I'm not willing to be made into an example'.<sup>728</sup> To be made into an example is to be used to illustrate or expound an argument; in Hegelian terms, to bring a thesis to its synthesis. In this instance, a person or persons are reduced to a theoretical component. It seems to be Mengham's lecture that prompted Mendelssohn's repudiation of Jean Baudrillard, a theorist of terror

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<sup>725</sup> Letter to Ian Patterson, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

<sup>726</sup> Mengham, private email correspondence, 5 April 2017.

<sup>727</sup> Letter to Peter Riley, 16 July 1988, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/2; SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

<sup>728</sup> Letter to Patterson, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

whose work is directly concerned with violent revolutionaries of the seventies, chiefly the Italian Red Brigades and the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany. In his influential treatise *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, The End of the Social* (1978), Baudrillard argues that terrorism is a homologue of, or the violent equivalent to, the 'silence and inertia of the masses'.<sup>729</sup> This is because in its 'deadly and indiscriminate taking of hostages, terrorism strikes at the most characteristic product of the whole system: the anonymous and perfectly undifferentiated individual, the term substitutable for any other'.<sup>730</sup> The 'whole system' referred to here is that of the postmodern, post-Fordist era, a time of widespread consumerism, a phenomenal expansion of media culture, revolutionary violence and new industrial technologies that transformed the organisation of labour.<sup>731</sup> The effect of the expansion of media culture, for Baudrillard, is the dissolution of the 'real' and its replacement with representations or simulations of the real. This state of semiotic equivalence constitutes a "terroristic" form of signification' in which signs are separated entirely from their referents.<sup>732</sup> Hence the analogy with the 'hostage', an individual held as security for the purposes of exchange, and made equivalent to far wider political or societal demands. The 'most characteristic product' of the media-saturated 'system' for Baudrillard's text is the 'silent majority', the 'anonymous' and 'undifferentiated' masses from which hostages are drawn. Similarly, in Walter Laqueur's influential study, anonymity is a hallmark of terrorism.<sup>733</sup> The masses are the aggregate of the system, the postmodern equivalent of the proletariat, 'senseless', 'formless' and nameless, without definition.<sup>734</sup> However, Baudrillard's characterisation of the actors of that strategy, the 'silent majority', as anonymous, undifferentiated and eminently substitutable, fails to account for the precision

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<sup>729</sup> Quoted in *The Violent Muse*, p. 3; 'the only phenomenon which may be in a relation with [the masses] is terrorism', Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or the End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton and Andrew Berardini (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2007), pp. 67-68.

<sup>730</sup> *The Violent Muse*, p. 3.

<sup>731</sup> *In the Shadow*, p. 11.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>733</sup> Laqueur, p. 3.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 47, 37-38.

with which mid-twentieth-century guerrillas targeted their kidnappings, and the specific values attached to individual hostages.<sup>735</sup>

It is most likely that Mendelssohn referred to *In the Shadows* when she wrote to Patterson in the late eighties that ‘Baudrillard writes syncretically, and its [sic] a harmful, inaccurate logic which emerges [...] lethal as the intelligence behind dynamite’.<sup>736</sup> I want to focus on two of the charges Mendelssohn makes: firstly, that of syncretism, and secondly, that of harm. Syncretism is the union or reconciliation of diverse beliefs or systems – a form of synthesis. It is precisely this union or fusion, and the consequent demolition of specificity and dependence upon equivalence that forms the basis of Mendelssohn’s objection to Baudrillard’s theories. Violence as misreading is again invoked: in this instance, ‘syncretically’ formed logic produces terrorist theory and discursive violence. Synthesizing is critiqued explicitly in one of Mendelssohn’s Spanish Civil War poems, which opens ‘I also wish to refer to my loathing of conformism/& levelling’.<sup>737</sup> ‘Levelling’, which may contain an echo of the Irish guerrillas referenced by the Moonlighter’s Cell, takes the form of ‘lecturing people’ who ‘cannot/distinguish between men and women,/or between traditions & their developments’. Sexual difference is the first casualty of a failure to ‘distinguish’, and the second is the distinction between the continuity of ‘traditions’, which are syntactically aligned with ‘men’, and the changes wrought by ‘developments’, which are aligned with ‘women’. To level is to reduce difference, to create uniformity or to smooth what would otherwise be uneven. The poetic speaker draws on two different groups of historical victims to establish the casualties of ‘conformism/& levelling’: the Spanish Republicans, ‘who/fought against Fascism for a Spanish Republic’, and the victims of the Holocaust, who were subjected to ‘the grim grisly grey/“night and fog” existence’. The reference to ‘those who/fought against Fascism’ is

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<sup>735</sup> To give a handful of examples: in 1977, Hanns Martin Schleyer, a former SS officer and one of the most powerful industrialists in Germany, was kidnapped by the Red Army Faction; in 1978, the Red Brigades kidnapped Italy’s ex-Prime Minister Aldo Moro; in 1974, Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army who intended to leverage her family’s wealth and political influence.

<sup>736</sup> Letter to Patterson, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

<sup>737</sup> *LA*, p. 102.

significant. As Michael Seidman reminds us, antifascism ‘sought consensus, not synthesis’.<sup>738</sup> ‘Levelling’ is made synonymous, in the poem, with ‘synthesis’: the ‘lecturing people’ are described in the last line as ‘the synthesizers of Literature’. Synthesis may be defined as the combination of parts into a complex whole; the resolution of the conflict between a thesis and an antithesis; or, in the poem, it acts ‘in a similar way/to the digital synthesizing of music’, that is, when different frequencies are combined to generate sound electronically. Highly modern ‘synthesizing’ here appears to risk the mistransmission of historical victimhood and the homogenisation of political positions.

Secondly, the adjective ‘harmful’ with which Mendelssohn critiques Baudrillarian theory describes precisely that against which her poetry defines itself:

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.<sup>739</sup>

Disavowing associations with violence – while also admitting the ubiquity of ‘harm’, and the limitations of the lyric ‘I’ – Mendelssohn lays claim to an affective and non-harmful poetics. A late poem published in 2004, ‘Photrum’, reaffirms Mendelssohn’s claim to ‘sympatico poetry’.<sup>740</sup> She is not alone in making this claim: the poet Douglas Oliver (who published ‘1:3ng’ by Mendelssohn in 1997), was deeply concerned with forging a poetic space of ‘no-harm’, in direct response to the guerrilla violence of the Uruguayan Tupamaros.<sup>741</sup> Yet unlike Oliver’s, Mendelssohn’s poetry does not make a priority of poetic ‘harmlessness’. Poetry, she writes in *Implacable Art*, ‘is [...] the suture’, a small violence admitted in order to repair the effects of greater violences.<sup>742</sup> ‘My poetry is not the harmful type’ is a line from

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<sup>738</sup> Michael Seidman, ‘Was the French Popular Front Antifascist?’, *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics 1922 to the present*, ed. Hugo García and others (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), pp. 43–60 (p. 43).

<sup>739</sup> *LA*, p. 78.

<sup>740</sup> Mendelssohn, ‘Photrum’, in *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems*, eds. Rod Mengham and John Kinsella (Cambridge, UK / Applecross, Western Australia: Salt, 2004), p. 177.

<sup>741</sup> Douglas Oliver, *The Harmless Building* (London: Ferry Press, 1973), p. 5. For Oliver’s poetic treatment of the Tupamaros, see *The Diagram--Poems* (London: Ferry Press, 1979). I gratefully acknowledge Joseph Luna’s doctoral thesis on Oliver, harmlessness and poetry, which guided me to the references above.

<sup>742</sup> *LA*, p. 24.

'My Chekhov's Twilight', a poem that deals directly with the relation between women and the law. The poem does not code 'harm' as a specifically masculine attribute. While the *de facto* agent of violence in theories of terror is always coded male, Mendelssohn does not exempt women as agents of violence.<sup>743</sup> In 'My Chekhov's Twilight', women are both hostile agent ('personal invasion from women') and structural victim ('women were at a decided disadvantage'). Persecution, according to Mendelssohn, is at the heart of '[m]y poem on Chekhov [which] is not ample enough - I slide into the fury & disgust I felt for my persecutors. I cannot convey how terrified I was and still am'.<sup>744</sup> To designate the 'affections' as poetic source aligns with a Romantic tradition (and, by association, the understanding of poetry as a 'lament from a solitary cell'), but might also code this poetry as feminine. What is the antithesis to the affections? The absence of feeling or emotion, the state of being unaffected, unmoved, untouched. Mendelssohn's poetry sets itself up *against* the 'silence and inertia of the masses', the 'harmful [...] logic' of theory, and the continuum between masculinity and violence.

To examine one instance of 'harmful' Baudrillarian logic: Baudrillard uses the example of 'Mogadishu Stammheim', shorthand for the hostages taken at Mogadishu in 1977 by members of the Red Army Faction still at large, who were to be exchanged for RAF prisoners held at Stammheim prison. Baudrillard cites this terroristic standoff in order to illustrate the equivalence between terrorist acts and the mass media, who are both the vehicle and propagator of terrorism.<sup>745</sup> 'They are,' Baudrillard claims, 'themselves terrorists', and this 'they' refers both to the media and the masses, due to the Moebius-strip-like relation between the two.<sup>746</sup> This Moebian logic extends to the relation between masses and terrorism, with violent implications for systems of representation:

there is no equivalent to the blind, non-representative, senseless character of the terrorist act, but the blind, senseless and unrepresentational behaviour of the

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<sup>743</sup> In her important recent study of gender and violence, Third contests the 'generalised invisibility of masculinity' in relation to the terrorist, who is always 'gendered masculine', pp. 35, 28.

<sup>744</sup> Miscellaneous correspondence, 5 October 2000, SxMs109/3/B/6.

<sup>745</sup> Baudrillard, p. 106.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., p. 17-18.



masses. What they do have in common is that they are the most radical, most intense contemporary form of the denial of the whole representative system.<sup>747</sup>

Baudrillard's relish for the nihilistic, the rhetorical and indeed the 'syncretic' (as diagnosed by Mendelssohn) can be detected through his use of intensifiers, emphatic negation and the sweeping synthesis of 'whole representative system'. Mendelssohn's emphasis on the harmful 'syncretic' quality of Baudrillardian theory works implicitly to remind us of the importance of the recognition – rather than the elision – of *difference*. *In the Shadows* espouses a theory of terror that catches not only figures of power and authority but representation itself in its capacious net.

The capacious net, however, is a little torn. As Amanda Third's pioneering study has shown, 'terrorism is a highly gendered phenomenon'.<sup>748</sup> Yet considerations of gender slip right through Baudrillard's net. In other words, the founding notion of the 'perfectly undifferentiated' hostage, 'substitutable for any other', erases crucial aspects of sexual difference. Similarly, Luce Irigaray has shown how a Girardian economy of exchange corresponds to a model of male sexuality and fails to consider the relation between women and violence.<sup>749</sup> Comparing René Girard and Baudrillard, Richard J. Lane writes that

the hostage does not have the symbolic power of what René Girard calls 'the scapegoat' (1986) – a person who redeems the violence of the surrounding society by being sacrificed – merely the anonymity of being a part of what Baudrillard calls 'the masses'. So instead of having the status of that ultimate sacred scapegoat in Western society – Christ – *the hostage is unnameable, anonymous, a kind of ghost who temporarily haunts the imagination*.<sup>750</sup>

This description of the hostage closely recalls the evocation of namelessness 'and Waterloo Westminster' and the ghost-like disavowal that runs through Mendelssohn's writing. We should not forget Mendelssohn's darkly ludic assertion that she should not have been put on trial, but instead been referred to the 'United Nations Standing Committee on Hostage

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<sup>747</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>748</sup> Third, p. 1.

<sup>749</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>750</sup> Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 103. Italics my own.

Taking by Guerrilla groups'.<sup>751</sup> This assertion forms one of a number of instances when Mendelssohn identifies explicitly as a hostage.

The first of these identifications with the hostage occurs during the trial of the Stoke Newington Eight in 1972. While held on remand, the majority of the Stoke Newington Eight defendants were not granted bail on the grounds that they might perpetuate the conspiracy of which they stood accused. Some of the defendants characterised their position as virtually synonymous with that of the hostage – although here the hostage-taker was the state, rather than left-wing radicals. During a cross-examination, co-defendant John Barker stated that: 'If innocent people are convicted for these bombings, but people active in opposition to the Government, then it is the same as taking hostages for the future good behaviour of the bombers' [sic].<sup>752</sup> While it would be a stretch indeed to claim that all those held on remand are hostages, in this case the police search for the Angry Brigade had cast a wide net. To recall the words of one Special Branch officer, 'we're chasing a myth [...] a many-headed hydra'.<sup>753</sup> The imprecision of this policing strategy appears to be borne out by the fact that half of the eight defendants were eventually acquitted of all charges. The conspiracy charge under which the remaining four were prosecuted practiced what could be termed a 'substitutional' approach to criminal conviction: one conspirator being substitutable for any other.

To give a brief summary of the conspiracy charge: due to looser rules of evidence ('hearsay' and circumstantial evidence permitted), the blurring of political views and actions, and the 'persons unknown' clause (by which prosecutors were not obliged to name fellow conspirators), the conspiracy charge effectively forces defendants to prove their innocence.<sup>754</sup> Mendelssohn reprises this undermining of the principle of innocence in a poem as '[g]uilty until proven innocent', which I discuss at greater length in the following chapter.<sup>755</sup> Political activity, necessarily involving public meetings, collective action, and

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<sup>751</sup> Letter to Mengham, 22 November 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/47/1.

<sup>752</sup> Cross examinations, 18 September 1972, SxMs109/2/D/2, p. 7.

<sup>753</sup> Burns, p. 1.

<sup>754</sup> Hain, pp. 177-181.

<sup>755</sup> *LA*, p. 116.

demonstrations, is easily caught up by the ‘dragnet’ of conspiracy.<sup>756</sup> This was the case for the more politicised circles of early seventies counter-culture. Several British historians of the period concur that the political implications of conspiracy charges ‘became apparent in the 1970s in a flurry of judgements by which conspiracy was used to repress radical dissent’.<sup>757</sup> In a further demonstration of how the state response to the Angry Brigade trial was bound up with the state response to the situation in Ireland, conspiracy charges were used historically to suppress the nationalist movement in nineteenth-century Ireland.<sup>758</sup> Recall Judge James’ advice to the jury: that ‘conspiracy can be effected by a wink and nod, without a word being spoken’.<sup>759</sup> As women are more likely than men to be positioned as supporters of radicalism, rather than direct perpetrators, a blurring of the boundaries between radical activism and political violence stands to disproportionately inculcate women.<sup>760</sup>

If there is a Baudrillarian indiscriminacy at work in the taking of hostages in the 1970s, this indiscriminacy would seem to operate at the hands of the British state, rather than at the hands of the guerrillas.<sup>761</sup> The police allegedly went through address books (documents they referred to as ‘glossar[ies] of revolutionaries’) belonging to Stuart Christie and Jake Prescott to identify potential suspects.<sup>762</sup> In ‘exchange’ for the convictions of the Stoke Newington Eight ‘hostages’ on the grounds of conspiracy, the British state legitimated the implementation of exceptional policing powers and a clamp-down on the activist counter-culture – thus ensuring the ‘future good behaviour’ cited by Barker above. The concession in this atypical hostage exchange was extracted by the State from the wider public. In Hall’s study of social control, as discussed in chapter one, the Angry Brigade is

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<sup>756</sup> Hain, p. 182.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid., p. 177; also see studies by Geoff Robertson, *Whose Conspiracy?* (National Council for Civil Liberties, 1974), Robert Hazell, *Conspiracy and Civil Liberties* (London: Bell, 1974) and Robert Spicer, *Conspiracy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1981).

<sup>758</sup> Hain, p. 175.

<sup>759</sup> Carr, p. 172.

<sup>760</sup> Third, pp. 37, 39.

<sup>761</sup> The SN8DG point out that one of the most common definitions of terrorism, ‘indiscriminate violence’, does not apply to the Angry Brigade, due to the specificity with which they chose their targets. *If You Want Peace, Prepare for War* [undated, c.1972], p. 5. A component of Laqueur’s influential definition of terrorism is ‘indiscriminate murder’, p. 79.

<sup>762</sup> Carr, pp. 82, 92, 174.

considered to have ‘cemented in public consciousness the inextricable link [...] between the politics of the alternate society and the violent threat to the state’.<sup>763</sup> This led the drive towards what Hall calls ‘the exceptional state’ under the Heath government which mobilised the law to quell domestic conflicts.<sup>764</sup> Counter-insurgency theorist Brigadier Kitson’s *Low Intensity Operations* became the British manual for counterinsurgency tactics during the escalating violence in Northern Ireland. Kitson proposed that the Law be used ‘as just another weapon in the Government’s arsenal’, a cover-up for heavy-handed suppression and part of the ‘war effort’ against insurgency. The defendants argued that this militarized logic had already been institutionalized, and the impartiality of the law thus compromised.<sup>765</sup>

Sympathetic journalists reported that the work of the women defendants (or ‘hostages’) was made more difficult than that of their male counterparts, ‘because it was unusual for women to defend themselves from prison’, and ‘the authorities at Holloway were not used to coping with the situation’.<sup>766</sup> According to *Time Out*, Mendelssohn and her fellow female defendants ‘were denied the use of writing materials for several weeks, and now the notebooks they use are being scrutinised by the prison authorities every time they’re passed to lawyers’.<sup>767</sup> As research by Steve Chibnall has shown, media coverage of the trial focused disproportionately and sensationally on the female defendants and their alleged involvement in acts of violence.<sup>768</sup> Labelled as one of ‘The Bomb Girls’, ‘Anna the Bomber’ and ‘Terror Girl Anna’ by the tabloid press, Mendelssohn was far from faceless and nameless, unlike the ‘anonymous’ Baudrillarian hostage.<sup>769</sup> Almost thirty years later, Mendelssohn’s assertion in a letter to Oliver that ‘I am not a bullet’ disavows tabloid-headline conflations between women and weapons.<sup>770</sup> At the time, beneath the *Daily Mail*

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<sup>763</sup> Hall and others, p. 292.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid., pp. 268-320.

<sup>765</sup> Carr, pp. 129-130.

<sup>766</sup> Jackie Leishman, ‘Defendant tells jury: “I oppose bombing on political grounds”’, *Guardian*, 17 November 1972.

<sup>767</sup> ‘Defence Difficulties’, *Time Out*, 21-27 January 1971, p.4

<sup>768</sup> Steve Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News* (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 114-115.

<sup>769</sup> George Glenton, ‘The Bomb Girls’, *Daily Mirror*, Thursday, 7 December 1972; Steve Crowther, ‘Breaking of Anna the Bomber’, *Daily Mirror*, Tuesday, 15 February 1977, p. 5; ‘Terror girl Anna, enjoying Freedom’, *Daily Mail*, Wednesday, 16 February 1977, p. 1.

<sup>770</sup> Letter to Oliver, 29 July 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/43/1.

headline 'I'm not an anarchist says bomb case Anna', Mendelssohn is reported as saying:

that she was sick of being labelled 'the Angry Brigade's girl' [...] she was also fed up with being called a self-styled revolutionary, anarchist and intellectual [...] Mendelson, who refused the offer of defence counsel, told the court: 'Being on trial is not a job for me. It is my life [...] Everything is in the balance. This is why I am defending myself'.<sup>771</sup>

Defence, in the seventies, was also a feminist strategy. The women's liberation movement considered self-defence to be 'an expression of the politics of women's liberation'; a refusal to let paternalistic authority do all the talking; a refusal to be silenced.<sup>772</sup> These resistances, refusals and assertions of agency recall Sara Ahmed's definition of the willful subject, whose 'willfulness is a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given [...] Willfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down'.<sup>773</sup> The concept of the beleaguered, frequently female subject whose willfulness constitutes a form of resistance offers a theoretical corollary to Mendelssohn's self-inscription as persecuted yet insubordinate.

Being 'taken hostage' is also how Mendelssohn identifies her involvement in the radical activism of the late sixties and early seventies. The beginning of her involvement in radical activist circles is characterised as 'when I was taken hostage in 1967', or as being 'hijacked by 1967 graduate leftists'.<sup>774</sup> At times this claim escalates, as when Mendelssohn writes that 'I had been taken hostage by the dreadful militants'.<sup>775</sup> She describes how the 'Angry Brigade and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were Ambushers', and asserts that 'I was their hostage not their supporter'.<sup>776</sup> Here, the condition of 'hostage' is pre-determined by the gender politics at work in this political scene, which figures retrospectively in her poems and archival writings as a time of sexual violence. Mendelssohn

<sup>771</sup> 'I'm not an anarchist says bomb case Anna', *Daily Mail*, Thursday, 12 October 1972, p. 9.

<sup>772</sup> 'Miss World', *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, compiled by Michelene Wandor (London: stage 1, 1972), pp. 249-60 (p. 253).

<sup>773</sup> Ahmed, pp. 1-2.

<sup>774</sup> Letter to Mellor, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/33; Letter to Mengham, 28 May 1998, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1.

<sup>775</sup> Letter to Campbell, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/6.

<sup>776</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12; Letter to Nigel Wheale, 17 July 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/65.

repeatedly depicts the political avant-garde as not only ‘fascists of the left’ or ‘great little fascists’ but perpetrators of sexual and gendered violence, complicit with the capitalist, patriarchal system against which they fought.<sup>777</sup> Campus radicalisation and sexual violence are juxtaposed in the poem ‘digne’ as ‘university place snatched/virginity snatched’.<sup>778</sup> ‘On Vanity’, published in 1997, explicitly describes a scene of rape and a court-room trial. The poem documents the immediate effects of sexual violence: the loss of ‘interior life’, and in an attempt to ‘understand’, ‘she seeks for her perpetrator in other forms’.<sup>779</sup> The girl-victim is described as ‘lacking thrust’, feminine lack inhibiting sexualised motion. An early poem ‘To a Green Field’ (1987) corrals violence and discourse, and returns to the violent verb ‘thrust’:

which is why discourse is so important  
& why I had trouble on my hands.

So which which why why may be unpleasant  
much less comforting than bomb bomb thrust thrust<sup>780</sup>

Ludic repetition undoes the pseudo-logic of ‘which is why’ and turns this apparent answer into a series of confounded questions: ‘which which why why’. Unanswered questions, quizzically, offer less reassurance than the Futurist soundbite ‘bomb bomb thrust thrust’, a fusion of explosive and masculinised violence.<sup>781</sup> The poetic speaker’s tongue is firmly and characteristically in its cheek. The glamorized heroics of revolutionary violence are lambasted as ‘thrust thrust’, as are the pretensions of authoritative speech or ‘discourse’. ‘I was not the surrenderable sort’, the willful poetic speaker continues, ‘who could so lightly without thought/take your dictum as my obligation’. Given Mendelssohn’s love of

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<sup>777</sup> Letter to Mengham, 6 December 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/34/1; Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>778</sup> *LA*, p. 54.

<sup>779</sup> ‘On Vanity’, *TA*.

<sup>780</sup> ‘To a Green Field’, *Slate*, 3, Spring-Summer (Cambridge: Cambridge Free Press Workers’ Co-op, 1987).

<sup>781</sup> ‘Futurist’ because such explicit weaponized violence is reminiscent of poetry by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, such as the poem ‘Bataille à 9 étages’, *Selected Poems and Related Prose*, ed. Luce Marinetti, trans. Elizabeth Napier and Barbara R. Studholme (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 116.

wordplay, it seems highly plausible that ‘To a Green Field’ refers to her co-defendant Jim Greenfield, as noted above. Here is a buried trace of the ‘contretemps’ from which Mendelssohn wishes to disassociate her poetry. In my ‘misreading’, the poem bears traces of the events of the early seventies and of the narrative of the hostage that Mendelssohn revisits in her letters and other poems. In that narrative, the state of the ‘hostage’ describes an explicitly gendered form of constraint.

## 2.1 Gender politics and the Left

Within the British Left, as well as across Europe and North America, radical discourse and the ‘sexual revolution’ worked – often in insidious ways – to detain and disempower activist women in the late sixties and early seventies.<sup>782</sup> British psychoanalyst and feminist Juliet Mitchell described in 1971 how women in the sixties found ‘the attitude of the oppressor within the minds of the oppressed’.<sup>783</sup> Mendelssohn refers in a letter to ‘the 1960’s deluded machismo’.<sup>784</sup> The politics of sexuality were seen as a distraction from the class struggle, and the hierarchies and tactics of the Left frequently perpetuated conditions of gendered oppression.<sup>785</sup> The Women’s Liberation movement in Britain encountered similar opposition from the organised left to that of the earlier women’s movements in the U.S.<sup>786</sup>

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<sup>782</sup> The often contradictory gender politics that played out in various left-wing groups in the early seventies is the timely subject of a recent issue of the *European Review of History*. The editors of the issue, Nikolaos Papadogiannis and Sebastien Genhrig, challenge the straightforward ‘sexual revolution’ narrative and seek to show how ‘the politics of sexuality remained a contested field amongst the European Left’ which produced ‘multiple and contradictory transformations’. While some of these transformations were progressive, many were repressive, even as they masqueraded as emancipatory. Papadogiannis and Gehrig, ‘The personal is political: sexuality, gender and the Left in Europe during the 1970s’, *European Review of History*, 22.1 (Feb 2015), 1-16 (pp. 1-4).

<sup>783</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Woman’s Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 19.

<sup>784</sup> Letter to Nick Smart, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/56.

<sup>785</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Women’s Liberation and the New Politics’, *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, compiled by Michelene Wandor (London: stage 1, 1972), pp. 3-30 (p. 4).

<sup>786</sup> Ibid., pp. 91, 93, 98. Tatiana Teslenko provides a useful overview of studies that document the sexual exploitation of women within the American New Left of the Sixties, including Sara Evans’ *Personal Politics*, which discusses the auxiliary status of women within the Movement; Marge Piercy’s account ‘The Grand Coolie Dam’, which describes the allocation of ‘shitwork’ almost exclusively to women within the New Left, and how the Women’s Liberation movement was perceived as a secondary issue; and Alix K. Shulman’s essay ‘Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism’ which shows how the Women’s Liberation Movement sprang from women’s discontent at their

‘All the revolutionary left organisations’, wrote Sheila Rowbotham in 1972, ‘have had an awkward relationship to women’s liberation’.<sup>787</sup> During a discussion of women’s liberation at Essex University in 1969, when Mendelssohn was a student at Essex, Rowbotham recalls how a man intervened to claim that ‘in a revolutionary moment you couldn’t waste time on trivia, and the fact was that women simply weren’t capable of writing leaflets’ - only of typing them up.<sup>788</sup> Michelene Wandor’s compilation of writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-72 bear witness to women’s status within the British Left as ‘the assistants, the receivers, the collaborators, dumb, lacking in presumption’.<sup>789</sup> An attempt, again at Essex University, to convene a women-only meeting is interrupted by another man who demands a ‘theoretical reason’ for his exclusion.<sup>790</sup> In response, he was told that ‘we didn’t have one but we were fed up with being told by men what we ought to think about ourselves and them’.<sup>791</sup> Indeed, a ‘suspicion of theory’ pervaded the early British Women’s Liberation movement. ‘Trying to organise without any explicit theory’ was in part an attempt to distance the movement from the public, masculine domain of theory, and in part an attempt to make the movement more inviting to those – for instance working-class women or housewives – with less formal political awareness.<sup>792</sup> A voiceover in Godard’s *British Sounds*, which features a young Mendelssohn composing revolutionary songs at Essex University, informs the audience that women were ‘less likely to be educated, less likely to be unionised’.<sup>793</sup> While this might seem to function as a more prominent acknowledgement of the issues faced by women in the left, the voiceover is accompanied by a long shot of a naked young woman walking up and down a set of stairs. In a blatant example of leftist

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subordination to male radicals in the late sixties. For a fuller account, see Teslenko, *Feminist Utopian Novels of the 1970s: Joanna Russ and Dorothy Bryant* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>787</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, ‘The beginnings of Women’s Liberation in Britain’, *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, compiled by Michelene Wandor (London: stage 1, 1972), pp. 91-202 (p. 98).

