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**Care for Trapped Things: Literature and the Critique of Insurance**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis conducts a materialist analysis of 20th and 21st century literature and cinema in relation to the history of insurance practices. It begins with an introduction that examines the key elements of what François Ewald has called the “insurantal imaginary.” This introduction serves to establish what is at stake in the thesis as a whole, and establishes key theoretical reference points such as Marx and the Frankfurt School. Following this, I consider Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's long poem *Zong!* in relation to the history of transatlantic slavery, maritime insurance and contemporary North American mass incarceration. Chapter 2 examines the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann in relation to the post-war economic miracle in Germany and Austria. Chapter 3 examines the cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini in relation to Italian fascism, social security and shifting conceptions of risk. The final chapter examines the poetry of the British poet Sean Bonney in relation to austerity policies in the UK and the withdrawal of welfare in response to the 2008 financial crisis. The thesis concludes with a coda that reviews its key findings and reflects on the relationship between historical struggle and concept formation.

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This work is dedicated with love and gratitude to Patrick Rolfe (1987-2011) and Sean Bonney (1969 – 2019).

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*The securer is not secure.*

**Brecht**

## Introduction

### The Insurantal Imaginary

Insurance intensifies the form in which a thing exists. To insure a worker against workplace accidents is to naturalize her position as a worker, opposed to and dependent upon the means of production against which she requires protection. Likewise, to insure an object as a commodity is to affirm the fact that it has both an exchange value and a material body. Insuring an object, or a person invests one in the continuation of whatever social relations enable this object or person to bear value. Marx writes famously that “no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond.”<sup>1</sup> As an exclusively social quality, value is present only so far as the social relations which constitute it prevail. From this, it follows that to insure an object is to maintain an active interest in the continuation of the world in which that object has value.

Francois Ewald writes that “considered as a technology, insurance is an art of combining various elements of economic and social reality according to a specific set of rules”.<sup>2</sup> The forms that different modes of insurance take are determined by the relations of production within a particular society. Such relations inform what Ewald calls the “*insurantal imaginary*”, defined as “the ways in which, in a given social context, profitable, useful and necessary uses can be found for insurance technology.”<sup>3</sup> This imaginary determines what use can be made of the technologies of risk and actuarial calculation as they exist within a particular historical moment. In doing so, the insurantal imaginary determines what does and does not feature within such calculations: i.e., what can be designated as a risk that a thing may be insured against, as well as under what conditions an insurance claim may be valid, and under what conditions it may be deemed to be void. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the insurantal imaginary is explicitly concerned with particular social formations. The introduction of social insurance policies in Germany and Austria explicitly tied insurantal thinking to a “political imaginary”, establishing boundaries for legitimate social action and enforcing

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Francois Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchill, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1997), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Ewald, 198.



the limits of class through the allocation of injury compensation and minimal pension coverage.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the following century, risk calculations developed for actuarial purposes came to define a “new penology”, based on the identification of high-risk demographics located within urban areas.<sup>5</sup>

Insurance manifests a specific kind of rationality, one that “provides a kind of general principle for the objectification of things, people and their relations.”<sup>6</sup> The history of insurance involves a series of mutations within this rationality, mutations that take account of changes within social formations, intellectual concepts of right and freedom and the kind of technology available to formulate particular insurance claims. While this thesis does not attempt this, one of my basic contentions is that it would be possible to write a history of modernity by tracing changes and transformation in the thinking and practice of insurance and an accompanying understanding of what is meant by the term *security*.

M. NourbeSe Philip (1947-) Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973) Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) and Sean Bonney (1969-2019) are artists whose work intervenes in such a speculative history. While only Philip and Bachmann present explicit meditations on insurance per se, I argue that each of the four are concerned with aspects of the insurantal imaginary, both as it relates to the manner in which specific objects, and people, are “protected”, and also in terms of the insight that particular kinds of insurance give to the nature and structure of the social world in which they are employed. For each of the authors, the rationality of insurance is a vehicle for the perpetuation of catastrophe. This catastrophe has effects that radiate throughout history and that undermine any effort at coerced reconciliation. My chapters will attempt to demonstrate the manner in which a fidelity to the reality of such catastrophe is, in and of itself, a form of resistance, as well a precondition for the articulation of modes of community and protection that exist outside of, and are antagonistic towards, the limitations of actuarial rationality.

The rest of this introduction aims to sketch a conceptual framework through which one can understand the practice of insurance within a capitalist context. To do this, I will delineate what I take to be the key concepts necessary for the functioning and application

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<sup>4</sup> Ewald, 198.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm M. Feeley and Jonathan Simon, “The New Penology: Notes on the Emerging Strategy of Corrections and Its Implications,” *Criminology* 30, no. 4 (1992): 449–474, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01112.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Ewald, “Insurance and Risk”, 206.

of the insurantal imaginary. As the authors whom I consider produced their work under capitalist social relations and as, for me, the precise quality and contradictions of such relations are best elaborated in the writing of Karl Marx, I make frequent reference to Marx throughout the thesis. I do this even when discussing writers who profess little or no explicit interest in his thought.

### *Accident*

Human labour enacts a relationship to nature. In what follows, I am primarily inspired by Alfred Schmidt's writing on the relationship between humanity and nature, especially in his *The Concept of Nature in Marx*. In particular, I follow Schmidt's claim that labour, for Marx, is a transhistorical condition of human life and is necessarily conducted on and against a nature that remains, at least partly, outside of the human process of production. I am aware that commentaries exist that read Marx as suggesting that any focus on labour as trans-historical is mistakenly "essentialist", in that it takes a mode of life specific to capitalism and treats such a characteristic outside of its historical determinations. Such readings often build on Moishe Postone's claim argument that what Marx calls "abstract labour" is best understood as a historically specific form of social domination, and that the concept of "labour" per se, as it appears in *Capital* must be seen as a product of this form of mediation. Marina Vishmidt writes approvingly, for example that such a view of abstract labour as a "social mediation [...] obviates [...] the 'essentialist' stance frequently assigned to Marx's conception of labour as affirming a transhistorical constant of human interaction with the world."<sup>7</sup> While an affirmation of labour as an inherent transformative good may well be questionable, it remains the case that one finds unequivocal support for such an "essentialist" perspective throughout Marx's work. As such, the usefulness of Postone's reading of Marx for my present project is limited.

Such labour involves appropriating nature, transforming natural substance according to its own potentialities, and submitting it to human ends. The appropriation and transformation of nature takes place under specific social conditions, as determined by a particular mode of production. By transforming the material of nature into material intended to serve human needs, human activity both appropriates and humanizes nature.

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<sup>7</sup> Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production* (Leiden ; Boston, MA: BRILL, 2018), 65.

This activity engages nature, but also remains subservient to it, as it is never fully successful in transforming that which is not human into that which is completely amenable to human ends. Rather, Schmidt argues that, for Marx, a natural non-human kernel persists within any object of labour, meaning that this nature “cannot be totally dissolved into the historical processes of its appropriation [...]”.<sup>8</sup> A table may be shaped from wood and therefore no longer be immediately “natural”, but its quality of being irreducibly object-like is in no way changed by giving the matter from which it is composed a different form.

Nature is conceived as such a domain of unfreedom and as the realm of contingency. This contingency persists in appropriated nature in the form of the accident. Peter Ulrich Lehner argues that, in its basic form, an accident (*Unfall*) represents the “unforeseen” consequences of any particular labour process.<sup>9</sup> Marx writes about the impossibility of fully domesticating natural forces in *Capital: Volume III*, linking this immediately to a thinking of insurance. The passage begins with the claim that the defining qualities of the capitalist process of production are visible in the manner in which surplus labour is manifested within it:

Capital [...] pumps a definite quality of surplus-labour out of the direct producers, or labourers; capital obtains this surplus-labour without an equivalent, and in essence it always remains forced labour – no matter how much it may seem to result from free contractual agreement.<sup>10</sup>

Such surplus labour “*appears* as surplus-value, and this surplus value exists as surplus products.”<sup>11</sup> What is distinctive about the capitalist production process is not that it entails surplus-labour, that is, labour which is done over and above what is necessary for the satisfaction of needs. Rather, it is that such surplus-labour takes the form of surplus value produced through the production of commodities. Marx is quite clear that he does not consider it possible to abolish surplus-labour itself:

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<sup>8</sup> Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2014), 70.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Gerd Koch, *Kafkas Fabriken / bearbeitet von Hans-Gerd Koch und Klaus Wagenbach ; unter Mitarbeit von Klaus Hermsdorf, Peter Ulrich Lehner und Benno Wagner*, (Deutsche Schillergesellschaft: Marbach am Neckar, 2002), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 958.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, 958.

Surplus-labour in general, as labour performed over and above the given requirements, must always remain. In the capitalist, as well as in the slave system etc. it merely assumes an antagonistic form and is supplemented by the complete idleness of a stratum of society. A definite quantity of surplus-labour is *required as insurance* against accidents (*Zufalle*), and by the necessary and progressive expansion of the process of reproduction in keeping with the development of the needs and growth of the population, which is called accumulation from the point of view of the capitalist.<sup>12</sup>

*Zufalle* is translated here as *accidents*, but it could just as well be rendered as contingencies. Marx is not necessarily speaking of an accident that might befall a person such as a car crash, a severed limb resulting from a faulty machine, or a collapsed factory. Although this kind of accident, *Unfall*, may result from a *Zufall*, the latter does not necessarily carry negative connotations. Rather the word describes first and foremost the contingent, the arbitrary and the non-free, qualities associated with the natural. Insurance in this context is something that mediates between a human, planned and fully rational mode of social organization and the persistence of natural contingency within such organization. Such a mediation remains necessary in any conceivable social formation.

Marx considers both the accident and its mediation through insurance as permanent features of human interaction with nature. He goes as far as to state that it is one of the “civilizing” functions of capitalism to have generated social conditions in which such protective measures could be potentially combined with measures that would reduce, as far as possible, the amount of labour required to meet the needs of a population.<sup>13</sup> The so-called *realm of freedom* is predicated on the successful combination of these two elements:

Freedom [...] can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature.<sup>14</sup>

Some kind of insurance is, according to Marx, an essential constituent of the actualization of free human action in a rational intercourse with a nature that, in itself, cannot be made fully human. That the rationality of this intercourse does not fully humanize nature is, in

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, 958. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, 958.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, 959.

and of itself, not a criticism of the social framework Marx has in mind. Surplus-labour in the form of an insurance fund designed to protect a commonly held social wealth against the destructive potential of nature is a world away from surplus-labour generated by the werewolf hunger of capital for surplus-value.

The history of insurance under consideration in this thesis does not represent such a rational mediation. Rather, it expresses the persistence of natural, chaotic relations within human society in the form of a kind of “second nature.” Following from Marx’s understanding that the capitalist mode of production is one in which the economy dominates individuals as if it were a blind force of this very nature, thinkers in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, from Adorno and Horkheimer onwards, make consistent pejorative use of the metaphor of society as a kind of natural state. Horkheimer himself writes that “the process [of capitalist production] is accomplished not under the control of a conscious will but as a natural occurrence. Collective life results blindly, accidentally, and badly from the chaotic activity of individuals, industries and states.”<sup>15</sup> As Schmidt puts it, “In a wrongly organized society, the control of nature, however highly developed, remains at the same time an utter subjection to nature.”<sup>16</sup> Writing in the register of Adorno and Horkheimer, Werner Bonefeld states more recently that irrational methods for mediating the relationship between humanity and the natural world “are no less mythical” when they form a secular ‘logic of things’ that on pain of ruin judges the actions of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals.”<sup>17</sup> Within such a society, historical attempts to raise oneself over and above a chaotic realm of contingency expose people to random destruction in a manner that apes the blind dictates of the mythic fate from which they have tried to free themselves.

Institutions of insurance are exemplary of the wrongness of such an organisation of society. Adorno and Horkheimer characterize our world as one in which “Science stands in the same relationship to nature and human beings in general as insurance theory stands to life and death in particular. Who dies is unimportant; what matters is the ratio of incidences of death to the liabilities of the company.”<sup>18</sup> Contingency, fate and the accident are aspects of “natural” relations that, rather than being sublimated in capitalist

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<sup>15</sup> Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Werner Bonefeld, “Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Economic Objectivity,” *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 2 (1 April 2016): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695116637294>.

<sup>18</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 66.

modernity, are perpetuated in and through the means of “protection” which such a modernity employs. In his work on Kafka, Howard Caygill insists that “the world of insurance” is one which understands the accident as not simply a particular a danger “in itself”, stemming from a particular combination of events, but rather as something beholden to a “peculiar logic by which accidents obey rules and are, in some sense, necessary.”<sup>19</sup> Aside from an analysis of the conditions under which certain accidents occur, insurance must assume that accidents in general will always take place, that they form a kind of stochastic necessity within any plan or mode of production. The accident asserts a kind of ontological priority over and above its actual manifestations; it “defies meaning.”<sup>20</sup> The purpose of insurance is to protect individuals against accidents, so much as to create conditions in which their persistence does not threaten continuation of whatever process they occur within.

For Ewald, the accident identifies a specifically modern relation between the human subject and nature. It forms the kernel of “liberal thought,” a mode of thinking predicated on the complete separation between the autonomous, self-legislative subject and nature.<sup>21</sup> For Ewald, the accident is the dominant mode through which to understand the harmful potential of nature once, following the Lisbon Earthquake, this nature can no longer function as a vehicle for theodicy.<sup>22</sup> It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that, as Walter Benjamin claimed in a radio program dedicated to the Lisbon Earthquake, Kant, the arch-philosopher of autonomous reason, published the first serious attempts to provide a natural-historical account of earthquakes and so began the study of seismology in Germany.<sup>23</sup> Such study attempted to investigate nature on its own terms and made no reference to divine action, nor to any notion of cosmic justice. Accidents, by definition, merely happen, and, as a result, they find their opposite in the subject who thinks, plans and acts according to purposive will.

From the perspective of the insurer, the neutrality of the accident is in opposition to the potential responsibility of a wounded person for whatever misfortune befalls them.

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<sup>19</sup> Howard Caygill, *Kafka: In Light of the Accident* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 59.

<sup>20</sup> Caygill, 66.

<sup>21</sup> François Ewald, *L'Etat providence* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1986), 80. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from either French or German are my own.

<sup>22</sup> Ewald, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*, ed. Lecia Rosenthal, trans. Jonathan Lutes (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2014), 224.

Daniel Rodgers notes this in his descriptions of the development of early American industrial insurance schemes:

For an accident caused by a fellow worker [...] employers had no legal obligation [...] Nor were employers liable for injury to the worker who knew (and could be assumed to have factored into his own wage bargain) the risks of the job, or who himself contributed even a piece of responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

According to this description, it is not simply the case that one must be able to prove that autonomy played no role in the accident, but it is equally the case that the accident itself must in some way be overwhelming, a *surprise*. Ewald notes the naturalizing effect that this thinking had with regard to industrial production, as under relations of production, a worker must accept a certain amount of risk, and the responsibility of the industrialist lies in ensuring that this risk is no higher than “all men face from the fatalities of nature.”<sup>25</sup> Protection against the accident within the industrial workplace requires viewing this space as the seat of arbitrary, violent misfortune. The employer may seek to reduce this violence to a minimum but cannot reasonably be expected to obviate it.

A system of accident insurance based purely on responsibility only marks a moment in the development of the insurantal imaginary. As Jacques Donzelot insists, the unsustainability of a system in which either a worker would receive no compensation or in which a successful claim from a worker would be sufficient to ruin an employer, was a direct motivation in the generation of systems of social insurance in which some degree of protection was guaranteed by the state, easing the burden on employers while providing some measure of security for workers.<sup>26</sup> In his commentary on Ewald’s work, Michael Behren states that a certain understanding of actuarial risk “explodes responsibility as a moral and legal category. Previously accidents were explained in terms of bad luck or a moment’s negligence. But when considered from the standpoint of an entire population they were seen to obey stable and predictable laws.”<sup>27</sup> As Ewald notes, this transition is dependent on a situation in which insurance functions in order to render loss manageable and not to prevent it:

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 256.

<sup>25</sup> Ewald, *L’Etat providence*, 239.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Donzelot, “The Promotion of the Social,” *Economy and Society* 17, no. 3 (1988): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085148800000016>.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Behren, “Accidents Happen: Francois Ewald, the “antirevolutionary” Foucault, and the Intellectual Politics of the French Welfare State,” *Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 3 (2010): 609.

Insurance does not, as has been mistakenly said, eliminate chance but it fixes its scope: it does not abolish loss but ensures that loss, by being shared, is not felt. Insurance is the mechanism through which this sharing is operated, it modifies the incidence of loss, diverting it from the individual to the community. It substitutes a relation of extension for a relation of intensity.<sup>28</sup>

To exist in such a society is live under mythic fate by another name. The thing which makes relations “safe” is that which generalizes the accident with the same stochastic consistency as ancient fate struck down, seemingly at random, both the deserving and the innocent. In such a situation, neither the securer nor the secured is actually safe.

### *Risk*

The accident, writes Caygill, exists in a “peculiar conjuncture of chance and necessity.”<sup>29</sup> Individual *risks* represent the socialisation and the monetarisation of particular accidents, once the necessity of their repetition has been confirmed. Different risk classifications denote the likelihood of particular accidents; risk attaches itself to accidents as a way of monetizing them.<sup>30</sup> Stanley Corngold states in his commentary on Kafka’s insurance writings that the process of insuring an individual or a firm will pass through the stages of “data collection [...] the differentiation of risk classes [...] and the fixed contractual regulation of the new insurance deal.”<sup>31</sup> While advances in technology enable different levels of importance to be attached to each of these stages, they remain the basic steps through the process of insuring something will pass.

Published in 1921, Frank Knight’s *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* understands insurance in terms of a particular relation to risk, a relation that demands that one thinks according to a principle of homogenization: “Insurance is concerned with classes of business contingency that are “fairly classifiable” or show a relatively low degree of uniqueness.”<sup>32</sup> To be an insured object is to be held firmly within an economy of possible destruction, and, as a result, to be made commensurate with many other individuals and

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<sup>28</sup>Ewald, “Insurance and Risk”, 205.

<sup>29</sup> Caygill, *Kafka*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg and Benno Wagner, trans. Eric Patton and Ruth Hein (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 87.

<sup>32</sup> Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2009), 247.



objects. Insurance offers little protection to these objects as they exist in themselves. Rather, such protection exists purely from the perspective of the commodity owner. Knight states clearly that the principle of insurance is founded on the fact that “no one can say whether a particular building will burn” but that some of them will, and that insurance will be able to minimize the damage caused by such inevitable accidents, doing so precisely by abstracting from the specificity of the actual objects insured.<sup>33</sup> To be an insured object, therefore, is not only not to be protected, but it is to have one’s place affirmed in a nexus of risk in which the condition for inclusion is one’s potential for destruction.

Knight insists that the practice of insurance relies on differentiating the external risks an enterprise could face from an inherent uncertainty central to the undertakings of the entrepreneur. Such an entrepreneur is “simply a specialist in risk-taking or uncertainty bearing, apart from any constructive action. But entrepreneurial risks should not include such hazards as damage by fire and storm, or burglary and embezzlement, which can be covered by insurance.”<sup>34</sup> Insurance, on this model, functions as way of enabling someone undertaking a capitalist enterprise to separate material risks from the uncertainty endemic to profit-seeking. By covering potential losses, either to their stock or to the quantity of workers setting their capital in motion, from what Marx calls “extraordinary natural events, fire, flood etc,” a capitalist entrepreneur is able to focus their mind on an uncertainty more amenable to their own sense of adventure.<sup>35</sup> The dynamic here is reminiscent of one presented in the *Grundrisse*, in which the capitalist is said to comfort the injured worker with the words of Don Quixote who “consoles Sancho Panza with the thought that, although of course he takes all the beatings, at least he is not required to be brave.”<sup>36</sup>

Ewald argues that a generalized acceptance of risk leads to an intermingling of ethical opposites. Following something like a general awareness of the fact that the lives of people are subject to risk, a commonplace view emerges whereby “evil in society was coextensive with good, accompanied it, was a component of it. No profit without loss. No

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<sup>33</sup> Knight, 213.

<sup>34</sup> Frank H. Knight, “Profit and Entrepreneurial Functions,” *The Journal of Economic History* 2, no. S1 (December 1942): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700083479>.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume Two*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 256.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 891.

progress without the associated damages.”<sup>37</sup> Within such a situation, the prudent practice of insurance transformed from being the “fruit of private foresight” to a “mandatory moral obligation.”<sup>38</sup> To refuse to insure oneself is to neglect one’s social responsibility, a responsibility that makes sense according to a proleptic element contained within the notion of risk itself: “Risk does not represent only a virtual threat or something that is merely possible, but is entirely real. Risk gives effective – quantifiable presence – to that which is nevertheless only probable.”<sup>39</sup> Risk calculation folds the future into the present, enabling this future to be hedged against and speculated on, while also creating a real fear of the accidents to which it points.

Marx suggests that this capacity to think proleptically partly defines capitalist production. A capitalist is only a capitalist if they have “contrived” to sell whatever it is that they are producing for profit, and as a part of a cycle of accumulation, with such contrivances necessarily taking account of contemporary market conditions and the likely amount that a commodity will be worth at the moment of its sale.<sup>40</sup> Such contrivance is itself a form of thinking of risk whereby the future is predicted and acted on as if it were already present. According to Jonathan Levy the insurance industry boomed in America due to its precise ability to “to foreclose pieces of the contingent future into risks”.<sup>41</sup> The idea of *risk* contains a contradiction, therefore. It marks out a danger to the continued existence of an object or a person, and, in the same moment, appears to bring this danger closer, to the extent that anxiety over perceived risks is a cause for the moral commendation of others.

Contemporary risk calculation techniques take this foreclosure to its most extreme point. Joseph Vogl writes, “Since the 1970s, the vanishing point of financial theory is to be found in the figure of a system that achieves stability by rendering its processes atemporal. The future is always already priced in.”<sup>42</sup> Financialised risk calculation predicts the future in order to obviate its consequences. Risk brings items and situations together at the same moment that it treats them as already voided. The purpose of insuring stock is to enable accumulation to continue, regardless of the destruction of individual

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<sup>37</sup> Francois Ewald, “Two Infinities of Risk,” trans. Brian Massumi in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 226.

<sup>38</sup> Ewald, 227.

<sup>39</sup> Ewald, 227.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 709.

<sup>41</sup> Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 82.

pieces of capital. Within contemporary financial markets, this logic operates under the auspices of what Vogl terms “abstract” risk. Such transactions are those in which “the act of trading itself performs an economic and semiotic act that culminates, not in a representation of the world but in its de-representation, its voiding of presence.”<sup>43</sup> Abstract risk strives towards the obviating of the distinction between existence and non-existence: it deals with its objects only so far as they are already dead.

### *Character*

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, insurance served an explicitly integrative function. The origins of state mandated social insurance in Bismarck’s Germany are paradigmatic for such integration. These policies aimed to give workers a vested interest in the continuation of existing relations of production, while also developing a consistency of action and purpose amongst the working class that would aid in maximizing their labour-power. To those who sang the praises of the new social insurance policies, their development appeared as logical and necessary as the expansion of capitalism. According to one Gustav Schmöller,

The triumph of insurance in every conceivable area [is] one of the age’s great advances in social progress. It was an entirely logical development that insurance should spread from the upper classes to the lower classes; that it had to try, as far as possible, to eliminate poverty; and that the older charitable relief funds for the workers were more and more constructed on the sound principle of insurance.<sup>44</sup>

Such progress was akin to a system of vaccination against radical change. Gerhard A. Ritter states that, in the penultimate decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany pursued innovations in social insurance that were “intended to inoculate those workers who had not yet succumbed to social democratic propaganda.”<sup>45</sup> Bismarck’s social regulations of 1883, 1885 and 1889, covering sickness, accident and old age infirmity respectively and promising minimal accident compensations for workers came a few years following the legal suppression of socialist mutual aid organizations. The development of these policies were, Bruno Palier argues, “less an arena of industrial conflict than an instrument of social

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<sup>43</sup> Vogl, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard Albert Ritter, *Social Welfare in Germany and Britain: Origins and Development*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ritter, 33.

partnership designed to address the issue of the social and political integration of industrial workers [...] and a guarantee of social peace.”<sup>46</sup> In 1889, Bismarck himself reflected that “The social and political significance of generally insuring the ‘have-nots’ is incalculable” and that of particular importance was “that conservative mentality in the great mass of have-nots, which the right to a pension brings with it.”<sup>47</sup> Bismarck’s confidence in the generation of such a mentality is especially striking if one considers that the workers’ pensions guaranteed by the German state were unable to provide a decent standard of living for the poor or the disabled before at the earliest 1957.<sup>48</sup> More than any tangible affluence, these policies represented what Ewald called the “moral technology” of insurance, its capacity “to master time, to discipline the future”, and to provide a vested interest in the avoidance of any destructive breaks or changes in social composition.<sup>49</sup>

Social insurance follows from the nature of capitalist relations. Within these relations, the reproduction of the worker *as* worker, that is, as an individual who remains divorced from ownership over the means of production and who therefore sells their labour power in order to be able to reproduce themselves, is taken as the first and most necessary consequence of production. In his posthumously published “Results of the Immediate Production Process,” Marx writes that the final result of capitalist production itself “is, [...] the production and reproduction of the total relationship by virtue of which this immediate process of production defines itself as specifically capitalist.”<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in *Capital* one reads simply that an “incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the worker, is the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production.”<sup>51</sup> As a tool of integration, social insurance is a politically expedient, logical consequence of capitalist relations.

Corngold and Wagner discuss describe this state of affairs brought about by such policies as follows:

Life becomes a mere economic asset, a capital relative to a given labor market. When work-related injuries are considered as professional risks, insurance payments do not cover the loss of a person – a family relative, in the case of

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<sup>46</sup> Bruno Palier. “Continental Western Europe” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, ed. Francis G. Castles et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 604.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Ritter, *Social Welfare in Germany and Britain*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> Ritter, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” 207

<sup>50</sup> Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 948.

<sup>51</sup> Marx, 716.

fatalities, or a body part, a limb, or an organ, in the case of injuries; they cover merely the loss of earning power the worker suffers from such an accident.<sup>52</sup>

The brutal irony of such a “compensation” is shown in a photograph published by one William Harbutt Dawson in a philanthropic text entitled *Social Insurance in Germany 1883-1911*. The book, published in 1912, was written with the aim of facilitating the adoption of social insurance on the German and Austrian model within the U.K. One of its images shows a man in a mock workshop who has lost both of his arms and both of his legs in an unspecified industrial accident/s. Having had his legs replaced by prosthetic blades and his hands by hooks, the man is shown able to continue working at the occupation that he previously held - hammering metal on an anvil. With no detectable irony, Dawson insists that such a situation be celebrated as a triumph for the insurance of workers.<sup>53</sup> Integrative social insurance crowns a mode of production in which a person may have each of their limbs clipped off and still be described as protected; a mode of production that “converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity”,<sup>54</sup> and that makes no apology for this provided that the worker is still able to expend their vitality for the sake

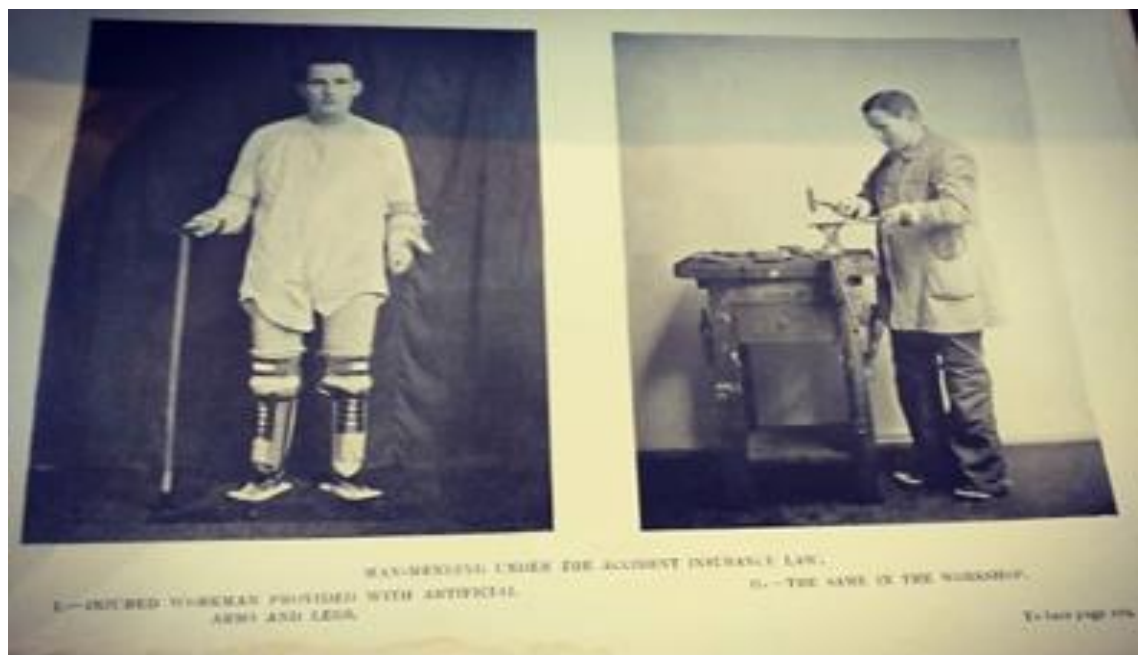


Figure. 1<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Corngold & Benno Wagner, *Franz Kafka: The Ghosts in the Machine* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>53</sup> William Harbutt Dawson, *Social Insurance in Germany, 1883-1911. Its history, operation, results, and a comparison with the National Insurance Act, 1911 ... With ten illustrations.* (London ; Leipsic: TFisher Unwin, 1912), 103.

<sup>54</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 249.

<sup>55</sup> Dawson, 101.

of the production of value.

Insurance facilitates the integration of labor-power into capital by dissolving potential political flashpoints while, in exceptional cases, enabling those who would otherwise be irredeemably injured to return to work. For the bourgeois supporter of its implementation, social insurance also actively inculcates a positive reliability and regularity of character amongst the working class. Throughout numerous later 19th and early 20th century texts, one can find descriptions of what are assumed to be the beneficial effects of encouraging workers to make provisions for an accident, or for their own funeral expenses, by contributing to some kind of insurance fund. When seeking to celebrate the success of Prudential insurance company, then based in Newark, Frederick Hoffman, pseudo-scientific statistician, theorist of race-extinction and historian of life insurance, quotes an 1874 article from the *Insurance Times* which reads,

The very fact that [...] thousands of working men are induced to make timely provision against the day of death by life insurance is a proof that the recklessness, selfishness and spendthrift habits of these men are giving way before better influences, and that the future of their houses and families is of more consideration to them than to any of their class in days gone by.<sup>56</sup>

That the kinds of policies which the Prudential offered to workers served the sole function of protecting them against the ignominy of a pauper's burial will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. What is immediately important here is the relationship between the assumed capacity to maintain a series of insurance payments and the development of noticeably bourgeois virtues, such as thrift and a calculated magnanimity. The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the manner in which the development of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century credit economy, reliant as it was on the development of specific modes of *credit* and *trust*, itself relied on a specific idea of character related to a specific understanding of language, and of "honesty." In an economy devoted to industrial production, character becomes something to be generalized and cultivated across an entire class of purportedly peaceable, future-minded workers.

This process is self-reinforcing: workers with insurance policies are more likely to develop a sufficient character, and those who develop such a character are more likely

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Hoffmann, *Paris Exposition of Nineteen Hundred. History of the Prudential Insurance Company of America-industrial insurance-1875-1900* (Newark, NJ: Prudential Press, 1900), 45.

to take out specific policies. This is especially useful for the promulgators of insurance themselves. As Hoffman states,

The problem for the underwriter who will be successful in industrial insurance [a mode of life insurance through which the Prudential made their name, and which covered nothing other than the cost of funeral for the policy-holder] is, it seems to us to secure persistence in paying by the assured. That done, the way is easy.<sup>57</sup>

Dawson makes a similar claim with regard to the benefits of social insurance for those who are legally compelled to contribute to it. Making specific reference to Germany and Austria, he states that the implementation of compulsory insurance has given rise to an improvement in the “physical, material, and moral condition, not merely of the insured classes, but of the poorer sections of the population as whole, and that this improvement is reflected in a higher standard of civilization as a whole.”<sup>58</sup> For the supporters of social insurance, the existence of an insured class is enough to diffuse an attitude of thrift throughout a population. The assumed capacity to cultivate this latter quality was a major aspect of the appeal of 19<sup>th</sup> century British life insurance policies, promising, as it did, to help people become “steady” and “industrious”, and to match Adam Smith’s model of the prudent individual as someone who delays full gratification in the present in the name of a less intense, but more prolonged and secure gratification in the future.<sup>59</sup>

Integration breeds its opposite in the form of an excluded class of uninsurable individuals. These people occupy a social status necessarily below that of the industrial working class and are marked in the mind of the insurers by their vagabondage, unreliability and their unsuitedness to work. The image of the vagrant or wanderer as antithetical to the proper industrial worker runs throughout the movements of primitive accumulation in the early modern period up to the heavily racialized vagrancy laws of the post-bellum United States, and into contemporary debates around predictive policing and the maintenance of surplus populations within a carceral state. The image of the uninsurable also provided a necessary ground of comparison for the instantiation of 20<sup>th</sup> century welfare states. Piven & Cloward write that “to demean and punish those who do

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<sup>57</sup> Hoffmann, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Dawson, *Social Insurance in Germany*, 208.

<sup>59</sup> Liz McFall, “Political Liberalism and Life Assurance,” in *The Appeal of Insurance*, ed. Geoffrey Clark et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 131.

not work is to exalt by contrast even the meanest labor at the meanest wage.”<sup>60</sup> The same authors claim that, even considering the fluctuations in the specific policies employed by different governments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, one consistent factor remains the “ritual degradation of a pariah class, that serves to mark the boundary between the appropriately motivated and inappropriately motivated, between the virtuous and the defective.”<sup>61</sup> In the final two chapters of this thesis, I will consider how this uninsurable figure is roughly equivalent to what Marx termed the *lumpen* and how the language and behaviour of such a class forms a reservoir of antagonistic energy that, for Pasolini and for Bonney, enables one to think and to affirm the potential for action outside of the domain of an insurantal rationality.

### *Interest*

At least one question remains regarding the status of the aesthetic in this thesis and why it is that I have chosen to read literature and films alongside the conceptual history that I have just attempted to sketch. One way to begin to answer this question is through the idea of *interest*. This word has played a vital role in the history of insurance from, at least, the early modern period to the present. John Weskett’s 1794 marine insurance compendium, discussed again in the following chapter, contains a long section covering complications arising from the fact that a demonstrable interest in the survival of insured goods or insured persons was the only thing which prevented a maritime insurance contract functioning as speculation on the destruction of whatever it covered.<sup>62</sup> In terms of life insurance, one reads of a frenzy of betting on lives which overtook London in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and of the ensuing legal demand that anyone taking out a life-insurance policy for someone else must be able to show a material interest in the insured person’s survival. Such manifestable interest remains an essential precondition for life insurance policies around the world.<sup>63</sup> Alongside this, as I have already noted, one of the most attractive qualities of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century social insurance programs for the governments

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<sup>60</sup> Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3–4.

<sup>61</sup> Piven and Cloward, 149.

<sup>62</sup> John Weskett, *A Complete Digest of the Theory, Laws and Practice of Insurance- 3d Ed.*, (Dublin: John Archer, 1794), 307.

<sup>63</sup> Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2017), 124.



who implemented them lay in their presumed capacity to generate an interest amongst the working class in keeping social relations more or less as they were. In each of these three cases, the interest that must be shown or generated concerns the objects or people to be insured and the kinds of social structures and mediations which enable them to have value.

Thinking the aesthetic in terms of interest, one is immediately reminded of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and the famous, and subsequently emphatically criticized, notion that a properly aesthetic experience is fundamentally *disinterested*. For Kant, the notion of an interested relation is inseparable from the judged object's conditions of existence: "Interest is what we call the liking that we connect with the presentation of an object's existence. Hence such a liking always refers at once to our power of desire, either as the basis that determines it, or at any right as necessarily connected with this basis."<sup>64</sup> The properly aesthetic experience of an object is one in which the "mere presentation of the object is accompanied by a liking, no matter how indifferent I may be about the existence of the object of this presentation."<sup>65</sup> It follows that the judgement of the beautiful is one that must be "wholly indifferent" to the conditions that either birthed the object being judged or that are responsible for its continued existence.<sup>66</sup>

Disinterest, whatever we may make of it as a way of understanding aesthetic experience, returns us again to the lumpenproletariat, the incorrigible and the uninsurable. Since its identification by Marx following 1848 as containing those people most likely to side with reactionary forces in a period of struggle, this class has been understood according to their lack of interest in either the rulers whom they serve or in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat proper. It is this disinterest which makes the *déclassé*, fragments of both high and low classes, an incorrigible, corruptible menace, just as it is their assumed incorrigibility which makes this stratum of society literally uninsurable.

According to the traditional Marxist definition, "the lumpenproletariat does not have a direct economic relation to production, and therefore structurally it cannot stand in direct opposition to the capitalist class – at least not at the point of production."<sup>67</sup> As a class, the lumpen lacks the capacity to maintain a direct opposition to capital; it has no

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<sup>64</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis ; Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 45.

<sup>65</sup> Kant, 46.

<sup>66</sup> Kant, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Clyde W. Barrow, *The Dangerous Class: The Concept of the Lumpen Proletariat* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 55.

unified class consciousness through which to maintain such an opposition and as a fundamentally parasitic group, it would have no real interest in doing so even if it were to be united. The absence of this interest in transformative action has traditionally explained the lumpen's tendency, at least in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be bribed into the service of a ruling power. As Barrow argues, this tendency was especially clear in France in 1848, although numerous different stories of lumpen reaction can be found throughout Marxist historiography.<sup>68</sup>

In the wake of social insurance and the generation of an interest amongst the working-class which is no-longer directly contrary to that of capital, the disinterest expressed by a certain idea of the lumpenproletariat takes on a different valence: it begins to function as a reservoir for alternative futures and suppressed histories and for precisely that which was not, and perhaps cannot, be integrated into a labour movement that has abandoned its transformative impulses in favour of the promise of economic security. A 20<sup>th</sup> century repositioning of the lumpenproletariat, undertaken most notably in America by the Black Panther Party via Fanon posits disinterest as a conduit of vitality, as precisely the quality that makes the lumpen the only remaining non-reactionary element of the proletariat.<sup>69</sup>

The lumpenproletariat, as will be explored later, is unified in name only. The class consists of a massive variety of different occupations, and it would be wrong to suggest that the lumpen is properly united by one single "disinterest." Rather, what is manifest in the lumpen is a mass of conflicting, fragmented desires and intensities unified negatively through the fact that they aim neither towards the maintenance of the prevailing state of things nor its programmatic overcoming. In a typically epigrammatic reading of Kant, Adorno suggests that a disinterested aesthetic experience may have more in common with lumpen intransigence than one might expect: "Even the contemplative attitude to artworks, wrested from objects of action, is felt as the announcement of an immediate praxis and – to this extent itself practical – as a refusal to play along."<sup>70</sup> Aesthetic disinterest, if it is an appropriate way to think about art, may function as a kind of suspension, a drawing of breath which is the condition of alternative action. It is obviously by no means necessary that this condition be fulfilled; however, as later chapters aim to

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<sup>68</sup> Barrow, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Barrow, 101.

<sup>70</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

demonstrate, an aesthetic elaboration of the kinds of potential that, for example, both Bonney and Pasolini found to be inherent within the lumpenproletariat requires political commitments on the part of the artist. I do not mean to say here that art should be understood as “lumpen” or that there is an inherently aesthetic quality to the desires and activities of a socially excluded class. Nonetheless, I would argue that these two ways of understanding interest and disinterest provide a way of bringing the aesthetic and the uninsurable together as two categories which are, potentially at least, antagonistic to the insurantal imaginary.

An understanding of disinterest as a mode of refusal, however slight, enables me to provide a brief justification of the specific artists whom I have chosen to consider within this thesis. Importantly, I do not claim that any of the figures written about below had or have any expertise regarding the insurance industry. While Philip certainly has a profound professional understanding of legal rationality, she is not, to my knowledge, engaged in the practice of insurance law; likewise, although Bachmann’s prose makes direct reference to insurance, it would be just as possible to treat these references as minor moments in her novel as it would be to build an entire reading of *Malina* around them; and finally, neither Pasolini nor Bonney were, to my knowledge, literate in the technologies of finance and security to which I claim their work is hostile.

This being said, the aim of my thesis is not to delineate the way in which writers or filmmakers have thought about insurance, nor is it to investigate the specific qualities of art produced by those who worked in insurance. If my thesis were about either of these subjects then it would surely need to include, at the very least, extended reflections on the work of Wallace Stevens and Kafka, and most likely a significant chapter on *Double Indemnity*. My writing here is more concerned with how art, in this case poetry, prose and cinema, although I see no reason why other art forms could not be included, can interfere with the modes of thinking and action constitutive of an insurantal imaginary. I believe that the period of time from January 2020 to July 2021, when I am writing this section, makes completely clear that the mobilization of concepts such as *risk* and *character* by governments in the UK and elsewhere is not intended to do away with either suffering, unnecessary death or the fear of their future manifestations, but rather to manage these social phenomena so as to better perpetuate a contingent set of property relations increasingly indistinguishable from catastrophe. With this in mind, the question outlined above - in what ways can art be antagonistic towards modes of social organisation that

that techniques developed throughout the history of the insurance industry play a key role in perpetuating? - seems to be worth asking.

The following chapters aim to elaborate the manner in which each of the individuals whom I consider make specific interventions with regard to the functioning of insurantal rationality. That these interventions are occasionally historically dissonant – I claim, for example, that Philip’s writing intervenes both in the 18<sup>th</sup> century credit economy and in ethical judgements that underpin the contemporary U.S. carceral state, and I move at one point from a poem published in Canada in 2011 to an Austrian novel published in 1971 – should be taken as evidence of the manner in which the history of insurance is itself composed of fragmented, overlapping innovations and of the repetition both of concerns and techniques, albeit with evolving forms and fields of operation. The potential severity of some of my transitions is also, I think, in keeping with a shared fidelity to brokenness, fragmentation and to a resistance to smooth historical transitions which is shared by each of the figures I consider.

One way of understanding art in this thesis, therefore, is as something thing which distorts the distortions of the insurantal imaginary, and which articulates in different forms the conflicts and alternative futures suppressed and frozen within the process of the formation of the seemingly neutral ethical and epistemological concepts that underpin this way of relating to the world. In all of this, I do not claim that the artworks I consider are in any way lacking in interest; rather, I aim to consider them as possessing their own disruptive desires and commitments. Of course, no elaboration of an artwork could provide an exit from the social relations to which it claims that the work is in antagonism, any more than a deeply moving impressionist painting of a prison wall can be turned into a door leading out of it. Nonetheless, I will end the introduction by saying that I agree with T. J. Clark that some works of art do provide a way of “imagining otherwise”<sup>71</sup>, which is to say that they may yet play a role in deciding whether or not to maintain walls like this or to replace them with something better.

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<sup>71</sup> T.J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2001), 245.

### *Chapter Summaries*

The first chapter provides close readings of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2011). It reads this book of poetry as a meditation on the relationship between law, language and reality, and also as an intervention into a catastrophic history which runs through the Atlantic slave trade and up to the contemporary context of North American mass-incarceration. I argue that by constructing esoteric, intensely musical poems from the words used within the transcript of *Gregson v Gilbert*, the 1783 legal proceeding used to determine the validity of captain Luke Collingwood's version of the events surrounding the Zong massacre of 1781, Philip's work serves, first of all, to negate and unsettle fundamental aspects of the bourgeois social relations that made 18<sup>th</sup> century insurance possible. Philip performs this negation through a destabilisation of two inter-connected conceptual pillars on which the logic of insurance rests: the first being the essential, albeit unstable, distinction between the material existence of a thing and its value; the second being the concept of *character*, as it refers to a particular conception of internal subjective consistency and to the capacity to gauge such consistency based on both the content and form of an individual's language. Throughout the chapter, I elaborate the somatic quality of Philip's writing and read her use of repetition and irregular syntax as attempting to unsettle the cognitive reifications underpinning and developing from the Atlantic slave trade. In the final section of the chapter, I consider the relationship between Philip's work and sorrow-song, alongside insurgent traditions within Caribbean history. I argue that viewing *Zong!* within this tradition enables one to understand it as expounding a singular philosophy of history, one that seeks to preserve a mode of collective memory while registering an active resistance to the promulgation of a catastrophe which leads from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slave trade directly to the contemporary North American mass incarceration.

My second chapter is concerned with the work of Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973), and especially with her 1971 novel *Malina*. I read Bachmann as intervening in the social fabric of the European economic miracle, and of the consumer economy of the early 1970s. Bachmann's intervention is, I argue, directed explicitly against the purported safety and security of middle-class position within such an economy, a position mediated by the suppressed memory of Nazism within Austria and by the failure of either private or public consciousness to properly reckon with the past. Throughout the chapter, I argue

that Bachmann's writing is committed to repudiating the freedom from contingency that the Austrian and German economic miracle promised to its citizens and I argue that she demonstrates that any such freedom is conditioned by the foreclosure of any potential for radical change. A key aspect of this is the manner in which *Malina's* protagonist consistently refutes notions of consistency and safety associated with hypostatized capitalist temporality. The chapter ends with a consideration of a dream sequence from *Malina* in which the narrator imagines a location known as The Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters. I argue that this sequence elaborates a central contradiction within Bachmann's work concerning the need to manifest some kind of solidarity with victims of historical violence as mediated by a refusal to invoke or to press such individuals into the service of a historical project.

My third chapter concerns the work of Italian filmmaker, essayist, poet and novelist Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). The chapter begins by elaborating Pasolini's relationship to the Roman *borgate*. The chapter considers Pasolini's writing on Rome in combination with Marx's writing on the lumpen proletariat, arguing that what the former identifies with in this class is a state of perennial exclusion, one that marks the lumpen as a forceful contrary to the economy of resentment and integration which, for him, characterized the post war Italian boom. Following this, the chapter considers Pasolini's first feature film, *Accattone* (1961). I argue that this work is concerned with the lumpen as an excluded class and pays particular attention to Pasolini's claims that the film is concerned with a situation of "pre-history", one marked by a persistence of contingency within social relations, but also by the potential for a redemptive pathos. From here, the chapter considers Pasolini's film *Salò* as manifesting a near complete absence of risk. I argue that the logic of transgression within the film itself matches transformations within the logic and meaning of risk as a term which names increasingly abstract, tautological modes of thinking. This transition involves a movement away from risk thought as a submission to chance through which real things may be either lost or gained, and into a logic of fixed profit. The chapter ends by elaborating an alternative view of transgression within Pasolini's writing, one that views the actual danger resulting from a transgressive action as of paramount importance in determining its efficacy.

The final chapter considers the writing of the UK-born poet Sean Bonney (1969-2019). First of all, I consider this writing within the context of the UK student movement (2010-12) and the London Riots (2011), both of which can be thought alongside austerity

policies introduced following the 2008 financial crisis. I argue that taken together, Bonney's *Happiness* (2011) and *Letters Against the Firmament* (2011) manifest an oscillation between states of self-defense and self-preservation through which the poems themselves form a subjective correlate to their wider political context. Following this, the chapter ends with a consideration of Bonney's final major collection *Our Death* (2019). It argues that aspects of this work, written between 2014 and 2019, respond to an increasing logic of securitization, thought as a continual process of the refinement and intensification of technologies of security which are themselves derived from the practices of insurance and the insurantal imaginary.

### Noise, Character and Conspiracy in *Zong!*

M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) consists of a series of poetic sequences constructed from the words used in the legal document *Gregson v Gilbert*, a transcript of the trial concerning an insurance claim made by the owners of the Dutch-owned slave ship the *Zong*. This ship jettisoned 133 live slaves off the coast of Jamaica in November 1781. According to the captain and former doctor of the vessel, Luke Collingwood, this action was taken in order to preserve the lives of the rest of the cargo and the crew after various problems beyond his control had left the ship low on water and insufficiently close to land to acquire supplies to keep all on board alive for the remainder of the journey. As a large number of slaves were sickly and therefore unlikely to survive the rest of the voyage, Collingwood decided to maximize resources by sacrificing those who were already likely to die in order to save those who could reasonably be expected to survive.

The owners of the cargo claimed on the value of the jettisoned slaves according to the logic of the "general average", an insurance regulation which allowed the destruction of goods on a ship provided that it could be proved that such destruction was necessary in order to protect the whole. By jettisoning his slaves, Collingwood converted "an uninsurable loss (general mortality) into general average loss" enacting "a sacrifice of part of a cargo for the benefit of the whole."<sup>1</sup> The slaves would have been useless to him had they died on the ship, or had they failed to fetch the appropriate price upon arrival in Jamaica. However, as necessary sacrifices for the sake of the preservation of the rest of the cargo, those thrown overboard could retain their value.<sup>2</sup> The aim of *Gregson v Gilbert* was not to determine whether or not Collingwood had intentionally jettisoned the slaves (this was not contested), but whether or not the logic of the general average applied to the case, i.e. a) whether Collingwood could be held responsible for the lack of supplies on the ship - the trial transcript shows insurers insisting on this, claiming that the situation on board resulted from a navigation error on Collingwood's part, and also that rains in the days preceding the massacre had refurnished the ship's water supplies, and b) whether or not the need to protect the lives of all on board necessitated the killing of those thrown over. The text of consists of a series of deliberations, whereby those present in the court

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Armstrong, "Slavery, Insurance and Sacrifice in the Black Atlantic," in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, ed. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (New York ; London: Routledge, 2004), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong, 174.



room attempt to answer these two questions, and, in doing so, to determine whether or not underwriters were legally required to pay out on the value of those thrown over. What remains unquestioned is the status of living human bodies as property, as things which can be owned and disposed of, even to the point of administering their death.