<sup>788</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>789</sup> Rowbotham, ‘Women’s Liberation’, p. 5.

<sup>790</sup> Rowbotham, ‘The beginnings’, p. 95.

<sup>791</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid.

<sup>793</sup> *British Sounds*.



myopia, Godard's narrator mounts a critique of gender politics even as his camera re-enacts the sexualised objectification of women.

These feminist critiques of the British Left can be seen to shape Mendelssohn's later poetic treatment of gender politics and the left. The poem 'Wolore', published in what appears to be Mendelssohn's earliest poetry publication in a journal, comments disparagingly on 'some great political men of the '60s/who caught a bit of theory from a few books'.<sup>794</sup> As previously discussed, a feminist resistance to 'Marxist-Leninist' dogma is picked up in Mendelssohn's long poem '1:3ng' in which 'They were communists once, they taught Marx [...] They said they wouldn't be seen dead with you pregnant', 'I am held in sexism', and 'I don't understand why women have to be so/Servile. Why everything has to be taped, named, known'.<sup>795</sup> The poem 'Venus 27.' takes aim at the sexism enshrined in cultural institutions, and asks '[i]s that a usual tactic for western art? Hands on trigger dictionaries?/the women you mould become your advanced cover'.<sup>796</sup> A violent aesthetic, 'hands on trigger[s]', involves the manipulation of women into human shields. However, as Duncan has pointed out, Mendelssohn's poetry frequently critiques 'official feminism', or what Mendelssohn calls 'the bromide feminists'.<sup>797</sup> The publishing house Virago, for example, is portrayed as rabidly exclusive in the poem 'virago'.<sup>798</sup> Some of her poems were included in a Virago anthology in 1990, but Mendelssohn's letters contain repeated criticism of 'viragoans'.<sup>799</sup> Mendelssohn's allegiance to feminism was certainly conflicted. Her lyric subject is often, insistently, a woman; but she confesses that 'I can't cope lightly or easily with feminism'.<sup>800</sup> A partial explanation may be discoverable in her assertion, in a letter to Mulford, that 'in my youth the Women's Movement were not interested in poetry or art'.<sup>801</sup>

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<sup>794</sup> Grace Lake, 'Nine Poems', *Constant Red: Mingled Damask*, ed. Nigel Wheale, 1 (September 1986), p. 43.

<sup>795</sup> '1:3ng', pp. 14, 16, 17.

<sup>796</sup> *LA*, p. 109.

<sup>797</sup> Duncan; *Vanishing Points*, p. 175.

<sup>798</sup> *LA*, p. 56.

<sup>799</sup> Letter to Ulli Freer, 27 October 1993, SxMs109/3/A/1/15. In another example, Mendelssohn asks Kate Wheale: "Q: why wasn't I consulted/over the Inauguration of Virago Press?/A: Capital displacement", 7 June 1995, SxMs109/3/A/1/64.

<sup>800</sup> Letter to Dido Davies, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/9.

<sup>801</sup> Letter to Mulford, 23 August 1990, SxMs109/3/A/1/39.

Samuel Solomon has shown how Mulford's own poems, written a little later in the late seventies and eighties, work to bring together feminist commitment and experimental lyric, through attempts to connect the collaborative aims and critical perspectives of the women's movement with formal poetic innovation.<sup>802</sup> Mendelssohn's own poetry is more fiercely critical of organized feminism, and attempts to draw a sharp distinction between politics and poetics. This distinction is not always sustained. 'I don't want this turning of poems into political acts', as she writes to Oliver, and in the same letter, 'I want to write at length about what it is like for a writer to be brought to trial'.<sup>803</sup> The close juxtaposition of disavowal and avowal sustains the contradictory dissonance that runs through Mendelssohn's writing.

Mendelssohn's own early commitment to the politics of women's liberation is traceable in contemporary accounts. Jonathon Green's *Days in the Life* (1998), a series of interviews with prominent figures from the sixties, records in some detail the sexual chauvinism of the English 'underground' and its disconnection from the women's movement.<sup>804</sup> Green's interviewee David Widgery recalls how 'the underground was a particularly male-dominated thing [...] it was the same in the student left: men talked and women did the background work'.<sup>805</sup> Another interviewee, Rosie Boycott, who wrote for *Freud* and went on to found *Spare Rib* in 1971 and Virago Press in 1974 finds that

[w]hat was insidious about the underground was that it pretended to be alternative. But it wasn't providing an alternative for women. It was providing an alternative for men in that there were no problems about screwing around or being who you wanted. You were still able to do it on a chauvinist level and there was still a power game going on in that women were typists, men were the bosses, men were the ones who decided what wages people got, whether people had jobs. Women were dependent on men. The fact that this was happening in an alternative society gave it its punch and gave it its kick. Women came into the underground expecting to get a liberal world and became more embittered when they did not.<sup>806</sup>

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<sup>802</sup> Samuel Solomon, 'Forms of Reproduction in Wendy Mulford's Early Work', *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today*, ed. David Nowell-Smith and Abigail Lang (New York/Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 205-25 (pp. 207-208).

<sup>803</sup> Letter to Oliver, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/43.

<sup>804</sup> Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 359, 402.

<sup>805</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>806</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, pp. 407-08.

Latent in Boycott's assessment is the implication that it was the very chauvinism of left-wing movements that galvanized feminism in Britain in the seventies. Other accounts corroborate this counter-intuitive cause-and-effect. 'The biggest impetus' behind British Women's Liberation, according to Sue Thornham, 'came from women active in radical left-wing politics'.<sup>807</sup> Indeed, two of the women later charged with belonging to the Angry Brigade, Hilary Creek and Angela Weir, were responsible for the women's issue of *Frendz* that precipitated the first meeting of Women in the Underground.<sup>808</sup> Mendelssohn also worked on this special issue.<sup>809</sup> In Boycott's words:

the women's issue of *Frendz*, done by the Angry Brigade people, started the meetings of women in the underground that then produced *Spare Rib*, so you could actually say that the Angry Brigade were responsible for *Spare Rib*.<sup>810</sup>

Within the women's issue there is a satirical sketch written from the perspective of an overly comfortable bourgeois that cements this link between the women's movement and the Angry Brigade: 'Is my wife or daughter angry? Do they get involved in Women's Liberation? [...] Is this person buying clothes or this woman looking at me [a] member of the "Angry Brigade"?'. The lampoon continues: 'How really big the conspiracy is?..... And are we part of it?.....' [sic].<sup>811</sup> The politics of women's liberation informed the Angry Brigade's actions from the beginning. The first bombing claimed by the Brigade targeted the 1970 Miss World competition and its objectification of women's bodies.<sup>812</sup> *The Daily Express* reported in 1972 that the Brigade had 'attracted so-called Women's Libbers to their cause'.<sup>813</sup> Yet as we have seen, Mendelssohn frequently characterises her own experience of radical activism as far from liberating.<sup>814</sup>

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<sup>807</sup> Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism', *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Post Feminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), pp. 29-42 (p. 31).

<sup>808</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, p. 406.

<sup>809</sup> Mendelssohn's opening speech, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5.

<sup>810</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, p. 406.

<sup>811</sup> 'Women's Issue', *Frendz*, 3.30 (June 4 1971), p. 5. This issue of *Frendz* attributes its contributors as including 'Rosie Boycott' and others with 'MUCH HELP from: The female Brigade...'.<sup>812</sup>

<sup>812</sup> Carr, p. 237.

<sup>813</sup> Latcham and Wright.

<sup>814</sup> Lynne Segal finds that the Angry Brigade signalled a turn to a more macho politics; see Segal, *What is to be done about the family?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 49.

The most explicit account of being ‘taken hostage’ can be found in a letter sent to Andrew Duncan, in which Mendelssohn reports being

frogmarched off the Essex campus in 1970 by a fellow poet who didn’t want me to be either single, younger than him, or a Writer[...] I had been handed over-in the middle of a vast lyrical metropolitan exequy’s composition (incepted by me & in the process of being incised upon paper) by a group who were writing for Tariq Ali’s ‘Black Dwarf’ who wanted Politics not Poetry- to a strange flat in Stamford Hill where I was seized by a group armed with stolen chequebooks & weapons.<sup>815</sup>

In this account Mendelssohn disavows any agency in relation to violence, casting her involvement in radical activity as a forced movement motivated by sexual predation, a kind of immobilised mobility. The left-wing identity of the perpetrators, writers from the Marxist newspaper *Black Dwarf*, is made explicit. Mendelssohn doubles down on the role of the victim, but sets a grandiose scene of the poet interrupted while composing ‘vast lyrical’ odes in a belated retrieval of agency. The lines above are a rare example of a letter that reached its recipient, and they suggest the extent to which Mendelssohn considered her poetry, as well as her person, to be in the position of the hostage. Her self-description in a letter to her friend Kate Wheale as a ‘Jewish poetess who has been taken hostage in a staged attack and her poetry and essays removed’ aligns hostage-taking even more explicitly with the confiscation of writing. Hostaged writing in turn becomes the subject of her poetry.<sup>816</sup>

‘The arrested poem’, a lyric from *Implacable Art*, puts the immobilisation or detainment of poetry at its centre.<sup>817</sup> Its governing metapoetic conceit is that the ‘arrested poem’, personified as ‘she’, cannot speak for herself. Due to her detention, she ‘is unable to be with you/despite her own wishes’ but exercises agency *in absentia* in the form of negation: ‘will not speak of war with enthusiasm/will not be mistaken for any who do’. Who voices the poem when the poem is under arrest? We know from the first line that this is a poem ‘whose life was in synch with life’, who conveys apologies for her absence via this synchronicity with vitality. The second-person pronouns abruptly morph into the first

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<sup>815</sup> Duncan.

<sup>816</sup> Letter to Kate Wheale, 16 October 2002, SxMs109/3/A/1/64/1.

<sup>817</sup> *LA*, p. 131.

person halfway down the first stanza, when ‘airlessly artlessly callously my body was taken/lifted into the persona of an immense Republica’. Here is another confiscation, this time of body rather than poem, and the absorption of that body into the ‘persona’ of a much larger body, the state. This bonded form generates a shift to the third person: ‘in one body we moved to the stage/but the doors were of Iron and bolted against us/and now we lie falling into microbes and stray foils...’. The attempt to move to a theatrical, performative plane is obstructed by formidable locked doors: a possible entrance (or exit) made impassable. The borders of this ‘body’ then begin to dissolve into particles and ‘stray foils’. A foil is a contrasting character, or a police line-up, an identity parade. To ‘fall’ into a ‘stray foil’ might be to find oneself inadvertently drawn into a police investigation, or even to be framed. A police line-up relies both on a degree of substitutability or likeness, and a small but insurmountable difference between the individuals on parade. The process of coming-to-voice in ‘the arrested poem’ is bracketed and curtailed by police procedures of arrest and identification. The ‘voice’ with which the poem begins might be the voice of a defence lawyer, making apologies for their client’s absence, but by the middle of the poem, that formal second-person register dissolves into first-hand account and then the collective third-person, blurring the borders between ‘she’, ‘I’, and ‘we’, and troubling the relation between ‘poem’ and ‘poetic voice’, between the arrested poem and her speaking representative.<sup>818</sup>

These indistinctions arise too in Mendelssohn’s prose writings, where violences done to the body of the poem are frequently indistinguishable from the body of the poet. ‘My early poetry’, Mendelssohn writes, was ‘handed over to police [...] in 1970’.<sup>819</sup> In 2003, Mendelssohn wrote to her friend Estelle Langley that ‘mostly the “she” I refer to is the girl who was smashed to the ground and deliberately disorientated’.<sup>820</sup> As previously noted,

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<sup>818</sup> The movement between ‘She’ and ‘I’ might remind us of Denise Riley’s assertion that “‘She’ is I, in *Dry air*, (London: Virago, 1985), p. 11. Carol Watts characterises this movement as ‘an acknowledgement of the trial of identity’ in her essay ‘Beyond Interpellation? Affect, Embodiment and the Poetics of Denise Riley’, in *Contemporary Women’s Poetry*, ed. Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (London: MacMillan, 2000), pp. 157-72 (pp. 159-161).

<sup>819</sup> Letter to Harries, June 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/18/1.

<sup>820</sup> Letter to Langley, 5 October 2002, SxMs109/3/A/1/29.

Mendelssohn prefaced her contributions to Ian Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos* anthology with an introductory note that publicly frames the poems that follow with the violence done to the poet in the late sixties and early seventies:

My academic career was brought to an abrupt halt in 1967 by harassment, both political and emotional. Upon returning to this country, in 1970, I was attacked, my own poetry seized, and my person threatened with strangulation if I dared utter one word of public criticism. I was unable to return to university at that point and was silenced.<sup>821</sup>

Even in this biographical note, the attack on the 'person' of the poet is closely linked to the attack on the poetry itself, and physical 'strangulation' equated with the silencing or confiscation of poetic voice, which is – as we have seen – an already gendered discourse. The spectre of *terrorist* violence is implicit in Mendelssohn's account of being 'attacked' and 'seized' – and its effects are horrifying and immobilising. The conflation between hostaged poet and poetry takes us back to Third's definition of terrorism as a signifying practice, that is as 'the representational effect of exchanges between terrorists and their audiences that take place *in and through the texts* that mediate them'.<sup>822</sup> The assertion made by the Stoke Newington Eight defendants that the *state* was the taker of hostages and thus the terrorist actor inverts the dominant discourse by which the state is understood to be *beyond* terrorism, and the chief arbiter of legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence.<sup>823</sup> Similarly, the assertion made in Mendelssohn's poetry and other writings that she was hostaged by the New Left by virtue of her gender recasts conventional definitions of hostage-taking and dramatizes feminist critiques of the gender politics of the left. What are the mediating 'texts' that construct the specific, short-lived form of 'terrorism' of which Mendelssohn was convicted? There are many: the media coverage of the trial, ephemeral communiqués, the charge of conspiracy, numerous theories of terror, and – to some degree – Mendelssohn's own poems.

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<sup>821</sup> Lake, *Conductors of Chaos*, p. 184.

<sup>822</sup> Third, p. 16.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

## 2.2 *Bernache Nonnette*

I want to conclude by turning to some poems from the pamphlet *Bernache Nonnette* that mediate and redeploy representations of terrorist violence, from the invocation of a feminist mythography to a parody of Baudrillardian substitutability to an exemplary expression of the dissonance between the figure of the victim and the tone of wilful agency with which this chapter opened. *Bernache Nonnette* opens with myth, alludes to terror and closes with what is almost a lyric biography. Simon Perril considers the eponymous first poem, 'Bernache Nonnette' to be a poem full of 'trapped myths'.<sup>824</sup> 'Bernache Nonnette' is a barnacle goose associated with myths of spontaneous generation. According to folklore, the barnacle goose does not lay eggs, but grows from driftwood in barnacle-like forms. The name may also refer to the goose barnacle, capable of crustacean intransigence and hermaphroditic reproduction. Perril does not discuss the other 'trapped myth' of *Bernache Nonnette*, the biblical Judith, who capitalises on her beauty to gain an audience with and then decapitate Holofernes, an Assyrian general who had laid siege to her home town of Bethulia. She is invoked not by name, but by deed: 'Xerox it ! the execution of the demonstrable holofernes, a voracious monster'.<sup>825</sup> As in '**in medéa mé**', Lake/Mendelssohn slings ancient myth into the contemporary scene, whether through the addition of roadway kerbs or, in this instance, a Xerox machine. The Book of Judith's exclusion from the biblical canon might prompt the exclamation, 'Xerox it !', linking non-canonical texts to processes of small-print or underground press production; or perhaps, more figuratively, this is a call for the multiple replication of Judith's violent act. Xerox machines, of course, are capable of producing and disseminating multiple copies, of generating (cheaply and easily) pluralities from a single original. The history of subversive femininity, Lake reminds us, is not singular or exceptional, but plural and generative.

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<sup>824</sup> Perril, p. 98.

<sup>825</sup> 'Bernache Nonnette', *Bernache Nonnette*.

The titular poem's insistence that '[t]he referral was not self' can also be taken to parody a Baudrillarian conception of substitutability. This playful insistence refutes the notion of 'self' as a fixed point of reference, and makes of that self a referential fugitive. Processes of identification are again in close, threatened proximity to processes of policing: 'and now false charges of possession'. The density and minimal punctuation of the poem produce a velocity, self-reflexively characterised as a 'hurtling speed', that resists a single focus. The reader's attention, as well as the singular subject, is refracted. 'One is oned and backward turned': here, 'oneness' is doubled or akin to Butler's 'girded', that is, reduced to category, and turned inside out. The poem's parody of singularity is not equivalent, however, to the substitutability of Baudrillarian signs or hostages. Lake plays on the minute differences in the multiple uses of the same sign, between 'one' and 'oned', 'one off' and 'out of one'. The 'difference' on which the poetic play of 'Bernache Nonnette' depends cannot be collapsed into sameness. Yet a degree of substitutability is also written into this poetic play. Butler has written of a 'certain principle of substitutability at the core of singularity'.<sup>826</sup> 'If I try to give an account of myself', Butler writes, 'I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable'.<sup>827</sup> Such a conceptualisation of the substitutable 'self' similarly counters a Baudrillarian notion of substitution as a function of mass anonymity. Substitutional phrases such as 'deputy serifs the duplicity serfs', of which there are many in *Bernache Nonnette* ('sunson shone', 'creased/cressed, rheretic/heretic) further rework a Baudrillarian sense of substitutability. Marked by particularity as well as subterfuge, Mendelssohn's substitutional poetic play satirises the very indiscrimination it seems to replicate. To warp 'serif' into 'serf' or 'deputy' into 'duplicity' is not to break down the distinctions between these phonically similar units, but to depend upon their small but insurmountable difference. Such differences may be playful in a poem, but may also derive from Mendelssohn's deep experience of how 'writing is dangerous'.

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<sup>826</sup> Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics*, 31.4 (2001), pp. 22-40 (p. 25).

<sup>827</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.



There is a brief reference in the *Bernache Nonnette* poem ‘concilia.’ to terror, another ghostly trace, which brings us back to the discussion of disavowal with which this chapter opened. It reads:

remarking in copyright ISBN’d on fictionalised naked emotion  
encouraged dulcamente to change that to terror, scattered,  
shadows, behind a hammed production of a national condition.  
speechless, open mouthed, tongueless fish. Felicitations.

The speaker of ‘concilia.’ seems to be critical of sensationalising advice to ‘change that to terror’. ‘That’ refers to the ‘fictionalised naked emotion’, in a reminder that ‘terror’ is an affect. The very invocation of ‘terror’ produces an immobilising, ‘speechless’ horror. The reference to ‘copyright’ and ‘ISBN’d’ indicates that the poem refers to processes of writing and publication, and the continued imbrication of these processes with ‘terror’. That ‘terror’ is located, murkily, ‘behind [...] a national condition’. To figure terror as backstage to the ‘nation’ may carry more than one meaning. There is a line of thought which holds that modern terrorism came into being with the democratic nation state.<sup>828</sup> Equally, Lake/Mendelssohn might be alluding to the existence of state-led terror, masked by exaggeration or a ‘hammed production’. Terror is invoked but only in order to mark its absence, a form of disavowal: the perception of an absence that produces concomitant anxiety or more dramatically an open mouth, a synecdoche for horror. The allusion to terror in ‘concilia.’ both acknowledges and repudiates the ghosts of terroristic violence that haunt Mendelssohn’s writing.

This characteristic dissonance is sustained - even exemplified - in ‘She Walked’, the penultimate poem of *Bernache Nonnette*. According to Mendelssohn, ‘She Walked’ ostensibly collapses the poetic ‘she’ with the biographical ‘me’. The account sent to Duncan of being ‘seized’ by an armed group opens with the assertion that “‘She Walked’ is me, frogmarched off the Essex campus in 1970’.<sup>829</sup> The broken dactyls of ‘She Walked’, which in the first line

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<sup>828</sup> Third, p. 24.

<sup>829</sup> Duncan.

stress 'Walked', 'should', and 'still', counterpoise mobility and immobility, terror and horror, obligation and agency:

She Walked where she should have stood still, stock still.  
or edging slightly, morose, if not moribund and there  
she stood too far from the yorkist, to be of much use  
she knelt by the casement it took her ages  
her legs were too long they had been partly sawn off  
it was cheaper than extending the length of her rest  
but he waited, as only the dead could.

Any biographical associations rapidly morph into allusion, parody and semantic fragments. The 'yorkist', like 'and Waterloo Westminster', might remind the reader of violent shaping moments in British history. The violently shortened woman of 'She Walked' is a non-compliant victim. Recalcitrance, or standing 'too far' away, again functions as wilful agency. The legs that have been 'partly sawn off' invoke a kind of lyrical horrorism. In Cynthia Weber's reading of Cavarero, 'dismemberment' of the 'human body and the human condition – is a central motif of horror'.<sup>830</sup> Where terror aims to kill the body, horror aims at a still more profound form of violence, that of the 'spectacle of disfigurement' which is 'directed at nullifying human beings even more than at killing them'.<sup>831</sup> The removal of limbs and the erosion of biographical reference literally and figuratively debilitate the poetic subject. And yet the horror is undercut by comic understatement ('partly sawn off') and the bathetic description 'morose, if not moribund'. The trait of being stubborn or intractable is brought into comic equivalence with the existential state of dying or decay. The movement away from personal tragedy and towards the farcical continues with the introduction of 'finja and minja chomping on apples' in the final stanza. The partial dismemberment of 'She Walked' might offer a means of conceptualising the breakdown in Mendelssohn's poetry between biographical violence and poetic violence, the connections between poetic figures and the 'contretemps' of Mendelssohn's history only 'partly sawn off'. The substitutional

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<sup>830</sup> Weber, p. 344.

<sup>831</sup> Cavarero, pp. 8, 9.

exchange between poet and poetry, poem and letter, victimhood and agency, is similarly never clean or complete, but partial and tangled in ghostly traces.

The poetic mythography that tracks through Mendelssohn's body of writing destabilises conventional autobiographical forms. The hostage-figure invoked in Mendelssohn's poetry, whether as 'the women you mould', 'the arrested poem', or 'She Walked', is not anonymous or universal, but neither is she entirely individualised. She is substitutional, and thus, as Butler tells us, recognisable. As in 'and Waterloo Westminster', the silenced and effaced subject regains some trappings of the personal, but also takes on the stereotypical costume of subversive women: the 'vile witch', Medea, Judith, the 'rheretic' Bernache Nonnette. In admitting this history, Mendelssohn's poetry admits violences, while at the same time seeming to lay claim to a normative, non-violent form of femininity by disavowing its own capacity to harm. We have a sustained voicing of both the effects of gender conditioning and the resistance to that conditioning. That is, the voicing of victimhood juxtaposed to the voicing of agency: an expressive mode in which both conditions are possible, in a challenge to the discourse by which women are more readily understood as victims than agents. In a coded form that Elisse Gelfand has identified as a characteristic mode of French women's prison texts, the poems discussed in this chapter 'covertly subvert and contest' conventional narratives of terroristic violence and the putative sexual emancipation of the sixties.<sup>832</sup> The experimental mode in which Mendelssohn writes works to subvert totalising readings and identification via interpretative strategies – but the same could be said of almost all experimental poets. What is unique to Mendelssohn's experimental mode is the flickering mismatch between the voicing of victimhood and agency, and between avowal and disavowal. The poetic voice is thrown and ventriloquised from places where it is hard for the reader to follow. The legacy of terrorist violence with which this poetry contends is not romanticised but refracted through the lens of feminist myth, substitutional wordplay, a resistance to synthesis and a refusal to supply answers. As

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<sup>832</sup> Elisse Gelfand, *Imagination in Confinement: Women's Writings from French Prisons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 110.

we have seen, the state of hostage is figured as a specific *gendered* and *carceral* state. The ‘hostage’ is not conventionally held in state-run prisons, but as this chapter has shown, the Stoke Newington Eight considered themselves to be hostages of the state, an effect both of the intentional nebulousness of the Angry Brigade and of the indiscriminacy of policing procedures in the seventies. In Mendelssohn’s experience, the state-held hostage, if a woman, was already a ‘hostage’ of the counter-culture. The violence that is enacted by both of those hostaged states is a violence that fails to register difference: an indiscriminate, or syncretic, violence which assumes each term to be substitutable for another. These incarcerating conditions are the ‘makers’ of Mendelssohn’s poetic personae.

## Chapter 4

### 'I collect sentences':

#### The Psychiatric Incarceration of Women in the 1970s

in patriarchal socialisation, the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father.

- Dianne Hunter <sup>833</sup>

#### Part 1: Sentencing

'[M]y long flowing sentences', writes Grace Lake in the 1993 pamphlet *viola tricolor*, 'rapidly turned into sentencing full of legal acrimony for what i fail to understand'.<sup>834</sup> Here, Lake/Mendelssohn makes a conceit of the curious philological parallel that 'sentence' refers both to a term of punishment and a unit of grammar – the same conceit that Mendelssohn uses elsewhere. I use the term 'conceit' advisedly; the concept of the sentence, and its complex implications, extend across Mendelssohn's poetry. In this line from *viola tricolor*, the poetic syntax itself morphs into legal edicts. These personified legal sentences bear the affect of 'acrimony' or bitterness. This bad feeling is directed against a cognitive inadequacy ('what i fail to understand') and rebounds upon the speaker from whom the sentences and failed understanding emanate. Moreover, this 'acrimony' is 'legal' - that is, authorised. Writing on 'Bad Words', Denise Riley offers a way into thinking about such reflexive, self-inculpatory language. For Riley, 'accusation often lodges in the accused'.<sup>835</sup> She refers to the capacity for 'bad words' to linger and 'indwell' in their target, and thus become constitutive. The convolutions and enjambment of these lines mimic and confound its sentence form, meeting the next line's desire for lyrical subterfuge: 'wanting to write undetected'. The slippage between the two meanings of 'sentence' has been deployed by several experimental

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<sup>833</sup> Hunter, 'Hysteria', p. 474.

<sup>834</sup> 'the fourteenth flight', *viola tricolor*.

<sup>835</sup> Denise Riley, 'Bad Words', *Diacritics*, 31.4 (Winter, 2001), 41-53 (p. 44).

poets of Mendelssohn's generation, such as Wendy Mulford and J.H. Prynne. However, Mendelssohn's poetic sentences operate within frameworks that differ in important ways from Mulford's whimsical conflation between subject and sentence, or Prynne's abstracted 'pent-up sentence'.<sup>836</sup> Via the conceit of the sentence, Mendelssohn plays with the properties, operations and interpretations of that long-established unit of grammar and penalty. Sentences can take many forms: long, short, declarative, imperative, legal, syntactical. They are not, however, constitutive of poetry, where the basic unit is the line rather than the sentence. Yet sentence-forms are invoked repeatedly in Mendelssohn's poetry.

'[L]ong, flowing sentences' are not a definitive poetic mode for Mendelssohn. The following short, end-stopped lines from the poem 'digne' in *Implacable Art* return to this conceit of the sentence, and demonstrate the porousness of the boundary between official and poetic language:

I do not run the prison system.  
I am not a lesbian.  
Serve your own sentences.  
In future.  
I collect sentences.  
I used to have a set of my own.<sup>837</sup>

Issued as a series of strictures and disavowals, the sense jostles between the legal and grammatical, from prison sentence to syntactical sentence. The question of authorisation ('who or what has imposed the sentence?') marks these lines. The claims made by this combative 'I' conjure another, oppositional authority — presumably, the sentence-giver who is simultaneously the sentence-taker ('I used to have a set of my own'). Mendelssohn's potentially problematic assertion that 'I am not a lesbian' is not unique to this poem.<sup>838</sup>

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<sup>836</sup> Wendy Mulford, *and suddenly, supposing: selected poems* (Buckfastleigh, Devon: Etruscan Books, 2002), p. 145; J.H. Prynne, *Collected Poems* (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2015), p. 513.

<sup>837</sup> *LA*, p. 54.

<sup>838</sup> See mentions in various letters: 'it has nothing to do with lesbianism', in a letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12; in a letter to Jude Windle, 12 September 1990, Mendelssohn goes so far as to express a hatred of lesbianism, SxMs109/3/A/1/68; and refutes the idea that lesbianism rebels against the patriarchal norm in a letter to Dido Davies, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/9.