The text from which Philip draws is a purposive legal document. At the same time, it is a crystalline presentation, an interplay between notions of responsibility, nature, law and language, a constellation which prefigures and conditions the contemporary capitalist economy. What I aim to show in this chapter is that Philip's own text functions to unravel such a constellation. This process exposes the historically mediated character of the conceptual framework which underpins the Zong massacre and which continues to the present. The next two sections of this chapter will take as their point of departure Philip's comment that, following a process of the intense study of her source text, she began to realize that "there is always a search—a restless search perhaps?—for space among the words in the text, always a seeking out a space, as if the words are seeking space to breathe."<sup>3</sup> I argue that this restlessness can be thought in two ways: first of all as restlessness which is endemic to the commodity form as theorized by Marx, and secondly as phonic linguistic residue whose suppression is the pre-condition for the proper application of insurantal reason.

### *Waarenwelt*

The cargo of the Zong were insured as commodities. In this process, they were defined as something with a value which was separate from, but also dependent upon, their material bodies. Insuring commodities provides the means, in certain circumstances, for this value to outlast the destruction of such bodies. Indeed, in cases such as that described with *Gregson v. Gilbert*, insurance seemingly provided a direct incentive for the destruction of the physical in order to protect the non-sensuous aspect of the insured object, i.e., its value. Marx famously wrote that commodities are "sensuous things which are, at the same time suprasensible or social."<sup>4</sup> Such a thing has its physical body rooted firmly in the material world, but derives its value from a purely social relation, one which

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe: a Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 72.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 165.

is contingent upon the “social relation of the producers.”<sup>5</sup> Insurance intensifies the double-character: it aims, as far as possible, to free the social aspect of the commodity from its physical character. In this way, it may be taken to represent the consummation of the process whereby, when a thing’s value is determined according to amount of socially necessary labour which went into its production, “all its sensuous characteristics are extinguished.”<sup>6</sup> What remains following this abstraction is a purely social quality.

As bearers of a social quality, commodities are themselves social objects. The *Waarenwelt*, or “world of commodities” is a space of abstraction in which the material quality of the labour that has produced the commodity, together with the material properties of the commodity itself, are dissolved into the quality of abstract labour, a category that itself includes only that labour which is deemed “socially necessary”, i.e. the kind of labour which is required to produce particular commodities under “the conditions of production normal for a given society and with an average degree of skill and intensity of labour present in that society.”<sup>7</sup> Marx dismisses a lazy reading of the labour theory of value which would insist that objects which have been worked on for longer, and which have had time wasted on their production, should be worth more, by arguing that value is determined only in line with this socially necessary average, i.e. commodities derive their value not simply from the labour expended in them, but more exactly from how that labour mediates, and is mediated by, a social whole. Moishe Postone adequately describes this logic:

Although value is constituted by the production of particular commodities, the magnitude of value of a particular commodity is, reflexively, a function of a constituted general social norm. The value of a commodity, in other words, is an individuated moment of a general social mediation; its magnitude is a function not of the labor time actually required to produce that particular commodity but of the general social mediation expressed by the category socially necessary labour time.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed in isolation, a commodity is a restless, contradictory thing. In a passage from the first edition of *Kapital*, Marx describes the historical necessity of money, the universal

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<sup>5</sup> Marx, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Marx, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

equivalent form of value against which all commodities may be measured, and through which they may be exchanged, as emerging directly from this restlessness:

The immanent contradiction of the commodity, as immediate unity of use value and exchange value, as product of useful private labor that develops only as an isolated member of a naturally growing total system of useful labour or the division of labour, develops, and as immediate social materialization of abstract human labour – [...] finds neither rest nor peace until it has formed the doubling of the commodity in commodity and money.<sup>9</sup>

The logical restlessness of the commodity *births* money as a necessary way of anchoring its location within the *Waarenwelt*. One individual commodity exists as a result of such a world, and simultaneously calls out and contains its brethren.

The *Waarenwelt* simultaneously touches on and excludes material reality. Slave ships were a site of near continuous terror, in which violent punishment and sadistic deprivation was meted out against the cargo and the crew in an attempt to ensure that the former remained within their designated position in the world of commodities and did not assert their own agency in a manner which conflicted with their status as objects for sale. Alfred Sohn Rethel is known for arguing that the process through which commodities are exchanged is one of real abstraction, in which the material aspects, history and determining features of a commodity are extinguished in the process of assessing its value. As commodities, slaves form an exemplary case of the brutality of such a process. Greg Grandin, in his account of the 1805 slave rebellion on board the Tryel ship which inspired Melville's Benito Cereno, notes contemporary accounts of the definition of slavery as being that of *cisma*, or schism, severing humans from their past, from their history family, and home, and transforming them into 'genealogical isolate.'<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA). Abteilung 2, Kapital und Vorarbeiten, Volume 5, Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Volume 1, [Teil I], Text* (Berlin: Dietz, 1983), 44. My translation. Fowkes English translation of this passage runs as follows: "The historical broadening and deepening of the phenomenon of exchange develops the opposition between use-value and value which is latent in the nature of the commodity. The need to give an external expression to this opposition for the purposes of commercial interest produces the drive towards an independent form of value which finds neither rest nor peace until an independent form has been achieved by the differentiation of commodities into commodities and money." *Capital: Volume 1*, 181. While I am not aware of any philological studies which answer precisely why Marx altered this passage, I believe that such a study would start by considering other moments in which revisions to the first edition take Marx's presentation away from a Hegelian, speculative account, whereby the logical structure of commodity in and of itself treated as being the structuring principle of the entire work, to one in which this speculative motor is mediated with attempts at a historicization of the logical transition between sections and categories which Marx undertakes.

<sup>10</sup> Greg Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity: The Untold History of a Slave Rebellion in the Age of Liberty* (London: Picador, 2015), 247.

fundamental restlessness of the commodity is present in the slave as the capacity for revolt, as the capacity for the assertion of history and an agency which runs counter to the brutal amputations of the world of commodities. The restlessness of the commodity mirrors historical conditions. When describing the state of affairs on board late 18<sup>th</sup> century slave-ships, maritime historian Marcus Rediker makes a refrain of the phrase “a war-like peace” to name the conditions in which terror and the omnipresent threat of extraordinary violence was necessary in order to maintain the semblance of an apparently stable order.<sup>11</sup> This phrase, denoting a state in which the apparent calm of a functioning vessel covers an intensive, perpetual state of antagonism is reflected in the text of *Gregson vs. Gilbert* as Philip reads it. Real abstraction, if it means anything, is felt in the flesh.

This process of abstraction continues, according to Sohn Rethel, in the circulation of commodities:

In the marketplace and in shop windows, things stand still. They are under the spell of one activity only; to change owners [...] A commodity marked out at a definite price, for instance, is looked upon as being *frozen* to absolute immutability throughout the time during which its price remains unaltered.<sup>12</sup>

Entrance into the world of commodities is, therefore, a kind of exit from nature:

When a commodity is offered at a certain price, it is not only withdrawn from transformation by human activity; it is also taken to be excepted even from natural causality within its own body. An unchanging price consigns the commodity’s physical constitution to a no less unchanging status. In the sphere of exchange, it is no longer nature but rather property that governs commodities. The time and space that commodities traverse in circulation are the abstract time and space of capital. This is the sphere of “second nature.”<sup>13</sup>

The abstraction that Sohn-Rethel invokes here is both real and fantastic. It is manifestly the case that commodities move through real space. Likewise, it is manifestly the case that they decay, break, and in the case of slaves, frequently revolt.

Nature and society threaten the commodity; they intrude on the *Waarenwelt* in the form of accidents, sabotage, decay and insurrection. Insurance serves, as far as possible,

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<sup>11</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: John Murray, 2008), 50.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel. “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature,” *Selva*, trans. Daniel Spaulding, 20 July 2019, <https://selvajournal.org/the-formal-characteristics-of-second-nature/>.

to bridge the gap between the material and the social worlds of the commodity. It does so, however, not just by protecting the commodity from the risks of the material, but by abandoning them to it. Such commodities remain “restless”; they continue to embody a tension between their material characteristics and their immersion within a world of commodities. Insurance seeks to obviate this restlessness, this incorrigible return to a material selfhood, one that, in the case of the *Zong*, remained a site of suppressed human agency. What I believe to be one of the singular qualities of *Zong!* is a capacity to invoke an echo of such agency through an attention to a restlessness within the language of the text from which the poems are drawn.

### *Noise*

In an interview concerning *Zong!*, Philip draws a direct correlation between the “aesthetics” of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the transportation of living human bodies. For her, the text in question “becomes an aesthetic translation of the physical containment that marked our arrival in this part of the world.”<sup>14</sup> This aesthetic is, first and foremost, one in which excess sound is suppressed for the sake of clarity. This aesthetics of clarity enables the circulation of commodities, commodities including the cargo of the *Zong* itself.

Fred Moten argues that the realization of properly functioning universality in language, itself a precondition for legal processes in which words and terminologies must be able to communicate their meaning without requiring excessive time for clarification, necessitates the “reduction of phonetic substance” and the “dismissal of the merely phonetic” within whatever words are used.<sup>15</sup> In writing this, he recalls Derrida’s elaboration of the distinction between *Klang* (noise) and *Sprache* (speech) within Hegel’s philosophy. According to Derrida’s elaboration of Hegel, the institution of an ethical world, whereby each person may understand their freedom in and through the actions of others, and whereby each person is therefore responsible to some kind of collective constituted ethical framework, is dependent upon the transition from noise to speech. Derrida describes the process as a transition from “resonance to language.”<sup>16</sup> It is only once this pure linguistic resonance has been abandoned that a group, or a “family” is able

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<sup>14</sup> Saunders, “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive,” 64.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2018), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. Richard Rand and John P. Leavey (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 7.

to enter into a properly functioning ethical community, in which norms of behavior may be shared and in which notions of general responsibility and mutually constitutive freedom may take hold. The language of an individual people achieves universality once it denies its own particularity and passes over into a universal: “A people that has *Aufhebung* in its throat denies itself as a particular people, strangles and depopulates itself, but in order to extend further its imperium and deploy infinitely its range.”<sup>17</sup> *Klang*, noise, or what Moten calls “phonetic substance” is here a necessary stage in the development of a language capable of dealing with universal concepts and of entering into world history, but it is one which legal institutions of modernity treat as eminently less important than a word’s semantic content.

This suppression of noise also participates immediately in the attempt to remove uncertainty and ambiguity from potential communication. Thomas Hobbes provides an early modern model for such an approach to speech. In his *Leviathan*, he describes the hypothetical situation in which an advisor to a sovereign dispenses information. Such a person must “propound his advice in such a form of speech as may make the truth most evidently appear, that is to say, with as firm ratiocination, as significant and proper language, and as briefly as the evidence will permit.”<sup>18</sup> Alongside this, the speech must equally be free from “*obscure, confused, and ambiguous Expressions also all metaphorical Speeches, tending to the stirring of the Passions.*”<sup>19</sup> Emily Nacol argues that the capacity for language to maintain a kind of phonic residue which potentially confuses the information that it is intended to communicate immediately frustrates the capacity for the kind of abstract universal statements required for legal thinking: “Language, with its fraught connections to sense perception and experience, generates new forms of uncertainty and aggravates existing ones, in part because human practices of naming and defining perceptions are not uniform.”<sup>20</sup> According to this thinking, uncertainty arises from a potentially unclear, emotive use of language, just as the communication of information tends to suppress such uncertainty through phonic clarity. The most appropriate way to avoid a potentially catastrophic breakdown in meaning is to

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis ; Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), 179.

<sup>19</sup> Hobbes, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Nacol, *An Age of Risk: Politics and Economy in Early Modern Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 22.

fix words with a specific meaning, and also to communicate them effectively, without unnecessary phonic excess.

Within the history of insurance, information plays a key role as that which enables individual insurers to make judgements about whether or not to underwrite a particular enterprise. Such information must be communicated clearly and must be done so by a person who is reliable, otherwise there is no way for an underwriter to assess the risk with which they are confronted. As a result, a key part of development in insurance technology has involved the development of methods for collection of processing of information in various forms. According to certain commentators, contemporary finance functions according to a dominion of information:

Information has replaced currency standards of various kinds as the basis for global finance. The credit economy and currency systems no longer depend for their stability on conversion into gold or commodity money; stability is conceived instead as an ongoing exchange between money and information.<sup>21</sup>

This ultimately resolves into a situation in which “the market installs an information-automatism” which “extends all the way to today’s competition in ‘high frequency trading,’ where the latest technologies provide an advantage of milliseconds when it comes to retrieving market information.”<sup>22</sup>

The communication of information aims to name and demarcate qualities of the thing which it discusses, and which aims to establish causal relations between things, and people. For the insurantal imaginary, such information actually serves two key purposes. Alongside enabling a risk calculation, information is also a vital part in establishing whether or not an insurer is liable to pay in the event that an object which they have “protected” is damaged or destroyed. Insurers make use of information both before and after an accident, with the second act of gathering seeking not only to develop a picture of an objective state of affairs, but also to explain why and how a particular event took place, making use of such an explanation in order to determine whether or not the event, as explained, matches conditions in which a claim must be honoured.

As with the communication of information, the explanation of a state of affairs is one which binds its object within fixed determinations and categories. Hegel discusses explanation as a mode of comportment towards an object or situation that necessitates a

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<sup>21</sup> Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Vogl, 77.

stasis in what is being explained. Such a stasis is one in which the “understanding steadfastly insists on its object’s motionless unity.”<sup>23</sup> The contradictory elements of such an object, any tension between the word used and the thing which it designates is suppressed in such a movement. An object or situation as it features in the explanation exists as it appears to the explainer, with any contingent elements, any aspects of the object’s history which may contradict the explanation, amputated. Explanation, as the sober and, as far as possible, noise-free communication of information is an appropriate way of settling legal disputes. What one sees in *Gregson v. Gilbert* is the presentation of two competing explanations - Collingwood’s own human error vs unavoidable bad luck – of precisely why some of the ship’s “cargo” was jettisoned in order to save the rest. The validity of the categories of “slave” and “cargo” within such an explanation go unquestioned.

I read Philip’s project in *Zong!* as a direct intervention within the movement of freezing and tautological definition present within the legal explanation. Such a project cannot recreate the detail of events on board the ship in question, nor can it provide a sufficient counter-narrative. However, it can, and I think does, enact a movement that is fundamentally contrary to the movements of law, as expressed in the motion of explanation. Philip invokes such a minimal potential when she refers to the restlessness that she sees within the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. She views her source text as a source of historically sedimented tension in which potential antagonisms or contingencies are foreclosed. For Philip, this closure mirrors, in some way, the hold of the ships that transported human cargo across the middle passage; its linguistic abstractions, through which the word “cargo” is able to designate sentient individuals, mirrors the visceral abstraction of personal history that was enacted when an individual person was made into a slave; the somatic residue of the words themselves enacts a struggle which pushes against this foreclosure. The text works on the level of both semantics and phonics as the imposition of a sequential order on a potentially riotous interrelation. It is by working to evoke and unearth this suppressed restlessness that Philip makes her first interventions in the history of slavery, and its afterlives.

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<sup>23</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 93.



### *Zong #3*

The first sequence in *Zong!*, entitled “Os,” consists of twenty six short poems, each of which, I want to claim, is concerned with manifesting a tension between the somatic quality of language and the clear communicative function it serves in Philip’s source text. I would argue Philip’s writing aims to reinvigorate the phonetic, sonic element of words which she uses. Doing this enables her to perform a destructive action against the sedimented material processes present within these words themselves. By encouraging an anamnesis of a repressed *Klang*, the linguistic categories employed within *Gregson v. Gilbert* begin to loosen themselves from a determinate meaning and, in doing so, reveal these reified category as possessing a historical, phonic element. Reading Philip’s poems as concerned with such a reinvigoration is to understand them as both a negation and an opening, one brought about through a minimal untethering of language from semantics.

*Zong #3* is reproduced overleaf. The first line of this poem is a brutal pun in which *sum*, a word denoting a weighed and measured quantity, is smuggled within *some*, a nondescript mass. The homophonic relation between the two words makes manifest the relation between precise measurement and violent indifference that defines the exchange of commodities. The line can also be read as genitive, delimiting a quality that may in turn be possessed. In such a reading, “some” is owned by “negroes” and agency conflicts with the capacity for imprisonment as a predicate brings about a subject capable of possessing it while simultaneously opening this subject out to the potential of being made captive. In this moment, a hint of a predicate which necessitates a still non-descript subject manifests itself through the disjunction between sound and text, a lateral interrelation between sounds and concepts. Obviating such an ambiguity is the precondition of legal speech, in which subjects and predicates, possessor and possessed, must remain clearly distinct.

Reading the rest of the poem requires a series of forced leaps between seemingly familiar clusters of words and concepts. Each new line functions both as a beginning and as a continuation of previous words, with the intended relation between each stage of the poem nearly impossible to ascertain. These lines jut out as a new world, only to be returned to sequence by the fact of being followed by another. The final *etc.* is,

*Zong! #3*

the some of negroes  
over  
board  
the rest in lives  
drowned  
exist did not  
in themselves  
preservation  
obliged  
frenzy  
thirst for forty others  
etc

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Nobini Zesiro Yaa Issa Kamboji

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<sup>24</sup> Philip, 6.

accordingly, both bathetic and devastating as previous gestures towards singularity are brought into unity and devastating as previous gestures towards singularity are brought into unity via their participation in a nondescript, potentially infinite sequence of continuing banality.

An oscillating tension between the material and the abstract sounds most clearly in the word *preservation*. Within the poem, this word appears in relation to a movement of self-hood, denoting an act of survival and, seemingly, of personal agency. In the case summary that appears at the start of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the ambiguity of this agency is made clear. One reads, in a clear invocation of the logic of the general average, that “some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest.”<sup>25</sup> To read this back into the poem which seeks to manifest a fundamental restlessness within the words used is to allow *preservation* to express a material contradiction from which one may unfold, and, I would argue, begin to unwork the process of abstraction within the logic of insurance, and within the logic of the commodity.

In *Zong #3*, *preservation* functions as a bridge that simultaneously connects and sunders two worlds: the material world and the world of commodities. This bridge is unstable, however, and the commodity exists in a state of tension between its ideal exchange value and its material body. Reading Philip’s poem slowly, one begins to feel the manner in which the tension she enacts between a suppressed phonic quality and the legal use of the word, all but evacuated of its material quality, mirrors the restlessness of a commodity, a commodity which, in this case, was capable of manifesting such restlessness in refusal, sabotage and insurrection.

Insuring cargo enables one to seek compensation for the intrusion of the contingencies of the material world into the ideal realm of circulation. John Weskett’s introduction to his *Complete Digest of the Theories and Law of Insurance*, published two years after the *Zong* jettisoned its cargo, asserts that maritime insurance is the means by which “the Property of the Merchants, and, consequently, of all the other Trades, Manufactures, and Artisans, who depend on, or are immediately connected with them, can be rendered *secure* and *permanent*.”<sup>26</sup> Following this stated purpose, Weskett notes that the “great utility” of the notion that “the value of property in almost every situation,

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<sup>25</sup> Reproduced in M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 210.

<sup>26</sup> Weskett, *A Complete Digest of the Theory, Laws and Practice of Insurance*, vii. Emphasis added.

however, precarious, may be rendered safe against Accidents, is so universally acknowledged that there needs no Attempt to prove or explain it.”<sup>27</sup> Contained within these statements is an intuitive understanding of the dual structure of a commodity as a bearer of value and as a material thing. The act of rendering “secure and permanent” against “Accidents” is profoundly ironic, as insuring a commodity has little to no effect on whether or not it is likely to be destroyed. Indeed, the category of “moral hazard” was invented precisely to cover the fact that individuals covered by insurance tend to take more risks rather than fewer. In such a situation, nature is tamed not through reconciliation, but through the domination of abstraction over concrete reality. Maritime insurance closes the gap between protection and destruction; for an insured commodity nonexistence is expressed as a precise monetary value, a value that negates the distinction between these two potentialities. The phonic quality, the resonance of the words within Philip’s first sequences sound as the reemergence of these material bodies over and above their domination.

While the opening line of *Zong #3* enacts a contradiction via the introduction of an ambiguous genitive, in *Zong #9*, a dative grammar unsettles a rigid conceptual taxonomy. Specific elements within the conceptual framework of the 18th century are made to mutually enfold each other and to contain and to refer their opposite. What emerges here is not simply language as somatic material but also language as that which enables a movement between concepts that quickens them, revealing a life and mutual dependence in spite of their apparent isolation. In the 1812 preface to *The Science of Logic*, Hegel formulates an opposition between the understanding, a mode of thinking associated with the development of conceptual schemas, and “reason,” the thought associated with dialectic. The former “determines and holds the determination fixed.”<sup>28</sup> The latter is “negative and dialectical, since it dissolves the determinations of the understanding into nothing; it is positive since it generates the universal and understands the particular therein.”<sup>29</sup> Understanding determines and abstracts. It functions as the negation of mere sense data, subsuming objects under concepts and holding them fast as such. This thinking is suited to taxonomy and to *explanation*, not to the elaboration of contradiction. In contrast, dialectical reasoning is a negation and a dissolution; it is a

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<sup>27</sup> Weskett, vii.

<sup>28</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giova (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Hegel, 10.

*Zong!* #9

slaves  
 to the order in  
 destroyed  
 the circumstance in  
 fact  
 the property in  
 subject  
 the subject in  
 creature  
 the loss in  
 underwriter  
 to the fellow in  
 negro  
 the sustenance  
 in want

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 Rufaro Uweimana Nasiche Nafuna Asura

17

30

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<sup>30</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 17.

motion of life and a release of the new through a dissolution of the reifications of the old. C.L.R. James, a writer whose *Black Jacobins* (1938) Philip credits with drawing her into an awareness of herself as a “living descendent of the enslaved, being in active relation with the memory of Toussaint [L’Ouverture, the major figure of the San Domingo revolution] and his supporters”, describes the error committed by a mode of thinking that is entirely invested in the application of fixed, seemingly ahistorical categories.<sup>31</sup> James writes that, when presenting his table of categories, Kant, and by association those who apply conceptual categories in an a-historical manner, “did not see that the categories developed out of one another, in a consistent movement, of opposition and resolution of position, and were all connected.”<sup>32</sup> To treat the categories of the understanding as a-historical is to fail to understand that what appears to be a way of making deductions about the world, is, in fact, an active participation within a historically determined mode of life.

It would be a gross overstatement, however, to claim that Philip’s writing attempts to integrate her newly fluid concepts within a new, more advanced or more representative universal. There are no new assertions within *Zong!* Rather, the effect the text generates is closer to what Adorno understands to be the kernel of dialectical thinking: the simple, life-saving impulse towards the animation of that which is under the most intense pressure to remain still. To think dialectically is “to resist the enormous pressure which is exerted upon us from without.”<sup>33</sup> Dialectical thinking is itself as much a movement of survival, as it is an emphatic testimony to the fact that thought has not been reduced to rigidified self-preservation. Adorno’s definition is congruent with Phillip’s poem in the sense that the latter shies away from the triumphant declaration of new concepts, but nonetheless manifests a critical life within those that already exist.

“The subject in / creature” and “the loss in underwriter” and the “fellow in / negro”: these opposed words are presented in a manner whereby they contain and necessitate each other. What, when arranged in the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and placed under the force of an explanation appears as a legitimate set of categories through which to investigate a specific event reveals itself in Philip’s re-arrangement to be a close conceptual totality. Purportedly valid categories become visible as a net cast over the

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<sup>31</sup> M. Nourbese Philip, *Blank: Essays & Interviews* (Toronto: Book\*hug, 2017), 304.

<sup>32</sup> C. L. R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, ed. Christoph Ziermann trans. Nicholas Walker, (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 3.

colour and innocence of becoming, and a blanket with which to smother alternative histories.<sup>34</sup> The text of the poem, at this point, remains a closed system. Nonetheless, it is one in which the secure categories of the understanding begin to be deposed and in which the suppressed phonic element of the language of concepts comes alive via the slow revelation of a negated but enduring agency. When read slowly and sonorously, as Philip herself reads this poem, the organized emptiness of legalistic speech grows into a musical excess in the mouth of a living speaker.

### *Being Sufficient*

The final moments of *Zong!* # 16 are reproduced below:

	the of and during & wherefore
	the preserving
	the insurance of water
	the within loss
	the terms of exist
	a negro of wit
should they have found	
	water
	&
	being
	sufficient

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<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann & Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 34.

<sup>35</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 28.

The final four moments of this poem form a constellation that I take to be immanent to the logic of maritime insurance. Such a constellation can be unraveled via reference to the concept of character. The notion of character emerges from the logic of the circulation of commodities via the credit instruments that the so-called African trade brought into being and that it passed onto the workings of contemporary finance. This continuum is evident in the continued existence of credit and creditworthiness as a key subjective faculty, and in the continuing use of *character* as a quality deemed to be lacking in particular demographics who find themselves frequently denied access to all but the most punitive loan products. As Khalil Muhammed argues, the very idea that a person might possess a good or bad character has an evident relationship to the various modes of racist exclusion that the increasingly financialized aspects of the U.S. economy have facilitated, and often directly generated.<sup>36</sup> Once one has elaborated the importance of a thinking of character for the slave trade in general, it is possible to understand the manner in which Philip's writing in the final third of *Zong!* begins to unweave such a thinking, along the lines of radically different notions of history and self-hood from those which are posited by insurantal rationality.

Commodities, Marx writes, cannot take themselves to market.<sup>37</sup> Neither, it turns out, can they be taken by just anyone. Rather, the transportation of captive humans around the world played a crucial role in the development of the flourishing 18<sup>th</sup> century credit economy, which gave traders access to streams of capital without which they would have been incapable of pursuing the trade. P.G.M. Dickson records the development of the London stock exchange, and notes an immense proliferation of bonds and securities, the majority of which were related to major Atlantic trading companies. As he notes, in 1717, the total share of capital of joint-stock companies was over £20 million and by 1721, the South Sea Company and the East India Trading Company had issued bonds with a combined value of over £7 million.<sup>38</sup> Slave-backed bond finance made immense contributions to the development of the English credit economy.<sup>39</sup> In particular, studies of the slave trade explain the specific need for credit instruments as emerging, in part,

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<sup>36</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>37</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 37.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Inikori, "The Credit Needs of the African Trade and the Development of the Credit Economy in England," *Explorations in Economic History* 27, no. 2 (1990): 202, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-4983\(90\)90010-V](https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-4983(90)90010-V).



from the trade's singular geography. The distances involved in collecting and transporting groups of slaves necessitated a significant amount time between investment and return, meaning that those wishing to enter the trade at the point of departure would almost certainly need to acquire funds on credit.

Only those deemed to be reliable debtors could expect to be loaned necessary funds in order to make a start or maintain themselves within the business. The growth of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, therefore, was correlative with the growth of the credit economy, meaning that it was also correlative with notions of trustworthiness and of a particular consistency of action which would potentially make a person credit-worthy. A person's mannerisms, references and sociability became an essential aspect of their livelihood. To give one example, in 1697, the London based Africa company reorganized its relationship with its factors, employees who were engaged in arranging credit for plantation owners. The company forced these factors to be directly financially responsible for advances made to the buyers of slaves in the Caribbean. Maintaining one's position as a factor was possible so long as one was able to provide "security" and performance bonds, backed by "well-to-do merchants" in England.<sup>40</sup> It was through measures such as these, which were in part necessitated by the huge distances actually involved in the slave trade that credit, and the capacity to acquire it, gained exponentially in importance.<sup>41</sup> The continuation and development of the slave trade from this point relied on the capacity for one individual to stand in for another and to provide a cover for their interests. Within this context, the notion of *character* provided a series of standards and determinations through which individuals could be compared and judged and, as a result of which, money could be loaned, and the trade expanded.

Adorno remarks in *Minima Moralia* that "no science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness,

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob M. Prince, "Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies," in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, ed by Barbara L. Solow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 301. It may appropriate to note here that fluctuations within the relative availability of financial security provide a register of world historical events and explosive assertions of freedom. Prince notes, for example, that throughout the 1790s, a relative glut in slaves caused by the San Domingo revolution and the removal of the market for slaves in this area of the Caribbean gave buyers in North America and elsewhere sufficient leverage to demand easier access to credit from traders, something that in turn generated an increase in the need for guarantors on the part of sellers. The financialized version of security therefore functions both as a way of realizing aspects of trade prior to the existence of their material preconditions, and as a way of negotiating and, occasionally, capitalizing on the organized resistance of slaves to their own thing-hood.

<sup>41</sup> Inikori, "The Credit Needs of the African Trade and the Development of the Credit Economy in England," 204.

openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equitable practical frame of mind.”<sup>42</sup> A place in which such a science could start is the hold of the slave-ship. The various credit instruments operative at the height of the trade meant that “each active slave trader had to develop his own circle of affluent acquaintances with available liquid resources who would help him with large, longer-term discounts as needed.”<sup>43</sup> Only those with suitable social skills, together with necessary reputation, were able to acquire funds and to maintain access to cash in the event of short falls or a disappointing rate of return. Life in the bourgeois credit economy, which is to say, contemporary life per-se, consists of continual bluffs and feints and of voracious judgements dictated by the codes of good manners and accompanied by fervent suspicion. Marx observes that such relations are subject to a perverse dialectic, in which “under the appearance of mutual *trust* between men” what takes place is “really the greatest *distrust* and a total estrangement.”<sup>44</sup>

Marx finds the essence of social life in such an economy in the interchangeable quality of ethical and financial categories. With reference to Shylock’s exchange with Antonio and Bassanio in the first act of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the former agrees to lend to the latter on the basis that his friend will stand as security, Marx argues that the world of credit is one in which a “good” man is equivalent to “sufficient” man.<sup>45</sup> Within the play, Shylock’s comment comes by means of a knowing explanation for Bassanio’s indignation. “Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?” asks the later, when Shylock declares that Antonio is a “good” man.<sup>46</sup> Shylock responds with laughter, asserting that sufficiency, a category of causation more reminiscent of physics than of moral worth, is enough to determine someone’s character. For Shylock, and for Marx, the language of the credit economy, the language of moral life and the language of physical causation are correlates. “Sufficient” is an appropriate word: the question to be solved is literally whether or not Antonio will be able to enact a movement within the world of commodities, enabling Bassanio to pursue a venture that he feels certain will secure him sufficient funds to court his love. Only those with the proper moral worth are able to facilitate such movement, however. Earlier in the play, the

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<sup>42</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London ; New York: Verso, 2005), 59.

<sup>43</sup> Prince, “Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies,” 303.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 2000), 263.

<sup>45</sup> Marx, 163.

<sup>46</sup> William Shakespeare, *Comedies Volume II* ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York ; London ; Toronto: Everyman, 1996), 15.

interchangeable quality of the ethical and the economic is announced when Bassanio requests money from his friend who responds by insisting that he has neither “money nor commodity” and but that his friend should go forth and “Try what” his “credit can in Venice do.”<sup>47</sup> The two Christian characters have already understood that there is no real distinction between the financial and the moral judgement before they meet with their potential creditor. Shylock’s laughter in the following scene is provoked, and justified, by Bassanio’s unconscious though blatant hypocrisy.

For Marx, the collapse of the ethical and the economic transforms the entirety of a life into a qualitative guarantee of a capital return: “The totality of the poor [in the financial sense] man’s virtues, the content of his life’s activity, his very existence, represent for the rich man the repayment of his capital, plus interest.”<sup>48</sup> Such a situation forces acts of conspiracy and makes intense suspicion the ground of purported trust, since all but those with the most spotless reputation “must make a counterfeit coin of himself, obtain credit by underhand means, lies etc.”<sup>49</sup> This process is one in which “man himself is transformed into money and in which “*the spirit of money* is not money, paper, but instead it is my personal existence, my flesh, my blood [...]”<sup>50</sup> To determine character is to determine “being / sufficient,” to assign to an individual the capacity to move objects effectively around the world in order to enable a sufficient return for those who lend them money. The same process which marks an individual as morally exemplary extinguishes their actual particularities, however, transforming human life and action into a medium of commodity circulation.

In *Gregson v. Gilbert*, an idea of sufficiency carries such a dual weight, functioning as a moral category, one which relates to the apparent autonomy of the Zong’s captain, Luke Collingwood, and also one which views such autonomy within the context of a number of potential causes and pressures, which may or may not have necessitated him taking the action he took. Collingwood’s autonomy is set in relation to the natural, accidental phenomena with which the ship was confronted, with a hypothetically *sufficient* ground for making a claim on the lost cargo emerging from a situation in which the autonomy of the captain would have been unable to mitigate whatever natural forces may have combined in order to threaten the voyage and its cargo. An insufficient ground

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<sup>47</sup> Shakespeare, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Early Writings*, 163.

<sup>49</sup> Marx, 264.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, 264.

is one in which blame for the state of the ship's supplies may be laid at a free thinking and acting subject, one who stands over and above a natural chain of causation. The language of the trial reflects the fact that for a policy such as that taken out by the owners of the *Zong*'s cargo to function, a subject must be *sufficient* in two ways, that is they must be sufficiently autonomous to provide a counter-point to the world of nature against which the cargo is insured, and they must be sufficient in the Shylockean sense; they must be sufficiently free to be able to obviate this freedom for the sake of objects. Philip's "water / & being / sufficient" can, at this point, almost be read as a list of the most basic preoccupations for those who participated in the slave trade.

The category of the "perils of the sea," a category that continues to be used to this day, names all that lies outside of such autonomy. It denotes a natural world defined as an unfree accumulation of necessities and accidents. Alexander Annesley, writing in 1808, defines the perils of the sea with reference to "every accident happening by the forces of nature of the wind or waves, by thunder and lightning, by driving against the rocks, or by the striking of the ship, or by any other violence that human prudence could not foresee, nor human strength resist."<sup>51</sup> Within *Gregson v Gilbert*, this category takes account of the "contrary winds and currents" and "leaky hulls" which Collingwood insisted resulted in the error.<sup>52</sup> More recently, Armstrong has described the perils of the sea as "the earliest form of the concept of insurable risk."<sup>53</sup> Davenport, Pigott and Heywood, speaking in *Gregson v. Gilbert* in support of the ruling against the claimants insist that, although the official declaration of the case insists that "by the perils of the sea, contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship [the *Zong*] was rendered foul and leaky; [...] no evidence was given that the perils of the seas reduced them to this necessity," instead stating that the ship sailed "without sufficient water, for the casks were found to be less than supposed."<sup>54</sup> The functioning of insurance, and by association, the world economy at the time, are founded on this opposition between free responsibility and a blind, accidental nature.

Published in 1786, Kant's *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* provides a philosophical elaboration of the concept of character, its relation to the self-

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Annesley, *A Compendium of the Law of Marine Insurances, Bottomry, Insurance on Lives, and of Insurance against Fire: In Which the Mode of Calculating Averages Is Defined, and Illustrated by Example* (London: AStrahan, 1808), 66.

<sup>52</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 210.

<sup>53</sup> Tim Armstrong, *The Logic of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 210–11.

governing individual and the relationship of this individual to language.<sup>55</sup> Kant defines character according to standards of predictability, reliability and internal consistency, each of which represents the capacity of a person to raise themselves above their chaotic impulses. The ideal representative of a character is “a man of principles, from whom one knows what to expect, not from his instinct, for example, but from his will [...]”<sup>56</sup> One obtains character by behaving according to universal principles, but only principles the validity of which one must develop for oneself. Such a practice precludes mimesis: “The *imitator* (in moral matters) is without character; for character consists precisely in originality in the way of thinking. He who has character derives his conduct from a source that he has opened by himself.”<sup>57</sup> The social actuality of such character is, however, unthinkable without a degree of concealment and dissimulation. When considering the potential of a misanthropic retort to his faith in the potential for individual moral autonomy, Kant states simply that “it is already clear enough from the concealment of a good part of one’s thoughts, which every prudent human being finds necessary, that in our race everyone finds it advisable to be on his guard and not to allow others to view *completely* how he is.”<sup>58</sup> The individual of good character is not simply the one who is capable of acting, and thinking, according to ethical precepts, but it is also one who is able to use language to effectively cover any thoughts that spring from instinct. Words spoken by the person of character should not always be taken literally; Kant insists that it is only a race of “angels” that would be able to speak a language that completely expresses their thought.<sup>59</sup> Contained within the very notion of “being / sufficient” is the capacity for language to cover and to dissimulate. The language of autonomy is already the language of an incomplete sublimation of nature, one made necessary by the 18th century philosophy of freedom on the one hand and by the demands of the credit economy on the other.

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<sup>55</sup>Ironically, for Kant, character is the only personality trait which Kant insists must be taken to stand outside of a system of market value. While he is willing to concede that things such as talent and temperament have, if not always an exact market price, at least the potential to be denominated in terms of a kind of balance of relative social value, character is marked by an “inner worth” and is therefore “beyond all price.” Character stands outside of the market economy, and the same moment represents the most perfect expression of that economy’s ideal, *sufficient* subject.

<sup>56</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner, trans. Mary Gregor et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 384.

<sup>57</sup> Kant, 390.

<sup>58</sup> Kant, 420.

<sup>59</sup> Kant, 445.

*Zong #16* maintains a tone similar to the working through and calculation appropriate to the patient opposition of nature to freedom present in *Gregson v. Gilbert*. The lines “the of and during & wherefore / the preserving,” and those that follow, appear to mimic the seriousness of the tone of the investigation, while the continuous weight accorded to these words through their repetition within the poems up to this point serves to develop both a phonic resonance and a sense of the deadly disinterest inherent in legalistic reasoning. The phonic resonance of the words enacts an oscillation between reason and nature, performing both a suppression of the particular through repetition and the return of excess, of repressed drives, as sound. In such language, the sublimation of nature into a reasonable, rational character is incomplete, as the resonance of the words themselves belie the considered deliberations of the partisans of autonomous reason.

The critique of such a subject is achieved, at least partly, through a critique of the idea of the “promise”, itself a key element of the credit economy. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche presents the promise as the telos of the historical development of a moral subjectivity: “To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind?”<sup>60</sup> The modern subject, considered here as the promise-making subject, is fully autonomous according to their capacity to stand by their word, a capacity that Nietzsche insists involves a complex history of prior determinations:

In order to have that degree of control over the future, man must first have learnt to distinguish between what happens by accident and what by design, to think causally, to view the future as the present and anticipate it, to grasp with certainty what is end and what is means, in all, to be able to calculate, compute – and before he can do this, man himself will really have to become reliable, regular, necessary, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable for his own future!<sup>61</sup>

This process, so Nietzsche argues, is primarily to be understood as one of sedimented cruelty, a process for which the sovereign individual is merely “the ripest fruit on its tree.” For the promise to exist, the subject must feel guilt at the thought of breaking it and Nietzsche posits this guilt as the result of the collective memory of punishments including

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<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 58.

<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, 58.

stoning [...] impaling, ripping apart and trampling to death by horses ('quartering'), boiling of the criminal in oil or wine [...], the popular flaying, cutting out flesh from the breast; and, of course, coating the wrong-doer with honey and leaving him to the flies in the scorching sun.<sup>62</sup>

One can gain insight into the concept of character by moving such punishments outside of the pre-history of the sovereign subject in which Nietzsche locates them and into the relation between owners and slaves. Moments that he relegates to prehistory formed a part of the immediate material conditions that allow this subject to exist. As C.L.R. James describes it, the maintenance of 18th century slave populations in San Domingo and elsewhere in the Caribbean regularly involved situations in which

masters poured burning wax on their slaves' arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves.<sup>63</sup>

Such tortures represented a process through which, as Grandin notes, the ideal "of the free man [...] answerable to his own personal conscience, in control of his own inner passions [...] was honed against the idea of its opposite."<sup>64</sup> This pain is the historical content of the serenity with which Kant, and many a slaver, contemplated the harmony of natural and seemingly inexorable moral laws.

### *Fraud*

Nietzsche describes an origin of the ethical imperative that language correspond to reality. In theory at least, insurance functions according to such a correspondence theory of truth and testimony, a logic of the *of and during and wherefore*. The subject with character, the one who is *sufficient*, enacts such a correspondence: they tell the "truth." Kant remarks in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* that "a human being who lies has no character at all, and if he has anything good in him this is merely due to his

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<sup>62</sup>Nietzsche, 62.

<sup>63</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity*, 8.



temperament.”<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere when illustrating the precise nature of the categorical imperative, it is the idea of a making a “lying promise,” of engaging in *fraud*, that most clearly demonstrates a logical contradiction, “for, in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises, because it would be pointless to avow my will in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this avowal.”<sup>66</sup> Making a promise that one knows one will not keep does not merely mean betraying another, it means destroying the possibility for a world in which it is possible to act on the promise of another. Materially, it would mean destroying the possibility of a credit economy, and with it the circulation of commodities. At the same time, to refute the correspondence of language to a particular determined reality is to begin to dissolve a specific notion of character, and the economic demands correlate to it, from the *of, and during & wherefore*. In what follows, I want to argue that as *Zong!* progresses, it enacts such a refutation, one which ultimately transforms into a language of conspiracy, and into a radically opposed conception of character.

Lying with regard to commercial transactions is termed fraud, and its forms are legion. Consider the following statement in Weskett’s compendium:

The grand and most essential Point to be guarded against in all matters of Insurance is Fraud. Under this term is comprehended not only every direct, intentional, palpable Deceit, Cheating and Imposition; but also, and as having the same Effect or Tendency, every kind of Collusion, Misrepresentation, Equivocation, Concealment, Reservation, and every Departure from Truth and good faith.<sup>67</sup>

To engage in commercial fraud is to give false testimony concerning the nature of one’s goods, the course that a ship would run, the quality of the vessel that one might use or any other element of a voyage that may lead an underwriter into making a false calculation concerning whether it is worthwhile insuring a particular voyage or how to classify the risk. Annesley’s handbook explicates the danger of fraud via reference to an understanding of *risk* as entirely dependent upon the purported trustworthiness of the individual who signs a contract with an underwriter:

The underwriter *computes* his risk entirely from the account given by the person insured, and therefore it is absolutely necessary to the justice and validity of the

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<sup>65</sup> Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, 471.

<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Reath Andrews, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>67</sup> Weskett, *A Complete Digest of the Theory, Laws and Practice of Insurance*, XXVI.



contract that this account be exact and complete; accordingly the learned judges of courts of law, feeling that the very essence of insurance consists in a rigid attention to the purest good faith (a) and the strictest integrity, have constantly held, that it is vacated and annulled by any least shadow of fraud or undue concealment; and therefore if the insurer, at the time that he underwrites can be proved to have known that the ship was safe arrived, the contract will be equally void, if the insured had concealed from him any accident which had befallen the ship.<sup>68</sup>

Just as the lie annuls character, so the fraud obviates the contract; it destroys that which binds interested parties and dissolves the structures of security that enable the value of particular objects to survive their material destruction.

The first poem of *Dicta*, the second sequence in *Zong!*, (overleaf) carries what I have claimed to be Philip's previous phonetic invigoration of categories into a more active negation of such a correlation. While this language remains focused on the use of space and slow repetition, the writing now operates within a space of active imagination, with the dual meaning of "without" enabling the cognitive possibility of the absence of such demarcations, while affirming the existence a possibility of "seas" "africa" and "owners" literally *outside* of the transcendental categories of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Several other poems in the sequence, the shortest in the book, appear, at least partly, as tables of categories or as the repetition of the constituent parts of an unknown whole. Each of these categories maintains an ambiguous potential for apostrophe, one which addresses a previously smothered possibility contained within the word, as much as it merely delineates it. The rearrangement of such categories is a mode that enables what within *Gregson v. Gilbert* takes the form of competing explanations of an already closed event to point towards new possibilities for understanding. While these possibilities remain rooted within the categorical determinations of the source text, they nonetheless enact a process of fission within such categories which is capable of beginning to reform possibilities that they would otherwise preclude.

Philip's repetitions gradually release these words from their categorical, unambiguous determinations. At the same time, they begin to generate the sense of a community, an "Africa" outside of the concepts that have previously defined and determined boundaries of signification; an "africa / without / perils." W. E. B. Dubois and, more recently, Christina Sharpe, posit the subjectivity of a slave and its afterlives as

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<sup>68</sup> Annesley, *A Compendium of the Law of Marine Insurances, Bottomry, Insurance on Lives, and of Insurance against Fire*, 101.

constitutively outside of a legalistic correspondence notion of truth. For Dubois, the reality of subjection is made most clear with the fact that a promise made to a slave holds no legal authority.<sup>69</sup> Sharp writes that “to be in the wake [the metaphor which she uses to denote the continuing, contemporary afterlife of slavery and its effects] is [...] to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship [...]”<sup>70</sup> Positioned outside of the law, the black subject is defined in both a singular and collective sense by their own capacity to be arbitrarily overwhelmed by violent force. At the same time as marking the condition of continued, extraordinary vulnerability, the wake, for Sharpe, is a position of action, of belonging and of a foundational community.<sup>71</sup>

*Zong!* #




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<sup>69</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Towards a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America. 1860-1880* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014),

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<sup>70</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>71</sup> Sharpe, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 49.

One can catch a glimpse of this in the very first poem of *Zong!*, which acts as both an origin, an apostrophe and a desperate climax:

*Zong! #1*

w w w w a wa  
 w a w a t  
 er wa s  
 our wa  
 te r gg g g go  
 o oo goo d  
 waa wa wa  
 w w waa  
 ter o oh  
 on o ne w one  
 w o n d d d  
 ey d a  
 dey a ah ay  
 s one day s  
 wa wa

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<sup>73</sup> Philip, 3.

With reference to Walter Benjamin's early essays on language, Werner Hamacher states that

Language is not a medium that can be measured against an 'objective state of affairs' - a standard verifiable independently of this medium and already available outside of itself. Rather, language is the articulation of a mediacy prior to any distinction between 'true' and 'false' [...] Whoever speaks does not posit [...] without exposing himself and his positings to the possibility of deposition in the mediacy of language, a deposition not determined by the distinction between truth and lying.<sup>74</sup>

The pre-existence of a linguistic community is a condition of speaking, and the fact of this community opens one's speech to the potential of deposition and of overthrow. I want to claim that Philip's poetry also begins, at moments, to manifest such a community. *Zong!* #20 ends with the words "falls / upon / enemies":

for  
otherwise  
the sure of verdict  
in the want of action

preserve the soon in afterwards  
the time in africa

to jamaica

now the question  
falls  
upon  
enemies

<sup>74</sup> Werner Hamacher. "Afformative, Strike," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000), 115.

<sup>75</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 36.

In this poem, Phillip suggests a potential mode of linguistic community, one whose temporal dimensions are contradictory and generative. The “soon in afterward,” “the time in Africa” preserves a memory of the past as a point of departure for alternative futures. The final diminuendo enacts a process in which these potentials pass, in which the openness of the poem to such futures passes back into present reifications. Read alternatively, however, that fact that the question “falls / upon / enemies” speaks of a radical openness within the text, as the apparent certainty of the structures in question is eroded. Language returns to the enemies, but the question as to their own permanence falls upon them, as it has previously fallen upon the categories they employ. To open such categories to questioning is already to have admitted their fluidity, their contingency, and with this the contingency of the material relations that birthed them and that propagate. To claim that the question as to this origin has now been passed to “enemies” is to invoke their opposite in the form of an antagonistic community of fractured belonging.

### *Conspiracy*

Conspiracy is a medium and a mode of belonging. Such language communicates information, while at the same time forming a ground for a participatory linguistic community, one that excludes those for whom a certain message is not intended. Édouard Glissant argues that plantation-era Creole forms the paradigm for such a language. This manner of speaking, emerging as a combination of numerous African languages and colonial French, is one in which “the meaning of a sentence is sometimes hidden in the accelerated nonsense created by scrambled sounds,” but equally in which “this nonsense does convey real meaning to which the master’s ear cannot have access.”<sup>76</sup> Glissant defines Creole accordingly as “a kind of conspiracy that concealed itself by its pure, open expression.”<sup>77</sup> The capacity for language and ritual to serve a dual function as a medium for the transmission of potentially emancipatory information and as the ground for a radical, insurrectionary community recurs throughout studies of slave rebellion. Notably, when writing of the first major slave uprising in San Domingo, James states that “Voodoo

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<sup>76</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 124–25.

<sup>77</sup> Glissant, 125.

was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves traveled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk, and now, since the [French] revolution, to hear political news and make their plans.”<sup>78</sup> Prior to this, James prefigures Glissant’s description of Creole, noting that the guttural, somatic quality of the voodoo chant functioned as a way of binding a revolutionary community, and as an active repudiation of the positivist understanding of affairs sought by colonial administration.<sup>79</sup> It is in their voodoo songs that slaves recalled older forms of religious practice and in these same songs that they were able to insist repeatedly on their determination to “destroy the whites, and all that they possess,” a desire that could never have been openly articulated in a language accessible to the master.<sup>80</sup>

A view of language as simultaneously opaque and communicative is antithetical to the aims according to which *Gregson v. Gilbert* was composed. The legal transcript is a language that tends, as far as possible, towards perfect clarity, a clarity that enables an analogy to be drawn between the circumstances that it describes and any number of possible events to which the document could prove to be an interpretative guide. Philip, herself a trained lawyer, understands that there is an affinity between law and poetry lying in the fact that both of these “share an inexorable concern with language – the *right* use of the *right* words, phrases or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is shared by both.”<sup>81</sup> This apparent affinity should not be exaggerated, however. As Philip notes, “A rightly worded contract, for instance, can save an individual from financial loss, or secure great financial benefits.”<sup>82</sup> In one sense, at least, legal language, unlike poetry, is capable of making *something* happen, provided that it is interpreted and spoken by people who maintain a vested interest in relating it directly to an existing empirical reality.