Here, the poetic speaker appears to resist mass media representations of female deviants as mad or lesbian. In *Gender and the Political*, Third finds that it is ‘not surprising that lesbianism gets attached to the figure of the female terrorist. Constructed as non-heterosexual women within a culture that privileges heterosexuality, both feminists and female terrorists were positioned as mutually constitutive Others, discrediting both by representing them as external to the range of socially sanctioned female behaviors’.<sup>839</sup> Mendelssohn’s speaker explicitly raises the connection between sexuality and criminality only to reject this otherness, in an expression of the homophobia that is uncomfortably present in some of her writings.<sup>840</sup> Homophobic insinuations aside, the lines from ‘digne’ quoted above write *against* an unseen authority, whose implied accusations or interrogations meet with denial (‘I do not’, ‘I am not’) and defiance (‘Serve your own’). The legal sense of ‘sentence’ is foremost, but its syntactical equivalent is also in play, working against a juridical monopoly of meaning. In form, this lyric’s short, emphatic end-stopped lines dramatise their sentence-status. Of these six grammatical sentences, which refer to their penal equivalents, four are declarative, one imperative, and one a disruptive syntactical fragment: ‘[i]n future.’ Hermeneutic allegiance, in the case of this fragment, could be cast to either or any of the adjoining sentences. ‘In future’ sounds like the beginning of a reprimand, but also indicates some sort of beyond, a future in which (reading over to the next line) it is possible to ‘collect’ disused or defused sentence-relics. What is here installed as poetic practice finds a theoretical analogue in Agamben’s prophecy that ‘[o]ne day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good’.<sup>841</sup> A dark playfulness, especially as a means of dismantling hegemonic structures, is one of the main modes of Mendelssohn’s poetry. In this future of reified, collectable sentences, the power-relation between subjects and sentences is overturned. Sentences typically reify their subjects: the accused is judged, quantified and convicted; the subject is fixed and ordered. The speaker of these lines turns sentences and

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<sup>839</sup> Third, p. 58.

<sup>840</sup> Specifically directed against lesbians; see letter to Jude Windle, undated SxMs109/3/A/1/68.

<sup>841</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 64.

their canonical authority back fiercely upon themselves. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mendelssohn has been characterised as a poet who is ‘writing *against* something always being said [...] attacking official knowledge’.<sup>842</sup> To rephrase Butler: what gives these sentences their power is the normative operation of power that they embody without quite becoming.<sup>843</sup> These two examples, one from *viola tricolor*, one from *Implacable Art*, demonstrate that the primary property of Mendelssohn’s poetic sentences is mutability. From flowing freely, they become full of bad feeling; their meaning shifts from the syntactical to the legal and back again.

In feminist theory, the sentence has a long association with patriarchal power. The alliance between sentence-making and a shadowy, persecutory authority, between language and power, is explicated in theoretical terms by Dianne Hunter’s post-structuralist reading of how

the recognition of male dominance in the social world conjoin[s] with the integration of the patriarchal child into the systematic organisation of language [...] In patriarchal socialisation, the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father.<sup>844</sup>

Hunter’s understanding of ‘sentences’ builds on the Lacanian concept of ‘the symbolic father’ as the ‘(ideal) embodiment of paternal authority, the locus from which patriarchal law and language come’.<sup>845</sup> Sentences are crucial to the articulation of social order through the organisation of language. Hunter contrasts the organised, masculine linguistic unit of the sentence to the symptomatic linguistic disorder of hysterical feminine subjects. Mendelssohn’s play on the sentence, in diverse prosodic modes, incorporates an abrasive awareness of a patriarchal social order with the modernist desire for break or rupture. The claustral persistence of the past in the form of the father is in especial evidence in *viola tricolor*, which holds aloft the figure of the father and ‘commune[s] with the Dead’.<sup>846</sup> As

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<sup>842</sup> Duncan.

<sup>843</sup> Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, p. 10.

<sup>844</sup> Hunter, p. 474.

<sup>845</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 72.

<sup>846</sup> ‘the fourteenth flight’, *viola tricolor*.



Carnochan reminds us, ‘the case of the prisoner cannot be abstracted from considerations of lawfulness, hence with claims of order as well’.<sup>847</sup> Nor can it be abstracted from considerations of gender, which are utterly bound up with the establishment and persistence of the social order.

Etymologically, the grammatical authority of the sentence is closely bound up with its legal and patriarchal authorisations. The juridical sense is the older, but both refer to the setting up of limits or beginning and end points. A historically near-synonymous relation between the sentence and epistemological authority is noted by Ian Robinson in his philological Renaissance study *The Establishment of Modern English Prose* (1998), which attempts to make up for the absence of ‘any history of the concept of the sentence’.<sup>848</sup> Robinson cites canonical literary examples such as Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, in which ‘sentence’ is equivalent to sense or ‘sense particularly worth remembering’ and framed as aphorism: ‘Madame the sentence/of this Latyn is/Womman is Mannes joys/and al his blis’.<sup>849</sup> In Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster* the character Ovid is told ‘[t]hou speakest sentences’, here meaning authoritative or weighty dicta.<sup>850</sup> King Lear finds that Cordelia’s refusal to count up her love in words upon command ‘comes between our sentence and our power’ and sends her into exile.<sup>851</sup> Milton’s Moloc uses ‘sentence’ as ‘advocacy’, and declares ‘[m]y sentence is for open war’.<sup>852</sup> The adjective ‘sententious’ retains some of these uses, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘full of meaning’, ‘aphoristic’ or ‘pompously moralizing’.<sup>853</sup> A syntactical ‘sentence’, then, is closer to its authority-wielding legal equivalent than a cursory glance at dictionary definitions may suggest. The knowledge-laden ‘sentence’ as exemplified by Chaucer and Jonson is not etymologically distinct from the sentence of legal judgement. Robinson’s history of the sentence is defined entirely by canonical male authors and mainly

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<sup>847</sup> Carnochan, p. 431.

<sup>848</sup> Ian Robinson, *The Establishment of Modern English Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>849</sup> Robinson, p. 15.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>851</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I.1, 159.

<sup>852</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Norton, 2005), Book II, 51.

<sup>853</sup> The line ‘it sounds tendentious or is it sententious’ (*LA*, p.103) is discussed at greater length in chapter 1.

by poetry rather than prose. In literature, as well as in Hunter's feminist psychoanalysis, the uses and definitions of the sentence are constructed by the patriarchal order.

As I have argued, part of the work of the poetic wordplay in 'digne' is to turn the authoritative operations of 'sentence' back upon the patriarchal authority from which they issue. The imperative to '[s]erve your own sentences' demands that the reader-accuser work through, obey or satisfy the authoritative functions of language within the linguistic cell of their own making, on the Althusserian understanding that language interpellates its subjects. 'Serve your own sentences' is simultaneously a retort to the sentence-givers, a demand that the accusers swap places with the accused and do their time; it refers to the handing out or dishing up of words; and commands a reflexive subservience to these 'sentences', perhaps legal, perhaps syntactical. Disallowing conviction one way or another, these ambivalent lines resist the usual, fixed functions of the sentence. Imperative sentences, in Roman Jakobson's analysis, resist interrogation in a way declarative sentences do not.<sup>854</sup> The imperative 'Serve!' is 'not liable to a truth test' - is it true? - unlike its other forms, such as 'you served', 'you will serve', or 'you would serve'. 'Serve your own sentences' is imperative in function but taunting in tone, and thus warps the authoritativeness of the imperative by a) resisting the demand for truth or objectivity upon which legal sentences rely and b) deflecting conviction from one subject to another.<sup>855</sup> An evasive ambivalence leaks in through the uncertainties - grammatical, temporal, categorical - raised by this sentence play. Such ambivalence is characteristic of Mendelssohn's poetry, and here takes the more specific form of a resistance to the imposition of taxonomical (and hence carceral) order associated specifically with the formation of sentences.

What is the relation between poetic and penal sentences in Mendelssohn's work?

Archival evidence of Mendelssohn's preoccupation with 'my long flowing sentences'

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<sup>854</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), p. 355. In a letter to Peter Riley from the early nineties, Mendelssohn writes 'I'm taking three volumes of Roman Jakobson with me to Suffolk and Feuerbach's "The Philosophy of the Future"', SxMs109/3/A/1/52/1.

<sup>855</sup> For Foucault, the 'truth-power relation [...] remains at the heart of punishment', *Discipline and Punish*, p. 20.

demonstrates their dissemination from historical trauma into poetic practice and thus into circulation amongst her contemporaries. Mendelssohn discloses to her teacher and mentor John Kerrigan that ‘I have never discussed what I know to be the most vulnerable part of me, which is that I have served a prison sentence’.<sup>856</sup> A draft of a poem in a letter to Duncan begins ‘what kind of sentence will “serve me right”, never, hush’.<sup>857</sup> To Huk, she writes that ‘poets [...] should be brave enough to serve their own sentences’.<sup>858</sup> In another letter, Mendelssohn claims to have ‘served a prison sentence in order to purify myself’.<sup>859</sup> A letter to Mulford makes reference to an intended submission for Reality Street Editions Press which has not yet been discovered. Mendelssohn describes this contribution as ‘my “Cambridge” writing from 1977-79 [which] marked a specific period in time and was the end of an unbroken development in my work on the open sentence’.<sup>860</sup> Mendelssohn gives no further definition of this phrase, but I take ‘the open sentence’ to refer to an ongoing but diffuse term of grammar or penalty. To embed ‘sentences’ into poetry is to subject them to fragmentation or elongation, distortions and a less constrained syntactical order. Mendelssohn’s ‘open sentence’ brings together the threads of lived experience and poetic practice, penalty and language, reality and its representation.

In this chapter, I first explore the sentence in its most quintessentially powerful form, as a speech act, and show how Mendelssohn’s poetic conception of the sentence diverges from speech act theory. In a continued exploration of the power-relation between the sentence and its subject, I consider Mendelssohn’s representations of the gendered dimensions of legal speech acts, which problematize how women are constituted before the law. The first part of this chapter concludes with readings of the different temporalities called up by Mendelssohn’s poetry which further challenge the putatively linear temporality of the sentence. I turn to Mendelssohn’s time on remand and the poetry that subsequently draws on this experience to illustrate the gendered constraints, temporal pluralities and

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<sup>856</sup> Letter to Kerrigan, 12 July 1990, SxMs109/3/A/1/26.

<sup>857</sup> Letter to Duncan, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>858</sup> Letter to Huk, 18 March 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/20.

<sup>859</sup> Letter to Harries, June 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/18.

<sup>860</sup> Letter to Mulford, 20 August 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/39.

excessive, constitutive properties of the sentence. In the second part of this chapter, I return to the history of Holloway Prison in the 1970s to examine the psychiatrisation of the British prison system, and the consequent sentence of psychological abnormality passed on all women offenders. Here I follow Foucault's argument that 'sentencing implies judgements of normality'; that is, that prison sentences are closely connected to processes of normative classification.<sup>861</sup> The coalition between sentences and gender norms was in stark evidence in Holloway, where normative social roles were enforced through feminised and domesticated forms of labour. The coercive mesh between the domestic and the carceral is central to the poem with which this chapter opened. My reading of this poem alongside its historical contexts reveals the point at which penal and poetic sentences collide in Mendelssohn's work. The point of this collision is in the question of *interpretation*, and the constraints and taxonomies that interpretation places both on legal subjects and works of art. Here I draw upon Susan Sontag's argument in *Against Interpretation* (1966), which seeks to foreground the reductive effects of critical readings upon works of art; effects that Mendelssohn explicitly resists on more than one occasion. The intersection between *poetic* sentences and *psychiatric-penal* sentences comes to the fore in *viola tricolor*, and I read this pamphlet as an exemplification of how these 'sentences' and the norms they imply are constitutive of but also contested by Mendelssohn's lyric subject. This chapter ends with an extended discussion of normality in the work of the anti-psychiatrists of the sixties, in Foucault's account of the disciplinary norm, and in critiques of Foucault made by both feminist and disability scholars. Against the vast network of constitutive sentences surveyed in this chapter, an unusually utopian Mendelssohn poem briefly imagines a form of carceral transcendence, and a partial escape from sentences penal, sentences of gender and sentences poetic. In my reading, that paradoxical space of imaginable escape and limited agency is the space of the 'open sentence'.

Arguably, the most powerful form of the 'sentence' is as a speech act. In raising the spectre of authority, and the dual sense of 'sentence', the lines from 'digne' evoke the

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<sup>861</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.20.

sentence as paradigmatic speech-act — by which certain forms of language, for example promises, vows, invitations, warnings and greetings, are understood to possess an enacting or performative, rather than simply descriptive, function. This function depends (among other conditions) upon the investment of correspondent authority in the speaker. The passing of a penal sentence is an exemplary speech act: for a penal sentence to be passed, the judge (invested with legal power) must utter this sentence, and through that utterance, transform the accused into a convict. Speech-acts could be said to constitute the ‘unwritten constitution’ of English Common Law, which is based upon precedent or the spoken sentences of judges. Both senses of sentence, therefore, come together in the concept of the speech act. Speech acts, according to J.L. Austin, in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of their saying.<sup>862</sup> As we have seen, Mendelssohn’s poetry is concerned with the temporality of sentences, their past (‘I used to have a set of my own’) and futures, which seem to last significantly longer than their saying. Mendelssohn’s poetic conceptualisation of the temporality of the sentence is at odds with the tenets of speech-act theory. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari reaffirm the penal sentence as paradigm, attesting that speech acts are ‘explained by juridical acts or equivalents’.<sup>863</sup> In a re-emphasis of Austin’s rule that the speech-act lasts not a second longer than its saying, speech acts ‘are precisely dated to the hour, minute, second, and take effect the moment they are dated’.<sup>864</sup> The remit of *A Thousand Plateaus* is in many ways sympathetic to Mendelssohn’s poetry, in that the authors seek to ‘establish connections between [...] multiplicities’, resist linearities and overturn categorical divisions between representation, world and subject. Jon Clay has applied Deleuzian ideas to explore how Mendelssohn’s poetry invites and resists traditional lyric reading.<sup>865</sup> But while for Deleuze and Guattari, the speech act is a unified instant of action, for Mendelssohn, the sentence as speech-act

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<sup>862</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 52

<sup>863</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 87. Deleuze and Guattari understand speech-acts to implicate all uses of language. Speech-acts are conceived to be the most fundamental form of language, not as an origin or departure point, but as a ‘function’ that is co-extensive with language.

<sup>864</sup> Ibid., p.25. For Deleuze and Guattari, syntax itself is invested with and produced by latent power. Thus, ‘a rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker’, p. 25.

<sup>865</sup> Clay, pp. 43-48.

reaches both backwards and forwards in time. The moment in which the (juridical) speech-act takes place is theorised by Deleuze and Guattari to be instant, ‘incorporeal’, and ‘pure’:

what takes place beforehand (the crime of which someone is accused), and what takes place after (the carrying out of the penalty), are actions-passions affecting bodies (the body of the property, the body of the victim, the body of the convict, the body of the prison); but the transformation of the accused into a convict is a pure instantaneous act of incorporeal attribute that is the expressed of the judge’s sentence.<sup>866</sup>

This assertion of the ‘pure’ and highly theoretical, abstracted moment of the speech-act does not account for the pragmatics of language, that is, the cross-contamination of its social, political and legal contexts. A sentence is not a neutral unit. A juridical speech-act, vested with considerable powers, takes place over a space of time that is not easily delimited; neither is its transformative effect upon its subject. Writing on Austin, Judith Butler concurs that

[t]he ‘moment’ [...] is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance [...] The speech situation is thus not a simple sort of context, one that might be defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries.<sup>867</sup>

Mendelssohn’s sentence conceit similarly complicates the speech act as a spilling over of linguistic authority into the past and future of the subject it acts upon. While Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the incorporeal speech act as separate, to some degree, from its contexts and effects, Mendelssohn articulates the action of the sentence as ongoing.

There are many instances spanning Mendelssohn’s published work that trouble assertions of purity, instantaneity and incorporeality, particularly in reference to legal frameworks. In ‘My Chekhov’s Twilight World’, which was discussed briefly in chapter three, Mendelssohn writes that ‘I doubted that the Law was pure’.<sup>868</sup> ‘Pure’ is a term

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<sup>866</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 89.

<sup>867</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>868</sup> *LA*, p. 78.

frequently deployed to police female sexuality, and in another poem from *viola tricolor*, the feminine poetic subject is conversely ‘accused of purity’.<sup>869</sup> To Kate Wheale, Mendelssohn writes that ‘purification has a social, ethnic historical echo which is very real still to me’.<sup>870</sup> Moreover, Mendelssohn closely associates processes of ‘purification’ with prison sentences: ‘I served a sentence in order to purify myself’, and ‘lock it with another idea of purity’.<sup>871</sup> Purity, as theorised by Julia Kristeva (whose writings formed a notable part of Mendelssohn’s library), ‘will be that which conforms to an established taxonomy’.<sup>872</sup> Impurity ‘unsettles [purity], establishes intermixture and disorder [...] the impure will be those that do not confine themselves to one element but point to admixture and confusion’.<sup>873</sup> Mendelssohn’s construals of the ‘pure’ disturb conventional alignments of taxonomy and order with legal efficacy. Instead, she suggests that the law fails to account for the plurality of its non-conforming subjects. The same poem that doubts the purity of the law brings questions of identity, legality and temporality into contact:

pan & tilt. weft & warp. the earth does tilt. to define me as straight  
ignores the fact that my mother’s family were Russian. Polish Russian relations have  
had a painful history. I was in the pain of that history.  
And I know it to the last fibre of my body and soul. So whom you saw  
Standing there without the faintest conviction apart from the Drag &

pull of miscarriage was a Pole from Seville. Methought I had a Beard  
coming on twas so fulsome [...]

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. Where I came from one requested a license

to write. one did not suddenly Snatch momentum. At each stage there are  
moral considerations. Before the Equal Opportunities Act became Law  
(over twenty years ago) women were at a decided disadvantage. There is  
no question about that. It is absolutely and incontrovertibly true.  
I Live my life. I don’t have two lives or five or nine. I have One Life

<sup>869</sup> Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English feminism and sexual morality, 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>870</sup> Letter to Wheale, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/64.

<sup>871</sup> Letter to Harries, June 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/18; untitled, *viola tricolor*.

<sup>872</sup> Peter Riley, private email correspondence; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Goudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1972), p. 98. For Foucault, ‘taxonomy’ is the ‘disciplinary space of natural beings’, a form of carcerality. *Discipline and Punish*, p. 149.

<sup>873</sup> Kristeva, p. 98.

My Own. And what I decide to do with my life is a matter between  
myself, my mind and the Law.<sup>874</sup>

These lines bring the temporal constitution of the political subject into sharp focus, and reasserts the unruly agency of that subject. A refusal of 'straightness' in any form is evident in the 'tilt', 'warp' and 'Drag' of these lines, which move across horizontal and vertical planes: 'pan & tilt'. The broken form and syntax troubles fixed categories of identity, as when 'Drag' segues into 'pull of miscarriage', or in the allusion to Shakespearean gender-bending: 'Methought I had a Beard/coming on'. A 'Pole from Seville' likewise disrupts a straightforward alignment between race and identity. The poetic subject, moreover, is 'in' the 'painful history' of 'Polish Russian relations', that is, as a descendant of victims of the Holocaust, a horrific eugenicist drive for racial 'purity'. Through the half-submerged trauma of these historical intersections, which are as preoccupied with race as they are with gender, the poem approaches the 'Equal Opportunities Act'. In keeping with the poem's suspension of formal reality, the 'Equal Opportunities Act' appears to stand in as a conflation of the Equal Pay Act (EPA) of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) of 1975, legislative watersheds for gender equality in Britain. The clipped understatement of 'decided disadvantage' undercuts its invocation of the accepted view (that women were worse off 'before' this gender equality legislation), and takes aim at the assumption that gendered inequality in the workplace is readily resolved through legislature. Through the repeated insistence upon an illusory clear-cut distinction between a regressive 'before' and enlightened 'after', the poem suggests that 'in order to understand the background to the legislation one must understand the conditions of discrimination prior to 1976', that is, 'Before the Equal Opportunities Act became Law'.<sup>875</sup> A letter to Mendelssohn's friend and publisher Peter Riley dating from around 1993 also satirises the illusion of legal efficacy secured by the clean-cut notion of the 'before' of the 'Equal Opportunities Act, when a girl

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<sup>874</sup> *LA*, p. 78.

<sup>875</sup> Katherine O'Donovan and Erika Szyszczak, *Equality and Sex Discrimination Law*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 21.



poet could not be included in the realms of poetry without being solicited for sex'.<sup>876</sup> Here, Mendelssohn mockingly imagines the prohibition against the solicitation of female poets as a clause in the statutes. The satire of this poem is directed at the notion that the establishment of gender equality legislation is 'a pure instantaneous act', and that identity-based discrimination can be neatly taxonomised and addressed via legal mechanisms.

What had been 'before' was the entrenchment of the denial of the rights of women in the very foundation of British democracy. Albie Sachs and Joan Hoff Wilson make this argument in 1978:

The English common law which had so often been extolled as being the embodiment of human freedom, had in fact proved the main intellectual justification for the avowed and formal subordination of women.<sup>877</sup>

In this conception, there is no 'before', as the same legal apparatus used to guarantee gender equality is enmeshed in patriarchal, heteronormative logics. In feminist accounts, the inefficacy of sex discrimination laws has been attributed in large part to an impoverished concept of 'women's rights'. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar and co-author Isabelle Barker understand this impoverishment in rights language as related to norms, and find that 'feminist resistance to women's claims for universal rights stems from a concern that universality necessarily bears the markers of a parochial Western, patriarchal norm, masquerading as neutral'.<sup>878</sup> The deep structures and norms that produce sex-based discrimination went mostly untouched by British equality laws, which reified the categories of 'woman' and 'man' through the establishment of men as the normative model, and made assimilationist demands that women act, and work, as men.<sup>879</sup> The 'feminist disillusionment with the inability [...] of the EPA to achieve parity between male and female wages' is well

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<sup>876</sup> Letter to Riley, c. 1993, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.

<sup>877</sup> A. Sachs and J.H. Wilson, *Sexism and the Law: A Study of Male Beliefs and Judicial Bias* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1978), pp. 40-41.

<sup>878</sup> Jasbir Puar and Isabelle Barker, 'Feminist Problematization of Rights Language and Universal Conceptualizations of Human Rights', *Concilium International Journal for Theology*, 5 (2002), 64-76 (p. 608); also see Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 215; and Nicola Lacey, 'From Individual to Group?', in *Discrimination: The Limits of Law* ed. Bob Hepple and Erika M. Szyszczak (London: Mansell, 1992), pp. 103-05.

<sup>879</sup> O'Donovan and Szyszczak, pp. 36, 43, 47.

documented.<sup>880</sup> Both acts were widely considered to be ‘largely unsuccessful’ and became illustrative of the limits of law and legal method to combat gendered oppression.<sup>881</sup> ‘My Chekhov’s ‘Twilight World’ condenses the constitutive failure of the law to address issues of gender, not only in relation to questions of equal pay, but to the judicial system as a whole.

The repetition of the ‘Law’ in ‘My Chekhov’s Twilight World’ refers back to but also away from these specific pieces of legislation and towards a more abstract notion of ‘the Law’. To challenge the constitutive powers of the law at large, the poetic subject makes its own repeated claims to self-possession — ‘my life’, ‘My Own’, ‘my mind’. The repetition of ‘life’, sometimes capitalised, sometimes not, alongside the ‘Law’, suggests ‘life’ in its criminal justice contexts: a life sentence. The flagrant repossession of ‘my life’ ‘My Own’ in these lines is shadowed by the threat of excessive (two, five, nine!) life sentences, and the perpetual negotiation between the unruly or wilful subject and the law which attempts to constitute her. I say ‘constitutes her’, because the accusation that precedes sentencing and upon which presupposition this poetry operates forms part of a chain of interpellation. In ‘Bad Words’, Riley concedes ‘a habitual (if not inevitable) closeness between accusation and interpellation’.<sup>882</sup> The carceral subject is formed by a series of transitive pronouncements, a plurality – not a purity – of sentences. To name but a few of the more formalised of these pluralities: a judge’s judgement precedes the jury-given verdict and subsequent sentence, and this judgement is preceded by prosecution, remand, interrogation and arrest, succeeded by appeal, sanctions, rehabilitation and parole. Outside of these are the constitutive sentences of legislature, such as the ‘Equal Opportunities Act’, which itself negotiates the non-legislative sentences of everyday interpellation. Mendelssohn’s subject wryly locates herself

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<sup>880</sup> Ibid., p. 121; see also Anne E. Morris and Susan M. Nott, *Working women and the law: Equality and discrimination in theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 1991); Anne Morris and Therese O’Donnell, *Feminist Perspectives on Employment Law* (London: Cavendish, 1999); Lacey, *The Limits of Law*, pp. 99–124; Susan Atkins, ‘The Sex Discrimination Act 1975: The End of a Decade’, *Feminist Review*, 24 (Autumn, 1986), 57–70; and Lacey, ‘Legislation against sex discrimination questions from a feminist perspective’, *Journal of Law and Society*, 14 (1987), 411–421.

<sup>881</sup> Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 138; Stephanie Palmer, ‘Critical Perspectives on Women’s Rights: The European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms’, in *Feminist Perspectives on the Foundational Subjects of Law*, ed. Anne Bottomley (London: Cavendish, 1996), pp. 223–242 (p. 225).

<sup>882</sup> Riley, ‘Bad Words’, p. 44.

and her volition in between all of these: ‘a matter between/myself, my mind and the Law’. The work of this lyric is to articulate and resist attempts to ‘define me as straight’ in terms not only of gender but of the political constitution of the subject, whether through categories of race, criminality or labour legislation. A feminist resistance towards the law is evident in the poetry of contemporaries such as Riley, who writes that ‘I won’t place it or/describe it It *is* and refuses the law’, and Mulford, who asks ‘[w]hat in practice does it mean for [the woman writer] to talk about the revolutionary violation of the Law?’.<sup>883</sup> In contrast, for Mendelssohn, a consideration of legal *temporalities* is inextricable from a consideration of the constitution of women before the law. As the poem ‘1:3ng’ puts it: ‘I am held in sexism. it was not a conviction it was a sentencing’.<sup>884</sup> The distinction between a conviction and a sentence made here stresses the non-criminal ‘sentences’ imposed outside of the official judicial system – in this instance, the inescapable sentence of sexism conferred upon women.

### 1.1 Doing Time

Sentences, it should be recalled, specify a unit of time. As well as contesting the disinterest and efficacy of the legal sentence, Mendelssohn challenges its putatively linear temporality. Mendelssohn’s poems, which are often undated, untitled, and without clear beginning and end points, tend to resist any attempted imposition of linearity. Rather, they self-consciously incorporate multiple and divergent temporalities. As discussed in Chapter One, ‘time’ is frequently invoked as shorthand for incarceration, and is the measure upon which the modern prison system is structured. A less explicitly carceral temporality is invoked in a handwritten poem in *Implacable Art*: ‘we knew the time to be synchronometric’.<sup>885</sup> Folded

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<sup>883</sup> Denise Riley, *Dry air*, p. 19; Wendy Mulford, ‘Notes on Writing: A Marxist/Feminist Viewpoint’, *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora 1983), pp. 31-41, p. 34. quoted in *A History of Twentieth Century British Women’s Poetry* by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 161.

<sup>884</sup> ‘1:3ng’, p. 16.