This use of language, this relating of a legal document to the world is conditioned by a profound silence, and by the capacity for the language of the law to actively exclude the voices of those whose life it determines. When discussing her book, Philip insists on the belief that “the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance money [...] is locked in this text. The many silences within the Silence of the text.”<sup>83</sup> For Philip, one dominant silence presides over the text of

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<sup>78</sup> James, *The Black Jacobins*, 125.

<sup>79</sup> James, 18.

<sup>80</sup> James, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 191.

<sup>82</sup> Philip, 191.

<sup>83</sup> Philip, 191.

*Gregson v. Gilbert*, a silence that contains the erased humanity of the *Zong*'s cargo. This silence is the condition of possibility for legalistic reason. Such a silence is composed of many silences, of an irretrievable variety of liquidated personal histories. In order to be faithful to this fact, the language of *Zong!* must move from a stable presentation of silence to a restless cacophony, with the two elements bound together through combination of narration and disruption - a kind of linguistic *conspiracy*.

Philip describes the process of writing the latter sections of the book in visceral terms, reminiscent of a ritual of sacrifice and reconstitution:

I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles [...] until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer or prophet [...] reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.<sup>84</sup>

The notion of a story that tells by “not telling,” or the impulse to tell the story that can only be told by not telling, forms a consistent refrain throughout Philip’s twenty-page afterword. It is, especially when seen within the context of slave revolt and of the language of the plantation, one possible definition of a conspiratorial use of language - a language that communicates by concealing and that conceals via the directness of its communication. Having considered the first poems in Phillip’s book as primarily negative in their relationship to the structure of law and security within which they intervene, it is possible to argue that the latter sections of the text make positive claims, or at least claims that actively point to an active subjectivity and to a lyric purpose.

From the third sequence onwards, *Zong!* adopts a distinctly lyrical register, with fragments of what appear to be narrative emerging, but never settling into full coherence. The first sequence written in this mode, entitled “Sal,” makes use of regular personal pronouns for the first time and ends with a passage that reads both as sound poetry and as an echo of a nostalgic transition appropriate to an early modern travel narrative:

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<sup>84</sup> Philip, 194.

the cat she was    torn we sear  
   & singe the rose  
                                 of afric a mole  
on her nape a bill    of sale flap  
   flap  
                                 in the wind the sail    seal  
the sale sad  
   sail s night    falls so far  
to afric & the dog  
   star

85

These words recall the motions of memory and the preservation of experience. They form scattered images and sounds that may determine the narrative of an individual journey, or that equally suggest a variety of somatic linguistic expressions tied to no direct signified. While any claims concerning content or referent of such a narrative remain speculative, its traces continuously emerge throughout the remaining sections of *Zong!*:

loss  
this is but  
ration time  
the loss within  
days how long  
thirst & thirst  
fortunes over  
now i lose  
of loss visions  
as sobs  
to wa  
the seas  
with she  
n negroes murder  
ora pro  
an o  
sands  
how many  
where being is  
be being she  
falls  
board rub  
and rob her  
lord  
over and  
here bring them  
no provisions  
s sow  
negroes ma  
my lord

86

<sup>85</sup> Philip, 76.

<sup>86</sup> Philip, 61.



A legal document, a closed linguistic circuit that permits of no further addition or renewal, is here disrupted into the impossible question of “days how long.” The counting of moments of time, a counting relevant to a transcript concerned with determining the precise moment at which the throwing overboard of a ship’s living cargo was or was not “necessary,” is here shot through with the pathos of lived experience of the passing of time. Philip enacts this passing via slips in grammar which oscillate between predicated agency and a subject that is entirely owned: “now I lose                      count I am.” While the former three words are denied a direct object, they nonetheless manifest a subject capable of having things taken away, generating a singular pathos that functions as a quietly devastating *Urbild* for the slave in transit. The latter statement flits into an ambiguity that positions the subject between the material experience of the passing and counting of time, and their function as measure, as a “count” within a specific mode of calculation. This poem restlessly oscillates between the tentative presentation of concrete, lost life, and the lethal abstractions of the world of commodities.

These lyric sections continually disrupt any linear temporal structure. In an earlier page, Philip makes use of an indicative grammar which she places in a contrapuntal relation to onomatopoeic exclamations in order to enact a continual returning to immediacy that, through its very repetition, constitutes a temporal flow. The immediacy of pain, or surprise, and of the indicative gesture, exists in contradiction with the structure of a song, one that necessitates moving from one beat to the next:

there is

creed there is

fate there is

oh

oh oracle

there are

oh oh

ashes

over

This temporal contradiction extends back to the genesis of the occidental cultural heritage, as Philip's words form a liminal space for the play and confrontation between differing mythic origins:

circe argues with eve  
about eden                      on the eve  
   of murder  
   rome mourns  
   her

Staging a confrontation between opposing Homeric and Biblical figures, Philip breaks further the notion of historical continuity and consistency of character upon which the logic of insurance rests and returns the narrative of cultural progression to the status of competing mythologies. Later, the Bible stands alongside and the history of literature innovation from Baudelaire to Gertrude Stein:

*le mort le*                      *mort le p tit mort*                      scent of mortality  
she                      falls                      to  
*ifáifáifá*                      falling                      port  
   &                      over  
   over                      my fortunes  
   a sin                      you say  
*video video vide*                      the lord                      o who says i am  
i say                      for ruth                      a rose                      of loss a rose  
   ruth sup                      and for t                      pose truth

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<sup>87</sup> Philip, 60.

<sup>88</sup> Philip, 83.

<sup>89</sup> Philip, 62.

What appear to be specific events in these sequences appear in a register of an involuntary anamnesis itself woven within an opaque, but tangible rhythmic structure:

wind create a cat s  
the sea sing *te*  
cradle on  
*deum s* the bells  
the bells ding ding  
and dong over  
the water done done  
deed done died  
done dead  
there is fresh  
fish no water  
rush rush feet  
guns run red  
run dear lisa

90

Repetitions and alliterations combine with what appears to be a traumatic memory, before resolving into an experience of pure sound and rhythm:

ding don din don ding  
dong done

91

Philip writes of how she considers that her poem “bears witness to the *resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed* and transforms the desiccated legal report into a cacophony of voices – wails cries and moans, and shouts that had earlier been banned from the text.”<sup>92</sup> This specific invocation of “cacophony” stands, in her own mind, in contradiction to the form of fugue, a musical form that Philip invokes to describe her work, and that engages in “sustained repetition or reiteration of various themes, phrases and voices,

<sup>90</sup> Philip, 85.

<sup>91</sup> Philip, 98.

<sup>92</sup> Philip, 201.

albeit fragmented.”<sup>93</sup> The fugue, as Philip notes, however, “has another, darker, meaning, referring to a state of amnesia in which the individual, his or her subjectivity having been destroyed, becomes alienated from him, or herself.”<sup>94</sup> This erasure is paradigmatic for understanding the erasure of the “humanity of Africans on board the *Zong*,” meaning that “the legal text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* becomes a representation of the fugal state of amnesia and serves as a mechanism for erasure and alienation.”<sup>95</sup> This process is reconfigured, so Philip argues, through her action of “fragmenting the text [of *Gregson v. Gilbert*] and re-writing it [...] or rather, over it, thereby essentially erasing it” and allowing it to become a “fugal palimpsest through which *Zong!* is allowed to heal the original text of its fugal amnesia.”<sup>96</sup> Forgetting and erasure moves against a forgetting and a silence that is constitutive of the legal text with which Philip is working.

The temporality of such a counter-forgetting is, by definition, anachronistic. Philip’s song includes flashes of the future plantation of the slave labour that awaited the survivors and descendants of the *Zong*:

she  
negro the  
wonder  
of it a dower  
gift you for  
in the grain  
field overhead sun  
in your  
gold hair as  
corn *first*

*act third scene*

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<sup>93</sup> Philip, 204.

<sup>94</sup> Philip, 204.

<sup>95</sup> Philip, 204.

<sup>96</sup> Philip, 204.

<sup>97</sup> Philip, 83.

A sense of the pastoral infuses this writing, a literary genre that, as Saidiya Hartmann notes, played a key role in the historical denial of the brutality of a system of production founded on slave labour.<sup>98</sup> What the intrusion of this genre, however, of the “field,” and of the suggestion of leisurely work under the sun, do is to manifest plantation slave labor as a historical memory. The precise location of this memory within the historical nexus from which *Gregson v. Gilbert* is constituted is unidentifiable and, as such, the notions of sufficiency and causality, upon which the legal text, and, by association, the entire structure of maritime indemnity rests, are undermined.

Philip’s writing has further consequences for an understanding of character and of the lie. In the posthumously published “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” Nietzsche develops a thinking of language and metaphor that stands in a primary, immanent relationship to sense-perception. This is a language of intensely creative, magmatic flux. A concept of *truth* as the opposite to *lie* requires that this movement is frozen:

Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor, only by virtue of the fact that a mass of images, which originally flowed in a hot, liquid stream from the primal power of the human imagination, has become hard and rigid, only because of the invincible faith that this sun, this window, this table is a truth in itself - in short only because man forgets himself as a subject, and indeed as an artistically creative subject, does he live with some degree of peace, security, and consistency.<sup>99</sup>

Security and consistency are made possible by a taming and a fundamental reification of sense experience. Following from this, I would argue that to return, as Philip does, to the indicative and to the genesis of cultural tradition, is to remain within the experience of subjective constitution. The historical disruptions that emerge in the “narrative” sections of *Zong!* are to be understood as the intrusions of a collective memory, and, equally, as the exercises in subjective and aesthetic self-making. The specific, concrete lives of the Zong’s cargo are excluded from the closed text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Philip, however, is not simply making a liberal argument regarding the text’s prejudices. Her own mutilations do not attempt to reinsert this humanity where it has been denied recognition, so much as

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<sup>98</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>99</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143.

they enact a persistent return to the echo of a moment prior to the linguistic ossification that is itself a precondition for the law. The poem, in this sense, is both an attack on sedimented occidental history and the continuing recreation of a new present.

This relationship to language, truth and lie has immediate political resonance in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century decolonial struggle, a history to which *Zong!* speaks. In his discussion of militant activity during the Algerian Revolution, Fanon writes of a process in which language begins to lose its relationship to an empirically verifiable category of truth. In such a situation, concepts of truth and lie become irrelevant in the face of a growing self-awareness of the insignificance of a verifiably “true” report of events. In his extraordinary essay on the importance of the radio in the revolution, Fanon describes a situation in which truth and lie no longer exist as static oppositions, but instead enter into a dialectical movement capable of deposing structures of colonial security:

The Algerian found himself having to oppose the enemy news with his own news. The “truth” of the oppressor, formerly rejected as an absolute lie, was now countered with another, an acted truth. The occupier’s lie thereby acquired greater reality, for it was now a menaced lie, put on the defensive [...] Because it avowed its own uneasiness, the occupier’s lie became a positive aspect of the nation’s new truth.<sup>100</sup>

The certainty, the *truth* that emerges from such a situation is extra discursive. It is a truth that disrupts a reified language that has previously aided in perpetuating the perennial state of insecurity of the colonized subject, and but that exists in a situation in which “no neologism can mask the certainty” of revolutionary change and in which “the plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and the source of freedom.”<sup>101</sup> Within such a situation, no new bureaucratic formulation would serve to cover over the truth of the movement of something fundamentally new. Rather than coagulating into something that allows itself to be named, such a movement disrupts previous linguistic relations, and blasts open the sedimented history of language and tradition, revealing it as a source of remarkable energy. Part of the historical significance of *Zong!* lies in its affinity with such a movement. The “narratives” within the book do not exist as either a lie or a fiction, but as an enactment of a continual anamnesis of a domain prior to the distinction between

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<sup>100</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994), 32.

<sup>101</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 43.

truth and lie. The text stands, to use an image from Rebeca Comay's writing, as a space in which "sketch and ruin, project and memory, future and past, converge."<sup>102</sup> Such a space is one in which the abysses and silences of history manifest a creative potential.

To understand Philip's text in this way is to understand it according to its musical qualities, qualities that enable the poem, ultimately, to be considered within the tradition of the African American sorrow-song, that form of art which Du Bois insisted was the "only gift of pure art in America."<sup>103</sup> Sung by slave workers and their descendants, the status of the song as art relates to its status as an archive of historical memory, as a natural historical phenomenon, capable of insinuating dead matter into living experience. When speaking of the Nashville Jubilee Hall, Du Bois writes that the building "seemed ever made of the songs themselves and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past."<sup>104</sup> The relation of the individual who hears the song to this past is obscure. The sorrow-song is not clear; it does not communicate specific information. Rather, to take part in it is to, first and foremost, participate in a line of transmission - to make of oneself a medium for the obscure and the opaque, a medium for "death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways."<sup>105</sup> Opacity is, in this case, a condition of communicability:

The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.<sup>106</sup>

The relationship between events described in the song and singer is a shattered one and a collectivity is established through a community of sympathy itself founded on the impossibility of restitution. In this sense, the song bears testimony through an opacity and

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<sup>102</sup> Rebecca Comay, "Hegel's Last Words: Mourning and Melancholia at the End of the Phenomenology," in *The Ends of History: Questioning the Stakes of Historical Reason*, ed. Amy Swiffen and Joshua Nichols (Routledge, 2013), 142.

<sup>103</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 4.

<sup>104</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), 167.

<sup>105</sup> Du Bois, 169.

<sup>106</sup> Du Bois, 170.

an efflorescent disguise, through shapes and shadows of collective memory that threaten continually to overwhelm the fortress of an individual's categories.

The sorrow-song points in two directions: it participates in the transmission of incomplete historical memory, and it is actively concerned with present political possibility. These two qualities constitute what Hartmann terms the "insurgent nostalgia" of the rituals and music of African American slave communities.<sup>107</sup> This term is deeply contradictory, suggesting as it does an impassioned movement forward alongside a longing for origin, a literal "homesickness." As with Du Bois, the actual meaning of such rituals is less important than the fact of being involved in their transmission. Hartmann describes communities of people who expressed a longing for a "home that most could only vaguely remember or that lived only in imagination" and that "transformed the space of captivity into one inhabited by the remnants of a dismembered past."<sup>108</sup> The anamnesis of an absent origin has, in and of itself, a direct relation to the slave's experience of uncertain inheritance: "The impossibility of origins might also be conceptualized in relations to the sexual economy of slavery: the uncertainty of descent, the negation of paternity."<sup>109</sup> The routine rape of slave women, together with the forced separation of families and friends at almost every stage of the slave-making process, renders the idea of an actually coherent personal genealogy an absurdity. The insurgent quality of this nostalgia is manifest precisely in its capacity to push a subject into, and out from, a community founded on a shared experience of breach.

This communication of such a breach is, again, dependent on opacity. Hartman argues that the apparent incomprehensibility of the slave song enabled it to function as something other than the "the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy, sorrow and toil and leisure."<sup>110</sup> Building partly on Hartmann's work, Fred Moten argues that this relation to opacity as a medium of community provides a basis for an understanding of contemporary African American subjectivity as a mode of celebration. Such celebration is "the essence of black thought, the animation of black operations, which are, in the first instance, our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality."<sup>111</sup> Hartmann insists that the subterranean and veiled

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<sup>107</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 69.

<sup>108</sup> Hartman, 72.

<sup>109</sup> Hartman, 76.

<sup>110</sup> Hartman, 36.

<sup>111</sup> Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 742, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345261>.



character of the slave must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hyper-visibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance and a tool for practical political organisation.<sup>112</sup> With this in mind, one can argue that the song like quality of Philip's book becomes, in and of itself, a final mode of resistance, a resistance that functions according to the transmission of opacity and that participates in a history of revolt that stretches from San Domingo to the present. The poem is lyric memory as creolization, concrete conspiracy and opaque historical remembrance mobilized as a ground for contemporary community.

This communal ground has immediate relevance to our present, a present in which, as Michelle Alexander has famously observed, there are now more African Americans incarcerated in American prisons than there were slaves in 1850.<sup>113</sup> Phillip's discussions of her work in *Zong!* place heavy emphasis on its relationship to the present situation of mass-incarceration. As she formulates it, such people are "trapped outside of the law today (and yet trapped within it) in the way that law is used to police and confine black bodies in the new prison industrial complex."<sup>114</sup> As the legal text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* seeks to eliminate any restless ambiguity from its language, so the contemporary prison, at least within the context of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration, functions as futureless, monstrous tautology. As Loic Wacquant puts it,

when the prison is used as an implement for social and cultural purging, like the ghetto, it no longer points beyond itself; it turns into a self-contained contraption [...] And its inhabitants learn to live in the here and now, bathed in the concentrate of violence and hopelessness brewing within the walls.<sup>115</sup>

For Wacquant, as for Alexander, the contemporary prison is a sealed space, one that no longer attempts to justify itself through reference to its capacity to change or to render either itself, or those it holds, mutable. Philip's text, finally, speaks to this present as it aims for a kind of fission, that breaks apart legalistic tautologies: "It is within that dispossession within the law that we find our liberation, our freedom, our energy, by

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<sup>112</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36.

<sup>113</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 180.

<sup>114</sup> Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive," 68.

<sup>115</sup> Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh," *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624740122228276>.

exploding it—from the inside.”<sup>116</sup> When her interviewer points out that those killed during the middle-passage have no gravestones, no monuments, Philip insists that “the archive—the archive of the owner and the lawmaker—is in fact the only marker [...] The text, that is, the reported case, is like a gravestone, and in shattering that gravestone the voices are freed.” To break open the gravestone stones would, again, be to engage in a specifically disruptive temporality.

Glissant, in the opening sections of his *Poetics of Relation*, makes reference to cannonballs used to weigh down the bodies of slaves thrown overboard. These submerged markers dot the length of the middle passage, embodying a historical contradiction as “the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, makes one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.”<sup>117</sup> Such balls are the transient condition of the apparently ahistorical experience of the oceanic. To break open such boundary stones, as Philip insists her text does, would be to explode an illusion of a-historicity, an illusion that stretches from the ideologies of slavery to the contemporary max-security prison, and to expose the ahistorical as historically determined, is to expose to the potential, however small, of irrevocable transformation.

As a linguistic monument to the acts of mythic, law-enforcing violence, the language of *Gregson v Gilbert* functions as a grave and a boundary stone, delimiting what may and may not be spoken within the regime of legally provisioned indemnity. In the present, the current regime of security is maintained by enforced silence over the blatant racial characteristics of mass incarceration. Such a silence, Alexander argues, is a product of the apparently post-racial discourses of contemporary America law, and has “helped to produce one of the most extraordinary systems of racialized social control the world has ever seen.”<sup>118</sup> Iron balls, gone green and aged at the bottom of the ocean are the conditions for the apparently reasonable, emotionless designations of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, and the closed circuit of mass incarceration forms a condition of possibility for the chaotic trundling of the contemporary global economy. The final section of *Zong!* adjusts itself to this relation, enacting an increasing resistance through its form. As her final sequence progresses, Phillip’s typesetting places the text further and further under erasure until it

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<sup>116</sup> Saunders, “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive,” 68.

<sup>117</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Arbor (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>118</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 103.

becomes all but indecipherable. Here, in the book's final page, the physical appearance of the text mirrors the opacity of its song, as the imperative to "cut the chord of this story" and "sow the sea" push out of a text that is all but unreadable. This final physical opacity reaffirms this text's kinship to traditions of linguistic conspiracy, and to a demand for happiness.

toys over the lute do you hear the lute  
 foaming lady gold I should cut the cord of this story sound to raise obo sobs  
 take every thing that is from the on front first my case  
 cum grano salinis a song of the heart is a part sow in negligence  
 with a grain of salt dire visions at vesters hear the tell / my pills right night water parts  
 the being ought evidence the thing that is not a necessity  
 these Ruteed then vedic mundeions negrous ave today you  
 the is a side negrous against suranth a rose promise you to life  
 told cold a the is a side negrous sow the sea repurks my lord  
 high art my liege kardum not with standing  
 him him is a side negrous sos dea with a side negrous os wysdeks &  
 Mike too us I don't she the ratio Ben reason

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The text, ultimately, manifests an immense sensitivity to the minuscule nature of such an opening, one that threatens to disappear under the overwhelming pressure of its adversaries.

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<sup>119</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 182.

## **The Denial of Insurance in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina***

This second chapter is concerned with a reading of the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann's 1971 novel *Malina*. The only part of Bachmann's *Ways of Death* (*Todesarten*) novel cycle to be finished and published in the author's lifetime, *Malina* portrays a female narrator, known in the novel and in its critical commentaries as "Ich" [I], living in contemporary Vienna. Throughout the novel, Ich, herself a writer, moves between two males, one of whom is her lover Ivan, and other of whom is a roommate and purported ego ideal, Malina. Divided into three sections and a preface, *Malina* contains extended meditations on temporality, contingency and, at brief but crucial moments, insurability. The first part of the novel, "Happy with Ivan", depicts a series of encounters, conversations and monologues with the narrator's partner, together with details from interviews that she undergoes regarding her life as a writer and reflections on the nature of life in contemporary Vienna. The second section, entitled "The Third Man," contains a series of nightmarish dream sequences in which the narrator intermittently witnesses a burial site that she terms "the cemetery of the murdered daughters," while being repeatedly tormented and murdered by a Nazi father-figure. The third, entitled "The Last Things," documents Ich's descent into a situation of near-complete unfreedom, culminating in her final disappearance into a crack in the wall of her apartment, an act that can be read as both an act of desperate suicide and as a paradoxical act of self-preservation.

My account of the novel, and of Bachmann's writing as a whole, will take as its point of departure the function of insurance [*Versicherung*] as metaphor and as an actual product available at the time that Bachmann worked on the *Todesarten*. Throughout her extensive critical reception, Bachmann has been frequently read as deeply invested in the limits of expression, and on the violence suffered by characters who act, speak, or feel in a manner inimical to such limits. While I will make reference to this critical tradition, I also seek to understand Bachmann's writing through a materialist reading of the economic, legal metaphors that appear within it. In order to elaborate the function of insurance in *Malina*, I make reference to other texts within Bachmann's *Werke*, including radio plays, poems and short stories. Throughout the chapter, I argue that Ich's denial of her own insurability relates directly to an assumed reconciliation between Austrian society and the experience of fascism. In particular, I pay attention to what Bachmann describes as a "state of war" endemic to everyday life, and to the relation between this

state and the purported escape from contingency promised by those who benefitted from the post-war economic boom. I conclude the chapter by considering the symbolic significance of the cemetery of the murdered daughters, a significance that relates to a drive towards integration which underpinned the development and promulgation of state sponsored social insurance in Europe, and elsewhere from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Within *Malina*, this cemetery serves as an image of the devastation elided by the apparently peaceful economic growth of the post-war era. At the same time, I argue that it also presents a way of maintaining a profound relation to those posited as the victims of historical progress, without invoking such victims in a manner that would suggest that they provide either epistemological certainty or the framework for a political program, and least of all a liberal doctrine of progress and reconciliation.

### *War*

The Austrian society in which Bachmann reached maturity was one that participated, along with Germany, in the so-called “economic miracle” or *Wirtschaftswunder*, a period of postwar boom fueled, initially, by Marshall Plan funding provided by the United States. This period marked a high point of profitability and growth within the advanced capitalist economies of both the U.S. and of Europe, in particular Germany and Austria.<sup>1</sup> Such growth was predicated on the logic of integration, with investment from U.S. sources helping to rebuild European markets according to a condition that would be most favourable to American capitalist interests, and, as result, creating a buffer against eastern communist states. For Giovanni Arrighi, this moment involved the “remaking of Western Europe in America’s image.”<sup>2</sup> Robert Brenner describes the situation as one in which “German and Japanese governments found themselves subject to the coordinated, insistent pressure of combined manufacturing and financial interests to provide policies oriented to the growth of domestic production rather than investment and lending overseas.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking of the immediate aftermath of the reconstruction period in Germany, W.E. Sebald notes a distressing irony in relation to this apparently miraculously productive organisation of production: “The prerequisites of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (London ; New York: Verso, 2005), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time* (London ; New York: Verso, 2009), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 32.

the German economic recovery were not only the enormous sums invested in the country under the Marshall Plan [...] but also something less often acknowledged: the unquestioning work ethic learned in a totalitarian society.”<sup>4</sup> According to Sebald, not only did post-fascist reconstruction preserve fascist elements within a new world, but they made the organization of this world possible.