<sup>885</sup> *LA*, p. 11.

into this abstract noun ‘the time’ is all time, both macro (‘the epoch’), and micro (the time of day), and we are given no further temporal co-ordinates. The Jungian concept of synchronicity refers to ‘the phenomenon of events which coincide in time and appear meaningfully related, but have no discoverable causal connection’.<sup>886</sup> To illustrate this concept, Carl Jung supplies an anecdote of a young woman patient who, during one of their appointments, told him that she had dreamt the previous night of a golden scarab. At that moment, a large green-gold scarab beetle flew against Jung’s window, and he caught it and presented it to his patient.<sup>887</sup> Synchronometric time is intuitive and incidental, rather than causal and rational. Acausality and coincidence, or finding suspects in the right place at the right time, as far as the defendants were concerned, were the hallmarks of the trial of the Stoke Newington Eight.<sup>888</sup> The tone of the poem from which this line is taken is rueful and bitter, and moves from the abstraction of psychoanalytic concepts to a more embodied litany of injury: ‘It could have been/a life. It might as well have been a life./so vibrant. trembling on my lips that were torn away’. ‘Could have been’ moves the poem into another kind of temporality, one that is conditional and unrealised. The poem then moves into the resignation of ‘might as well have been’ which refers to a lack of alternatives rather than lost possibility. As we have seen, abstract nouns such as ‘time’ and ‘life’ often bear traces of carcerality (‘doing time’, ‘life sentence’). The poem that faces the ‘synchronometric poem’ opens with the line that also seems to invoke ‘life’ in a carceral sense: ‘To have life taken twice that is terrible’.<sup>889</sup> The ‘life’ ‘torn away’ implies a violent confiscation whose effects stretch both backwards and forwards in time. In a single poem, we encounter ‘time’ in abstract and more specific manifestations. The psychoanalytical concept of time as acausal and incidental segues into suggestions of carceral time and temporal injury. In my reading of this poem, a psychoanalytical conception of time (conceived by one of Hunter’s

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<sup>886</sup> ‘synchronicity, n.’, *OED Online*.

<sup>887</sup> C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 109–110.

<sup>888</sup> ‘You wanted to make out that you had caught the Angry Brigade?’, Mendelssohn accuses Chief Inspector Mould of indiscriminate arrest driven by media pressure, cross examination of 20, 21 Sept 1972, SxMs109/2/D/4.

<sup>889</sup> *LA*, p. 10.

psychoanalytical fathers, no less) is brought into contact with a more explicitly carceral temporality, as if the two are somehow related or coincident.

Can we conceive of a non-carceral temporality? In ‘Art made me thin’, we find another formulation of the time of poetry which takes this to be a relation dependent on escape and concealment:

more specifically poesie has its time  
it is attended to without fear, & when there is  
fear of retribution it flies to the light  
or falls silently into the pitch dark.<sup>890</sup>

The time of poetry, or the more elevated ‘poesie’, is an idealisation of a place outside punishment or ‘retribution’ — a non-carceral time. ‘Poesie’ is figured as a suspect, liable to take evasive action, and a drama between threatened confinement and flight is played out in these lines. However, the poem ‘A man who snatches a ring’ reiterates that carceral time is not easily transcended in poetry:

My attentive concern for stolen time  
I cannot sever my body from its multiplicity of  
Longing for words that lasting longer are being rendered null.<sup>891</sup>

If ‘stolen time’ is understood as ‘prison time’, then the historical condition of incarceration is what ‘I cannot sever my body from’. Severance or extrication is thwarted not only semantically through words that ‘last’ but syntactically, through the enjambment that attaches ‘body’ to ‘stolen time’. Here we have a quasi-Foucauldian formulation of the way in which modern penal practices intervene and act upon the body from a distance — except here the distance is temporal rather than spatial. The impossibility of severance or escape from carceral time is stated explicitly, and enacted by the prosodic enjambment. Carceral transcendence is rare in Mendelssohn’s poetry. It holds aloft the limits against which it

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<sup>890</sup> *LA*, p. 42.

<sup>891</sup> *LA*, p. 9.

writes – or, as Mendelssohn puts it elsewhere, ‘examine[s] extremes of sanctioned shapes’.<sup>892</sup> Here, the temporal limits of language are marked out as legally determined. ‘Rendered null’ mimics the legal phrase ‘rendered null and void’, usually used to terminate a contract. Words of a contract, rendered null, are still there on paper but emptied of positive value or binding force. Here, the lyric speaker’s longed-for words are curtailed but not entirely erased by this legal jargon which reaches as far as the body that these words ‘cannot be sever[ed] from’. ‘Stolen time’ has long-lasting and embodied effects.

We have seen how in its form and meaning, Mendelssohn’s poetry is at pains to mark the plural temporalities and lasting duration of legal speech-acts. If the sentence epitomises the constitution of the subject before the law, then, to again defer to Riley, ‘[p]ersecutory interpellation’s shadow falls well beyond the instant of its articulation’.<sup>893</sup> To consider historical manifestations of the invisible interpellator, persecutor or sentence-giver whose ‘bad words’ infiltrate and charge this poetry entails a return to the conspiracy charge with which Mendelssohn and the Stoke Newington Eight were prosecuted. As outlined in the previous chapter, the conspiracy charge undermines the classical principle ‘innocent until proven guilty’, and depends upon its antithesis: guilty until proven innocent. Judge James’ assertion that ‘conspiracy can be effected by a wink and nod, without a word being spoken’ is invested in the implicit rather than the explicit. It effectively elides the spoken ‘words’ of the defence in favour of what they have *not* said. In her closing speech, Mendelssohn speaks of the ‘heavy inferences and suspicions’ and the practice of ‘word association’ by the prosecution.<sup>894</sup> There are also accusations of being ‘verballed up’ by the police, a colloquial term that refers to the attribution of a damaging statement to an accused person.<sup>895</sup> This is a legal discourse based upon imprecise assumption, self-interest, and the unspoken, rather than vauntedly rational procedure, disinterest and objectivity. This amorphous and pervasive field of accusation discursively shapes Mendelssohn’s assertions

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<sup>892</sup> Grace Lake, ‘i.m laura riding’, *Parataxis: modernism and modern writing*, 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 4-12.

<sup>893</sup> Riley, ‘Bad Words’, p. 44.

<sup>894</sup> Mendelssohn’s closing speech, December 1972, SxMs109/2/D/6.

<sup>895</sup> Mendelssohn’s cross-examination of Commander Bond, 15 September 1972, SxMs109/2/D/1.

of legal impurity. And if ‘inference’, the ‘implicit’ and the ‘associative’ are close to the practices and modes of literary criticism, it is no accident that Mendelssohn’s poetry opposes literary forms of surveillance as fiercely as it opposes its legal and penal counterparts: ‘I’m in the grip’, protests a poem from *viola tricolor*, ‘of a literary psychoanalytical gynaecology’, bringing the surveilled or interpellated body back into play.<sup>896</sup> Mendelssohn’s recurrent insistence on the embodied dimensions of language wards off subliminal readings, or characterisations of this poetry as transcendent. In figuring analytical close readings as an unwanted and intrusive examination, *viola tricolor* suggests that its ‘meanings’ are not to be assimilated. Similarly, Mendelssohn’s sentence-play does not have teleological ambitions, and does not resolve. A critical analysis could continue by returning to the claim that ‘I used to have a set of my own’: if these once-owned sentences are penal, they gesture to a criminal past; if grammatical, to a kind of syntactic exhaustion, or draining. The exhaustion of dissident energy is one of the purposes Hain’s 1984 study attributes to modern political trials. Along with the intimidating and discrediting of dissidents, and the symbolic value of such trials, Hain lists the exhaustion and diversion of the energy of political defendants and their supporters (even when the trial ends in acquittal) as two of the main motivations behind the number of high profile political prosecutions in seventies Britain, including that of the Stoke Newington Eight.<sup>897</sup> The very lack of resolution offered by Mendelssohn’s sentence conceit sustains a ludic representational practice and produces what Elizabeth Freeman has termed ‘temporal drag’, the pull of the (exhausted) past on the revolutionary reversal of sentence serving ‘In future’.<sup>898</sup> To play with the ‘sentence’, that linguistic proxy for authority, or its temporal and legal counterparts, is to pull apart the legal constitution of the subject.

The state of legal suspension known as ‘remand’, and Mendelssohn’s responses to it, exemplify the less conspicuous characteristics of the sentence. As discussed,

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<sup>896</sup> ‘Half’, *viola tricolor*.

<sup>897</sup> Hain, p. 283.

<sup>898</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 62.

Mendelssohn was held on remand at Holloway Women's Prison for nine months before the five-month-long trial began in May 1972. Remand, then, constituted one of the transitive pronouncements that preceded her formal prison sentence. As given in court, Mendelssohn's own account of remand describes physical and mental 'isolation and repression', prolonged confinement in a small cell, and, most crucially, no access to an adequate library or her co-defendants. The Remand Wing at Holloway was a busy and disruptive place, with a high turnover of women coming and going, and many emotionally 'disturbed' inmates.<sup>899</sup> The difficulties the co-defendants faced in preparing their joint defence, and in particular the two women, are detailed in a *Guardian* report and the *Conspiracy Notes* newsletters published by the Stoke Newington Eight defence campaign group. *The Guardian* report goes to some lengths to demonstrate the everyday impact of remand upon the ability of the defendants to put together their defence, recording that:

the situation that confronts the two girls is the expectation that they can manage to put together, in two hours' work a night at the end of a long day, six months of notes (most of which are missing) to form the closing speeches upon which may rest their [...] liberty. During those two hours' work they are subjected to constant interruption and a great deal of noise — shrieking prisoners, banging doors. An ex-inmate remarks that the discomfort and noise is so great that you cannot even read a book [...] Strain in the dock; worse strain out of the dock, coming and going, sixteen hours a day. Is this the atmosphere in which we expect the innocent until proved guilty to prove their innocence? <sup>900</sup>

Remand, in this account, brings stringent daily conditions to bear upon detainees, who are doubly subject to the confines, procedures and restrictions of prison and courtroom. A few days later, another sympathetic *Guardian* article reports Hilary Creek's measured assessment of the situation. In Creek's view, because it was so 'unusual for women to defend themselves from prison the authorities at Holloway were not used to coping with the situation', and the women defendants struggled to procure necessary writing materials.<sup>901</sup> The first issue of *Conspiracy Notes* devotes several pages to the prison conditions primarily in

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<sup>899</sup> Rock, p. 218.

<sup>900</sup> 'The Trials and Tribulations of preparing a vital defence: One Over the Eight', *Guardian*, 6 November 1972.

<sup>901</sup> Leishman.



Holloway but also in Brixton, where the men were remanded, and records the following privations: that Mendelssohn and Creek were denied writing materials for several weeks; that the notebooks they were eventually allowed underwent scrutiny by the prison authorities before being passed to their lawyers, in contravention of prisoners' rights; and that by January 1972, the Home Office had intervened to ban further joint defence meetings between the Brixton and Holloway inmates.<sup>902</sup> Poor prison lighting made reading difficult, and the list of banned literature was long, including such 'political' literature as the *Irish Times*.

It is important to note that Mendelssohn and her fellow defendants were elite prisoners, politicised, aware of their rights, their voices amplified by the extensive media coverage of the trial, and the demands they made upon the penal system were correspondently stringent. Influxes of elite prisoners, including many suffragettes (among them Lady Constance Lytton and Sylvia Pankhurst), Diana Mitford (and her husband Oswald Mosley), and the Greenham Common women were not uncommon at Holloway. However, the majority of prisoners were from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, and their crimes reflect this: 'Woman, 35... Accused of defrauding the SS [Social Services] of £40'; 'Girl... 17: Up for soliciting'; 'Woman, 52... Up for shop lifting. Three pairs of tights and a lipstick'.<sup>903</sup> Consequently, the experience of Mendelssohn and other politicised prisoners differed in important ways from the experience of the majority of Holloway's inmates. It is therefore by virtue of her relative privilege that Mendelssohn was able to articulate in her statement to the magistrate how her pre-trial detainment inhibited her defence:

although the law book states that we are innocent until proven guilty, we are in effect serving a sentence right now. This is the time when we should be preparing our defence as we wish but what happens? We have access to *nothing*, no library, no confidential paper, a promise from the Home Office that joint conference with our co-defendants will be stopped — two people in a ten by seven cell half-an-hour's

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<sup>902</sup> *Conspiracy Notes*, 1.

<sup>903</sup> 'women imprisoned', *Friends*, 3.30 (June 4 1971), p. 14. The SN8DG were keenly aware that 'over 90% of the people now in prison come from the working class', *If You Want Peace, Prepare For War*, p. 22.

exercise a day and under *these* conditions we have to struggle for our basic right: to defend ourselves at trial.<sup>904</sup>

In these accounts, it is evident that in a political atmosphere that permits the indefinite detainment of suspects without trial, legal sentences overspill their boundaries, and act to incarcerate their subjects sometime prior to Deleuze and Guattari's 'pure instantaneous act'. The Criminal Justice Act of 1967 had recently changed the law to allow remand prior to sentencing. Mendelssohn's own detainment began a mere nine days after the implementation of internment by the British government in Ireland under the Emergency Powers Act of 1971. Extra-legal powers proliferated in Britain at this time in response, at least in part, to the perceived threat of home-grown terrorism.<sup>905</sup> The 'basic right' to a fair trial operating on the presumption of innocence was constrained by the exceptional measures in place at that time. As discussed in chapter three, the counter-insurgent mode of governance of the early seventies made heavy use of the conspiracy charge, which shifted the burden of proof onto the defendants. Furthermore, the conditions of remand undermined the 'principle of innocence', particularly in the case of the women on trial. Some months in advance of the judge's final sentence, Mendelssohn argues that she is 'serving a sentence right now', and her right to her own defence curtailed. To choose to defend herself, as noted in chapter three, was considered to be a feminist act, a means of asserting an historically excluded voice. Mendelssohn defiantly asserts her own 'sentences' even as the sentences of authority and power heap up around her.

It is possible to read across from Mendelssohn's magistrate statement to another poem from *Implacable Art*, in which the line '[g]uilty before proven innocent', can be found.

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<sup>904</sup> Carr, p. 127.

<sup>905</sup> Criminological assessments of remand find that 'there are stark differences between levels of pre-trial remand around Europe, apparently demonstrating very different levels of procedural commitment to the presumption of innocence and pre-trial release'. See R. Vogler, 'Introduction', *Criminal Procedure in Europe*, ed. R. Vogler and B. Huber (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2008), p. 26. Further to this, 'remand detention... impacts heavily on the rights and lives of those affected, and on the sentencing decision in their individual cases. The attitude towards the presumption of innocence and the acceptance of remand detention only as a measure of last resort more generally influences the size of the prison population and may impact on the overall climate of penal policy', Tom Daems, 'Punishment and the Question of Europe', *European Penology?*, eds. Tom Daems, Dirk van Zyl Smit and Sonja Snacken (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2013), pp. 27-52 (p. 212).

This is not merely an ornamental installing of historical context into poetry, but a way of bringing various literary-historical moments into argumentative contact. Carceral conditions and tribunal concepts come together in these lines that invert and contest the sequencing of ‘guilt’ and ‘innocence’:

off the cuff / some answers // my bracelets. psychology applied to nature in  
[isolation.  
ideology destroys my private wishes. emblematic. cobbled hills, streets..  
thrown back into personal detestation of someone else’s desire for bijouterie.  
daughters of spain locked in / locked up / locked away from music.  
Face. Any face. “Look straight at me” No. Guilty before proven innocent.  
Perverse pleasure in assessing misery. A chance to weaken me.<sup>906</sup>

This explicit satire of legal principle has various practical and theoretical analogues. Evincing the normativity implicit in concepts such as innocence and guilt informed the aims of Foucault’s *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons*, established in 1970 ‘to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty’.<sup>907</sup> More recently, Agamben argues in reference to the Holocaust that ‘if all right [...] is only tribunal right, then execution and transgression, innocence and guilt, obedience and disobedience, all become indistinct’.<sup>908</sup> To reiterate the abolitionist group Radical Alternatives to Prison (RAP), a wider understanding of these concepts than that exhausted by legal mechanisms is needed.<sup>909</sup> ‘Guilty before proven innocent’ might be read as a statement of fact, a state of overdetermination, or as a refusal to accept the cultural imperative to prove your own innocence, an assertion of agency. The poem ‘Zephyrus’ similarly inverts the meaning of legal terms, ‘and find[s] defence is named admission’, and prefaces this inversion with a ‘[s]tern objection’, again alternating between the assertion of agency and the undercutting of that agency.<sup>910</sup>

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<sup>906</sup> *LA*, p. 116.

<sup>907</sup> Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 140.

<sup>908</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), pp. 18-19.

<sup>909</sup> RAP, *Alternatives to Holloway*, p. 32.

<sup>910</sup> *LA*, p. 106.

Mendelssohn's lyric subject understands itself as a legal and penal construct, but is not ready to give up entirely on the possibility of self-determination.<sup>911</sup>

The question of guilt returns us to the opening of this chapter, where 'my long flowing sentences' accrued judicial guilt: 'sentencing full of legal acrimony'. In 'off the cuff', the poetic sentences are far from 'long and flowing'. Unconventional, abrupt punctuation marks the urgent movement of these lines between free play and constraint. In this improvisatory syntactical mode ('off the cuff'), the lines ricochet between public and private meaning, interrogation and rebuttal, accusation and defence. Traces of the carceral accrue lexically across 'cuff', 'bracelets', 'locked', 'isolation', words that, taken singly, would not bear such lexical specificity. The multiplied configurations of incarceration are demonstrated by the series of prepositions in the fourth line: in/up/away. Confinement is not merely a condition of being inside but of being contained or kept out, as exemplified here by the ambivalent slashes, which offer conditions that may be mutually exclusive or may be aggregate. 'Answers' and 'bracelets' are adjacent but cordoned from each other; the intervening double slash pulls the suggestion of explanation up short and abuts it with personal, feminine constraints. This erratically punctuated lyric voice, with unexpected swings in tonal register - fragmented, indeterminate and confrontational - refuses the charge of guilt, linguistic or judicial. The consistent discursive duck and weave refutes a reading that would hold the statement '[g]uilty before proven innocent' as a straight or personal account: "Look straight [...] No'. 'Face. Any face' ushers in any number of possible selves, and recalls Foucault's statement that 'I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to stay the same'.<sup>912</sup> Similarly, what this poem writes against or towards is kept faceless: psychology, ideology, 'someone else's desire', a shadowy and threatening series of persons unknown. A destructive violence is cast as committed by personified 'ideology', a system rather than an individual agent.

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<sup>911</sup> In a letter to Peter Riley, Mendelssohn articulates an embattled form of poetic agency: 'I cannot change history, Peter. Or only in a fast, witty way in a poem'. 8 May 2000, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.

<sup>912</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith, first edn 1969, (London: Tavistock Books, 1997), p. 17.

Formulating this systematic violence as ‘emblematic’ connotes its preponderance: an ‘emblem’ is both an object and a representation. The incarcerated ‘daughters of Spain’ presumably refer to the severely restricted private and public lives of women under Franco’s rule, in a move away from a faceless Foucauldian subject to gendered specificity – although the incarcerating authority remains shadowy. As the discussion in the first part of this chapter has shown, sentences – short, long, grammatical, penal, imperative, invested with judicial power, literary, legal, patriarchal or poetic – are deeply inflected by the politics of gender. It follows that other excluded identity categories – racialised, classed, or sexualised – also inflect the operations and authorisations of the sentence. To track the relation between, for example, race and the sentence is beyond the remit of this chapter. But it is clear that a penal sentence does not operate in a vacuum, and that the subject of any given sentence will be marked by other, informal but nevertheless deeply constitutive sentences.

## Part 2: The Psychiatric Sentence

In the seventies, psychiatric interventions in the women’s prison system compounded the gendered operations of the sentence in its carceral contexts. The implicitly female carceral subject of ‘off the cuff’ is always-already constituted as guilty, a product of psychiatric and penal overdetermination. In the psychiatric study by T. Gibbens, which formed the empirical basis for the redevelopment of Holloway, emphasis was placed upon the individual rather than the social causes of offending.<sup>913</sup> Snatches of formal, scientific lexicon from ‘off the cuff’, such as ‘psychology applied to nature in isolation’ and ‘assessing misery’, hint at a criticism of such pathologising practice – particularly when psychiatric research is carried out within the prison itself, acausally, in ‘isolation’. A detailed pamphlet produced by RAP, *Alternatives to Holloway*, describes how Holloway’s new status as a diagnostic centre

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<sup>913</sup> T. Gibbens, ‘Female Offenders’, *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 6 (September 1971), 279–286. This study sampled every fourth woman to enter Holloway, but was otherwise vague in its methods, and adopted very loose categories of ‘abnormality’ which included venereal disease, according to Russell P. Dobash, R. Emerson Dobash and Sue Gutteridge, *The Imprisonment of Women* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1986), p. 128.

effaced the social conditions of those it diagnosed. The institutional environment within which setting diagnoses were made was itself ‘abnormal’, a cause of trauma and anxiety, and isolated its inmates from their usual social contexts – an isolation surely exacerbated by the solitary confinement model on which Holloway was built.<sup>914</sup> The interior of the Old Holloway was made up of ‘cavernous spaces suffused by dim light’, and various categories of prisoner were kept strictly apart, assigned to different wings of the prison.<sup>915</sup> The strict spatial order of the prison and its air of remote surveillance was reflected in the strict hierarchies amongst staff and prisoners. Prisoners rarely came into contact with the prison governor, who remained a remote source of authority, and ‘the prison was a place governed by strict propriety (an officer recalled that inmates were told “be proper, girls, be proper”) and by a formality of manners and discourse’.<sup>916</sup> The language of therapy, such as ‘abnormal’, ‘maladjusted’, ‘sick’, further obscured the socio-economic conditions of the criminal-patients, assuming deviance to inhere in individual inadequacies and predilections rather than to derive from endemic conditions of poverty and abuse. As well as conducting its diagnoses within the denaturing walls of the institution, the prison-hospital Holloway operated an ambiguously therapeutic-punitive function in the mid-seventies. Despite its conception as a progressive penal policy, the rebuild compounded an already repressive prison regime.<sup>917</sup> As building work went on, conditions inside Holloway became increasingly cramped, noisy and disorderly. The increase in the prison population resulted in doubling up in cells and overcrowding from 1972. By 1974 Holloway was 30 per cent over capacity, and recreational and exercise programmes declined.<sup>918</sup> At this time there was an influx of ‘politicised’ prisoners, such as the ‘Angry Brigade’ women; Marian and Dolours Price, who initiated the Provisional IRA’s bombing campaign in Britain in 1973; and activists such as Pat Arrowsmith and Chris Tchaikovsky, who went on to form the Prisoners’ Action Group

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<sup>914</sup> RAP, *Alternatives to Holloway* (London: Christian Action Publications Ltd, 1972), p. 36.

<sup>915</sup> Rock, p. 21.

<sup>916</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>917</sup> Madan, p. 11, 8.

<sup>918</sup> Rock, p. 204.

in 1974.<sup>919</sup> In this period of transition, the operating prison was nominally treated as a ‘therapeutic community in waiting’, but under the pressures of an increased population and decreased capacity, it ended up being ‘torn between the imperatives of treatment and punishment’, between rehabilitation and discipline.<sup>920</sup>

The notion that criminality is biologically determined has a long history and has deeply shaped recurrent attempts to reform the women’s prison system in Britain. Originating with the influential nineteenth century school of Lombroso, the dominant criminological discourse held that certain individuals were predisposed to criminality, and that such tendencies could be discerned in their very physiognomy.<sup>921</sup> These physiological theories consider ‘woman’ (nurturing, passive, subordinate) as antithetical to ‘crime’ (violent, active, aggressive). Not only is crime aligned with the male, the normative and essential criminal subject, but the atavistic male. Female criminals, then, are doubly deviant, contravening their biological sex role as well as their social, ‘civilised’ role, and ‘as a double exception, the criminal woman is consequently a monster’.<sup>922</sup> The development of psychiatry in the nineteenth century increased the tendency to classify criminal women as ‘mad’ rather than ‘bad’, and to focus on the biological and individual aspects, rather than the socio-economic conditions, of the offender.<sup>923</sup> Feminist criminologist Carol Smart notes the ‘durability of the Lombrosian legacy in relation to female criminality’.<sup>924</sup> That legacy was not substantially challenged until the seventies and the arrested theoretical development of female criminology was reflected in policy making.<sup>925</sup> These biologically determinist theories - rather than the more radical feminist critiques which follow - shaped Mendelssohn’s experience of incarceration. There were only a small number of critical voices at the time.

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<sup>919</sup> Henry McDonald, ‘Old Bailey bomber Marian Price freed from jail’, *Guardian*, 30 May 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/30/old-bailey-bomber-price-freed-jail>> [accessed 9 July 2018]; Rock, p. 184.

<sup>920</sup> Rock, pp. 211, 220.

<sup>921</sup> Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero (1895), quoted in Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>922</sup> Ibid.

<sup>923</sup> *Women’s Imprisonment and the Case for Abolition: critical reflections on Corston ten years on*, ed. Linda Moore, Phil Scraton, Azrini Wahidin (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 3.

<sup>924</sup> Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology*, p. 145.

<sup>925</sup> Claire Valier, *Theories of Crime and Punishment* (Pearson Education Ltd: Harlow, 2002), p. 131.

RAP campaigned to halt the Holloway rebuild, arguing that ‘the “bad” label is being replaced with a “sick” label that is an even more insidious and degrading attack on the identity of an individual than before’.<sup>926</sup> *Spare Rib*, who supported RAP’s campaign, reported that the ‘New Holloway will be an expensive mistake’.<sup>927</sup> As it transpired, it took so long to build the New Holloway that by the time the project was completed, penal policy and political ideology had shifted sharply away from therapeutic optimism to a more punitive approach.<sup>928</sup> But the psychiatric intervention which launched the New Holloway project forms part of the increasing ‘proliferation of the authorities of judicial decision-making’ in the twentieth century identified by Foucault. Psychologists and psychiatrists, alongside judges, educationalists, sociologists, prison officers and others, all act to ‘modify the sentence’.<sup>929</sup> In this ‘medico-judicial’ context, in which the rising star of psychiatric studies is predominant, Foucault finds that ‘sentencing implies judgements of normality’.<sup>930</sup> Holloway, which is not one of Foucault’s case studies, appears to exemplify this conclusion, with its elision of criminality and mental disorder.

The emerging conflation between therapy and punishment shapes Mendelssohn’s poetic subject. In a poem from *Tondo Aquatique*, the speaking subject is ‘handed [...] over for treatment/to the department of police’.<sup>931</sup> In the poem ‘concilia’ from *Bernache Nonnette*, ‘descriptive psychology dents & is reinforced’, sustained damage committed by psychology itself.<sup>932</sup> In *viola tricolor* the presumption of the already-guilty female offender is again reversed, and ‘remedy’ denotes its opposite: ‘we were good little girls [...] remedied with [...] needles and lock-ups and strip cells and padded jackets’.<sup>933</sup> The connection between psychiatric intervention, the formation of the subject and sentence-giving is made in ‘off the cuff’, which reprises psychological ‘isolation’ as a component of the inverted sentence ‘guilty before proven innocent’. ‘Isolation’, like the ‘sentence’, operates both inside and outside the

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<sup>926</sup> RAP, p. 32.

<sup>927</sup> Caroline Younger, ‘Rapping on Holloway’, *Spare Rib* 1 (June 1972), p. 8.

<sup>928</sup> Rock, pp. 179, 182, 189.

<sup>929</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 21.

<sup>930</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>931</sup> untitled, *Tondo Aquatique*.

<sup>932</sup> ‘concilia’, *Bernache Nonnette*.

<sup>933</sup> ‘the fourteenth flight’, *viola tricolor*.



penal system. Writing in *Spare Rib* in 1973, Mendelssohn's co-defendant Angela Weir wrote of how women in prison were *more* isolated than men as a result of being cut off from their 'dependent' social role, and that 'although women in Holloway are together in the same boat, the experience of prison seems to fragment and isolate them even more'.<sup>934</sup> As Mendelssohn's 'good little girls' suggest, the modified sentence of mental disorder aimed to resocialise the women under its jurisdiction, via a kind of therapeutic incarceration, into their normative social roles.

Normative social roles for women are a source of mockery but also indictment in Mendelssohn's poetry. We are given a strong image of a feminine archetype and of self-negation if we return to 'The arrested poem', who

was not dressed in a polka dot bikini  
could not & cannot act like a leggy shirley temple  
had not the giggle, the gasp or the gulp  
was not miss sweetie pie.<sup>935</sup>

There is a suggestion that arrest is predicated on a failure to conform to a 'miss sweetie pie' femininity. In unexpected places, Mendelssohn's poems make 'allusion[s] to washing dishes', 'ironing without irony', and 'laundry rooms', almost always (as in 'The arrested poem') in proximity to forms of criminality or punishment.<sup>936</sup> The washer of dishes is a '**malfaisant**', a wrongdoer; those who do not undertake non-ironic ironing are 'punished for poverty'; the laundry is done by a 'She' who is a 'bit touched' and 'suspected' of 'something'. Enforced domesticity has long been a feature of female incarceration, as noted in my discussion of Davis' work on the gendered aspects of incarceration in my introduction. Elaine Showalter records the reformist spirit in which old manacles in nineteenth-century Bethlem were converted into stands for flatirons, in an 'efficient transformation of restraint into domestic work'.<sup>937</sup> Showalter marshals various contemporary accounts to show that the 'women's

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<sup>934</sup> Weir, p. 37.

<sup>935</sup> *LA*, p.131

<sup>936</sup> *LA*, p.110; 'no mixing not cake', *Tondo Aquatique*; 'Cultural', *viola tricolor*.

<sup>937</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 82.

work most highly touted by the Victorians for its therapeutic effects was laundry'.<sup>938</sup> For Irish women incarcerated in Magdalen Laundries, unpaid work in the laundries functioned as penance. Accounts of resocialisation into normative gender roles as a carceral strategy are not confined to Britain. Nawal El Saadawi, who was incarcerated as a political prisoner in Qanatir Women's Prison in 1981, recounts how paper and pen, forbidden materials, were smuggled into her cell in the form of toilet paper and an eyebrow pencil. This feminine and therefore permissible tool enabled Saadawi 'to write an entire book - my memoirs - in prison, on toilet paper, with an eyebrow pencil'.<sup>939</sup> During her 1971-72 detention in New York City Women's Detention Center, prison abolitionist Angela Davis found that it was almost impossible to obtain writing materials in prison, but notes the 'overwhelmingly sexist' presence of

washing machine, clothes dryer and ironing paraphernalia [...] the 'reasoning' behind this was presumably that women [...] lack an essential part of their existence if they are separated from their domestic chores. The men's linens and jail clothes were sent elsewhere for laundering; the women were expected to tend to their own.<sup>940</sup>

As Davis points out, these feminised modes of punishment are also highly racialised, and targeted at white women rather than women of colour.<sup>941</sup> Work in Holloway was 'women's work', in Weir's first-hand account: 'Packing pencils or machining clothes. Work training programmes are not even given lip service in Holloway as at least they are in men's prisons. Pay in Holloway is women's pay. Male prisoners earn up to 60p a week, women prisoners earn 25p a week'.<sup>942</sup> A paper given at the 1970 Women's Liberation Movement conference in Oxford recorded that 'large number[s] of women at Holloway are in on charges of defrauding Social Security [or for] child neglect [...] women are being punished for failing to

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<sup>938</sup> Showalter, pp. 82-3.

<sup>939</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, 'Presentation by Nawal El Saadawi: President's Forum, M/MLA Annual Convention, November 4, 1999', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33.3 (Autumn, 2000 - Winter, 2001), 34-39, (p. 38).

<sup>940</sup> Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974), pp. 308-309.

<sup>941</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, p. 26.

<sup>942</sup> Weir, p. 37.

live up to society's image of them as good mothers, when the society itself will not give them adequate means and facilities to do so'.<sup>943</sup> Instead, in what is termed 'the most pernicious irony of the prison process' 'women in Holloway are often put through a course in management and child care, consisting of training in budgeting and diet'; and 'the wing for child neglect offenders [in Holloway] is sprinkled with plastic doilies and ruffled curtains'.<sup>944</sup> There was a 'prevailing culture' of domesticity, too, and it was a point of pride amongst inmates to keep their cell 'squeaky clean'.<sup>945</sup> As Weir expressed it, 'the society of women in prison becomes [...] a gross caricature of the position of women outside'.<sup>946</sup> Induced female conformity through domestic labour was not a phenomenon confined to the prison. In 1975, following Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James' originary text *Wages For Housework*, Silvia Federici published *Wages Against Housework*, a landmark feminist pamphlet that challenged the assumption that housework was somehow a natural attribute of femininity, and socialised as an internal female need. For Federici, to resist this socialised assumption and refuse domestic work as the expression of female nature, was to be considered abnormal - but also to be potentially revolutionary.<sup>947</sup> A dissonant combination of identification and refusal, as we have seen in chapter three, tends to mark Mendelssohn's representations of normative femininity. The coalition between gendered domesticity and incarceration surfaces again in '1:3ng', where the speaker declares that 'I am not going to stand there & tell him how my coloured pencils were taken & I was given a sewing machine', powerfully recalling the domesticated discipline much practiced upon incarcerated women, but also the social constraints placed upon women artists who are not formally incarcerated.<sup>948</sup>

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<sup>943</sup> Raya Levin and Judith Brandt, 'Women, prison and economic independence', *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, compiled by Michelene Wandor (London: stage 1, 1972), pp. 175-179 (pp. 177-78).

<sup>944</sup> Ibid.

<sup>945</sup> Rock, pp. 38.

<sup>946</sup> Weir, p. 37; 'Everything in prison is a parody, a caricatured essence, of what happens in the outside world', 'women imprisoned', *Friendz*, p. 14.

<sup>947</sup> Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Power of the Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>948</sup> Lake, '1:3ng', p. 16.

The coercive mesh between the domestic and the carceral finds poetic representation in the poem from which the line ‘serve your own sentences’ is taken, in the form of slim columns of text:

fusain.  
 red velvet rose  
 red enamel rose  
 obscur/clair  
 brown/cinnamon  
 bb oo gg ll cc  
 ee nn aa nn  
 jamais tous  
 toast claxon  
 newborn, mouth  
 deep blue, strong blue  
 “a tea, a coffee & a motorway.”  
 an invitation to rot  
 force feeding.  
 children snatched.  
 mexican ring snatched.  
 wage packet snatched.  
 camera snatched.  
 cumbrian loft snatched.  
 rented house & studio snatched.  
 university place snatched.  
 virginity snatched.  
 exactly how silent  
 is one meant to be.  
 and yet... when reading...  
 attention snatched  
 and not by children  
 so that was curtailed  
 as apparently I was  
 enjoying being with  
 my children.

when I should have been  
 cooking cooking cooking  
 corking corking clucking  
 clicking heels peeling paint  
 bloody food.  
 i don’t like all that fuss  
 Any chance for forget it  
 Weetabix.  
 Snowflakes.  
 No, we haven’t.  
 Why discuss food?  
 I hate discussing food.  
 I don’t want to feel  
 my mouth watering  
 It bores me.  
 Why were my children plump  
 and Indian children not plump.  
 As you can read  
 it was a nasty racist heist.  
 I do not run the prison system.  
 I am not a lesbian.  
 Serve your own sentences.  
 In future.  
 I collect sentences.  
 I used to have a set of my own.  
 Musicians, artists, choreographers,  
 windhover.<sup>949</sup>

This anti-lyrical lyric operates as a satire of domestic obligation, in which the norm is invoked as domestic obligation, as ‘I should have been’. ‘Fusain’ is kind of fine charcoal used in drawing, and the poem as it is printed in *Implacable Art* is faced by one of Mendelssohn’s many line drawings. ‘Obscur/clair’, the French term for chiaroscuro, is drawn too from the lexical field of artist’s materials or techniques. These terms foreground visual or semiotic rather than syntactical, semantic representation. The artistic lexicon of the first few lines unravels into choked syllables — ‘bb oo gg ll cc’ — and only attains

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<sup>949</sup> *LA*, p. 54.

syntactical order via another, more quotidian voice. A staccato series of sentences follow, or lines that are punctuated as if they were sentences. The repeated ‘snatched’ sounds itself out, freighting these lines towards their aural elements. This sound bending reaches its height in the recounting of the speaker’s domestic obligations: ‘cooking cooking cooking/corking corking clucking’. This warped repetition sounds like frustrated boredom brought on by domestic labour; the suppressive force of the norm rendered in its private and sonic implications. The representational lack of meaning in ‘digne’ demonstrates the lack of meaning in the structures satirised.

The phatic, sketched quality of this lyric precludes a public interface until the carceral subject emerges explicitly in the last few lines. Various other forms or states of incarceration are detectable in the first column: ‘an invitation to rot’, ‘force feeding’, even ‘so that was curtailed’.<sup>950</sup> This last instance is also directive of the form of the poem. Reading across the two columns of text involves reading across resistances and tensions. ‘Force feeding’ faces ‘my mouth watering’. ‘[E]xactly how silent’ reads across to ‘In future.’ and then (across and down) to ‘is one meant to be’. Most theatrically, ‘so that was curtailed’ follows the truncation of the second column. Proofs of this poem in a letter addressed to publisher Rod Mengham suggest that all four columns from pages 53-54 of *Implacable Art* are intended to be read across as well as vertically.<sup>951</sup> So the twenty sixth to twenty seventh line, read across, would read:

inadequacy	to lock up playwrights	and yet... when reading...	I used to
			[have a set of my own
only glaring at other women,	how T.S. Eliot words are borne out	attention snatched	Musicians,
			[artists, choreographers

The ‘set of my own’, read horizontally, appears to refer not to sentences but to incarcerated playwrights. ‘[D]igne’ does not linger on its literary analogies from which ‘attention [is]

<sup>950</sup> ‘Force feeding’ recalls the treatment meted out to hunger striking suffragettes, and implies some form of pathological or political self-starvation that Lisa Appignanesi terms as ‘the most passive and conventionally feminine form of dissent’, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 387; there is evidence that Mendelssohn knew and read Appignanesi in a letter to Langley, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/29.

<sup>951</sup> Letter to Mengham, 8 November 1999, SxMs109/3/A/1/34.

snatched' as a function of the indeterminate four column form. Horizontal and vertical readings are held in play in this grid-like structure which Mendelssohn describes as the 'other half of the diptych', likening the poem to a devotional art object made up of two painted panels that may be folded in on themselves.<sup>952</sup> Following the visual prompting of this shaped poetry, the columns of 'digne' may stand as bars of a cell window, keeping in more than they let out.

The foregrounding of visual meaning and the passage between the particular ('my children', 'my own') and the general ('Indian children', 'your own') in this poem keeps in question the relation between sign and signified, language or representation and the world. In so doing, it mimics the relation of the sentence to 'reality'. In Agamben's formulation, the juridical norm begins with the 'concrete case' of the trial which 'always involves a plurality of subjects and ultimately culminates in the pronouncement of a sentence, that is, an enunciation whose operative reference to reality is guaranteed by the institutional powers'.<sup>953</sup> To sentence is to authorise, to diagnose, to normalise and to interpret - in art, in language, in domestic spaces, and in the courtroom. For 'digne' to accrue semantic meaning, readers must interpellate its segments of lived experience into generic proposition. For example, as above, 'this lyric operates as a satire of domestic obligation'. Interpretation, or the passing of literary judgement, marks the passage from the semiotic to the semantic. This passage is precisely what Susan Sontag warns against on the premise that 'interpretation' imposes normative classifications upon works of art.<sup>954</sup> This is the aesthetic version of Foucault's 'sentencing implies judgements of normality': that interpretation implies judgements of normativity. This passage from the concrete or specific sign to its abstracted, authorised signification seamlessly synthesises aberration or rupture — just as the reader of poetry demonstrates the tendency to knit together two columns of text in one direction or another in spite of a visible break or aporia between them. The fact that 'directions are not given in

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<sup>952</sup> Ibid.

<sup>953</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>954</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 10.

[Mendelssohn's] poetry' does not preclude interpretation, but it does problematize processes of interpretation and normative classification.<sup>955</sup>

To adopt a lyric lawlessness (serve your own sentences!) in response to the normative and authoritative tendencies of the sentence is to disrupt any smoothing psychiatrisation of the unruly lyric subject. This lawlessness is lexical as well as structural. Clusters of words such as 'snaffle', 'snatched', 'muggers', 'trumped-up charges' and 'heist' deflect criminal accusation away from the lyric I by casting accusative aspersions elsewhere. The capacity to reverse criminal charges, within the space of the poem, is a necessarily limited capacity – a simulacrum of agency. Mendelssohn's lyric subject is over- rather than under-determined, and has '[t]oo many memories of harsh language, orders, commands, threats, insinuations [...] they invent me'.<sup>956</sup> Here are Riley's constitutive 'bad words' at work. In this poem, 'at the moment', identity is imposed from outside: 'I don't like the way I am/invented [...] they invent me. Public eye, private eye'. The semantics of these lines imply the subjugation of the lyric subject, but their tone implies a wilful resistance to surveillance and subjugation, in a return to the argument of chapter three. Being 'invented' means the relinquishment of self-fashioning, and a speaking 'I' that is constructed via the language and the interrogatory surveillance of others. As when 'my long flowing sentences [...] turned into sentencing', the reader is left to ask: but who or what has imposed the sentence?<sup>957</sup> Who has 'invented me'? The sentences which invent or constitute Mendelssohn's lyric subject are not only legal and penal, but literary. Mendelssohn's wordplay, which masks 'I' with 'eye', subverts – however partially and playfully – the surveillance of the critic. Literary analogies (such as the one to T.S. Eliot in 'digne') indicate this poetry's modernist allegiances, the literary tradition within which it situates (and reinvents) itself. The ellipses of 'and yet... when reading...' in 'digne' are almost Prufrockian, but that languid fragment is fiercely inverted in the next line, read horizontally, into 'glaring at other women'. In 'digne', the lyric voice claims that 'I was murdered.' and

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<sup>955</sup> *LA*, pp. 34, 9.

<sup>956</sup> *LA*, p. 66.

<sup>957</sup> Jackson, p. 130.

that ‘libel & slander kills./through literary veins’, aligning fatal harm with literary genealogies.<sup>958</sup> In the 1993 pamphlet *viola tricolor*, from which the line ‘my long flowing sentences’ is taken, literary genealogies and dead fathers are invoked only to be confounded or short-changed. The continuum between the literary history and the psychoanalytical feminist theory of the ‘sentence’ with which this chapter opened is exemplified by the intertextuality, modernist fragmentations and long lines of *viola tricolor*.

## 2.1 *viola tricolor*

Dead fathers provide the co-ordinates of identification in *viola tricolor*. A recognition of the power of the father parallels the power to formulate sentences, that is, to ‘organise’ language. The *viola* of the title is derived from the cross-dressing Viola of *Twelfth Night*, arrested at the moment of the finding of the other. The epigraph to this chapbook is taken from the play’s reunion scene: ‘My father had a mole upon his brow’.<sup>959</sup> Viola, still in the guise of Cesario, offers this scrap of identifying proof to her brother Sebastian. Extracted from *Twelfth Night*’s welter of confused and mistaken appearances, *viola tricolor* sets out from this single, biological referent, this remembered patch of pigment. Identifiability, the epigraph suggests, is located in patriarchal likeness and lineage. The persistence of the past haunts the lyrical subterfuges of *viola tricolor*, ‘whose poetry was mocked not as a man’s,’ which finds that ‘here are too many words which tend to [canonical] order,’ and wants ‘to write undetected’.<sup>960</sup> Resemblances - central to the confusions of *Twelfth Night* - track through *viola tricolor*’s dense and accumulative lines. A poem entitled ‘poetry.’ reconfigures the visioning of Viola’s dead father in the figure of ‘flesh filled’ eyes:

there’s always another reality to be closing one’s eyes to wearily by ten  
[...]  
flesh filled eyes it is told as resemblances bleat by rough stone<sup>961</sup>

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<sup>958</sup> *LA*, p. 53.

<sup>959</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), V.1, 236.

<sup>960</sup> ‘*viola tricolor*’, ‘on challenge, positive attitudes and “*les peintres cubistes*”’, untitled, *viola tricolor*.

<sup>961</sup> ‘poetry.’, *viola tricolor*.



'Flesh filled eyes' may be another term for closed eyelids, but the proximity of the sheepish 'resemblances' additionally suggests that the flesh in these eyes is the flesh of metaphorical recall. 'Resemblance', understood as likeness or lack of difference, evokes Viola and Sebastian and the mole of the epigraph. That these resemblances 'bleat' deflates their gravitas. Not only external but internal resemblance is disjointed in 'poetry,' where we find 'self not being self and ears twisting inwardly against any possible/counter remark'. An 'inward twisting' motion, and the impulse to locate resemblances, is parodied a few lines later as 'telescoping tennyson'. 'Resemblances' in *viola tricolor* become something like repetition and distortion, mimicking the multiplicity of perception ('there's always another reality').

An allusion to Tennyson, 'inwardly twisted', is lodged in the opening stanza of 'poetry':

splinter down throstle brough from unspoken certitude  
 hanging stone pendant from brow element. lemon salience  
 not to see what it was that hit this tucking toes unpointed  
 setting a running stream in hard stopped vitreous soul sprung,  
 converting into an old rusty spring that had been held as a spring,  
 in happiness, faces were not reminded, or lowered or hoisted, before  
 the world was hit out to be crying for a poetry slung dead.

Lyric that 'splinters' or fragments its objects and syntax disrupts linearity and fixedness. The object of 'splinter,' 'throstle,' is an archaic term for a song thrush, and the eponymous subject of a poem by Tennyson. In 'The Throstle,' Tennyson renders the sound of thrush-song as 'new, new, new, new!' and addresses his bird-subject as 'my wild little Poet'.<sup>962</sup> The trope of the bird-poet is not new, but its repositioning in Lake's poem codes a symbolic break with lyrical conventions.<sup>963</sup> The 'likeness' to Tennyson does not permit the reader to move much closer to a stable identification of the meaning of 'poetry.' The 'brow' of Viola's father is, briefly, a place of suspension amongst the cascading sentences. Then resemblances

<sup>962</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'The Throstle', *The New Review*, 1:5 (October 1889), 409.

<sup>963</sup> Compare with Veronica Forrest-Thomson's subversion of Shelley's famous opener from 'To a Skylark': 'Hail to thee blithe horse, bird thou never wert!/And, breaking into a canter, I set off on the long road south' in 'Strike,' *Collected Poems*, ed. Antony Barnett (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008), p. 134.

are lost, or ‘faces were not reminded’. From this opening imperative (‘splinter down’) to the continuous present (‘hanging,’ ‘setting,’ ‘running,’ ‘converting,’ ‘crying’) and incursions from the past (‘it was that hit,’ ‘sprung,’ ‘reminded,’ ‘was hit out,’ ‘slung’) these lines do not settle into grammatical tense, and remain out of time. Grammatical category, too, is jostled out of place, the verb ‘sprung/ converting into an old rusty spring.’ Diving and springing, ‘poetry.’ shuttles between fluidity and the Goliath-esque figure of petrification – ‘a poetry slung dead’. This syntactical instability dissolves the linguistic order associated with the figure of the symbolic father.

Despite its modernist tendencies to fragment and rupture, *viola tricolor* not only opens but closes with dead fathers. The final poem, entitled ‘on challenge, positive attitudes and “*les peintres cubistes*”’, refers to a 1913 essay by Guillaume Apollinaire which addresses questions of echo, rupture and continuity in modernist art. John Berger describes the essay as the ‘first full-length communique issued by the Cubists’.<sup>964</sup> One of its best-known formulations translates as follows: ‘You cannot carry your father’s corpse around everywhere you go [...] But in vain do our feet leave the ground in which the dead repose’.<sup>965</sup> On the face of it, Lake’s poem seems to have little to do with such sententious statements. It opens with ‘that was havana’ and then moves between apparently unrelated designations: ‘this [...] is clever’ or ‘colloquial’, and ‘that [...] was a bilious mountain’. Figures of panoramic and linguistic entrapment, such as ‘the distance is shuttered’, and the speaker ‘fearful/to break through official language’, are conversely ‘hounded by the agency “escape”’. To be persecuted by ‘escape’ might refer to the futility of imagining that a complete break or emancipation can be achieved. A ‘code of poetics’ is cast as a site of conflict ‘fought over’ by protagonists who obstruct ‘freedom of speech/of movement, of thought, of style’. As touched on in chapter one, it is in this poem that Malcolm Lowry Wo,

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<sup>964</sup> John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso* (Harmondsworth: Granta/Penguin, 1992), p. 52.

<sup>965</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Peintres Cubistes*, trans. P. Read (Sussex: Artists Bookworks, 2002), p. 9. Apollinaire is also invoked in ‘An Account of a Mummy in the Royal Cabinet of Antiquities in Dresden’ (1986), where Lake/Mendelsohn notes how ‘Apollinaire’s stay in prison’ left him with a ‘feeling of terror’, and ‘marked for life’.

who wrote a novella about the experience of psychiatric incarceration, is briefly quoted. The poem ends on a description of ‘warm’ paint and a primed canvas, returning in some degree to the ‘painters’ of its title. What has gone before (whether Shakespearean, Victorian, Neoclassical or Cubist) is raised only to be baffled by the shift and suspension of states and processes in *viola tricolor*. That which is constitutive of literary and artistic order is thus re-constituted into disorder.

In *viola tricolor*, the patriarchal lineage of psychiatry and psychoanalysis - principal Foucauldian modes of modern surveillance and control - is also in play. The poem ‘Half.’ briefly alights on a Freudian term in a stanza that mounts a challenge to the gendered construction of the canon:

what was left there had been written better elsewhere a long time before, that is  
if what had been written had been a young woman’s searching her feeling  
into intelligibility, as an object, an extrojection, something it deserved  
unacknowledged as it was, and swept by negativity, humiliated some say.<sup>966</sup>

Far from implying some form of linguistic guilt or lack of originality (‘had been written better elsewhere a long time before’), the caustic ‘that is/if what had been written [...]’ contests the neutrality attached to claims of writerly originality and quality. ‘Extrojection’ is an esoteric psychoanalytical term that refers to the projection of consciousness into an external agent.<sup>967</sup> ‘[S]earching her feeling/into intelligibility’ describes a suppressed female agency, a thwarted negotiation between inner and outer, private and public, a stifled voice whose ‘intelligibility’ has historically been cast as hysteria rather than discourse. In his influential case study of hysteria, Freud considered his patient Dora’s worst hysterical symptom to be ‘the complete loss of voice’.<sup>968</sup> As previously discussed, the fear of voicelessness, strangling, suffocation, or curtailment haunts *viola tricolor*. In the same study, Freud theorises the phenomenon of transference, by which earlier trauma is displaced or

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<sup>966</sup> ‘Half.’, *viola tricolor*.

<sup>967</sup> See, for example, Freud’s theory of leadership, cited in introduction to Herbert Marcuse, *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (Routledge: Oxford 2011), p. 56.

<sup>968</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, volume VII (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), p. 22.

projected by the patient from its original source onto ‘the person of the physician’.<sup>969</sup> ‘Extrojection’, a concept akin to the better-known Freudian theories of projection and transference, supplies a parodic analysis of the articulation of female ‘feeling’ in pseudo-psychoanalytical terms. As Mendelssohn has it, female-authored writing is ‘in the grip of literary psychoanalytical/gynaecology’, pre-determined and overlooked not only by literary but psychoanalytical forefathers.

Psychiatry, too, is treated with derision in *viola tricolor*. In the poem with which this chapter opened, ‘the fourteenth flight’, ‘psychiatry’ is cast as ‘the modern worm’, ‘perfectly portrayed as a perfect perfect of english perfect’. Again, Mendelssohn foregrounds a conflation between discipline (in this case, the discipline of psychiatry) and grammar (the perfect tense). Psychiatry is here figured as a parasite, yet conversely ‘portrayed’ as a national or grammatical ideal. Parasites consume corpses, and this aspirational grammatical form is triply of the ‘past’, relegating ‘psychiatry’ to redundancy and putrefaction. Time, language, the psychic and normalising idealisation are drawn together in this derisive poetic formulation. The ‘fourteenth flight’ is hemmed in on all sides by ‘sentences’ and ‘sentencing’, ‘legal acrimony’ and ‘trapping tactic[s]’. The implications of psychiatric-penal collusion rise to the surface as ‘good little girls [...] remedied with [...] needles and lock-ups and strip cells and padded jackets’. Poetry as well as the feminised subject is subject to such strictures:

the imaginative faculties are in the grips of prosecutors who can gear them any way  
they both need and choose to secure their convictions so unconvinced are they that we share a lack  
[of conviction.]

A hopelessness  
that the accused are more often ready to admit to than are their prosecutors, and where does the  
[pounding  
come from if not from an economic system in some small trouble with some few straightenings in  
[circumstance].<sup>970</sup>

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<sup>969</sup> Freud, p. 116.

<sup>970</sup> ‘the fourteenth flight’, *viola tricolor*. As is the case for the printed pamphlet itself, I have had to reduce the font and margin size to accommodate Lake’s exceptionally long lines.

Prosecutors and accusation ‘grip’ the imagination as well as the feminised body represented by ‘gynaecology’. The substance of these accusations is hinted at earlier in the poem, where ‘I commune with the Dead/although they may have accused me of imitation’, returning us to the ‘linguistic guilt’ and unwilling plagiarism of ‘Half.’.<sup>971</sup> Conviction, sentencing, accusation, identification and surveillance both of the person and of the poem are demonstrative of the fragmentation of carceral authority amongst disciplines literary, psychoanalytical, psychiatric and legal. Mendelssohn’s distrust of psychiatry and the other social sciences is evident in her letters as well as her poetry.<sup>972</sup> To give one example: Mendelssohn states in a letter that ‘what I detest is the subsumation of poetry to politics and psychiatry’, implying that all discourse - including that of the arts - risks being subsumed, explained, interpreted and treated by the smoothing encroachment of medical psychiatry.<sup>973</sup>

The ‘fathers’ with which Mendelssohn had to contend were not simply the canonical fathers of psychoanalysis, or literary ‘fathers’ such as Tennyson and Eliot. In the 1960s, the anti-psychiatry movement came to prominence in Britain. The anti-psychiatrists challenged the role of psychiatry in society and characterised its practices as controlling and repressive. Foucault, David Cooper, R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, Franco Basaglia and Deleuze and Guattari were amongst the most prominent anti-psychiatrists. Broadly speaking, they were highly critical of psychiatric orthodoxy and the use of psychiatry as a method of social control.<sup>974</sup> The anti-psychiatrists considered madness to be a social construct, comprehensible as protest through attention to an individual’s familial or institutional contexts.<sup>975</sup> Standards of normality disseminated by positivist, diagnostic means were challenged by leading British anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s radical assertion that ‘normality’ was an alibi for ontological security and mental illness no more than a theory.<sup>976</sup>

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<sup>971</sup> Denise Riley, *Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: SUP, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>972</sup> To the poet and publisher Peter Riley, Mendelssohn writes ‘neither do I wish to be a psychologist’s specimen [...] I am not a politician.’ and of the ‘glare and exposure to personal examination to psychologists and sociologists and experts in terrorism’, in letters dated 19 Feb 1990 and 16 July 1988, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/1. In a letter to Butterfield she castigates ‘charlatan women psychologists’, 2 Feb 1988, SxMs109/3/A/1/3.

<sup>973</sup> Letter to Duncan, 26 June 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

<sup>974</sup> Showalter, p. 221-222.

<sup>975</sup> Ibid.

<sup>976</sup> Showalter, p. 228.