The afterlife of fascism in Austria and its subsequent integration into the fabric of everyday life in Austria was a major concern of Bachmann’s entire writing life. In her introductory remarks to public readings of what was intended to be the first section of the *Todesarten*, entitled *Der Fall Franza* (The Franza Case), Bachmann insists that the overall work would be a narration of crimes “which are carried out today, of the virus of crime that, after twenty years, is no less actual than when murder was the order of the day, commanded and permitted.”<sup>5</sup> A statement often cited in critical readings of the *Todesarten*, “crime” here is most often read to refer to the persistence of fascism in reconstructed, post-war Austria, a designation supported in 1986 by the so-called Waldheim affair, in which a potential presidential candidate was implicated in direct participation in SS war crimes.

The persistence of actual members of the Nazi party in Austrian politics, however, does not exhaust Bachmann’s understanding of either of crime or its consequences. Rather, Bachmann figures “crime” as kind of a-priori precondition for social life. Everyday life is a situation which Bachmann describes in interviews as a “state of war” (*Kriegszustand*). Such a state, she insists, exists outside of any distinction between actual war and peace, with actual war being merely “the explosion of the war that peace is.”<sup>6</sup> When asked to qualify this further, Bachmann insists: “When I say that few people have grasped that this eternal war exists, that it endures in the so-called peace, then I naturally do not mean that people are always killing each other. Rather, one speaks of the primary cause of death” (*Todesursache*).<sup>7</sup> The state of war which carries with it a sense of continuum with the past. “Alltag” (Everyday) a poem from her first collection begins with the simple statements that, “War is no longer declared / but rather continued.”<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> W. G. Sebald, *On The Natural History of Destruction* (Notting Hill Editions, 2012), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Bachmann, Ingeborg, *Todesarten Projekt: Band 2* (Piper Verlag: Munchen & Zurich, 1995), 349.

<sup>6</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden: Gespräche und Interviews* (München: Piper, 1983), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Bachmann, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Darkness Spoken: The Collected Poems of Ingeborg Bachmann*, trans. Peter Filkins, Bilingual edition (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2005), 39.

second section of *Malina* ends with the affirmation that Ich will never again say “war and peace” and that “It is always war. / Here there is always violence. Here there is always struggle. It is the everlasting war.”<sup>9</sup> The affirmation that everyday relations constitute a kind of “war” is one that bridges Bachmann’s entire writing career, and that connects explicit concerns regarding the particularities of Austrian politics and history with a more general judgement regarding the nature of gendered social relations. Fascism, Bachmann insisted, begins “in the first instance, in the relation between a man and a woman [...]”<sup>10</sup>

The notion of “a war-like peace” had previously defined the lived-experience of the slave-ship and, by extension, the tension between the world of commodities and the world of living bodies. The lifeworld of which Bachmann speaks is one in which the terror that maintains such a state has become generalized to the extent that it has all but disappeared from view. War, murder and crime function in her writing as a kind of generic cause that persists throughout society, and that is indexed in each of its moments. No one simply dies anymore. Society in *Malina* figures as “the biggest murder scene of all. In it the seeds of the most incredible crimes are sown in the subtlest manner, crimes which remain forever unknown to the courts of this world.”<sup>11</sup> This fact has become so fully absorbed into lived experience that it is no longer visible to any but a profoundly anachronistic perspective.

### *Heute*

In *Malina*, Ich’s first reference to insurance follows a description of a conversation with Ivan in which the two have failed to communicate anything other than their mutual exhaustion. Ich states that she could not

stop hoping, begging and believing to have heard one sentence which did not arise from weariness, one that provides me with some insurance in the world, but something about my eyes draws tight, the secretion from the glands is so tight it won’t suffice for even a single tear in the corner of each eye. Is one sentence enough to insure the person for whose sake it was uttered? There must be some insurance that is not of this world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*, trans. Philip Boehm, (Penguin Classics, 2019), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 220.

<sup>12</sup> Bachmann, 57.

Ich's insistence that an insurance could be "not of this world" immediately condemns any policies grounded in such a world as somehow inadequate. As a network of information, calculations and the contingencies of first and second nature, any act of insurance is intimately tied to the world. To suggest that a kind of insurance must exist which is outside of such a nexus is already to draw attention to a central contradiction: the failure to protect the material body of the thing that it claims to cover. The demand for an otherworldly insurance affirms both the necessity of a kind of safety and the need for safety to raise itself above such a contradiction, and to combine a social form of security with an actual care over a person's material and mental flourishing.

Ich's second denial, occurring only a few pages later, is clearer regarding the precise nature of this contradiction. Soon after the initial denial, Ich describes a flirtatious encounter with Ivan, after which they begin to argue. This argument is resolved when Ivan "raises his hand in jest", as if to hit his interlocutor.<sup>13</sup> Ich then details a series of murderous thoughts that she cannot hope to express to her partner and insists that she should "only try to cut out this abscess, for Ivan's sake [...] I can't keep lolling about in this puddle of thoughts about murder, with Ivan I'm sure I'd succeed in eliminating them."<sup>14</sup> The affirmation of this purported capacity to eliminate intensely negative thoughts moves directly to an invocation of insurance as related to specific modes of being in the world:

He [Ivan] sees my face getting smoother and smoother and is glad when he can make me laugh, and again he'll explain to me that we're insured against everything, just like our cars, against earthquakes and hurricane, against thefts and accidents, against arson and hail, but one sentence keeps me insured and nothing else. The world knows no insurance for me.<sup>15</sup>

This second denial clarifies an ambiguity of *Versicherung*. It is a term that bridges two worlds, one of which involves the relationship between commodities, value bearing things, and nature, and the second of which speaks directly to a sense of self-certainty, of safety and of a consistent feeling of security. On the one hand, a direct irony of insurance is that while it may protect property against the various accidents of first and second nature, it does not actually protect Ich's own body, so much as provide compensation for

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<sup>13</sup> Bachmann, 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Werke 3: Todesarten: Malina und unvollendete Romane*, ed. Christine Koschel (Munich: Piper, 1978), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 60.



the loss of labour-power which this body could bring to a particular labour market. At the same time, the statement also holds an existential resonance, suggesting that while *insurance* may be provided against any number of risks, the actual securing of Ich's own self remains impossible in the current shape of the world. The denial of her own insurability places Ich over and above the object world, that domain of accidents and unfree forces against which insurance protects. At the same time this denial condemns her to a sporadic immanence which, as the novel progresses, appears unable to resolve itself into a coherent subjectivity.

Ich's absence of self-certainty exists in contrast to Ivan, a figure who is in apparent mastery over the dangers that the world presents as a result of the access to that he has to various kinds of insurance and who is able to explain this situation to his lover. This explanation is a confident one, grounded in Ivan's knowledge of the policies taken out under his name, together with the general security afforded middle-class citizens during an economic boom. It is also one that considers reality as being essentially non-dynamic, as being easy to read and non-contradictory. Such explanation can be figured as an essentially tautological mode of communication. As in the previous chapter, the explanation, grounded on base-information, presupposes the stillness of this object in order to delineate the circumstances and causal nexus in which it exists. Ivan expresses an indifferent cruelty which forecloses the possibility of the communication of whatever there is within Ich that might exceed explanation.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of explanation, at least in the mode quoted above, is integration and the suppression of that which cannot be integrated. Ivan expects his lover to be calm, since as far as he is concerned, any event that could cause a change to their standing within the world has already been hedged against. Implicit within such an assertion is Ich's own capacity to be integrated within an economy of vulnerable objects that may then be rendered subject to such protection. Her insistence on her own uninsurability represents a clear anxiety, however it also represents a demand that she be removed from the position of a mere object amongst objects. The invocation of her own uninsurability

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout her work, Bachmann relates a particular cruelty of explanation to a cruelty of prose, especially as this features in male, female relationships. In another section of the *Todesarten, Requiem für Fanny Goldmann*, most recently edited into *Das Buch Goldmann*, the female protagonist discovers that a younger male lover has made use of their relationship to write prose work with a her as a central character, a process that she refers to as him making "blood sausage and roast out of her", having "cooked" and smoked her "like a swine." Ingeborg Bachmann, *Das Buch Goldmann: Werkausgabe*, ed. Marie Luise Wandruszka (München : Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 17.

therefore reflects both a position of radical vulnerability and, I would argue, a simultaneous resistance to integration.

Ich's denial of insurability appears alongside as specific experience of time, one that is simultaneously eschatological and founded on the repetition of an overwhelming immediacy. In the opening pages of the novel, Bachmann's narrator states that, for her, "today" is an impossible word. This impossibility manifests itself in an anxiety stemming from an experience of a time of complete presence:

This today sends me flying into the utmost anxiety, so that I can write about it, or at best report whatever's going on. Actually, anything written about today should be destroyed immediately, just like all real letters are crumpled or torn up, unfinished and unmailed, all because they were written but cannot arrive, today.<sup>17</sup>

A letter indexes both the today of its writing and the impossibility of the fulfillment of this today, with the word "today" representing a moment of *parousia* which a letter contains, but which it cannot possibly sustain. This contradiction is maddening:

In fact, "today" is a word which only suicides ought to be allowed to use, it has no meaning for other people. It merely signifies a day like all the rest, when they have to work another eight hours or take time off, run errands, buy groceries, read the morning and evening papers, drink coffee, forget things, keep an appointment, give someone a call – in short, a day on which something is supposed to occur, or better yet, not too much happening.<sup>18</sup>

For Ich, the word "today" signifies simultaneously an empty husk, a constitutive moment in a dull infinity, and the signifier of a near apocalyptic consummation. This latter meaning constitutes a sublimity and a boundlessness that threatens to overwhelm her. Ich insists that she is "just afraid "today" is too much for me, too gripping, too boundless, and that this pathological agitation will be a part of my "today" until its final hour."<sup>19</sup> Michaela Grobbel comments that this experience of today speaks of a fundamental incapacity to participate within the pseudo-peace of the everyday, something that enables the character to possess a unique insight into the *Kriegszustand* which constitutes the

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<sup>17</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Bachmann, 4. While I have not modified the translation, one can note that Bachmann writes in the final clause: "weil sie [the letters] von Heute sind und weil sie in keinem Heute mehr ankommen werden". A more literal translation would run, "because they are from / of today, and but will no longer arrive in a today." The structure of the letter, therefore, is that it will carry traces of an immediate present that the necessary disjunction between sending and arriving will betray.

<sup>19</sup> Bachmann, 5.

everyday. She writes, “Ich’s *Heute* signifies the constant confrontation with the atrocities and murders committed under the cloak of the everyday. It is also her struggle against them.”<sup>20</sup> This confrontation is itself a movement against the domestication of atrocity within the progression of historical sequence. As Catriona Leahy puts it, “where every moment is *heute*, the question of how to get beyond this beginning how to arrive somewhere else, at someone else, is acute.”<sup>21</sup> For Ich, *Heute* approaches the sublime, although, crucially it lacks the mastery of a self-legislating ego capable of appreciating this boundlessness from a position of safety. What for the Kantian observer would be an experience of sublimity in which, after feeling thrilled and expanded, they would be able to return to a previous occupation is, for Bachmann’s narrator, a perennial repudiation of the everyday. The very word “today” simultaneously summons and denounces the possibility of safety, especially any safety that could be defined in terms of the untroubled duration of a particular state of affairs, that is, any safety thought in terms of insurance or insurability.

This thinking brings the novel close to elements of Christian eschatology, elaborated by Rudolf Bultmann around the basic contradiction of an eschatological moment in the past, thus forcing world history to contain its own completion at the moment that the continuing progress of such history refutes the efficacy of this same eschatological content. As Bultmann states, Christianity posits “a history of salvation unrolling as world history.”<sup>22</sup> Bachmann’s poetry consistently marks an engagement with the representation of time which manifests a contradiction between time as presence and time as a fall into a profane history within which such a presence echoes, but which it cannot properly affect. The poem “Fall ab, Herz,” published in her first collection, ends with the stanza, “And so what can your heart attest to? / Between yesterday and tomorrow it swings, / soundless and strange / and what it beats / is its own fall out of time.”<sup>23</sup> In German the last line reads, “ist schon sein Fall aus der Zeit.” Here Bachmann combines the notion of falling “out” of time in the sense of leaving time as if it were a place with an anachronistic subjective position, one that is “out of time” in the musical sense of being

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<sup>20</sup> Michaela M. Grobbel, *Enacting Past and Present: The Memory Theaters of Djuna Barnes, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Marguerite Duras* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 86.

<sup>21</sup> Caitríona Leahy, ‘Der Wahre Historiker’: *Ingeborg Bachmann and the Problem of Witnessing History* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Volume Two* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 126.

<sup>23</sup> Bachmann, *Darkness Spoken*, 9.

counter to a dominant rhythm. The genitive pronoun “sein” distinguishes the individual heart in the same moment that it moves it outside of a possible temporal community. The pathos in these lines speaks to an intimate vulnerability to that which would forcibly reinsert such a subject within a temporality in which its singularity would evaporate into continuity.

Ich is the most vocal and sustained exponent of anachronism in Bachmann’s writing, and she finds solidarity with those elements of life that move against a normal flow of time. The third and final section of *Malina* opens with an envious invocation of the notion of the vocation or calling (Beruf), that thing which in protestant theology is able to reconcile divine and profane histories. For Max Weber, living, and working within the calling comes to form, for a protestant subject beset by uncertainty regarding their salvation, “the best, often in the last analysis the only means of attaining grace.”<sup>24</sup> The calling provides existential security, a capacity to ground oneself in a world of change and of accidents, while at the same time allowing one to live a life pleasing to God. In essence, work within the vocation preserves and makes bearable the eschatological content of the everyday. Ich invokes the exalted history of the vocation when she insists that only those who are sufficiently capable of feeling the call to be a postal worker should be able to be one, before insisting that the utter seriousness of this calling is manifest in the case of one Otto Kranewitzer, a person who “ceased distributing the mail and for weeks and months [...] accumulated it in the old three-room apartment where he lived alone, piling it up the ceiling [...]”<sup>25</sup> Ich insists that this act marks Kranewitzer as an exceptional individual, someone “sensitive, tender, a great man who realized the full momentousness of his work,” a realization that led to his “dismissal by a postal service that “takes pride in employing only reliable energetic mailmen of stamina.”<sup>26</sup> This pejorative dismissal of those who fail to understand the truly exceptional nature of such work is followed by the affirmation that

in every profession there must be at least one man who lives in deep doubt and comes into conflict. Mail delivery in particular would seem to require a latent angst, a seismographic ability to receive emotional tremors, which is otherwise

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<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992), 121.

<sup>25</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Bachmann, 200.

acknowledged only in the higher and highest professions, as if the mail couldn't have its own crisis.<sup>27</sup>

It is in the existential crisis that the *Beruf* reveals its true nature. The figure of the postman is appropriate for understanding such a crisis, as the letter itself, at least according to Ich's experience, embodies a contradiction between the preservation of the moment in which it was written and the deferred moment of its arrival. By refusing to deliver letters, Kranewitzer fulfills one aspect of his calling, while refusing to enact the other. In doing so, he reveals the everyday as consisting of a series of potentially boundless punctums, rather than a smooth continuum of calculable, homogenous time.

To affirm such boundlessness is to be uninsurable, to be temporally incommensurable with both the character and the temporal schema that those who promulgated insurance policies, and those who supported the idea of social insurance, sought to inculcate within the general class of workers. Ewald describes these models of insurance as a specific mode of "moral technology," one that necessarily relates the actions of individuals and groups to an overarching concept of risk in order, essentially, to "master time, to discipline the future."<sup>28</sup> The preservation of individuals within specific modes of productive relations is also the foreclosure of alternative possibilities. The mastery over the future is simultaneously a mastery over the past, one that deems who may and who may not claim a protected status according to a series of delimited behaviors each of which is regulated by the idea of the "uninsurable" and the fear of the vulnerability which will result should an individual fall into this category.<sup>29</sup> The moral technology of insurance grounds the subject in a temporal sequence that determines their role and access to a historical continuum. As Leahy notes in relation to *Malina*, "History requires gravity [...] But it also requires sequencing, ordering, temporal embeddedness, in other words the structure of plot."<sup>30</sup> Ich's experience of an eschatological temporality moves against any thinking of a smooth historical continuum. Within the Austria in which Bachmann was writing, such a historical continuum required the suppression of the memory of atrocity. By remaining unintegrated within such a continuum, Ich, paradoxically perhaps, allies herself with the memory of that which is repressed.

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<sup>27</sup> Bachmann, 200.

<sup>28</sup> Ewald, *Insurance and Risk*, 201.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey W. Clark and Gregory Anderson, "Introduction" in *The Appeal of Insurance*, ed. Greg Anderson, Christian Thomann, and J. Matthias-Graf von der Schulenburg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Leahy, *Der Wahre Historiker*, 95.

Ich explicitly rejects the idea of her own self-consistency. She states that, in comparison to Malina, an individual who appears to her as a model of moderation and sustained rational engagement, she is “the first perfect example of waste – extravagant, ecstatic and incapable of putting the world to any reasonable use [...].”<sup>31</sup> This absence of consistency leaves her continually vulnerable to an upsurge in strangeness, in contingency, one that prevents anything approaching an everyday life from taking shape: “When standing in front a familiar door in Vienna, perhaps because I am invited, it occurs to me at the last moment it might be the wrong door; or day or hour, and I turn around and drive back [...] too quickly tired, too much in doubt.”<sup>32</sup> At another point, Ich describes herself as being unable to participate within the structures of production that defined recovery from the devastation of war, fixing herself firmly to a sense of the contingent: “Long after there was plenty to eat, I still couldn’t eat well, and even now I can only eat when someone else is eating with me, or if I’m alone and there’s just an apple lying there and a piece of bread or a leftover slice of sausage. It has to be something left over.”<sup>33</sup> In such statements, Ich firmly allies herself with the accidental and the contingent. This incapacity to integrate present self-hood, past experience and causal progression again bears a clear relation to the conditions of insurability. In the previous chapter, the concept of *character* expressed a specific understanding of the relationship between self and language, one that enabled the circulation of commodities through the capacity to demonstrate *sufficient* reliability. Following the innovation of social insurance, the concept of character migrates into the productive sphere, as that which may be engineered in order to secure the consistent expenditure of labour-power across a social class. A fidelity to contingency places Ich within a liminal space, in which she maintains a singular personhood at the expense of what appears to be any capacity for purposive action.

In order to understand the stakes of this fidelity to the contingent it is necessary to consider the role of the liminal and the contingent in Bachmann’s poem *Böhmen liegt am Meer* (Bohemia Lies by the Sea) presents a certain kind of rootless vagabondage as a condition of glimpsing an alternative mode of life. This poem produces a kind of paradoxically indeterminate immanence that emerges from a confident mobility. The final stanza reads:

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<sup>31</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Bachmann, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Bachmann, 209.

ein Böhme, ein Vagant, der nichts hat, den nichts hält,  
 begabt nur noch, vom Meer, das strittig ist, Land meiner  
 Wahl zu sehen.

(a Bohemian, a vagrant, who holds nothing, who  
 is held by nothing, gifted only at seeing, by a doubtful sea,  
 the land of my choice.)<sup>34</sup>

The first of these lines enacts a subjective solidification. The relative nominative article *der* (*who* has nothing) hardens into an excluding accusative, *den nichts hält*, (*who* is held by nothing). Bachmann suggests a utopic potential via a relationship to objects that would both confine and determine an individual's subjective qualities. The poem is more than a dubious hymn to poverty, however. An earlier strophe reads as follows:

Grenzt hier ein Wort an mich, so laß ich's grenzen.  
 Liegt Böhmen noch am Meer, glaub ich den Meeren wieder.  
 Und glaub ich noch ans Meer, so hoffe ich auf Land.

(If a word here borders on me, I'll let it border.  
 If Bohemia still lies by the sea, I'll believe in the sea again.  
 And believing in the sea, thus I can hope for land.)<sup>35</sup>

Here Bachmann presents a difficult relation between a beyond and a present location. This relation is conditioned by a border (*Grenze*) that is simultaneously as distant as the sea and as present as spoken words. This border inspires belief in a beyond whose material reality it does not disclose and enables one to understand something vital in Bachmann's denial of *Ich*'s insurability, together with her final disappearance.

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<sup>34</sup> Bachmann, *Darkness Spoken*, 617. Translation modified. The original translation has "Vagant" as "wandering minstrel." I see no reason for this embellishment and, given the historical relationship between universally brutal anti-vagrancy regulations and "minstrels," I consider it to be, at best, an unfortunate choice of words.

<sup>35</sup> Bachmann, 618.

*Crack*

*Malina* is a novel of coincidences. Throughout the first and third sections, Ich describes aimless walks around Vienna, conducted in varying states of anxiety. Indeed, she suggests at several points that such a rootless approach to the city is, more or less, a necessary condition for her to be able to experience any kind of existential security. Coincidence also determines and structures the history of Ich's relationships. In her description of the genesis of her relationship with Malina, she states that for years it "consisted of awkward meetings, absolute follies and the biggest possible misunderstandings."<sup>36</sup> At key moments coincidence appears as a source of fragile hope. At one point, Ich states that a random meeting with Ivan enables her to engage with her lover "without any preconceived idea (Vorstellung)."<sup>37</sup> She goes on to say,

an event like this, which you've never known, which you can't know about in advance, which you can't have heard or ever read about, requires the utmost haste in order to occur. The slightest trifle could nip it in the bud, strangle it [...] so sensitive is the genesis and germination of this most powerful force (Macht) in the world, simply because the world is sick and doesn't want a healthy force to prevail.<sup>38</sup>

The coincidence in this moment is tender and vulnerable; it forms a liminal point, promising the hope of something new, a hope germinated from unexpected relations emerging from within the familiar.

Contingency was a preoccupation of Bachmann's in the years prior the publication of *Malina*. In 1964, seven years before the novel appeared, she delivered a speech upon her receipt of the Georg Büchner prize in Berlin entitled "Ein Ort für Zufälle" (A Place for Coincidences).<sup>39</sup> A baroque, absurdist short story which follows a chain of chaotic non-happenings around Berlin, the text functions as a sustained meditation on the nature of the accident. As Andrew J. Webber reads the text, Bachmann uses her speech to satirize "the grossly excessive culture of consumption in the West Berlin of the

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<sup>36</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Bachmann, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Bachmann, 24.

<sup>39</sup>I borrow Andrew J. Webber's translation of this title, however I would stress that the word "Zufälle" could just as easily be translated as "contingencies" or even "accidents," with the latter word bearing the slightly more archaic English sense of something inessential as well as something that has come about without prior intention.



Wirtschaftswunder and the historical conditions of violence and division that provide its volatile foundations.”<sup>40</sup> By delivering her speech in the time and the place in which she did, Bachmann, according to Webber, sought to navigate between “the monumental crime and suffering of the National Socialist period and the readiness of post-war society to resort to superficial acts of reparation and restoration.”<sup>41</sup> While I do not agree that Bachmann’s satire is directed against the “superficiality” of a contemporary society, as if this were either good or bad in itself, her narrative certainly is concerned with exposing a certain kind of pseudo-safety at work within the German, and Austrian, economic miracle, one that has evident consequences for a developing critique of modes of bourgeois security.

Bachmann’s text focuses on the eruption of unpredictable consequences within an apparently fully mediated and administered social nexus. To even speak of “consequences,” intended or unintended, within such a reality is already to cause anxiety. Prior to reading her story, Bachmann tells her audience that, “the consequence is, as you know, ladies and gentlemen, in almost all cases, something fearful [...]”<sup>42</sup> This fear emerges from a consequence’s status as tears” or “cracks” (Risse). Such a crack reveals itself not only in the “bodily and spiritual “accidents” (Zufälle) of an individual,” but also in the complex interrelations of everyday social life. In the same introductory remarks, Bachmann reminds her audience that she will not forget she is in their country, with their accidents (Zufälle). According to this logic, accidents and “consequences” reveal something about the basic ground of the particular societies in which they occur, a foundation that Bachmann insists is related to the particular “inheritance” of Germany.<sup>43</sup> With a clear, although unspoken, reference to the Nazi past shared with her native Austria, Bachmann insists that the very idea of an accident or a surprising coincidence refers to something *behind* its occurrence, something that is unseen but that “comes again with each new coincidence.”<sup>44</sup> The coincidence, as thought here, is a crack through which history leaks, a vehicle for the return of the repressed, and, much as it was for Ich, a momentary flash of an alternative future.

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<sup>40</sup> Andrew J. Webber, “Worst of All Possible Worlds? Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Ort Für Zufälle,”” *Austrian Studies* 15 (2007): 112.

<sup>41</sup> Webber, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Werke 4: Essays, Reden, Vermischte Schriften, Anhang*, ed. Christine Koschel (München: Piper, 1978), 278.

<sup>43</sup> Bachmann, 278.

<sup>44</sup> Bachmann, 279.

Throughout her story, Bachmann combines the description of coincidence with a linguistic parataxis. The text proper opens by enacting a kind of temporal contradiction; the first sentence follows non-specific “it” around aspects of the city, as the attempt to precisely locate this “it” facilitates an anxious revelation of streets, names and linguistic correlations:

It is ten houses after Sarotti, it is some blocks before Schultheiss, it is five stops away from the Commerzbank, it is not with Berliner Kindl, there are candles in the windows, it is also in the silent hour (Schweigestunde), there is a cross in front of it, there is a crossing in front of it, it is not so far away, but also not so near – bad advice!<sup>45</sup>

The opening is simultaneously a frenetic tour of different locations and a series of unconnected, staccato beginnings, each of which births the next. The audience of the speech learns the names of various locations not because the speaker means to provide one, but because the “it” that is being tracked cannot be caught. Bachmann’s opening paragraph ends without ever making clear what it is that is being described, simply stating that, “[it] is a permanent address [...] comes, comes in front of and out of, is something - in Berlin.”<sup>46</sup> Bachmann’s German in this passage works via contracting repetitions, moving from “zum Umkommen” to “kommt” to “kommt vor und hervor.” This motion creates a sense of directionless panic transmitted via an opaque phonic logic. Directions, and non-specific negative assertions brush against and demarcate each other without ever settling into a concretely identifiable object. The phonic similarities between the words themselves enact a chaotic juxtaposition with the city of Berlin, as for example, “Kreuz” und “Kreuzung,” both recall the district of Kreuzberg. The overall effect is close to a positive mobilization of linguistic coincidence against the reification of life and speech.

The narrative proper involves an excitement at a geriatric hospital as a plane flying overhead is mistaken for a bombing raid, following which chaos erupts on public transport for no good reason, zoo animals escape and a mistaken belief about a bomb sends customers in a restaurant scurrying under the table while spilt wine and ketchup mingle and run like blood, a situation that Bachmann sarcastically describes as so horrific that it is never again “to be made good.”<sup>47</sup> This final image straddles, as do other moments

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<sup>45</sup> Bachmann, 279.

<sup>46</sup> Bachmann, 280.

<sup>47</sup> Bachmann, 285.

within the text, the ridiculous present and the unspeakably violent history seeping through cracks wrought by these juxtapositions. For Webber, the text “traces both existential and economic forms of displacement as part of Berlin’s topography are seismically shifted [...] its landmarks displaced and the shops that serve the official economy of the post-war *Wirtschaftswunder* are overloaded with panic buying, slip and collapse.”<sup>48</sup> By revelling in a series of coincidences and meaningless happenings, and by demonstrating that coincidence itself is capable of directly recalling a past suppressed by the state-mandated imposition of historical order, the story articulates the manner in which the *Zufall* functions as simultaneously a tear in existing reality and as a temporary opening onto an immanent potential within the present. The positive valorisation of contingency brings Bachmann into conflict with a modernity that has long seen the domestication of the arbitrary and the accidental as a key marker of progress: to insist that the modern world remains the seat of arbitrary, a-moral coincidence, is to repudiate the reification of social life and the return of an indifferent fate expressed through the sublimation of contingency into generalized risk.

In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel thinks the a-historicity of the African continent in terms of what he perceives as the inherent contingency of the events that occur within it. He states that in such a place “there is a succession of contingencies (*Zufälligkeiten*) and surprises that follow, one after the other. There is no purpose (*Zweck*), no state there that one would be able to pursue, no subjectivity, rather only a series of subjects who destroy each other.”<sup>49</sup> Subjectivity is conceived as that which moves towards a purpose, a plan of some form, which will bring its actions to a level superior to those of the mere accidents of fate or of nature. History does not, indeed cannot, require the total sublation of the *Zufall*, however. Rather, different historical periods and their cultural modes of expression and understanding are, to a degree, defined by their relationship to the persistence of contingency. In the Hegelian view of the ancient world, any concept of agency or ethical responsibility is intimately related to the contingent, unforeseen consequences of an individual’s actions. From this perspective, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is the paradigmatic expression of the contradictions of the Greek world. As a man who is simultaneously guilty in terms of action and innocent in terms of will, Oedipus would appear, in the modern world, as simply a gross unfortunate. He is

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<sup>48</sup> Webber, “Worst of All Possible Worlds?,” 118.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte Einleitung in de Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Georg Lasson (Leipzig: Meiner, 1930), 216.

condemned by the ancients, however, because the structure of their ethical world retains the capacity for coincidence to congeal into guilt.<sup>50</sup> The transition between historical forms of life cannot hope to do away with contingency as a fact of either first or second nature. Terry Pinkard states that this mediation has a material history in “the pooling of risk in insurance schemes, such as the ‘widows and orphans fund’ to which Hegel was a contributor in Berlin.”<sup>51</sup> Insurance has an ironic function in such a situation. While its social function enables a separation between the consequences of one’s actions and the guilt that they may cause one to endure, the relative freedom from “consequence” that it inculcates lends the actual consequence a fearful, quasi world ending quality.

It is important to note, however, that the capacity for coincidences to point beyond the material conditions of their existence does not always carry a satirical weight in Bachmann’s work. An entirely non-sarcastic example of the positive power of coincidence is present in the story “A Step Towards Gomorrah,” included in the collection *The Thirtieth Year*. In this story, a married Viennese woman, Charlotte, undergoes an encounter with a seductive younger girl, Mara, with the event challenging Charlotte’s purported heterosexuality, together with her very understanding of time and of language. The aforementioned encounter begins with an apparently arbitrary arrangement of largely unrelated elements organized around the colour red:

She [Charlotte] blinked across at the armchair in the corner, at the hair with its reddish glint, at the red skirt which, spread out like a bullfighter’s cape, fell over the girl’s [Mara] legs [...]. More than the girl herself, she saw all these many clashing red tones in the room: the light that had to pass through a red shade [...]; a row of red books behind it on a shelf; the rumpled, wild skirt and the duller red hair. Just for a moment everything was as it could never be again - just for once the world was in red.<sup>52</sup>

As the story progresses, Charlotte’s realisation that she could actively love Mara has deeply unsettling consequences for her sense of self security:

If she could love Mara she would no longer be at home in this city, in this country, with a man, in a language, but in herself - and she would arrange the home for the

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<sup>50</sup> Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 284.

<sup>51</sup> Pinkard, 284.

<sup>52</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), 106.

girl [...] She would no longer be the chosen one, and never again could she be chosen in this language.<sup>53</sup>

The progression from being the chosen one to being merely chosen calls to mind the linguistic technique of “Böhmen liegt am Meer” – of holding nothing and of being held by nothing. As with the poem, the concern is with limits and with boundaries experienced both as topographical distance and as immanent. Such boundaries when touched, enable another land to emerge beyond a beyond, albeit as *strittig*, held in dispute. Bachmann writes,

Her [Charlotte’s] kingdom would come and when it came, she would no longer be measurable, no longer estimable by an alien measure. In her kingdom a new measure was in force. Then it could no longer be said: she is like this, and like that, attractive, unattractive, sensible, silly, faithful, unfaithful, scrupulous or unscrupulous [...] She knew what it was possible to say and in what categories people thought, who was capable of saying this or that and why.<sup>54</sup>

Language outside of this kingdom is language that is fundamentally inimical to the actual life of the one it describes; the adjectives quoted above read as so many false and arbitrary categories. These categories form the constitutive framework of the *Kriegszustand*: “She [Charlotte] had always loathed this language, every imprint that was stamped upon her and that she had to stamp upon somebody - the attempted murder of reality.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the gender of the characters involved, it is not possible, however, simply to establish a binary opposition between an actually existing murderous masculine language, and a feminine mode of speech and cognition that would, in some way, remain more true to its object. Rather, Bachmann continues,

The language of men, in so far as it had been applied to women, had been bad enough already and doubtful; but the language of women was even worse, more undignified [...] no insight, no observation corresponded to this language, to the frivolous or pious maxims, the jumble of judgments and opinions or the sighed lament.<sup>56</sup>

What Bachmann posits as the mere lament of the feminine contains no traction on reality, no negativity. It is important to note, therefore, that while Marjorie Perloff reads Ivan in

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<sup>53</sup> Bachmann, 124.

<sup>54</sup> Bachmann, 126–27.

<sup>55</sup> Bachmann, 127.

<sup>56</sup> Bachmann, 127.

*Malina* as representing an essentially prosaic, masculine voice that could be counterpoised to Ich's tendency towards a kind of lyric immanence, the essentially *bad* nature of the masculine prosaic does not immediately give positive value to its equally reified opposite.<sup>57</sup> The "kingdom" that Charlotte sees prefigured in her almost-relation with Mara is one that is focused on the sublimation of gender rather than its one-sided affirmation:

I wasn't born into any picture, thought Charlotte. That is why I feel like breaking off. That is why I want a counter-picture, and I want to construct it myself. No name yet. Not yet. First make the leap, leap over everything, carry out the withdrawal when the drum is beaten; when the red cloth trails on the ground and no one knows how it will end. To hope for the kingdom. Not the kingdom of men and not that of women.<sup>58</sup>

The extent to which any such "leap over everything" ever is possible is the subject of several critical readings of the story. Emily Jeremiah, for example, argues that "A Step Towards Gomorra" should be read according to the logic of queer desire, one that is anachronistic and in antagonistic relationship to the future orientated world of Charlotte's marriage. Read from this perspective, the story "charts the oscillations and contradictions of a female subject's negotiations with the Symbolic Order, also revealing the fragile grounds on which order is constructed."<sup>59</sup> In particular, Jeremiah draws attention to the ephemerality of Charlotte's experience, noting the importance of Bachmann's statement that, "one single time the world was all in red."<sup>60</sup> Dinah Dodds argues that this *redness* establishes a world that is simultaneously pervasive and lacking in any meaningful future, and links this directly to desire: "Mara's skirt is red, her hair, the lamp shade, the books on the shelf [...] Bachmann has constructed a unique moment for a unique experience. The red colour is a symbolic extension of Mara and the world she represents - the world [...] of lesbian love."<sup>61</sup> Aside from the fact that the colour red has a political significance of which Bachmann could hardly have been unaware, it is worth interrogating Dodd's claim that Charlotte's experience is primarily that of someone who discovers that they

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<sup>57</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 104.

<sup>58</sup> Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, 130.

<sup>59</sup> Emily Jeremiah, "'Ein einziges Mal war die Welt in rot.' Futurity, Failure, and the Matrixial in Ingeborg Bachmann's 'Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha,'" *German Life and Letters* 68, no. 3 (2015): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12091>.

<sup>60</sup> Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, 132.

<sup>61</sup> Dinah Dodds, "The Lesbian Relationship in Bachmann's 'Ein Schritt Nach Gomorrha,'" *Monatshefte* 72, no. 4 (1980): 431.

are unable to free themselves from the conditions of patriarchy, even as they attempt to act on a desire that is purportedly non-masculine. Dodds argues that the fantasy in which Charlotte engages shows her to be “doing nothing more than assuming for herself her husband’s masculine role,” and that Charlotte fails to imagine anything approaching an actually reciprocal relationship with Mara. Rather, “Mara is simply her creature,” someone whom she will educate to be loyal to her.<sup>62</sup> Such a reading would appear to be supported by the fact that, at another point in the story, Charlotte grabs Mara by the wrist and insists that she has found her “prey” and her “creature” (Geschöpf).<sup>63</sup> Rather than portraying a prefigurative moment of reconciliation, Bachmann’s story, as Dodds reads it, is closer to a demonstration of the fact that human relationships may be “damned to inequality because we have no models of equal relationships.”<sup>64</sup> The failure of Charlotte and Mara’s encounter to establish any lasting difference through intimate relations appears to be confirmed in the final line of story, in which “the red skirt lay crumpled and insignificant by the bed,” affirming that the moment has irrefutably passed for both the would-be lovers, and for the world as a whole.<sup>65</sup>

To read “A Step Towards Gomorra” as purely cautionary, however, is to fail to engage with its focus on the liminal, and with much of Bachmann’s thinking on the question of alternative modes of life and of social organisation. It is to fail to understand the manner in which coincidence makes possible the illumination of the boundary, an illumination that carries a prefigurative, albeit deeply imperfect, impulse. The content of this experience is focused on the border, over which another land may be seen, *in dispute*. It is a feature of the coincidence, the uninsurable that it enables this kind of limit-experience. To think coincidence is also to think boundaries and limits. Bachmann’s own evident attachment to the word *Grenze* immediately, and almost certainly deliberately, recalls the closing statement of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt” (the limits of my language mean the limits of my world), a statement that Perloff argues was read in the post-war German language context as “a statement about human limits, those limits that ultimately lead to the inability to say anything - that is, to silence.”<sup>66</sup> Silence, in Bachmann, however, is almost always more

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<sup>62</sup> Dodds, 437.

<sup>63</sup> Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, 130.

<sup>64</sup> Dodds, “The Lesbian Relationship in Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt Nach Gomorrha,”” 437.

<sup>65</sup> Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, 135.

<sup>66</sup> Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*, 146.

the end result of a striving towards the unsayable than it is a pre-emptive resignation regarding the limit of what can be said. Mark Anderson articulates something close to this, stating that Bachmann's utopian impulse represents an "imaginative nowhere where possibility abides rather than necessity, and the speaking subject is free."<sup>67</sup> However, to claim, as Anderson does, that for Bachmann the poet acts as a "bridge or border to utopia in both land and language," is to take this utopic concept as a positive assertion when no room for such a claim exists. Indeed, as Leslie Morris has argued, the figure of the bridge in Bachmann's writing is more likely to carry a sense of loneliness and isolation than it is to actually affirm a route that is immediately navigable.<sup>68</sup> It is in the very quality of the border, the *Grenze*, to signify a beyond through its own impermeability: hope for the land exists because one has irrefutable proof of the sea.

Having completed a doctoral thesis centered around a positivist critique of Heidegger, Bachmann wrote at least two extended pieces on Wittgenstein, one an essay and one a radio play. In the former, dating from 1953, she offers a description of the philosopher's project that makes of him an explicit partisan of the ineffable. She writes that what marks Wittgenstein out as being of vital interest to the present is not his negative statements with regard to the signifying capacities of the language of the natural sciences, but rather "his despairing effort (*Bemühung*) for the sake of the inexpressible (*Unaussprechliche*), that charges the *Tractatus* with a tension in which he himself is sublimated (*aufgehoben*)."<sup>69</sup> In Bachmann's telling, Wittgenstein loses and preserves himself through a straining that culminates in silence. Such a straining is as aware of the impossibility of speaking beyond the limit as it is contemptuous of those who would merely resign themselves in the face of such a border.

Elsewhere, in the unfinished *Der Fall Franza* (The Franza Case), Bachmann makes use of the opening of the *Tractatus*, specifically the statement that "The world is the totality of facts, not things," when, in a statement later appropriated by Christa Wolf, she writes that "the facts that constitute the world, they need the non-factual

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<sup>67</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *In the Storm of Roses: Selected Poems by Ingeborg Bachmann*, trans. Mark Anderson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>68</sup> Leslie Morris, *'Ich Suche Ein Unschuldiges Land': Reading History in the Poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001), 51.

<sup>69</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4*, 13. The same passage is translated by Anderson as "his despairing attempt to chart the limits of linguistic expression, which provides the *Tractatus* with its inner tension, a tension into which he eventually disappears." See Bachmann, *In the Storm of Roses*, 12.



(Nichttatsächliche) in order to be distinguished from it.”<sup>70</sup> As Leahy argues, this thought functions as a valorization of the potential for aesthetic knowledge and understanding, “an inherited debt” to an “impossible reality, and the *possibilities* of art.”<sup>71</sup> Bachmann insists in the early essay on Wittgenstein, however, on an immanently personal relation to the limit: “We stand on this side of the border, we speak here, we think here. The feeling of the world as a limited (begrenztes) whole comes about because we ourselves, as a metaphysical subject, are no more a part of the world, but rather a border (Grenze).”<sup>72</sup> The lived reality of a subject’s life-world is one conditioned by both the irrefutable reality of the limit and by the immanence of its transcendence: the road to utopia is blocked by the possible, and not by immediately existing reality.<sup>73</sup>

Wittgenstein disappearing into the ineffable prefigures the end of *Malina*, in which Ich disappears into a crack (Riss) in the wall of her apartment. Although readings of the text generally consider Ich’s act to be a mode of metaphorical, and quite possibly literal, suicide, there is a precedent in Bachmann’s writing to see such a disappearance as a mode of preservation. Just as Wittgenstein’s imagined *aufheben* preserves and vaporizes that which cannot be said, in his discussion of Bachmann’s radio play “The Good God of Manhattan,” Daniel Roth argues that the central character Jennifer is able to escape her worldly destiny through an intensity of love that enables her to “flee through a temporal puncture (Zeitloch) in the present.”<sup>74</sup> The play concerns a couple who meet by chance in Grand Central Station and whose love begins, like a cigarette, to “burn a hole in the world” with its intensity, and whose excess apparently justifies the murder of the female character by the titular “God.”<sup>75</sup> Roth’s claim relies on Bachmann’s hypothetical reading of Wittgenstein’s statement in his *Tagebuch* that, “If by eternity is not understood infinite temporal duration but non-temporality (Unzeitlichkeit), then it can be said that a man lives eternally if he lives in the present.”<sup>76</sup> This same aphorism bears on *Malina* with regard to Ich’s uninsurable *Heute*, which now appears not only to disrupt the alien measure of the world, but also to act as its positive, albeit unsustainable, sublimation.

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<sup>70</sup> Christa Wolf, *Kassandra. Vier Vorlesungen. Eine Erzählung*, (Aufbau: Berlin, 1989), 167.

<sup>71</sup> Leahy, *Der Wahre Historiker*, 184.

<sup>72</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4*, 20–21.

<sup>73</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 57.

<sup>74</sup> D. Roth, “Logik als Schicksal-Ingeborg Bachmanns geheimer Wittgenstein Essay,” *Modern Austrian literature*, 43, no. 1 (2010): 34.

<sup>75</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 1*, 291.

<sup>76</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), 75e.

This pure present preserves because “for life in the present there is no death.”<sup>77</sup> If one takes, as Roth does, Wittgenstein to be the single most significant influence on Bachmann’s thinking of death, it is possible to read Ich’s disappearance at the end of *Malina* as an act that represents not simply the end of the protagonist’s life, but also the possibility, and positive enactment of, preservation as well as the fulfillment of the promise of coincidence understood as a crack in the dominion of a murderous everyday life.

This reading is supported by a linguistic coincidence in the name “Malina” itself. As Alexandra Kurmann notes, a “malina” names a specific kind of shelter used by German Russian Jews during the Holocaust. The word itself was “a code word in ghetto language, a secret expression known only to those inside of the community who had need of such spaces of exclusion.”<sup>78</sup> For Kurmann, this coincidence is enough to provide a reading of the end of Bachmann’s novel as signaling a positive entrance into real safety, albeit one that remains unidentifiable as such from *our* side of the frontier. What is at stake in Ich’s final disappearance is a collapse into the liminal for the sake of that which lies sufficiently beyond it. This is, ultimately, an act of resistance against the securitization of the world. Insurance places a limit on destruction that returns the object to the conditions of its own destructibility. It enacts a false sublimation into a *Warenwelt* that, by the early 1970s, had reached its European zenith. The logic of social insurance, from its invention to its generalization as a ground for life, is to clarify that which is in dispute through the generation of social nexus which obviates non-identical behaviours. In the face of such a situation, the affirmation of the liminal, of what is visible because in its own uncertainty, is a possible register of hope. To make this hope actual might, from the perspective of the world as it exists, be to disappear without a trace.

### *Cemetery*

The final section of this chapter will elaborate on what I understand to be a singular relation to history at work in Bachmann’s writing. This is grounded on an intense desire to remember victims of an ongoing historical catastrophe, while at the same time, refusing to invoke those victims so as to make use of their suffering to justify either a

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<sup>77</sup> Wittgenstein, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Alexandra Kurmann, “What Is Malina?: Decoding Ingeborg Bachmann’s Poetics of Secrecy,” *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 32, (2016): 80.

contemporary state of society or a future political project. In order to demonstrate how this relation emerges within Bachmann's writing, I will first elaborate an understanding of history founded on debt and on guilt as it appears in Friedrich Schiller, a thinker whose notion of universal history makes use of such concepts to provide a teleological meaning to otherwise disparate events.

In a 1789 lecture entitled "The Nature and Value of Universal History", Schiller elaborates a teleological view of world history, one that understands all past events with regard to their relevance to the present:

Even the fact that we find ourselves assembled at this moment, at just this level of national culture, with this language, these customs, these civic advantages, this amount of freedom of conscience, is the outcome, perhaps, of all the past events of the world; the whole history of the world at least would be needed to explain this very moment.<sup>79</sup>

This view of history takes the existence of the present as proof of the necessity of past events, positioning the suffering of previous generations so that they enact a direct pressure on the current moment:

The unbearable misery of barbarism had to drive our forebears from the bloody judgments of God to human tribunals, devastating plagues had to recall medicine to scientific inquiry, the idleness of the monks had to make amends from afar for the evil they had done, and by their secular activity to preserve in the cloisters the fragmented remains of the Augustan age until the era of the printing press.<sup>80</sup>

This relation of the present to the past is a relation of debt and of guilt - the German word *Schuld* is equally translated as both terms – and this guilt is capable of binding together moments in a manner similar to that through which the late 18<sup>th</sup> century world market brought together exotic commodities:

Even in the daily routine of home life we cannot avoid our indebtedness to past centuries; the most dissimilar periods of human history contribute to our civilization, as do the most remote regions of the world to our luxury. The clothes we wear, the spices in our food and the price we pay for them, many of our most effective medicines, and equally so many novel means of corruption – do they not

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<sup>79</sup> Friedrich von Schiller, "The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture [1789]," *History and Theory* 11, no. 3 (1972): 79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504683>.

<sup>80</sup> Schiller, 329.

presuppose the discovery of America by Columbus and the circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco da Gama?<sup>81</sup>

The weight of the past pushes on the present, driving the latter forward in an attempt to redeem its debt. Such a debt permeates everyday life and history appears as a production line manufacturing a contemporary context out of disparate materials that would not otherwise be brought together. “Thus,” claims Schiller, “there extends between the present moment and the beginnings of the human race a long chain of events which interlock as cause and effect.”<sup>82</sup> The inevitability of such a causal relation means that one assumes its presence even when actual, tangible knowledge of history is absent, and speculation must fill the gap of any actual understanding.

Although the details of all world events remain unknowable to finite intelligence, Schiller insists that the “philosophical understanding” is capable of “joining these fragments together by artificial links” and transforming “the aggregate into a system, a rationally coherent whole.”<sup>83</sup> An “aggregate”, the natural enemy of any thinking of teleology, is a mere collection of things that bear no necessary relation to each other. To a thinker of historical progress, viewing history as such a lump would be tantamount to despair. Schiller concludes his lecture with the assertion that any right minded, morally thinking person would therefore be mindful of the obligation that they owe the past and, as a result would seek to “repay to the coming generation” the debt that they are unable to discharge to the past.”<sup>84</sup> Mindfulness of such a debt keeps the philosopher in a fixed relation to the past, at the same time as it binds this past to the present for which it is a justification. Debt and guilt hold the past and the present within a continuum, one in which it is possible to claim, in 1789 at least, that preparing for the actuality of the present has been, “although unwittingly and unintentionally, the endeavour of all past ages.”<sup>85</sup> Progress is possible only so long as one maintains an awareness of such a debt, as it is this debt that enables the aggregate of historical to appear as a coherent whole while, at the same time, allowing the past to exert a constant influence on the future via the obligation that such a debt necessitates.

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<sup>81</sup> Schiller, 329.

<sup>82</sup> Schiller, 329.

<sup>83</sup> Schiller, 330.

<sup>84</sup> Schiller, 884.

<sup>85</sup> Schiller, 334.

The instinctive aversion of the aggregate ignores the possibility that progress itself is catastrophic. At the same time, the former position also appears to obviate the potential for freedom, as any action carried out by a subject within such a nexus is carried as obligation. Acting within the historical framework by debt and by guilt is, as Werner Hamacher writes,

only a form of *not* acting. Anyone who is bound by guilt and obligation does not do what he does, but instead executes a preordained program and falls fatally, lethally for action itself, into the predestination of an inheritance from whose succession he is not free to abstain.<sup>86</sup>

One consequence of unfree action made in the name of progress is the cancellation of any alternative possibilities that may have been contained either within the moment that one acts or within the past events under whose name one undertakes such actions. As Kristin Ross argues, “asserting a teleology of the present [...] erases those memories of past alternatives that sought or envisioned other outcomes than the one that came to pass.”<sup>87</sup> While Ross refers here to official recuperation of a general strike into the narrative of capitalist development, it is possible to apply her insight to any thinking of teleology which submits the contradictory, fragmentary quality of historical moments to systematization. Such a thinking, for better or worse, necessitates a flattening of any radical alterity held by any of the individual pieces of its narrative.