In place of electroshock treatment, lobotomies and talking cures, Laing set up Kingsley Hall in 1965, an alternative treatment centre in East London. Kingsley Hall, famed for its sacerdotal revelries, earned Laing the reputation of being a 'mentor' of the sixties counterculture, or in the words of Doris Lessing, 'a key authority figure', 'a Law giver'.<sup>977</sup> In this role, Laing made the case that the concomitant violence of

[w]hat we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience [...] It is radically estranged from the structure of being. [...] Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years.<sup>978</sup>

Here, normality is reframed as a form of deeply damaged and damaging mental disorder. At a time of seemingly imminent nuclear war, Laing considered 'the perfectly adjusted bomber pilot' closer to lunacy than the schizophrenic.<sup>979</sup> Mendelssohn's inscriptions of 'normality' and conformity share some ground with the anti-psychiatrists. A poem from *Implacable Art* prophesies that 'we shall have conformed to the laws of time./done nothing other than conform to/the idea that life is hell on earth'.<sup>980</sup> Conformity, in this formulation, is a lunatic resignation. The refusal to conform is a recurring theme: 'I also wish to refer to my loathing of conformism', '[t]his is the reason why I do not conform'.<sup>981</sup> In a letter written in 1996, Mendelssohn writes of how 'I was threatened with incarceration in a mental hospital. Great emphasis was placed upon Normality'.<sup>982</sup> The capitalisation of 'Normality' marks out this most unmarked of terms. Aligning 'threat' with the ostensibly benevolent 'mental hospital' and supposedly benign 'Normality' conveys a deep distrust of the normalising processes of psychiatric institutions. Mendelssohn's doctoral proposal, as we have seen, was explicitly 'concerned with highlighting the question of conformity/non-conformity' in relation to 'poet, publisher and committed anti-fascist' Nancy Cunard, committed to a mental asylum

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<sup>977</sup> Cited in *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies*, ed. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 154-55; also see Showalter, pp. 230-231.

<sup>978</sup> R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, first edn 1967 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>979</sup> Qtd in Showalter, p. 229.

<sup>980</sup> *LA*, p. 43.

<sup>981</sup> *LA*, pp. 102, 84.

<sup>982</sup> Letter to Duncan, 24 June 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/12.

after being certified as ‘suffering from persecution mania, whilst she was begging for pen and paper to write against all wars’.<sup>983</sup> War and violence, in both Laing’s and Mendelssohn’s accounts, are indissociable from the construction of insanity.

Yet anti-psychiatry continued to efface the question of gender.<sup>984</sup> The role of women in the anti-psychiatric community remained that of the patient, the subordinate, the deviant subject. Although Kingsley Hall’s star patient, Mary Barnes, was a woman, and Laingian theory formulated madness as a female strategy, Simone de Beauvoir considered the contribution of antipsychiatry to the understanding of the female psyche to be negligible: ‘Anti-psychiatry is still psychiatry. And it doesn’t really address itself to women’s problems’.<sup>985</sup> It was left to the feminist theorists of the seventies to address the question of gender and its relation to psychology and the norm. Theorists and critics such as Nancy Chodorow, Phyllis Chesler, Carol Smart, Nancy Hartsock, Kate Millett, Nancy Fraser, Hélène Cixous, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Juliet Mitchell devoted much-needed attention to the gender-specific political implications of psychoanalysis and psychiatry during this decade. The peculiar repression that emerges in response to feminist or non-normative gender behaviour forms the subject of many of these studies. Phyllis Chesler’s 1974 study reprised the history of women and madness from a feminist perspective, and found that:

it is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviour [submissiveness, irrationality etc] are generally regarded as less socially desirable [...] The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture.<sup>986</sup>

Findings such as Chesler’s cast the Holloway project and its putatively benevolent assumption that female criminals were mentally disordered in a rather different light. By what normative standards were female criminals judged to be mentally ill? Mendelssohn’s

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<sup>983</sup> Letter to Kerrigan, SxMs109/3/A/1/26.

<sup>984</sup> Showalter, p. 231.

<sup>985</sup> Simone de Beauvoir cited in Showalter, p. 246.

<sup>986</sup> Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1974), pp. 68-69.

poem '[t]his is the reason why I do not conform' renders this critique of how behavioural norms are gendered colloquially: 'A man can demand explanations./A woman is accused of aggressive behaviour/for querying motive'.<sup>987</sup> The same behaviour – or even a modified, toned-down version of masculine behaviour – is judged permissible or impermissible according to the gender of the speaker.

To more closely delineate what these theorists refer to as 'norms', it is helpful to retrace the history of this term back to *The Normal and the Pathological* (1943) in which Georges Canguilhem makes one of the first sustained critical examinations of these terms. The norm, for Canguilhem, is not a question of an average, but of adaption.<sup>988</sup> Canguilhem points out that the concept of what is 'normal' is derived from established rules and behaviours; that it is not value-neutral, but socially and culturally constructed.<sup>989</sup> Canguilhem's pupil, Foucault, continued to deconstruct the 'normalising' disciplines of penology, psychiatry, medicine and pedagogy — although still without reference to the skewing bias of gender, which remains invisible. Foucault is certainly critical of psychiatric practices, but locates disciplinary power within a shifting, complex network rather than at the hands of individual, repressive agents.<sup>990</sup> Rather than casting psychiatrists as policemen in white coats, for Foucault the norm forms the nexus of a carceral network of knowledge production, policy making and identity formation.<sup>991</sup> Within this network, law is replaced by norm as the 'primary instrument of social control', and the docile modern subject acts as the agent of their own normalisation, due to their investment in discourses that purport to reveal us to ourselves.<sup>992</sup> These discourses are those of the new medical, social knowledges that distinguish between the healthy and the diseased, the criminal and the insane, and the

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<sup>987</sup> *LA*, p. 84.

<sup>988</sup> Roy Porter, 'Before Foucault', *London Review of Books*, 12.2 (25 January 1990), p. 23 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v12/n02/roy-porter/before-foucault>> [accessed 17 September 2018].

<sup>989</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>990</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 176-77.

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 182. According to Foucault, 'the carceral network [...] has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalising power', p. 304.

<sup>992</sup> Aurelia Armstrong, 'Michel Foucault: Feminism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/foucsem/>> [accessed 18 September 2018]. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 304, 138.



normal and the abnormal.<sup>993</sup> Foucault's norm is the agent of a pervasive capillary power that induces a psychological state of conscious visibility and thus docility in its subjects.<sup>994</sup> To return to the statement that 'sentencing implies judgements of normality': Foucault suggests here the complicity between authoritative language, legal mechanisms, and the establishment of normative categories to which subjects are held to account.

Feminist criticism, dating from the resurgent seventies, challenges the absence of gender in Foucault's account of normativity. Feminism usually conceives of power as repression, contra Foucault, and the non-male as passive and powerless, in order to enable a liberationist, emancipatory politics.<sup>995</sup> For Nancy Fraser and Jana Sawicki, Foucault's conception of an entirely capillary power leaves no room for resistance.<sup>996</sup> Yet if this capillary power is best understood locally rather than at the level of 'economics' or the 'state', this conception to some degree substantiates the feminist aim of altering gendered power relations at intimate levels of experience.<sup>997</sup> Attempts by Susan Bartsky and Susan Bordo to apply Foucault to feminist readings meet with the same charge: that if modern power is ubiquitous and inescapable, then the possibility of escape remains unimaginable.<sup>998</sup> This lack of agency is compounded by what Fraser calls Foucault's normative confusion and 'failure to outline the norms that inform his critical enterprise'.<sup>999</sup> For Nancy Hartsock, the normative neutrality of the Foucauldian subject (produced by, rather than prior to, power structures) is at odds with the feminist focus on 'naming' marginalised subjects and thus reclaiming some agency.<sup>1000</sup> In addition, as Fraser observes, that which asserts itself to be neutral and objective is most often coercive and subjective.<sup>1001</sup> More recently, feminist theory has turned its attention to the language of universal 'rights', in which the legal 'norm'

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<sup>993</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 296.

<sup>994</sup> Ibid., pp. 138, 201-202.

<sup>995</sup> Jana Sawicki, 'Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom', *Feminism and Foucault*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (West Hanover, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 177-192 (pp. 178-179).

<sup>996</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), p. 27; Sawicki, p. 179.

<sup>997</sup> Sawicki, p. 93.

<sup>998</sup> Sawicki, p. 293.

<sup>999</sup> Fraser, p. 31; Armstrong.

<sup>1000</sup> Nancy Hartsock, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?' in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson, (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 157-175 (p.169).

<sup>1001</sup> Fraser pp. 29-30.

refers to an ‘unmarked category of persons that are culturally regarded as “definitive human beings”’.<sup>1002</sup> Those unmarked persons are uniformly white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male. Within the growing field of disability studies, ‘normate is [...] made use of to highlight normalcy as an ideological construct’, and aims to contest the naturalisation of the normalised subject identified by Foucault.<sup>1003</sup> Disability studies, via the concept of the *normate*, critiques the canonical rhetorical tradition (awash with unmarked terms, ‘masquerading as neutral’) as a ‘normalising force’.<sup>1004</sup> Normalcy, then, is a social construct, shorthand for the privileged subject position of the unmarked subject and ‘the culture that valorises this position’.<sup>1005</sup> ‘Deviancy’ becomes a misnomer when ‘normal’ is unmasked as an equally ‘unnatural’, constructed category.

## 2.2 woman unbound

Mendelssohn was also critical of Foucauldian analysis, although her criticism, made in a letter, is only fleeting: ‘I became a police issue [...] that is also a power struggle which makes me doubt Foucault’.<sup>1006</sup> In a more implicit critique of ostensibly ‘neutral’, unmarked subjects, Mendelssohn’s lyric subject is frequently and insistently a woman. However, her often satirical insistence demonstrates both a concentration on and a refusal of the ‘created artificiality’ of categories of ‘girl’ and ‘woman’, to paraphrase Denise Riley.<sup>1007</sup> As we have seen, Mendelssohn’s feminised lyric subject ‘is not miss sweetie pie’. An unusually utopian poem associates the category of ‘woman’ with constraint, but also appears to locate ‘woman’s mind’ as a potential source of agency:

Reminiscent of a flat expanse trammelled  
is a woman, weighted by metal engines

<sup>1002</sup> Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self and Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 157.

<sup>1003</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1004</sup> Jay Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. 83.

<sup>1005</sup> Dolmage, pp. 9, 22.

<sup>1006</sup> Letter to Mengham, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/34.

<sup>1007</sup> ‘Both a concentration on and a refusal of the category of “women” is essential to feminism’, Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p. 1.

the nature that she was summarily dismissed  
to be, inconsequent, causing swell where  
dry conditions, behind her back, primroses<sup>1008</sup>

The impossibility of Mendelssohn's image – 'a flat expanse trammelled' – describes a state of explicitly female imprisonment. To 'trammel' is to 'hinder the free action of; to put restraint upon, fetter, hamper, impede, confine'.<sup>1009</sup> One repressive condition ('trammelled', 'weighted') is replaced by another. 'Nature' itself is figured as punishment here, a category to be sent to as if in disgrace, recalling the essentialist treatment of the female criminal. A pseudo-legal lexicon recalls the neutering force of a disciplinary norm. 'Dismissed' evokes a lack of attention to a fuller set of conditions; 'summarily', often found in legal contexts, likewise implies lack of due formal process, abruptness or termination; the opening '[r]eminiscent' calls up a shadowy history of confining determinism. 'Summarily dismissed' is a rote phrase that implies the exercise of authority without naming its source. This Kafkaesque blankness points up the multiplied restraint while avoiding an overdrawn representation of the fettered female subject. The utopianism of the poem lies in its move away from carceral figures and towards the promise of something life-giving ('swell') and primroses, symbolic of youth or pleasure (as in 'the primrose path'). The next stanza sketches a hopeful progression from the urban to the pastoral: 'leaving dust for sea, smoke for sunlight'. A similarly hopeful progression towards emancipatory agency through the redeployment of language is articulated at the end of 'Reminiscent of a flat expanse', where

the woman's mind unbound by contract  
makes life by clearing passages  
out from radiation, & ties against  
living language the resources that are hers  
in unknowable incongruities & agréments.

Here, woman 'trammelled' moves to woman 'unbound' – at least, intellectually unbound. To be 'unbound by contract' might be to move beyond legalistic 'contract' and its enmeshment

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<sup>1008</sup> *LA*, p. 104.

<sup>1009</sup> 'trammel, v.' *OED Online*.

in patriarchal logics; or it may be that the state of being ‘unbound’ is in fact contractually guaranteed. Contractual guarantee, as we saw in ‘My Chekhov’s Twilight’, has often proved far from efficacious. An originary fiction of confinement is called up by the term ‘unbound’: the myth of Prometheus, bound to a rock for stealing fire from the gods.<sup>1010</sup> Shelley’s reworking of the myth in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) draws that myth into the lyrical canon and elevates Prometheus to the status of Romantic prisoner-hero. Mendelssohn’s woman ‘unbound’ may refer back to her canonical forefathers but has none of their aspirations to heroism. Freedom from restraint (‘clearing passages’) is located ‘against/living language’. ‘Living language’ might refer to language’s capacity to evolve and accumulate meaning over time, as demonstrated by the literary echoes evoked by ‘unbound’. There is no suggestion of an *outside* to escape to – ‘the resources that are hers’ are *tied against* or attached to an already extant linguistic order. The ‘unknowable incongruities’ suggest that the process of tying-against might produce some disorder, but those ‘incongruities’ are in conjunction with ‘agréments’, another form of contract. Through its movement from constraint to release and back to constraint, ‘Reminiscent of a flat expanse’ posits but does not attain what Mendelssohn refers to in *viola tricolor* as an ‘unbinding of restrictive practises’.<sup>1011</sup> This lyric argument reprises feminist critic Toril Moi’s summary of Julia Kristeva’s account of subjectivity and language:

We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that proceeds us and from which there is no escape. There is no other space from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language.<sup>1012</sup>

For Mendelssohn, the sense that there is ‘no escape’ is echoed by the syntactical ambiguity of being ‘unbound by contract’. But the poem is not fully resigned to articulation within an already-constituted social and linguistic order. ‘[U]nknowable incongruities’ revive the faint utopianism of ‘behind her back, primroses’, and suggest that not all the possibilities that

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<sup>1010</sup> Carnochan, p. 427.

<sup>1011</sup> ‘1526’, *viola tricolor*.

<sup>1012</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 169.

arise from speaking within (or ‘against’) ‘living language’ can be congruous or known. As I argued earlier, Mendelssohn’s carceral poetics are not transcendent; constraint is not treated as emancipatory, contra to Adorno’s conception of art as a breaking-free, as discussed in chapter two. Indeed, my argument in this thesis is that Mendelssohn’s art foregrounds and subverts but does not triumphantly overcome conditions of constraint. Constraint, in Mendelssohn’s poetry, is not a metaphor for freedom. The intimation of a ‘woman [...] unbound’ might lead the reader to expect a poetic vision of transcendence, but what we are left with is more ambivalent. Release itself can only be conceived as a re-binding to a linguistic and legal order, but even that dubitable form of release opens up a space of possibility. That movement towards ‘opening up’, while remaining highly conscious of ongoing conditions of constraint, brings us closer to Mendelssohn’s concept of the ‘open sentence’. The next and final chapter will discuss what I am describing as a lyrical ‘opening up’ at greater length.

Due to the uniquely therapeutic-punitive function of the hospital-prison Holloway in the seventies, there are few directly comparable examples of prison poetry that share Mendelssohn’s preoccupation with penal-psychiatric complicity and its gendered aspects. However, there are a number of poets who write about the condition of psychiatric incarceration, or the asylum. These might include John Wieners (*Asylum Poems*, 1969), Robert Lowell (‘Waking in the Blue’, 1959), Anne Sexton (*To Bedlam and part way back*, 1960) and, perhaps most famously, Sylvia Plath, a poet who Mendelssohn appears to treat as something of a touchstone.<sup>1013</sup> Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is her most extended account of psychiatric incarceration; in her poetry, the closest we come to a carceral setting is the hospital.<sup>1014</sup> At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that Wendy Mulford more specifically addresses the condition of psychiatric incarceration in her poem ‘La Pitie Salpetriere’, in which the sentence is invoked as constitutive of the subject: ‘I am my

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<sup>1013</sup> In a letter to Harries, Mendelssohn claims that she is not a ‘hebraic sylvia plath’, 4 December 2000, SxMs109/3/A/1/18. Another letter cannot be sent because it is ‘as though another poet was there watching me, waiting for his chance to strike, as though I could be struck - or fired - Sylvia Plath’s spirit was still alive in those days’. Letter to Oliver, 12 September 1997, SxMs109/3/A/1/43.

<sup>1014</sup> See ‘Three Women’, in Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 179-180.

sentence'.<sup>1015</sup> La Pitié-Salpêtrière is a French hospital where nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot conducted his infamous research on hysteria, a specific historical site of psychiatric incarceration.<sup>1016</sup> I will conclude with a brief comparison between Mulford's and Mendelssohn's sentence-play, in anticipation of the next and final chapter, where I discuss how Mendelssohn's American contemporaries deploy the sentence. Unexpectedly, the 'sentence' of 'La Pitie Salpetriere' is that of the 'Wandering Jew', a sentence of mythical and perpetual exile, condemned to ceaseless movement: 'his sentence to wander perpetually. Sentenced of a sentence. In the/doom of repetition. What merits this sentence?'.<sup>1017</sup>

Repetition, or 'echo', is the structure within which the speaking 'I' 'wander[s] imprisoned', connecting legal sentences to spoken sentences.<sup>1018</sup> Mulford figures this sentence as a 'fixed gyration', or a movement that is also stasis.<sup>1019</sup> And 'this sentence', the poetic speaker reiterates, 'is my name'.<sup>1020</sup> There is a suggested but not concrete relation between psychiatric incarceration and the motif of the sentence in Mulford's poem. 'To establish the subject' is the opening line of the poem, and that subject is formed by the psychiatric hospital: 'La Salpêtrière gathers up this I'.<sup>1021</sup> More concrete is the relation between the 'Jew' who 'like the female is the Other' and racialised and gendered forms of imprisonment.<sup>1022</sup>

There are many shared preoccupations between Mulford's 'La Pitie Salpetriere' and Mendelssohn's carceral poetics. Yet unlike Mulford, Mendelssohn joins up the legal and psychiatric sentence of normality not only with the constitution of the subject but with its linguistic and literary counterparts. Sentences, for Mendelssohn, are not discrete in their legal, grammatical or interpretative functions; those functions are porous, and seep into one another to form Foucault's 'subtle, graduated carceral net'.<sup>1023</sup>

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<sup>1015</sup> Mulford, p. 125.

<sup>1016</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman attributes the 'invention' of hysteria to Jean-Martin Charcot, who infamously produced a series of photographs of the hysterics of La Salpêtrière Hospital. See *The Invention of Hysteria* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2003).

<sup>1017</sup> Mulford, p. 143. The 'Wandering Jew', according to legend, taunted Jesus on his way to the Crucifixion and was subsequently cursed to wander endlessly until the Second Coming.

<sup>1018</sup> Mulford, p. 145.

<sup>1019</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>1020</sup> Ibid., pp. 125, 67, 146.

<sup>1021</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>1022</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>1023</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 297.

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the ways in which Mendelssohn's poetry deconstructs the putative 'abnormality' of the feminine carceral subject. I began by discussing how Mendelssohn's own sentence-play deconstructs the sentence as a constitutive unit of grammar and authority. Turning to the sentence as speech-act, we saw how Mendelssohn's sentence play and invocation of diverse temporalities contested the conventional conception of the speech-act. In Mendelssohn's carceral poetics, sentences endure long after (and before) the moment of their articulation. More specific analyses of the legal 'sentences' of gender equality legislation, powers of detention and the psychiatrisation of the penal system as they emerge in Mendelssohn's poetry further demonstrate the multiple, fragmented ways in which sentences constitute their subjects. Poetry itself is a space of limited agency where 'sentences' can be provisionally inverted and denatured. Poetry, however, is subject to the normative interpretative 'sentences' of the literary critic and the long shadow of the literary canon. Mendelssohn's inscriptions of 'dead fathers' in *viola tricolor* indicates the extent to which the 'father' overshadows her 'long, flowing sentences', but also demonstrate lyric strategies by which the power of the father can be contested: referential parody, syntactical instability and a suspension of resolution. With Foucault, Mendelssohn's poetry recognises that sentences constitute a network of disciplinary power that *normalises* – but her carceral poetics are shaped by feminist thought as well as Foucauldian theory and thus challenges a masculine disciplinary norm. Breaking away from a Foucauldian conception of faceless, normatively constituted subjects, Mendelssohn's 'woman unbound' works within but also against the constraints and possibilities of 'living language' in a reminder of a political future and a poetic present where the gendered power-relation between subjects and sentences is overturned.

## Chapter 5

### Heroines from a foreign landscape: carceral poetics at the turn of the twenty-first century

#### Part 1: Carceral networks

Although the historical period with which this study has been predominantly concerned falls between 1968-1977, Mendelssohn wrote and published most of her poetry during the nineties. In this concluding chapter I consider the lapse between the political and social turmoil of the sixties and seventies, which saw an extraordinary growth of prison reform movements and prison literature, and the relative political stasis of the nineties, marked by an absence or decline of prison writing, despite ever increasing rates of incarceration.<sup>1024</sup> A 'prison renaissance,' as prison poet William Aberg characterises it, flourished across North America in the seventies.<sup>1025</sup> The Black Power Movement propelled that 'prison renaissance'. High-profile activist-prisoners such as Malcolm X, George Jackson and Angela Davis played crucial roles in cultural and social conflicts, their writings and activism politicising American culture inside and outside the prison.<sup>1026</sup> As noted in the introduction, in the UK the mainstream reformist penal lobby was less radical than the prisoners' rights movement underway at that time in the US, but the formation of the Koestler Trust in 1969 and the establishment of groups such as Radical Alternatives to Prison (RAP) in 1970 fostered creative work and critical thinking in and around the prison.<sup>1027</sup> The American prison renaissance exerted a cultural influence in the UK, too. In 1972, a SN8DG pamphlet

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<sup>1024</sup> 'During the 1990s alone, the number of women in prison in the United States doubled, to more than 90,000', Scheffler, p. xii.

<sup>1025</sup> William Aberg, quoted in Chevigny, p. xv.

<sup>1026</sup> Lee Bernstein, *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010) <[http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807898321\\_bernstein](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807898321_bernstein)> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018] p. 4-5.

<sup>1027</sup> Ryan and War, p. 111.



reproduced the following prison poem by the prominent Black Panther Ericka Huggins:

noises  
 sounds  
 unspoken words  
 feelings repressed because  
     the prison walls are also  
     soul walls  
     barriers  
 if only all barriers could be removed  
 and we could walk/talk/sing  
     be.....  
 free of all psychological, spiritual  
     political, economic  
     boundaries  
 all of us – all the freedom lovers of  
     the world but especially  
     right now – prisoners<sup>1028</sup>

Huggins' poetry is typical of prison writing in the late sixties, marked by revolutionary fervour and collective solidarity between all 'prisoners'. The collective aesthetic of Huggins' poem, with its use of plural pronouns rather than singular, and political investment in the stability and meaningfulness of that 'we', is representative of what H. Bruce Franklin identifies as the Afro-American tradition of prison writing. For Franklin, while

the prisoner-artist usually approaches his or her loss of freedom as both an individual matter and as an emblem of the universal human condition [...] From the point of view of the Afro-American experience, imprisonment is first of all the loss of a *people's* freedom. The questions of individual freedom and of human freedom derive from that social imprisonment.<sup>1029</sup>

The Afro-American consciousness that prison was 'an updated form of slavery meant to control a whole people, not only an individual' is generative of the collective aesthetic we see in Huggins' poem.<sup>1030</sup> The fact that the SN8DG borrowed from the African-American tradition of politicised prison writing to illustrate their critique of the British criminal justice system demonstrates its far-reaching influence, and may also indicate the absence of such a

<sup>1028</sup> Reproduced in *Conspiracy Notes* [1?]; also reproduced in *If They Come*, p. 112.

<sup>1029</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, 'The Literature of the American Prison', *The Massachusetts Review*, 18.1 (1977), 51–78 (p. 57).

<sup>1030</sup> Scheffler, pp. xxvii–xxix.

tradition in Britain. In my argument, a pluralistic aesthetic marks poetic representations of the prison by women in the nineties on both sides of the Atlantic in contrast to the otherwise individualistic feminist turn of that decade. The highly politicised collective aesthetic of seventies' prison poetry is less overt but perceptible in the *pluralistic* expression we can find in the poetry of the nineties. That pluralistic expression does not necessarily invoke a 'we' with the same conviction as Huggins, but it moves beyond a Romantic or solitary conception of the lyric 'I', which is brought into an intersubjective relation with a 'she' and a 'you'.

A network of carceral, feminine poetics in the nineties is traceable in the work of poets such as Mendelssohn, Wendy Mulford, Fanny Howe and Jennifer Moxley, but that network is not a coterie or a defined 'school' of poetics. Instead, it is a network of shared poetic commitment to a feminist experimentalism and to a transnational cultural exchange. It is also a network that is structured by absences – namely, an absence of racial diversity. In order to reassemble some of these absences, in the second part of this chapter I give close readings of two pamphlets published in 1996: Mendelssohn's pamphlet *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue*, and Moxley's *Enlightenment Evidence*, both of which give voice to historic and ongoing instances of incarceration. In my argument, Mendelssohn's and Moxley's carceral poetics realise a reflexive engagement with the past and, through modernist techniques and feminist strategies, articulate a pluralistic, transhistorical aesthetic that looks backwards in order to overcome the individualistic feminist turn of the nineties. Where does this tension between a *collective* and an *individualistic* form of lyric derive from? In part, as already discussed, from the overtly collective aesthetic of the seventies. In part, from a poetic movement towards 'opening-up', and a feminist problematizing of the category 'woman'. It also emerges from the formative influence of the Romantic lyric, with its emphasis on individual subjectivity, and Mill's definition of poetry as the 'lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell'.<sup>1031</sup> As I shall argue, the network of feminine, transnational

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<sup>1031</sup> Mill, p. 350.

carceral poetics at the end of the twentieth century challenges Mill's hermetic and solitary conception of poetic expression.

The poetry networks to which Mendelssohn had some connection include the 'Cambridge School' with its capillaries of small press publishers, ephemeral magazines and diasporic affiliations; and what has become known as women's experimental poetry, with its anthologies, feminist-socialist commitments and transnational outlook.<sup>1032</sup> In the UK, experimental women poets such as Riley, Mulford and Maggie O'Sullivan – all correspondents of Mendelssohn's – connected the collaborative aims and theoretical perspectives of the women's movement with formal poetic innovation in their work.<sup>1033</sup> In North America, the number of poets writing feminist experimental poetry in the nineties was far more numerous. A small sampling might list Harryette Mullen, Lisa Robertson, Barbara Guest, Bernadette Mayer and Rosmarie Waldrop, and expand to include the greater number of critics (also often poets) writing on that poetry, such as Linda Kinnahan, Kathleen Fraser, Rachel Blau de Plessis, Joan Retallack and Clair Wills. As Linda Kinnahan wrote in 1996:

In Britain, the contributions of women to a radically experimental poetics remain difficult to discover, especially from this side of the Atlantic, prompting one (American) reviewer, who is also a poet and feminist scholar, to draw a comparison between the status of women's language oriented work in America and in Britain: 'It may be that in the UK, as in the USA, non-mainstream, non-hegemonic poetics have it tough enough without raising the (divisive? or what?) question of gender; this was once, if I am not mistaken, the argument of certain of the women affiliated most decisively with language poetics'.<sup>1034</sup>

Given the historical paucity of women's experimental poetry in Britain, I intend to bring Mendelssohn's poetry belatedly into contact with a transnational network of feminist poetics.

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<sup>1032</sup> The 'Cambridge School' is a term of contested legitimacy, but I deploy it here because of the geographical – if not always creative – proximity of many of its more prominent figures to Mendelssohn during the last few decades of her life. Mendelssohn was known by and to the Cambridge poets, including Peter Riley, J.H. Prynne, Ian Patterson, Douglas Oliver and Tom Raworth.

<sup>1033</sup> Solomon, p. 208.

<sup>1034</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley', *Contemporary Literature*, 37.4 (1996), 620–670 (p. 624).

In 1996, a key year for feminist experimental poetics, Wendy Mulford's Reality Street Press published *Out of Everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America and the UK*, a collection of thirty women writers including poems by Mendelssohn (at that time, writing under the name Grace Lake). In that same year, Romana Huk held the New Hampshire conference 'Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally', and in so doing brought together significant numbers of innovative female poets from Britain, America, Ireland and Canada. In 2003, a collection of essays related to the conference and titled *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* were published. For Huk, the term 'transnational' encompasses the crossing of national boundaries *and* honours site-specific inflections of cultural difference. Huk's deployment of the term anticipates Jahan Ramazani's recent and compelling argument for the primacy of transnationalism in modern and contemporary English poetry.<sup>1035</sup> Letters from Mendelssohn's archive show that after initially accepting an invitation to speak at the conference, Mendelssohn declined to attend and stated that the reason for her absence was related to the lasting trauma of incarceration. For Mendelssohn to renege on readings and events was not an infrequent occurrence. In the letter in which she returned her airline ticket, she gave the rather oblique explanation that 'poets [...] should be brave enough to serve their own sentences'.<sup>1036</sup> Mendelssohn does not refer to herself, but to perpetrators of sexual violence who evade processes of justice. Nevertheless, incarceration is invoked in relation to her absence. To reassemble Mendelssohn's absence in New Hampshire is to bring her carceral poetics belatedly into contact with the poetics of her contemporaries.

What forms of carcerality were in circulation in Anglo-American experimental poetry in the nineties? The most striking correspondence between carcerality in Mendelssohn's work and that of her North American contemporaries is a shared preoccupation with the sentence. The British poet Wendy Mulford bridges this shared

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<sup>1035</sup> Romana Huk, *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), p. 24.

<sup>1036</sup> Letter to Huk, 18 March 1996, SxMs109/3/A/1/20.

preoccupation, as we have seen in the previous chapter. The US poet Hannah Weiner's book *Silent Teachers/Remembered Sequel* (1993) repeatedly invokes the motif of the sentence, but her sentences are predominantly grammatical. In a faint echo of Mendelssohn's explanation for not attending 'Assembling Alternatives', Weiner writes that 'I might be absent due to a subdeterminate of the/plausible clause'.<sup>1037</sup> Weiner's sentences do bear inflections of penalty: 'put sentence in', she writes, 'next to obey'.<sup>1038</sup> What is 'forbidden' is often found in close proximity to 'sentence structure'; 'sentences hurting' become a locus of pain; and with carceral reflexivity, the poetic speaker tells us that 'I sentence myself quietly'.<sup>1039</sup> US poet Rosmarie Waldrop's *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1994) is also preoccupied, to a lesser extent, with the figure of the sentence.<sup>1040</sup> Again, this is a preoccupation with the sentence as a grammatical, not a penal, unit. Differently from Weiner's relentlessly enjambed lines or Mendelssohn's fragmented columns, the sentence is the main unit of composition in the *Lawn of Excluded Middle*. Waldrop poses the gendered problem of how '[b]eing a woman and/without history, I wanted to explore how the grain of the world/runs, hoping for backward and forward, the way sentences breathe/even this side of explanation'.<sup>1041</sup> The personified vitality of the sentence refers back to Mulford's formulation of how sentences are constitutive of their subject: 'I am my sentence'. As with Mendelssohn's linking of sentences to the 'future' and to what 'used' to be, Waldrop's sentences refer backwards and forwards in time, but unlike Mendelssohn's, these sentences are primarily understood as grammatical rather than carceral.

The US poet Fanny Howe's books *[SIC]* (1988) and *Forged* (1999) deal more explicitly and extensively with imprisonment. *[SIC]* was written, according to Howe, when 'I was coming from visiting a friend in prison for life', and voices the carceral conditions

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<sup>1037</sup> Hannah Weiner, 'Silent Teachers Remembered Sequel', *Tender Buttons Omnibus: The First 25 Years of Tender Buttons Press 1989-2014*, ed. Lee Ann Brown and Katy Bohinc (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 2016), pp. 203-272 (p. 233).

<sup>1038</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>1039</sup> Ibid., pp. 242, 247, 244, 245.

<sup>1040</sup> Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Lawn of Excluded Middle', *Tender Buttons Omnibus: The First 25 Years of Tender Buttons Press 1989-2014*, ed. Lee Ann Brown and Katy Bohinc (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 2016), pp. 163-202 (pp. 170, 172).

<sup>1041</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

experienced by that friend, a woman known in the poem as May.<sup>1042</sup> That friend was Marilyn Buck, an activist imprisoned in 1985 for her role in aiding the escape of Assata Shakur (another political prisoner, prison writer and poet). Buck was ‘the main influence on my thoughts about prison’ according to Howe.<sup>1043</sup> As well as being a carceral muse, Buck is a prison poet too in her own right, and aims through her prison writing to ‘to bear witness to the oppression of women as prisoners, colonised subjects and workers, and to advocate for women as subjects of our own histories’.<sup>1044</sup> Poems by Buck collected in *Wall Tappings* primarily record the dialogue and daily experiences of other prisoners, in an example of the collective aesthetic identified by Franklin. Howe’s more experimental lyrical project and the networks that surround it might begin to address the lacunae identified by Waldrop of being ‘a woman and/without history’ – although the difficulty of obtaining a copy of this out-of-print pamphlet replicates rather than undoes that lacuna. Howe’s book *Forged*, according to its author, considers how ‘the soul is *Forged* by the physical world’, and refers to ‘London’s seven prisons’: ‘Wandsworth Brixton Latchmere/Belmarsh Holloway Pentonville and Wormwood Scrubs’.<sup>1045</sup> Howe’s treatment of carcerality in *Forged* is framed by the lens of ‘forgery’, of faked identity or forged signature. For Scott Bentley, it is a title that calls into question the ‘very act of writing itself, since all language... is a forgery insofar as the signifier is but a copy of the signified’.<sup>1046</sup> Bentley’s poststructuralist reading of *Forged* might prompt us to consider the political implications of ‘forgery’. What does it mean to write *for* and *of* the incarcerated, and how do conditions of carcerality constitute or ‘forge’ the subject? The first of these questions is urgently present in a third book of prison poetry not written but *adapted* by Howe. Her introduction to and adaptations of literal translations of the prison-poems of two Nazi labour-camp survivors, Henia and Ilona Karmel, testifies to

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<sup>1042</sup> Scott Bentley, ‘On the Day the Blood Let Fall: The Mastery of Mystery in Fanny Howe’s [*SIC*] and *Forged*’, *Jacket*, 25 (February 2004) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/25/bentl-howe.html>> [accessed 23 April 2018].

<sup>1043</sup> Private email correspondence with Fanny Howe (12 May 2018).

<sup>1044</sup> Scheffler, p. 256.

<sup>1045</sup> Quoted in Bentley.

<sup>1046</sup> Bentley.

Howe's commitment to the preservation and dissemination of prison writing.<sup>1047</sup> Howe is an old friend of Ilona Karmel and the Polish manuscripts of the sisters' poems are held in her archive in Stanford. Howe's intention in adapting the poems, the first time they have been made available in English, was to turn or 'translate' the poems into 'forms of contemporary poetry', and so make a contribution to the 'poetry of resistance'.<sup>1048</sup> The Karmel sisters describe their poems as 'inscriptions on a prison wall', and Howe details the highly constrained conditions of their production, written on stolen worksheets and sewn into their clothing inside the forced labour camps of Skarzysko-Jamienna in central Poland and Buchenwald between 1943-1945.<sup>1049</sup> A letter written by Henia Karmel records that the disorder and chaos of their poetry resulted from the fact that 'there was simply no time in that place for scribbling [...] one didn't write in comfort [but] in the interminable nights, on a sweltering bed of planks, almost unconsciously, in a fever'.<sup>1050</sup> Howe writes of how she could only come to the experience of incarceration 'second-hand', 'by immersing myself in these poems as a stand-in for experience', acknowledging the distance between the layered acts of witness that mark this volume of poems.<sup>1051</sup> Henia Karmel's poem 'The Mark on the Wall' supplies one such act of witness, recording a repeated 'mark' on the prison wall, 'Praxia Dymitruk', the name of a Russian girl about whom no more is known, except that her own 'prison writing' forms the subject of Karmel's prison poem which then forms the material for Howe's adaptation – an extended act of witness, spatially and temporally, from the inside to the outside of the prison.<sup>1052</sup> To write or translate carceral poetics at 'second-hand' here works to break past the hermetic contexts of their production. Howe's translations of a historic form of incarceration come closer to Mendelssohn's and Moxley's own poetic projects around carcerality than the contemporaneous account given by *[SIC]*.

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<sup>1047</sup> Henia Karmel and Ilona Karmel, *A Wall of Two: Poems of Resistance and Suffering from Kraków to Buchenwald and beyond*, introduced and adapted by Fanny Howe, trans. Arie A. Galles and Warren Niesluchowski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>1048</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>1049</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>1050</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

<sup>1051</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>1052</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

There are a number of directions a study of carcerality in women's experimental poetry in the nineties could take. Eileen Myles' *Not Me* (1991) occasionally touches on the carceral ('Jean Harris is still not/free') and its obverse: 'How do/they get to feel so free? I am/trapped by love'.<sup>1053</sup> In *Maxfield Parrish* (1995) Myles describes her own long narrow poems as 'the slender bars I bend and shape in the name of my world', an apt description for Mendelssohn's own 'slender bars' of poetry.<sup>1054</sup> Myles also suggests that her poetics are emancipatory: 'my poems floated like clouds, globs of sunlessness, and I marked the/world free'.<sup>1055</sup> *School of Fish* (1997) poses the opposition 'Day?/or jail?'.<sup>1056</sup> In *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), Denise Riley seems to admit an overarching carcerality when she writes that 'I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either'.<sup>1057</sup> The poem 'Laibach Lyrik: Slovenia, 1992' makes such a condition concrete, stating that 'It is a lie that walls are coming down in Europe. We see them rise/and we are penned inside'.<sup>1058</sup> However, non-figurative conditions of incarceration are rare in Riley's work. Figuring the lyric 'I' as constituted by judicial procedure, in 'Dark Looks' Riley asks what 'forces the lyric person to put itself on trial...?'.<sup>1059</sup> In a previously uncollected poem, 'Affections of the Ear', Riley takes the mythical figure of Echo as a trope for lyric, and revives the Romantic notion that '[a]ll I may say is through constraint'.<sup>1060</sup> Here, though, that Romantic notion of constraint is gendered and ironised. Echo is condemned forever to repeat the already-spoken, but nevertheless Riley finds a 'salutary agency' in the rich linguistic possibilities of that 'hapless repetition'.<sup>1061</sup>

More concrete poetic renderings of incarceration can be found in the work of Jennifer Moxley, who writes explicitly about incarceration both in a poem titled 'Cell #103', dedicated to the dissident Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, and at greater length in

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<sup>1053</sup> Eileen Myles, *I must be living twice: new and selected poems 1975-2014* (London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2016), pp. 76, 87.

<sup>1054</sup> Myles, p. 183.

<sup>1055</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1056</sup> Myles, p. 199.

<sup>1057</sup> Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>1058</sup> Ibid., p. 30. In 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric', Kinnahan argues that 'Laibach Lyrik' is a 'wrenching of the transcendent urge of conventional lyricism', p. 659.

<sup>1059</sup> Riley, *Selected Poems*, p. 74.

<sup>1060</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>1061</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, pp. 156, 138.



*Enlightenment Evidence*, which gives voice to the imprisoned Rosa Luxemburg – a figurehead, to recall chapter one, of mobilised melancholy. In ‘Cell #103’, Moxley poses the half-serious question, ‘[h]ow many years locked up/does it take to create a Revolutionary? How many a poet?’, locating the prison as a politicising and creative site.<sup>1062</sup> 103 was the number of the young Mayakovsky’s cell in Butryka prison in 1909, and Moxley cites Mayakovsky’s prison poem about cell 103 as a source for her own, one carceral poem nested within another.<sup>1063</sup> The lasting trauma of imprisonment marks Moxley’s poem: ‘With our penal system/we shall give to you [...] something to keep/for your memory’s permanent damage’. Lasting trauma is only one of a long list of the ‘things’ the penal system ‘gives’, along with ‘punishment’, ‘an alternate economy’, ‘prepared food’ and ‘allotted time’. The list-like, narrow structure of the poem – not unlike Myles’ ‘slender bars’ – replicates something of the narrow rigidity of a cell. Moxley read this poem aloud to inmates of Missouri’s Bonne Terre prison in 2013, and was asked how she ‘got it so close’.<sup>1064</sup> Her response was to cite a proximity of experience via literary or familial sources: through the writings of revolutionaries, poets and her own imprisoned brother’s letters.

In Moxley’s *Enlightenment Evidence*, the lived experience of incarceration, rather than its legacy or aftermath, finds inscription. Moxley borrows ‘heroines from a foreign landscape’, in this case the imprisoned Luxemburg’s love letters to Leo Jogiches.<sup>1065</sup> Similarly, Mendelssohn’s *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue* voices the imprisoned desires of another ‘heroine from a foreign landscape’: Clara Westhoff, Rainer Maria Rilke’s wife. There are multiple intersections between Mendelssohn and Moxley’s work. Both are preoccupied with questions of incarceration, itinerancy, the failure of art, and the gendered fallout of involvement in resistance movements. More than this, their approaches to the poetic line are contiguous. Moxley has written of how *Enlightenment Evidence* is an experiment

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<sup>1062</sup> Moxley, ‘Cell #103’, *Tender Buttons Omnibus: The First 25 Years of Tender Buttons Press 1989-2014*, ed. Lee Ann Brown and Katy Bohinc (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 2016), p. 314.

<sup>1063</sup> ‘Cell #103’, *Jennifer Moxley*, 3 July 2015 <<http://jennifermoxley.com/?p=563>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

<sup>1064</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1065</sup> Jennifer Moxley, *Often Capital* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2005).

in poetic line, and Mendelssohn's oscillation between long, loose lines and leaner fragments is the result of some years' experimentation with the form of what she called 'the open sentence'.<sup>1066</sup> In the previous chapter, I defined the 'open sentence' as a diffuse term of grammar or penalty, and a space of limited emancipation. In this chapter, I attempt a slightly different reading of 'the open sentence', and take it to refer to a paradoxical term of concurrent openness and closure. There is a return in these two pamphlets to the tradition identified by Gilbert and Gubar of the 'uniquely female' tradition of writing incarceration, and an extension of this tradition into a more collective aesthetic that derives – at least in part – from the tradition of Afro-American prison writing. The extension of this earlier tradition crucially moves us closer towards an understanding of gendered forms of imprisonment as a social condition, not an individual phenomenon. Mendelssohn and Moxley realise a not-quite collective but certainly *pluralistic* aesthetic in part through the form of the experimental lyric biography, and in part through their participation in a movement in the nineties towards 'opening-up' in feminist politics and in experimental poetics, both of which I shall go on to discuss.

## Part 2: Opening-up

Opening-up, on the level of the national, the political, of poetic form or the individual subject, frames Mendelssohn's and Moxley's lyrical projects in the nineties. These projects were not conducted in isolation. According to its publisher Wendy Mulford, the transatlantic anthology *Out of Everywhere* intended to 'open up closed systems of signification' and actively involve its readers in this process of opening-up.<sup>1067</sup> Mulford, like Huk, is a key facilitating figure in this history. Her expansion of the reading community beyond national borders, through projects such as *Out of Everywhere*, increased her British contemporaries'

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<sup>1066</sup> Letter to Mulford, 20 September 1991, SxMs109/3/A/1/39.

<sup>1067</sup> Wendy Mulford, *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry*, ed. Maggie O'Sullivan (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996), p. 239.

exposure to work by experimental American poets.<sup>1068</sup> There is a significant cross-over between the contributors to *Out of Everywhere* and those who contributed to or are featured in Huk's *Assembling Alternatives*, an edited collection of work that emerged from the conference of the same name. Americans Carla Harryman and Kathleen Fraser, Canadian Lisa Robertson, British Denise Riley and French-Norwegian Caroline Bergvall feature in both publications, and are representative of what Huk calls the 'transnational' – although most, it is important to note, are white. One exception is the Tobago-born Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, whose essay opens with the question: 'Why does a black woman like yourself write the kind of [complex and abstract] poetry you do'.<sup>1069</sup> Her answer to herself is that her 'profound distrust' of language derives from a 'historic distrust' of colonial language.<sup>1070</sup> The 'transnational' poetics of the nineties is structured by the exclusion of women poets of colour. Yet a distrust of the obscurities and effacements of experimental poetry troubles feminist as well as postcolonial theorists. Mendelssohn and Moxley are representative of a feminist avant-garde that sought to resist – to break out from – dominant modes of poetic expression without relinquishing a feminist politics. As Mendelssohn wrote to Huk: 'It is strange that the artist's vision, which is a traditional right, is stopped and deconstructed at precisely the time when women are moving into full emancipation'; and for Moxley, 'in the Western world, as soon as women started to be enfranchised and able to have selves, then it became unfashionable [...] that's not a good deal!'.<sup>1071</sup> Mendelssohn and Moxley compactly allude both to the gains and transformations achieved by the women's movement and to the rise of deconstructive, poststructuralist thinking that profoundly questioned the possibility of stable 'selves', identities, representation or the category 'woman'.

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<sup>1068</sup> Linda Kinnahan, 'Feminist Experimentalism, Literary History and Subjectivity', in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 275-283 (p. 279).

<sup>1069</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Interview with an Empire', in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 195-206 (p. 195).

<sup>1070</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>1071</sup> Letter to Huk, undated, SxMs109/3/A/1/20. Scott Thurston, *Talking Poetics: Dialogues in Innovative Poetry*, with Karen Mac Cormack, Jennifer Moxley, Caroline Bergvall & Andrea Brady (Bristol: Shearsman, 2011), p. 61.

Questions of lyric subjectivity, the role of feminism in recent experimental poetry, and the ways in which linguistically innovative writing engages with the political are large and contentious. The nineties, from a feminist perspective, have been variously described as a period during which feminism was considered to be ‘outdated’, its goals achieved and its battles largely won; as a time of the co-option of the ‘disputatious and contentious’ heart of feminism by individualistic capitalism; as a time of antagonism between anachronistic feminist theory and the rise of queer theory; and a period of high theory and reflexivity.<sup>1072</sup> Angela McRobbie examines the ‘post-feminism’ of the nineties and argues that elements of feminism, such as empowerment and choice, were taken up by the media and the state and converted into a much more ‘individualistic’ discourse that not only ran counter to a spirit of feminist collectivity but, through the placatory granting of financial and sexual freedoms, prevented the rise of a new women’s movement.<sup>1073</sup> More hopefully, McRobbie points towards and participates in the shift within feminist thinking towards a more Foucauldian understanding of non-centralised power structures that enables an analysis of the ‘multiplicity of ways’ in which feminism is co-opted, and ‘the consent and participation of young women [...] sought’.<sup>1074</sup> In her argument, the granting of wage-earning capacity is itself a ‘new constraining form [...] of gender power’, constraint masked as emancipation.<sup>1075</sup> McRobbie mixes deep pessimism (an ‘obsession with consumer culture’ is seen as ‘playing a vital role in the undoing of feminism’) with celebration of the intersectional work of theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler.<sup>1076</sup> McRobbie turns to Butler’s book *Antigone’s Claim* for a correlative, carceral account of the ‘displacement of feminism as a political movement’: just as Antigone is cast out and entombed in retribution for her rebellion, feminism has to be likewise ‘entombed’ for ‘social organisation to once again become legible’.<sup>1077</sup>

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<sup>1072</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>1073</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>1074</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 13.

<sup>1075</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>1076</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>1077</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Terms of carcerality and opening-up are present in the work of several feminist scholars of the nineties. Clare Hemmings similarly characterises feminism in carceral terms as both ‘caught and freeing’, arguing that while feminist theory is ‘certainly bound up in global power relations’, it also has the potential to ‘break open those relations’.<sup>1078</sup> Hemmings here refers to the way in which gender equality at the end of the twentieth century is secured as the preserve of Western capitalist democracies and a marker of progress in order to shore up the opposition between the ‘liberal’ West and ‘patriarchal’ non-Western cultures.<sup>1079</sup> The project of Hemming’s study is to ‘realign the political grammar’ of decade-bound feminist narratives, or, in other words, to examine how dominant discourses around feminism are constructed, and to seek ways in which to make those discourses more accountable and politically transformative: to break them open.<sup>1080</sup> Victoria Hesford, in her study *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (2013), similarly looks to track and excavate the formation of feminist narratives by turning to the rhetorical strategies of the movement.<sup>1081</sup> Hemmings, like Hesford, is sceptical about attempts to divide the feminist past into neat and schematic decades and aims instead for a ‘reflexive Western feminist accountability that shuttles back and forth between past and present in order to imagine a future that is not already known’.<sup>1082</sup> Turn-of-the-century accounts of prison writing and its reception invoke the discrete division into decades that Hemmings and Hesford oppose:

Public reception of prison writing over the past twenty five years parallels the plunging and rearing trajectory of attitudes towards prisoners we have seen: enthusiasm and broad based support in the seventies, doubt growing in the eighties, cynicism dominating in the nineties, and beginning to give way at century’s end.<sup>1083</sup>

As I shall go on to show, Mendelssohn’s and Moxley’s lyrical biographies challenge a schematic and individualistic approach to accounts of gender and incarceration by re-

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<sup>1078</sup> Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>1079</sup> Hemmings, p. 9.

<sup>1080</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>1081</sup> Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>1082</sup> Hemmings, p. 3.

<sup>1083</sup> Chevigny, p. xix.

imagining the lyric subject as plural and transhistorical, and realising a reflexive relationship with the past. Where McRobbie identifies subjectivity as a 'focal point for feminist interest' in the nineties, Hemmings asks what *is* the subject of feminist theory, and finds postmodern and poststructural feminism, with its post-identity politics, strangely subjectless.<sup>1084</sup> The 'subjectlessness' of poststructural feminisms, for Hemmings, is in part an effect of the separation of this theoretical tradition from the historical contests and struggles that form its own inclusions and exclusions. Experimental feminist poets and their critics have grappled with the problematic of *the subject* or *subjectivity*, which is both ineradicably present and 'strangely' absent in feminist theory at the end of the twentieth century.

'Opening-up' in experimental poetics has been considered as closely related to representations of the subject of feminist theory. In the mid-to-late nineties, opening-up in experimental poetry takes the form of a turn towards the rehabilitation and reinscription of the de-valued and discarded lyrical 'I'. Critics have sought to reclaim the lyrical 'I' as an expression of 'degraded' female subjectivity, or to reconfigure, as Gillian White does, our notions of the lyric subject entirely (*Lyric Shame*, 2005); Clair Wills locates the breakdown between the public and private, that is the opening-up of the social to domestic or private concerns, as a site of emancipatory potential for new forms of interiority that reconfigure the lyric self; and Steve Evans traces a movement in experimental poetry from the primacy of the linguistic through the seventies and eighties to the primacy of the social in the nineties.<sup>1085</sup> The move towards the social, towards practice, and away from theory, rehabilitates lyric forms such as direct address and re-engages with the lyric 'I'. Evans takes Moxley's nineties' work, such as *Enlightenment Evidence*, as exemplary of the turn to the lyrical 'I' and the correspondent opening-up of experimental poetry and its subjects. What is peculiar to Moxley's and Mendelssohn's work is that the movement of prosodic 'opening-

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<sup>1084</sup> McRobbie, p. 13; Hemmings, p. 7.

<sup>1085</sup> Kinnahan, p. 277; Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice', *Critical Quarterly* 36.3 (September 1994): 34-52 (p. 39); Evans, 'The American Avant-Garde after 1989: Notes toward a History', from *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 86-113 (p. 92).

up' takes place under conditions of carcerality or constraint. Their poetry offers a conception of subjectivity that is constituted by conditions of carcerality, even as it articulates a new, transhistorical and tentatively plural form of lyric interiority. This is the ambiguous poetic mode, as I understand it, which Mendelssohn terms the 'open sentence', a mode of expression that refers not only to experimental language use but to an indeterminate and overarching term of imprisonment.

## 2.1 *Enlightenment Evidence*

The wryly titled *Enlightenment Evidence* is a poetic sequence drawn from Moxley's reading of Rosa Luxemburg's letters to her lover and political comrade Leo Jogiches, Luxemburg's biography, and the first Gulf War, which formed the backdrop to the poem's composition. Luxemburg is something of a figurehead of the feminine carceral. She is the subject of another poem by Mulford, and Jackie Wang invokes Luxemburg in her recent study *Carceral Capitalism* (2018), quoting one of her prison letters to demonstrate how '[a]lone in your cell, your body became pure nerve'.<sup>1086</sup> Carceral spaces frame Moxley's text, which opens with the line 'red room, it means nothing other than resistance,' and closes with the admission that 'as yet was my prison unmindful'.<sup>1087</sup> The 'red room' is not a single or literal carceral space; the colour and the alliteration replicate a popular pseudonym for Luxemburg, 'Red Rosa', but Moxley's reworking evokes something more claustrophobic and confining, perhaps a cell, or perhaps another (hot, intensive) interior space. Rooms appear several times throughout *Enlightenment Evidence*. A few stanzas later, 'a green wall' is identified as 'that binder of rooms', the cell-like space of the room itself 'bound' or imprisoned by a surrounding wall.<sup>1088</sup> 'Influence' is another wall 'that kept things/physical', abstract nouns made figuratively concrete.<sup>1089</sup> '[D]omestic settings', 'behind these bars', 'the divided pacing

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<sup>1086</sup> Mulford, p. 44; Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT/Semiotext(e), 2018), pp. 298, 304-307.

<sup>1087</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, pp. 29, 53.

<sup>1088</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>1089</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

of room to room' and 'endless derivations of rented rooms' give a sense of inescapable interiority.<sup>1090</sup> Working against these closed spaces, the entire sequence is enjambed, unstopped and sentence-less, an open structure or, as Moxley puts it, 'open field', not unlike Mendelssohn's 'open sentence'. The phrase 'open field' opens and closes the third stanza of the sequence, facing a stanza that is bookended by 'must I be imprisoned' and 'my prison garden'. Here, we know that that 'I' refers to a fictionalised Luxemburg. A dialectic between closure and openness is suggested by the spatial organisation of the page. A 'field' and a 'cell' are not in binary oppositions to each other, one open, one closed. An open page is a bounded form, and spaces large and small are bound by boundaries and borders.

*Enlightenment Evidence* expresses its own dialectical relation to space in terms of 'border flux' and an 'endless threshold', juxtaposing apparently paradoxical terms.<sup>1091</sup>

Dialectical inversion, or as the poem would have it 'flip the dialectic', is central to Moxley's 'interrogation of what underground living – political, poetic -- does to those whose untimely ideals drive them to it'.<sup>1092</sup> Dialectics and the lyric 'we' converge in the following lines:

what a horror the forever treadable, flip  
the dialectic and we are the Freikorps hitting  
skulls in the Hotel Eden, exposing weakness  
through tiny increments of shifting power  
and strength, our imagined finish line  
is the end of reason<sup>1093</sup>

The racy enjambment of these lines, here as throughout *Enlightenment Evidence*, is relentless and accumulative in its effect. The pervasiveness of 'horror' is coded through the poem's persistent rhythm and enjambed form. Heavy consonants ('treadable' 'hitting', 'Eden', 'power', 'end') reinforce this sense of horror, in contrast to the lighter, clipped consonance of 'flip/the dialectic'. Flipping the dialectic is an almost playful move that paradoxically

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<sup>1090</sup> Ibid., pp. 34, 38, 41, 53.

<sup>1091</sup> Ibid., pp. 42, 53.

<sup>1092</sup> Evans, p. 105.

<sup>1093</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, p. 46.



produces a horror-filled moment of identification with the Freikorps, the private right-wing death squads who murdered Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1919. At the same time as invoking the Freikorps, Moxley also invokes the plural third-person 'we'. But it is not clear who is included in this 'we', which is a less stable category for Moxley than for Huggins. An exploration of how and what the Freikorps signify might tell us more.

The psyche of the Freikorps has been theorised by Klaus Theweleit as a violent blend of 'horror' and desire. The Freikorps fought the communists, nationalists, and the German working class, but in Theweleit's psychoanalytical account, their special targets were Red Army riflewomen – legendarily more brutal than their male counterparts.<sup>1094</sup> Theweleit turns to the literature (novels and autobiographies, written specifically for publication and propaganda purposes) of the Freikorps where bloody confrontations with Red women are frequently and graphically depicted. In one novel, Luxemburg's murder is invoked by a Communist woman, herself later killed at gunpoint, who cries 'Do you want to kill me too, the way you did Rosa Luxemburg?'.<sup>1095</sup> For Theweleit, the act of killing is a form of libidinal release from the threat of dissolution these women and their sexuality pose – and is thus a simultaneously erotic and fearful act.<sup>1096</sup> Luxemburg is invoked again by the anti-Semitic German General Maercker, who addresses the men of his Freikorps with the claim that 'Rosa Luxemburg is a she-devil [...] [She] could destroy the German Empire today and not be touched; there is no power in the Empire capable of opposing her'.<sup>1097</sup> Not only Luxemburg's gender but her race determine her excessively destructive power: 'the beautiful Jewess', according to Theweleit, is 'a special case of the woman with the penis': the armed or otherwise threatening woman represented as castrating, sensuous, engulfing and barbaric in the literature of the Freikorps.<sup>1098</sup> Race is as significant, here, as gender. Many of the Freikorps were later recruited by the Nazis. Barbara Ehrenreich affirms Luxemburg's

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<sup>1094</sup> Daniela Gioseffi, *Women on War: An International Anthology of Women's Writings from Antiquity to the Present*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), p. 76.

<sup>1095</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 178.

<sup>1096</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>1097</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>1098</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

mythos ‘as the most potent and horrifying of the “Red women”’.<sup>1099</sup> Flip the dialectic: could this be read as, invert the object that consciousness claims to know? Rosa not as a persecuted radical who died in conditions of struggle, but as a terrible, destructive power by virtue of her gender, race and politics? What might be gained from this epistemological and subjective flip, not only from Luxemburg to Freikorps, but from ‘I’ to ‘we’? This flip connects the historical subject to her author, her reader, even her murderers, a pluralism that compels *because* it horrifies. Evans, writing on Moxley, finds that ‘the more startling device involves a transhistorical doubling or fusion that effectively renders the first-person pronoun choral/plural’.<sup>1100</sup> ‘We’ may not want this identification, but as readers, ‘we’ are then compelled to recalibrate our own degree of identification.

The lines that complete this stanza perform another kind of flip, from Freikorps fantasies to:

the irresistible tantalization  
of presence, lips pressed together open  
to eat and are nourished at the expense  
of ideas, but it feels delicious the illicit  
taste of you right now, please send me  
one hundred flowery lines while you’re away  
for this resistance is so lonely I shall surely  
die of my own righteousness<sup>1101</sup>

At the level of sound, this stanza moves from the abrasive plosives of ‘flip’, ‘dialectic’ and ‘hitting’, to the mellifluous sibilance of ‘pressed’, ‘delicious’ and ‘righteousness’; at the level of address, from the third person to the first; at the level of content, from fascist death squads to love letters. The poem twists from the horror of ‘hitting skulls’ at ‘Hotel Eden’, the inaptly-named military headquarters where Luxemburg was murdered in 1919, through to the erotics of ‘irresistible tantalization’ and ‘illicit/taste’, that is, Luxemburg’s desire for the distant Jogiches. ‘Politics complicate’, writes Moxley in her afterword to the chapbook, ‘and sometimes destroy desire’.<sup>1102</sup> It could be added that the prison constricts and frustrates

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<sup>1099</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>1100</sup> Evans, p. 104.

<sup>1101</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, p. 46.

<sup>1102</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

desire. Often writing from prison, Luxemburg frequently expressed her frustration at Jogiches' dedication to the political to the exclusion of all else. To give one example from her letters:

I sense that every word concerning the most stupid business is twice, no ten, a hundred times more interesting to you than my pouring out my whole heart to you. Mention the PPS [Polish Socialist Party], and your eyes light up. Write about myself, that I'm tired, that I miss you, and it's quite different.<sup>1103</sup>

Although this letter dates from 1895, some twenty-four years before Luxemburg's death, one of its lines is embedded directly into *Enlightenment Evidence*: 'I will beat you soundly', Luxemburg's loving threat to Jogiches, in the source text reads 'with a rug beater', and in Moxley's, 'with unity whims', the domestic object transliterated into spontaneous desire for union.<sup>1104</sup> Inscribing Luxemburg's attempt to 'blend her political and intellectual work [...] with some semblance of emotional validation in her present life' as poetic practice, Moxley's enjambed lines pull together these stark contrasts of sound, voice and theme.<sup>1105</sup> Oppositions are thus held together and brought into radical contact that negates but also sustains. As Moxley's Rosa puts it: 'lips pressed together open/to eat and are nourished at the expense of ideas'. The opening-up here operates between prison cell and the world beyond its walls, between bodily needs and ideology, gender politics and revolutionary politics, and is predicated upon a demand for emotional intimacy that has historically been figured as female in our culture.

To bring Mendelssohn and the scene of the prison into dialogue with Moxley, Luxemburg and gender politics is to reconsider lyrical crossings between figurative and literal incarceration. Moxley's *Enlightenment Evidence* makes a transfer between Luxemburg's letters and Moxley's poetry, enacting an exchange between non-literary and literary documents, a poetic practice that I have traced back through the work of feminist

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<sup>1103</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, *Comrade and Lover: Rosa Luxemburg's Letters to Leo Jogiches*, ed. Elizabeta Ettinger (London: Pluto Press, 1981), p. 17.

<sup>1104</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, p. 53.

<sup>1105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

forerunners such as Muriel Rukeyser and Nancy Cunard. Andrea Brady has recently spoken of the need to avoid the suggestion of a continuum between metaphorical and literal constraints, and how the ‘fact and image of carcerality complicate the history of lyric’.<sup>1106</sup> In Brady’s argument, the much-used lyric ‘trope’ of the prison, or the valorisation of the prison as an inherently productive creative space, risks obscuring real conditions of constraint. Certainly, prison proved a productive intellectual space for Luxemburg. Her biographer writes of how ‘prison life, instead of stifling her, in fact enabled her to reach a spiritual and emotional maturity which is remarkable’.<sup>1107</sup> Mendelssohn, as we know, found it impossible to write in prison, contesting the emancipatory capacities often ascribed to lyric poetry. Her ‘heroine from a foreign landscape’ similarly experiences paralysis, rather than productiveness, as an effect of the lived experience of constraint.

## 2.2 *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue*

The pamphlet *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue* is made up of seven separate poems. Diverse in their prosody, subject matter and form, one of the threads that does connect almost all of these poems is that of incarceration. Connection *despite* diversity is itself a concern of Mendelssohn’s. The pamphlet’s epigraph stages a dialogue between the two ‘characters’ or lyric subjects (‘Bernache’ and ‘viola’) of two of her earlier pamphlets, *Bernache Nonnette* and *viola tricolor*. *Parasol* emerges out of this dialogue between poetic personae, introduced by the earliest of Mendelssohn’s published pamphlets, “Viola”:

V. peeled away her face furniture with a suitably pained  
upper crust grimace. “Listen B.N. - their voices are  
pale from distance. Here – use this.....”<sup>1108</sup>

<sup>1106</sup> Andrea Brady, ‘Lyric Insides: Poetry and Prison’, given at *Outside-in/Inside-out: A Festival of Outside and Subterranean Poetry*, 5 October 2016.

<sup>1107</sup> J.P. Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 652.

<sup>1108</sup> Epigraph, *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue*. (henceforth *PA*).

The first poem is a fragmented, associative lyric which repeatedly exclaims ‘Oh I really must/Break out from my more nothing/Mirroring back two ways’, in an expression of opening up or ‘breaking out’ of the speaking ‘I’. ‘Mirroring back two ways’ describes the meta-poetic set-up (*Parasol* reflects both *Bernache* and *viola*) and a backwards and forwards movement into history and back into the present characteristic of Mendelssohn’s poetry. A reference to Gramsci also features directions, ‘Take the third turning past/The roundabout (on Gramsci)’, and brings with it the suggestion of Gramscian prison writing, reinforced by references to a ‘strange case of Kidnap’ and a ‘[p]anopticonic Belvedere’ that is somehow related to the ‘Roundabout’s solar heating’. Roundabouts, like panopticons, are circular in structure and Mendelssohn’s capitalisation of ‘Belvedere’ suggests that this is a reference to the Cortile del Belvedere, a courtyard of the Vatican, whose enclosed and symmetrical space might well be described, anachronistically, as ‘panopticonic’. We are presented with a surreal topology – Gramscian roundabouts, panopticonic architecture – of carceral structures. The next poem, ‘the chantral grey’, introduces the character of a boy and describes how ‘in chains he was brought in’, making of this boy another carceral subject. The ‘her’ of the second part of ‘the chantral grey’ is also subject to carceral constraints specifically designed to stifle her expression:

This was the age of people & not writers in newspapers & now is not.  
Now the compost has fallen and squashed the one without words  
Who keeps her face still being used to vigilant checks on her moods  
In case of expression and other things that guardians of genius oppress  
with locks & chains & screens & electric waves & covens  
With tapes & gloves, scarves, daggers, carriages  
And marriages, priests & leases, dregs & segs, and silencers.

The invocation of an age of ‘writers in newspapers’ is reminiscent of Apollinaire (‘for prose you have the newspapers’) writing at the beginning of the century.<sup>1109</sup> The poem offers a whole litany of constraints, from the gatekeeping ‘guardians of genius’ (reminiscent of the highly gendered canon-formation of modernism) to more conventional ‘locks & chains’; the apparatus of surveillance indicated by ‘screens & electric waves’; the secrecy and intrigue

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<sup>1109</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Zone’, *Selected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 6-7.

suggested by ‘gloves, scarves, daggers’; and the more archaic confines implied by ‘carriages/And marriages, priests & leases’. Often violent curtailments of speech are invoked throughout *Parasol*. In ‘damned channel’, ‘Phone’ is located as the ‘symbol for/voice’, voice reduced to icon; and ‘my throat to be slit’ is aligned with the restrictions of ‘Curfew’ and ‘Inquisition’. The landscape of carcerality stretches backwards and forwards in time, and its chief effect is to silence not ‘I’ but ‘her’.

The next poem, a long, more regular lyric titled ‘fragment; redundance; wordsworth’ is more antagonistic, riven with rhetorical questions (‘What did he care though?’, ‘who was I?’) and negative assertions of the speaking ‘I’: ‘I cannot’, ‘I act dumb’. The poetic speaker issues retorts and commands to a second person: ‘How Dare you – tell me to Stop’, and ‘Don’t write into me’. The ‘wordsworth’ of the title may refer to William, or to Dorothy, another overshadowed and facilitating woman in the history of literature, whose writings Mendelssohn ‘always had under her arm’.<sup>1110</sup> The lines ‘I wondered why &/What her world was worth’, with their play on ‘worth’ and the feminine pronoun ‘her’, might support such a reading. In her title and in the line ‘Stupid I, who gave to him “the/Sweet creative voice of gratitude”’ Mendelssohn explicitly alludes to the (William) Wordsworth poem known only as ‘fragment’, which ends: ‘Is the name of friend/Known to the poor man? Whence is he to hear/The sweet creative voice of gratitude?’ In this poem, Wordsworth imagines the constraints and obligations of poverty, and the consequent ‘psychic oppression bound to pressing material urgencies’.<sup>1111</sup> ‘There is no freedom’, observes the poem, ‘in his [the poor man’s] love’. In Mendelssohn’s ‘fragment’, the ‘Stupid I’ *gives* the ‘Sweet creative voice of gratitude’ that Wordsworth’s poor man looks for to no avail. Having *given* a voice, stanzas later, the poem urges the embattled woman writer to ‘speak, poetess, speak in the end-/what has been Taken -/will always be being spoken to you’. Voice, spoken language, is not only given and taken; speech is also worn ‘as a Cloth’, words are ‘Armed’ and come ‘storming in’. The porosity between speaker and spoken, the

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<sup>1110</sup> Harries, p. 11.

<sup>1111</sup> Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 71.

body and the text, person and language, is acute in this poem. Wearing language like a garment, on the body, is a substitute for curtailed speech: 'I could not ask/& cannot say but wear speech as a Cloth'; and '[W]rite into the body of the language-' the poem requires, 'Don't write into me'. Mendelssohn's 'fragment' imagines the closeness between language and person as generative of the subject: 'this working in-to paper [...] was why, after too long I became/despite louder, false reports,/myself'. The process of becoming-subject is hemmed in on all sides. Firstly, by the expectation of compliance: 'Expected to be, compliant, &/Ready for restructuring/How very unlike Love of Subject'; and secondly, by a criminal conviction: 'Having found no evidence/Apart from Knowledge of my existence/Which had been enough to convict me'. The literary canon, too, defines the perimeters of the poem's strategies of identification. A parallel drawn between the 'I' and 'The deposited Thorn' recalls Wordsworth's poem 'The Thorn' in which an abandoned woman is closely associated with a weathered thorn bush – another transhistorical identification. The 'Stupid I' is constituted by a plurality of other subjects and an array of constraints, from Romantic poetry to legal conviction. The twists and turns of the speaking 'I' in 'fragment', from direct address to reflexivity, disrupts a conventionally Romantic lyric subjectivity in which the facilitating presence of the (feminised) 'other' brings that subjectivity into being – as Dorothy's presence goes infamously unacknowledged until the very end of 'Tintern Abbey'.<sup>1112</sup> The 'Stupid I' of Mendelssohn's poem is that facilitating, historical presence, speaking out against and rupturing its silencing through recourse to a plural rather than singular 'she'.

There is an important inversion at work between Moxley's voicing of an imprisoned Rosa Luxemburg and Mendelssohn's own biographical poem, 'Dyr Bul Shchyl', which voices Clara Westhoff and her state of marital imprisonment from the pamphlet *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue*. Given that we are dealing with poems in dialogue with texts and biographies, albeit experimental lyrical biographies, it is crucial to acknowledge Mendelssohn's experience of imprisonment alongside Luxemburg's. In neither

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<sup>1112</sup> Yousef, p. 126.

poets' work do subjects and speakers remain fixed: as in Moxley's incursion into the Rosa poems, 'may I borrow heroines from a foreign landscape', or 'Rosa I cannot reach you', and Mendelssohn's oscillation between the third and first person voice.<sup>1113</sup> Mendelssohn's heroine from a foreign landscape, not unlike Luxemburg, was trapped in a distant and often difficult relationship, not with a revolutionary, but with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke set the terms of their marriage early on, as a state in which 'each must be the guardian of the other's solitude'.<sup>1114</sup> Due to constraints financial, domestic and emotional, Westhoff felt imprisoned, unable to continue her work as a sculptor, and abandoned by her husband, who went to Paris and left her with their small child in a remote German village.<sup>1115</sup> Freedman recounts how Rilke's long letters 'did not compensate for [Westhoff's] own lack of freedom to live and work'.<sup>1116</sup> In a word, as Westhoff put it in a letter to a close friend, she was 'house-bound'.<sup>1117</sup> 'Dyr Bul Shchyl', a poem that is unusually grammatically conventional, immediately aligns the subject-position of 'wife' with the gradual erosion of Westhoff's artistic practice:

One day his wife had been asked to sculpt  
 She had been told to stop sculpting  
 she saw this sculpture in a book  
 her mind was overpowered by Apollo's torso

Apollo would not let her move her hands  
 She was a dead woman to him  
 Would she confess her sins or would she not  
 Before Apollo, before Delphi there was Orpheus<sup>1118</sup>

From line to line, there is a disjunction at the level of meaning, despite an apparent syntactical continuity. The level of coercion escalates through the stanza, from being *asked* to do something to being *told* to stop to being *overpowered* and physical paralysis. This

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<sup>1113</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, pp. 45, 43.

<sup>1114</sup> Ralph Freedman. *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press: 1998), p. 146.

<sup>1115</sup> Freedman, pp. 156-158, 263.

<sup>1116</sup> Freedman, p. 157.

<sup>1117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1118</sup> 'Dyr Bul Shchyl', *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue*.



immobilisation recalls the myth of Apollo and the nymph Daphne in which Apollo's desirous pursuit results in Daphne's transformation into a laurel-tree, a paradoxically rescuing and imprisoning paralysis. 'Apollo's torso' might allude to Rilke's own poem, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'; it might also recall the Apollo of the Belvedere, an ancient sculpture of Apollo installed in the Cortile del Belvedere in Rome, or the Belvedere torso, a fragmentary marble statue attributed to 'Apollonius' – both are well-known and influential works. The 'panopticonic Belvedere' of *Parasol's* opening lyric may then be buried in this highly intertextual reference: traces of carcerality disseminated transhistorically through works of art that 'overpower' the female artist.

Any stability of voice quickly breaks down through the revivification of Apollo to the introduction of the lyrical 'I' in the next stanza, which dislocates Westhoff's biographical contexts and Apollo's ancient ones into the contemporary:

I remember the convention & shrank, incapable  
Of forgetting the look in Clara Westhoff's eyes  
How could I explain that this is not America  
It seemed too dark and I did not want to go to Disneyland

The rupture in sense-making leaves the reader with fragments. 'Convention' somehow diminishes the speaker, and links itself through the processes of memory with 'the look in Clara Westhoff's eyes', a look which presumably reflects the constraints and deprivations straightforwardly conveyed by the following stanza:

She wanted Rilke back from Paris  
She was cold, it was damp in the house  
Their baby was coughing she was afraid

Mendelssohn's lyrical 'I' opens up Westhoff's nineteenth-century experience into its own, twentieth-century resistance to going 'to Disneyland', made synonymous here with America, which might recall or anticipate her own declined invitation to speak at the conference in New Hampshire. The final stanza lyrically expresses a condition of painful, unfulfilled desire

and an anxiety surrounding distance and proximity:

following a life full of desire  
 pressing the thorns on the stem of the rose  
 into her flesh hard bone  
 wondering why this german was long  
 anxious that the distance would be cut

There is a coalition between sense and sound in the final, abrupt syllable which contrasts sonically – if not semantically – with the long, resonant consonance and assonance between ‘desire’, ‘rose’, ‘flesh’ and ‘bone’. The ‘flowery’ is once more brought up against ‘hard bone’, ‘foreign heroine’ flipped across national and temporal borders, desire bound up with gender politics. The biography stretches here to accommodate Rilke, whose death from leukaemia was hastened when he pricked his hand on a thorn while gathering roses. Rilke’s courtship of Clara began with the gift of roses, and he composed poem after poem on roses throughout his life, including his own epitaph, which invokes this significant flower as ‘rose, o pure contradiction, desire’.<sup>1119</sup> We know from a letter sent by Naomi Segal, a modern languages scholar, that Mendelssohn was familiar with this very poem. Segal refers explicitly to a translation of Rilke’s ‘Rose, o pure contradiction’ in a letter dating from 1988.<sup>1120</sup> In Mendelssohn’s lyrical account, Rilke’s mythos is invoked in order to be transferred to Clara, the abandoned wife, the forgotten artist.

My reading of *Enlightenment Evidence* against *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue* demonstrates how Moxley and Mendelssohn were working along similar trajectories, articulating forms of female imprisonment via a temporally fluid, plural and even intersubjective aesthetic. The incursions of the lyric ‘I’ and other subject positions – biographical, historical – in their experimental lyrical biographies *open-up* the historical subject and linear chronologies. Both Moxley and Mendelssohn do so through poetic lines that follow conventions of grammar and sense-making – what Moxley terms ‘meaning-rich

<sup>1119</sup> Michael Wood, ‘His affairs with women were intense, literary and dominated by the word ‘soul’’, *Literary Review of Books*, 18.16 (22 August 1996).

<sup>1120</sup> Letter from Segal, 6 December, SxMs109/3/A/1/53.

syntax' – far more closely than other poetry later collected within the same volume, and written roughly contemporaneously.<sup>1121</sup> Yet moments of rupture and interruptions of the meaning-rich syntax persist, producing a dialectical movement between linguistic convention and experimentalism, free play and constraint. Both poets are concerned to confront the primacy of reason and Enlightenment modes of thought. 'Dyr Bul Shchyl' is also the title of the earliest and most famous poem written in *z̑aum* by Russian Futurist poet Alexei Kruschenykh. *Zaum* is a 'transrational' language characterised by an indeterminacy of meaning.<sup>1122</sup> The title is a transliteration (not a translation, as in *z̑aum* words have no definitive meaning) from the Russian.<sup>1123</sup> The name of Mendelssohn's lyrical biography might indicate the impossibility of conventional, expressive lyric. Moxley's own title stands as a challenge to Enlightenment modes of thought and their reliance on a dangerous positivism. This is a challenge which might derive from a feminist tradition that stands opposed to the primacy of reason and the intellect. Remember that the flipped Freikorps' vision is that of the 'end of reason', a form of transrationalism held out as the end to which syntactical order might provide part of the means. Much as accounts of 'women's experience' have forwarded feminism further towards the ideal of non-binary experience, the orderly syntax of lyrical biography might forward poetic subjectivity further towards an ideal of collective, rather than individuated, expression.

The tradition – if it can be termed as such – of feminist lyrical biography includes Muriel Rukeyser's 'Lives', a series of lyrical biographies of figures ranging from the physicist Willard Gibbs to the German artist Kathe Kollwitz to the Russian revolutionary Ann Burlak. The latter biography also makes a mention of Rosa Luxemburg, found after her death 'in the black canal'.<sup>1124</sup> Gander describes these biographies as a 'meeting of lives', as 'composite portraits', acts of 'profound identification' and an 'overcoming of otherness' by

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<sup>1121</sup> Moxley, *Often Capital*, p. 59. I'm thinking of Moxley's 'The First Division of Labour', and Mendelssohn's other poems from the *Parasol* pamphlet.

<sup>1122</sup> Tim Harte, *Fast forward: the aesthetics and ideology of speed in Russian avant-garde culture, 1910-1930* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), p. 80.

<sup>1123</sup> Harte, p. 256.

<sup>1124</sup> Rukeyser, 'Ann Burlak', *Collected Poems*, p. 191. This image circulates through the underground press in the seventies: the SN8DG reproduce an image of Luxemburg's body 'dragged from a canal... three weeks after her murder', in *If You Want Peace, Prepare for War*, p. 12.

bringing the past to bear upon the present.<sup>1125</sup> Moxley's and Mendelssohn's 'lyric biographies' might also be described in these terms – especially in their capacity to 'overcome otherness' by flipping their subjects and giving voice to the historically silenced 'she'. There is an explicitly gendered aspect, too, to Rukeyser's biographical projects. 'What would happen if a woman told the truth about her life?', Rukeyser writes in 'Kathe Kollwitz', answering immediately: 'The world would split open'.<sup>1126</sup> There is more to these lyrical biographies of and by women than a revisionist version of history; they break open their histories. Moxley strongly implies the extent to which the fate of the collective is bound up with the fate of the lyric 'I' in the lines 'may I borrow heroines from a foreign landscape/or must I feel akin to civil death'. 'Civil death' is a carceral state: a state in which the rights and freedoms of the citizen are withdrawn – a state disproportionately imposed upon people of colour, as well as women. As mentioned in the introduction, Davis records that the modern prison is premised on the confiscation of rights and liberties (such as the right to vote or to property) that historically women could not claim. Moxley suggests that civil death, whether physical imprisonment or conditions of gendered constraint, can be countered through a weave of choral, dialectical and transhistorical modes of address. Mendelssohn's and Moxley's lyrical biographies participate in a significant cultural intervention that is interested in the modulation between a rehabilitated lyric 'I' and the dispersed networks and pluralities that shape, constitute and gender that 'I'.<sup>1127</sup> This is not to claim an emancipatory capacity for their poetry, which articulates a deep consciousness of women as a constrained and silenced historical subject, integrated with a wariness of narrow identity categories, but the inscription of nested systems of oppression is itself a practice of opening-up the otherwise naturalised and invisible. To bring Mendelssohn's and Moxley's reflexive, pluralistic carceral poetics into contact is to assemble some - but not all - of the absences that structure the network of the transnational feminist avant-garde. Another, urgent absence takes us back to where this chapter began: to the poetry of the African-

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<sup>1125</sup> Gander, pp. 82, 93, 95.

<sup>1126</sup> *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 463.

<sup>1127</sup> See Kinnahan, p. 665.

American tradition, poetry written by those who belong to the group most likely to ‘serve sentences’ and least likely to be accorded a voice. Even as it participates in a more plural, African-American poetics of incarceration and opens-up its gendered subject, the network of feminist, carceral poetics discussed in this chapter remains exclusionary. The development of the carceral lyric in the nineties rattles the bars of Mill’s hermetic conception, but has yet to turn the key.

## Conclusion

What does Mendelssohn’s poetry have to tell us about the prison? As this study shows, her poetic representations of imprisonment deepen and extend our understanding of the gendered and – to a lesser extent – the racialised aspects of incarceration in its British and European contexts. Those gendered dimensions take many different forms. There are the masculine forms of poetic abstraction generated by the imprisoning legacy of left melancholy and the Spanish Civil War; the state and underground violence which holds Mendelssohn’s lyric subject ‘hostage’; the flawed equality laws and psychiatric interventions that shaped the conditions of women’s imprisonment in the seventies; and the social constraints that have long determined the different ways in which feminine, non-normative subjects experience ‘freedom’ and hence ‘imprisonment’. Mendelssohn’s representations of the Jewish carceral subject heighten our awareness of the racialised aspects of the prison, and of the perpetuation of those conditions which enabled racialised incarceration on a vast scale during World War II. The historical continuities her poetry inscribes continually reminds us that those incarcerating conditions reach forwards as well as backwards in time. Furthermore, as the comparative nature of my study shows, Mendelssohn’s representations of imprisonment and constraint were not formed in isolation, but draw on and extend the modernism, feminism and experimentalism of poets such as Cunard, Rukeyser and Moxley. My study has shown how the immediacy of Cunard’s Spanish Civil War poetry prefigures the temporal fluidity of Mendelssohn’s writing; how Rukeyser’s concentrationary poetics of

witness converge and diverge from Mendelssohn's own carceral poetics; and how Moxley's transhistorical and plural aesthetic resonates with the reflexive relation to the past that we find in Mendelssohn's lyric.

Yet, as Mendelssohn's poem 'digne' explicitly acknowledges, 'I do not run the prison system'. Poetry is powerless to intervene in the political and legal structures that adjudicate the penal system and put people in prison. It may be more plausible to imagine that poetry may influence the social mechanisms by which the prison is legitimated and accepted as an 'inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives', to reprise Angela Davis.<sup>1128</sup> But Mendelssohn's poetry has no grand aspirations towards prison abolition, nor is it an activist poetry, although we may find within it a poetics of action. What it does do is to demonstrate the close imbrication between linguistic imprisonment and other, more literal forms of imprisonment; to intimate some of the multiple ways in which the carceral is formative of the modern political subject; to extend the tradition identified by Gilbert and Gubar, of women writing incarceration; and to develop and contest the conception of poetry as a carceral medium. The imbrication between language and imprisonment is made most visible by Mendelssohn's sentence-play, which points up the patriarchal power invested in the sentences handed out by penal authorities. Mendelssohn's acknowledgement of how prison indelibly marks the modern, Western subject can be found throughout her work, from her Spanish Civil War poems to her concentrationary poetics to her inscriptions of the hostage. As the final chapter of this study re-capitulates, an extension of the tradition of women writing incarceration identified by Gilbert and Gubar is very much present in Mendelssohn's poetry. From the 'daughters of Spain' to the 'good little girls' of *viola tricolor* and Clara Westhoff, Mendelssohn dramatises forms of constraint which are not always strictly of the prison but which are far from abstract. The historical specificity of these forms of constraint distances them from nineteenth-century depictions of female imprisonment, although with the invocation of Westhoff, we find a return to those nineteenth-century roots. Shaped by a body of feminist thought, her inscriptions of a highly

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<sup>1128</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete.*, p. 9.

gendered and racialised carceral subject radically develop the Foucauldian insight that the modern carceral network entails a fragmentation of penal or disciplinary authority.

Mendelssohn's experimental inscriptions of incarceration constitute a significant addition to the literature of the prison, which is dominated by male writers and non-experimental texts.

What is more, her contestation of a solitary, Romantic conception of the carceral lyric paves the way for a form of carceral poetics which might re-negotiate the foundational lyric figures of freedom and constraint.

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