The question of comportment towards historical moments is itself a question of comportment towards those who lived through those moments, and those who fell beneath the wheels of progress. Concern for this question permeated post-war Austrian society, and Bachmann addresses it emphatically. The self-image of Austria as a country during the process of national reconstruction was defined by the framework of the so-called “victim doctrine,” an official national phenomenon centered on the assertion, vindicated officially by the 1943 Moscow declaration, that Austria itself was the first victim of National Socialist aggression. The doctrine of the victimhood of Austria, one present in school textbooks and poems celebrating Austria as a homeland and mourning those assumed dead on the Eastern front, as well as official government declarations made in the decades following the war, mobilized those who had been most recently killed in

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<sup>86</sup> Werner Hamacher, “Guilt History: Benjamin’s Sketch “Capitalism as Religion”, trans. Kirk Wetters, *Diacritics* 32, no. 3 (2002): 85.

<sup>87</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6.

the name of the preservation of Austria itself as a valid nation state, and as a country able to progress beyond the collective trauma of Nazism by effectively denying anything other than a passive relationship to it.<sup>88</sup>

For Bachmann, however, the deaths recuperated by the victim myth emphatically resist systemization. They remain a mere aggregate. In the short story “Among Murderers and Madmen,” one reads,

That’s the terrible thing about it [...] the victims show no path at all. And for the murderers the times change. The victims are the victims. That’s all [...] They simply fell down, were run over, were shot, stood against the wall, ordinary people who didn’t think much or have many opinions [...] No, that is something no one understands, that the victims serve no purpose. That is just what nobody understands and that is also why no one feels it an insult that these victims should also have to suffer so that we shall come to realize certain things.<sup>89</sup>

Bachmann’s prose positions the “victims” as a mere heap, a pile of bodies which point in no particular direction. A teleological relation to such victims is impossible. A short prose piece collected in her *Werke* and provisionally titled *None May Invoke the Victim* (Auf das Opfer darf keiner sich berufen), turns this thought into an absolute ethical imperative. Bachmann insists that “no country, no group, no idea, may rely on the victim.”<sup>90</sup> Bachmann’s statement here, and in the previously quoted story, combines moral prescription and epistemological claim. “Sacrificed people” (geopferte Menschen) reveal nothing beyond themselves; the dead say nothing because they are nothing but dead. It is not true that the victims urge, testify, or lay the ground for a further witnessing. That is the most fearful, and thoughtless thing, the weakest poeticizing.”<sup>91</sup> In the years prior to the publication of *Malina*, Bachmann formulated vital criticisms of the ideology of the victim doctrine, criticisms that maintained the impossibility of finding a justification for the suffering of history via the affirmation of the present. At stake in avoiding such justification is the potential for any kind of adequate relation to the past, and those who have been destroyed by it.

The second of the three sections of *Malina* is, I would argue, concerned with the question of establishing a kind of comportment to the past which registers the extent of

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<sup>88</sup> Peter Utgaard, *Remembering and Forgetting Nazism: Education, National Identity and the Victim Myth in Postwar Austria* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).

<sup>89</sup> Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> Bachmann, *Werke* 4, 335.

<sup>91</sup> Bachmann, 335.

historical catastrophe, and that does so in a manner which refuses to allow such events to coagulate into a narrative or any kind of affirmative direction. The section, entitled “The Third Man,” is mostly composed of a long dream sequence in which Ich hallucinates her father as, alternatively, a Nazi officer, a flesh-eating crocodile and an incestuous torturer dragging her through various levels of hell. As the sequence progresses, Ich makes several references to the end of the world and to the collapse of civilization in a final catastrophe, references that appear to tie evident references to the Holocaust to a more general apocalypse. At the thematic center of the sequence is “the cemetery of the murdered daughters,” a location that Ich describes as one in which “over every grave the sky is heavily and darkly overcast” and in which the “gravestones, the plaques with their inscriptions are scarcely recognizable.”<sup>92</sup> The cemetery is the scene of a “performance” (*Vorstellung*), directed by Ich’s father, in which:

The earth opens up above the graves, and for a moment the dead daughters stand with blowing hair, their faces remain indistinct, their hair falls down below their hands, each woman is raising her right hand, which can be easily seen in the white light, they spread their waxen fingers, the rings are missing, the ring fingers are missing on every hand. My father has the lake swell beyond its banks so that nothing comes out, so that nothing can be seen, so that the women drown above their graves, so the graves drown, my father says: It’s a performance: WHEN WE DEAD SHALL AWAKEN.<sup>93</sup>

These female figures are indistinct, although amputated ring fingers position them as symbolic bearers of the violence of gender relations. The inscriptions on the graves of the daughters are illegible chimes with Bachmann’s writing on the function of naming. In her Frankfurt lectures on poetics, she remarks that the name of a thing is contingent [*zufällig*], but as the sedimentation of this thing’s circumstances, it takes on a necessary content. The name represents, in this sense, the “created form” of a thing’s existence.<sup>94</sup> A name is both a reification of, and a mode of gaining access to, the disparate relations that constitute a life. To be unnamed, therefore, is to remain outside of a social economy in which contingency is transfigured into the necessary aspects of a particular thing’s existence. The unnamed are condemned and innocent; they are products of coincidence whose potential remains unfinished.

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<sup>92</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 143.

<sup>93</sup> Bachmann, 181.

<sup>94</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4*, 239.

This history of the cemetery relates to a thinking of coincidence and integration as both of these are mediated by the development of insurable self-hoods. This history connects the cemetery per-se with the existence of the mass grave, or Potter's Field, two kinds of burial site connected in a history mediated by the development of early life-insurance. This history contains an opposition between constructed historical teleologies and the brute fact of the fragmented aggregate. As Thomas Laqueur argues, major cemeteries were largely a nineteenth century phenomenon and, beginning with Paris' Père Lachaise in 1804, represented an attempt to recall, and construct, a mythological, ancient past which itself "levelled" evidence of more recent social upheaval, allowing for the presentation of specific narratives of nationhood.<sup>95</sup> To be interred in such a cemetery was to be assured a degree of permanence, and a place in a historical continuum, one which frequently stretched back to a mythologized ancient world.<sup>96</sup> In contrast the Potter's Field is a place in which history collapsed. Writing about Hart Island, outside of New York, Graham Willis states that this location is somewhere in which "victims of lynching, hanging, and racialized violence have been put in their place."<sup>97</sup> Such a "putting in place" is contingent and necessary. It is the latter because burial in such a location is dictated by precise governmental logics regarding right to internment, and it is the former in the sense that the Potter's Field is a space in which historically distinct periods bleed together in a kind of temporal parataxis. Willis writes that sites of mass burial function as "spaces where disinterment is standard and where political massacres of past and present blend together in human fragments."<sup>98</sup> To be buried within the Potter's Field is to participate within a shattered temporality. Such sites articulate the perennial social exclusion of those in the mass grave - those who form no "path" and whose death cannot be invoked in the name of progress.

Gillian Rose opens an essay on the untimely quality of death with the following reference to Hart Island:

New York City, 16 May, 1992: the body of my love has been taken to the Potter's Field, taken outside the walls of the city; beyond the ramparts, his ungodly ashes

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 255.

<sup>96</sup> Laqueur, 255.

<sup>97</sup> Graham Denyer Willis, "The Potter's Field," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*; Cambridge 60, no. 3 (July 2018): 539, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S001041751800018X>.

<sup>98</sup> Willis, 539.



will have been scattered upon that collective grave for the unreprieved - without community, without commemoration and hence without end.<sup>99</sup>

To be without “end” here carries a dual meaning: an interminable internment is synonymous with an internment that has no purpose. Rose continues, “By decreeing this merciless disposal, the city reclaims his soul and mine. Without proper burial and mourning, he cannot rest, I cannot recommence.”<sup>100</sup> To be buried in the Potter’s Field is to be denied a position within a historical teleology which could conceivably grant one a purpose, and which could determine an end point to one’s life. A consequence of this is that these same places are, perhaps perversely, testaments to the infinite potential for events to have been different. Mass graves are a kind of montage, arranging the past to reveal connections and combinations between fragments.

The fear of burial in such a place was sufficient to motivate the expansion of so-called industrial insurance throughout America towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a development that itself formed a model for the potential success of wide-ranging insurance schemes in Europe. In his history of the Prudential, Hoffman states simply that “of all the things poor people desire to avoid it is a ‘charity burial’ of one of their children.”<sup>101</sup> Earlier in the same work he writes that “the abhorrence of pauper support, especially for the burial of the dead, is a pronounced trait of every self-respecting man, and those who are familiar with the life and labour of the industrial masses can fairly grasp the deeper meaning of the abhorrence of the potter’s field.”<sup>102</sup> Such fear is itself a mark of character and enables Hoffman to establish a distinction between a conscientious industrial poor and an irredeemably pauperish under-class. This distinction is based on the fact that the former will inevitably take action, if only in the form of saving a few dollars a month, in order to save themselves from a “fate worse than death.”<sup>103</sup> As he insists, “It is something considerably to the credit of the industrial population that they make such provision.”<sup>104</sup> In this way, the categories of industrial insurance generate and maintain not simply the category of the uninsurable, but that of the incorrigible, the one

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<sup>99</sup> Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102.

<sup>100</sup> Rose, 102.

<sup>101</sup> Hoffman, *History of the Prudential Insurance Company of America-industrial insurance-1875-1900*, 147.

<sup>102</sup> Hoffman, 112.

<sup>103</sup> Hoffman, 112.

<sup>104</sup> Hoffman, 112.

for whom all hope is lost, and therefore, in whom all investment is waste. Such a person cannot be recuperated into a structure of either debt or credit; they belong on the rubbish heap, even in death. Ich's denial of her insurability reads now not simply as a denial of her own protection, or as an excess of subjectivity over and against objective circumstances, but also as declaration of the impossibility of her final integration within a historical continuum. Her place is in the Potter's Field with other uninsurable individuals.

Although the cemetery of the murdered daughters is a cemetery, and not a pauper's grave, it nonetheless shares features with this latter mode of burial. As a space, this cemetery exists outside of any specific epoch, visible only in a time that "could have been yesterday, could have been long ago" and that "could be forever."<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the a-temporal quality of the cemetery appears to match the a-historical quality of Ich's own unconscious which itself forms the cemetery's actual location. A kind of decrepit, a-temporal burial site exists within the subject. This inversion of space matches the view of the world as itself littered with the unmarked graves of women. Ich states at another point in the novel that "in every outskirt of the city [Vienna] a woman has been murdered, strangled [...] strangled by some brutal individual [...] An unknown woman murdered by some unknown man."<sup>106</sup> The city of Vienna itself, and by association any other city, is ringed by the graves of the unknown, of those killed and buried without end. Such murders push against the conception of historical progress on which the new Austrian state is founded. Wherever such people may actually be interned, they belong, silent and mutilated, in the cemetery of the murdered daughters.

The guardian of such a space is the fascist father. It is he who possesses the power to call up the women buried therein, and it is he who retains the power to destroy them. This father who manifests most clearly the capacity for a particular social order to be imposed upon historical fragments, standing in as a figure for the violence of the social. This standing in is integral to the overall project of the *Todesarten*. In an interview, the author herself distinguishes her planned series of novels from an explicitly realist project by stating that the latter project "would probably tell of many horrible things that could befall one person or a one group" before stating that, in her own work, these things are "taken together, in this one central (große) person, who carries out what society itself

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<sup>105</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 43.

<sup>106</sup> Bachmann, *Malina*, 231.

carries out.”<sup>107</sup> The figure of this father is an intensification of the social enforcement of death. He is a figure in whom the distinction between the particular social individual being killed and the diffusion of such death across a populace is all but erased.

The cemetery of the murdered daughters is more than an aesthetic image intended to raise awareness of the injustice suffered by women throughout history. Rather, I would claim that it represents Bachmann’s own specific mode of comportment towards the “victims”, one that through its constitution within Ich’s internal topography, memorializes while refusing to invoke. This effect comes about through a specific kind of cathexis. The elaboration of this cathexis stands directly opposed to overtly moralistic critiques of the *Todesarten* which seek to question the ethical legitimacy of the author, a non-Jew whose father was a Nazi officer and who had no direct experience of the Shoah, making use of Holocaust imagery within her narratives.

First and foremost, it is significant that the cemetery of which Ich speaks is an internal one, existing as it does within Ich’s dreamlife. Within this section of the novel, the protagonist herself functions as a broken, malfunctioning polis, one that is unable to reincorporate its fallen and is, as such, unable to move past its own compulsions towards melancholy repetition. This position calls to mind immediately what the post-war psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok describe as the fantasy of incorporation. The pair contrast this notion explicitly to the idea of “introjection”, whereby an ego is able to take into itself positive elements of an object to which it had previously been attached, but to which it no longer has access.<sup>108</sup> The fantasy of incorporation, on the other hand, reflects a mental state in which

Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes and affects, the objectal correlative of the [analysand’s] loss is buried alive in the crypt as a fully-fledged person, complete with its own topography. The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impracticable. A whole world of unconscious fantasy is created, one that leads its own separate and concealed existence.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 97.

<sup>108</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Routledge, 1988), 230.

<sup>109</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.

The situation of incorporation requires a powerful cathexis between the subject and object whom they encrypt. Abraham and Torok write that such incorporation forms a specific kind of fantasy which itself involves the “the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss, a loss that, if recognised as such, would effectively transform us.”<sup>110</sup> For them, the essential quality of any “fantasy” is a conflict between reality and our own psychic structure. Such a conflict forces some kind of change on an individual’s psychic topography, necessary in order to keep the “original topography intact in the face of danger.”<sup>111</sup> Rather than adjusting to changes in reality, what Abraham and Torok call fantasy functions to preserve that which has been lost. Fantasy, according to this definition, serves an explicitly conservative function. It enables the psyche, moulded according to one specific reality, to continue functioning following a fundamental change in this reality. Fantasy represents “the denial of a gap” between the individual’s psyche and the real.<sup>112</sup>

To live a fantasy of incorporation is to preserve something internally, to refuse to allow its absence to enter into the domain of lived experience. Indeed, in the most significant cases, the true nature of the subject’s relation to the incorporated object remains unknowable to their conscious ego. The fantasy of incorporation occurs when a subject is unable to properly participate within what Abraham and Torok term the “community of empty mouths” and unable to replace the object of their loss linguistically. It is for this reason that incorporation, the encryption of the subject’s cathexis, occurs only when a loss cannot be confessed. Shame acts as a seal that preserves what has been lost in its entirety, precluding the process of working through associated with a confessed attachment and conscious mourning. To return to *Malina*, one can argue that it is Ich’s refusal to invoke the “victims” of whom she dreams that binds her to them unconsciously.

In such a psychic situation, “the words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed - everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved.”<sup>113</sup> Incorporation both protects and destroys. As Fabio Landa puts it, “if introjection leads to independence with relation to the object, the mechanism of incorporation welds the self and the object

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<sup>110</sup> Abraham and Torok, 127.

<sup>111</sup> Abraham and Torok, 126.

<sup>112</sup> Abraham and Torok, 128.

<sup>113</sup> Abraham and Torok, 130.

together forever.”<sup>114</sup> The dream of Bachmann’s narrator manifests both a profound connection to the “victims” and, equally, is testament to an inability to enter them into historical narrative: the murdered daughters are preserved in their non-being.

That a loss cannot be spoken about is not, in and of itself, a sufficient cause for incorporation, however. Rather, it is necessary that a specific kind of taboo be broken, whereby the particular cathexis which leads to incorporation is impossible for a subject to admit even to themselves. Abraham and Torok give an example of a young boy who “carried inside him his sister,” having been “seduced” by her. They state that this boy’s

prohibited and shameful sexual games did not admit of any form of verbal communication. Only the incorporation of, and subsequent identification with the girl allowed the boy to safeguard his topography marked by the seduction [...] Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object’s doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the *object’s* secret that needs to be kept, *his* shame covered up.<sup>115</sup>

To read the middle section of *Malina* alongside an understanding of incorporation is also to confront a tendency towards overtly moralistic readings of the subjects of Ich’s identification, and by association Bachmann’s objects of sympathy. Jill Scott, amongst others, comments that Bachmann, a non-Jew, misuses the Shoah for her own aesthetic purposes, stating that she engages in a “problematic identification with victim status, the appropriation of Jewish suffering, and [in *The Franza Case*] the paradoxes of staging the trauma of a white woman against the backdrop of colonial oppression.”<sup>116</sup> The Holocaust imagery in the passage is undeniable, as Ich is subjected to an alternate freezing and boiling hot water and as she awakes, at one point, in a gas chamber, something that, while it may serve an evident dramatic function, represents a violation of a specific ethics of identification that works from the presumption that only members of the particular groups who have suffered a particular oppression are entitled to make use of it in art.

To suggest that such episodes within Bachmann’s writing constitute an ethically unacceptable use of someone else’s suffering is, I would argue, less interesting than attempting to understand the specific potential contained within such an “unacceptable”,

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<sup>114</sup> Fabio Landa, *La Shoah et les nouvelles figures métapsychologiques de Nicolas Abraham et Maria Torok: essai sur la création théorique en psychanalyse* (Paris ; Montréal: L’Harmattan, 1999), 172.

<sup>115</sup> Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 141.

<sup>116</sup> Jill Scott, *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 91.

*unavowable* cathexis of the murdered. This cathexis is capable of preserving that which would otherwise be instrumentalized into a teleology of the present, and of maintaining a fidelity to the potentially radically contingent qualities contained within what it devours. To conclude, it is precisely the transgressive quality of Ich's cathexis that forms the seal against the murdered daughters' dissolution in the open air of progress. The very wrongness of this cathexis preserves the possibility of a present that would no longer require justification.

### **Risk and Action in the Cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini**

This chapter focuses on the work of the Italian filmmaker, poet and novelist, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). It considers his work within the context of the reconstruction and development of Italian society following the end of the Second World War, the institution of the Marshall Plan and the coming of so-called “neo-capitalism” to Italy. I begin by providing an account of Pasolini’s fascination with the Roman sub-proletariat, as demonstrated in a number of novels, short stories, journalistic writing and poetry. I argue that the sub-proletariat are equivalent to the Marxist figure of the lumpen, and that Pasolini’s investment in this class is dependent on its putative position outside of structures of security and integration associated first of all with Italian fascism and then with what Pasolini saw as the near total reification of life underpinning the country’s post-war economic miracle. The chapter then moves to consider Pasolini’s first feature film, *Accattone*, (1961) and argues that within this film the lumpen functions as a potential reservoir of grace and pathos within a thoroughly profane moral economy. The Roman lumpen cannot be integrated into structures of social security that are themselves at least partly grounded on experiences of resentment and “bourgeois hatred” that Pasolini openly despised. Underpinning this argument is a particular understanding of *risk*, through which this word denotes an action a subject undertakes in a situation of real uncertainty and which could have either positive or negative results.

From here, the chapter moves to consider Pasolini’s last finished film, *Salò or The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* (1975). It argues that while *Accattone* grounds grace in the figure of the outsider and the excluded i.e. the one capable of taking risks, *Salò* represents a situation of near total integration that resolves itself into a paradoxical state of (near) complete security. This section of the chapter seeks to understand the manner in which the pathos and tragic potential of the sub-proletariat gives way to the banal evisceration of a fully integrated population. I make use of Pasolini’s writing on linguistics and cinema to argue that *Salò* presents a situation that obviates any meaningful distinction between existence and non-existence, something akin to the ideal state of the *Waarenwelt* (world of commodities) already discussed in chapters one and two. Following this, I argue that Pasolini’s final completed film can be used to elaborate a specific evolution in the thinking of risk from a constitutive aspect of a lifeworld to an

insurance technology through which pieces of stock may be arbitrarily destroyed without affecting either the meaning or the consistency of the whole enterprise.

The chapter ends with a consideration of one scene in *Salò* in which a young guard, Ezio, is found sleeping with a servant girl and is immediately executed, after having revealed his own political affiliation by giving a spontaneous communist salute moments before he is gunned down. This gesture can be read, I argue, alongside Pasolini's writing on the importance of an avant-garde artist finding the "firing line," or the precise point at which a transgressive action may properly threaten the constitution of the social world. For Pasolini, such a transgression exists in contradistinction to the excessive but essentially tautological pseudo-transgression of the fascist-libertines and remains a source of violent hope. The chapter concludes by arguing that it is within the figure of such a militant that Pasolini projects the possibility for aesthetic and political action, manifest as the disruptive, albeit momentary, re-entrance of history into a historically conditioned vacuum.

### *Lumpen*

Pasolini moved to Rome in early 1950 at the age of twenty-eight. He had previously been based in Friuli, an area in the north east of Italy. While living there, he conducted semiotic research on the local dialect, published his first books of poetry in a formalized version of that dialect, and actively participated in struggles for regional autonomy. The move to Rome was a forced one precipitated by a court case following accusations that the then teacher had conducted immoral acts with a group of four teenage boys in nearby woods during a town fair. Although no conviction resulted, the case led to Pasolini's expulsion from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and from his job, a position that, according to his biographer Barth David Schwartz, had offered him secure future employment together with the time necessary to pursue his personal literary endeavors.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks prior to the move, Pasolini wrote to his former party comrade, Teresina Degan, to confirm his own vitality in spite of his expulsion, together with the solidarity he felt towards the working class of Italy:

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<sup>1</sup> Barth David Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem: Revised edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 181.



There was a moment when I could have drowned in the dung heap of bourgeois hatred but now I am recovering and if ever I had vitality I feel it on me like a new suit. What you say about me being a defender of the working class is by now an element in my thinking which is absolute and do not fear, nothing will change it.<sup>2</sup>

While these words may simply read as an attempt to make the best of a situation that would see Pasolini and his mother living in poverty for a number of years while he attempted to support them both on the meagre wages of a journalist, and later a script-writer, they nonetheless express a hope and a sense of renewed vigor found in the fact that the pariah has not lowered himself to the level of his accusers and, as a result, has not been contaminated by the moralism that defines the life of the provincial municipal counsellor. The aversion of such moralism is political as well as ethical. Pasolini once insisted that “being moralistic meant being bourgeois in the most horrendous way”, and that the bourgeoisie were a class for whom he felt a hatred that was “visceral and profound.”<sup>3</sup> The aversion of such moralism was, for him, political as well as ethical.

This period of director’s life was, in his own words, a “war on two fronts.”<sup>4</sup> The first of these involved avoiding the moral structures and ethical preoccupations of the Italian petit-bourgeoisie, a class he saw increasing exponentially following the country’s economic miracle, and the other took the form of a “certain conformism of the left.”<sup>5</sup> The avoidance of this “conformism” manifested in solidarities with those who were not, strictly speaking, workers. Indeed, Pasolini’s life in Rome centered around his investigation of, and attempt to live within, the so-called “sub-proletariat,” a class of people who lived outside the labour market proper and who, as a result, at least from a conventional Marxist perspective, possessed none of the potential for revolutionary agency associated with the industrial proletariat’s capacity to organize, strike and struggle for their own self-overcoming as a class. For Pasolini, the antidote to “bourgeois hatred” was not to be found in the struggles of those already integrated into the capitalist mode of production, and who therefore possessed a capacity to disrupt productive relations, but rather in those who maintain a fundamentally parasitic relationship to such production, living on the outskirts of Rome and maintaining a singular capacity for pathos and tragedy

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<sup>2</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Letters, 1940-54: Vol. I*, trans. Stuart Hood (London: Quartet Books, 1992), 313.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Entretiens*, ed. Graziella Chiarcossi, trans. Marie-Ange Patrizio (Editions Delga, 2019), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Pasolini, 30.

precisely because of the contingent, rootless quality of their lives. Michael Hardt argues that the continuity between Pasolini's early Friulian novels and poems and the work produced in Rome is to be found in an imagined "connection to the customs and sensibility of the peasant society of the past" possessed by that class of people who lived on the outside of the post-war consumer explosion.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Pasolini's forced move to the modern urban center was lived, in fact, as a way of maintaining a relationship to the kind of archaic past he had loved in the provinces.

The figures with whom Pasolini associated are roughly correlate with those known, in Marxist parlance, as the lumpen proletariat. Writing in the wake of the revolutions of 1848, Marx identified such figures as embodying a number of contradictions. In *The Class Struggle in France*, they are described as a "mass quite distinct from the industrial proletariat" and a

a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all sorts, living off the garbage (*Abfall*) of society, people without a definite occupation (*Arbeitszweig*), vagabonds [...] varying according to the cultural level of their particular nation, never able to repudiate their lazzaroni character [...] thoroughly tractable, capable of the greatest acts of heroism and the most exalted self-sacrifice as well as the lowest forms of banditry and the foulest corruption.<sup>7</sup>

Marx's *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written during the same period, uses a similar series of metaphors, describing the class as the "scum, (*Auswerfe*) the leavings (*Abfall*), the refuse of all classes"<sup>8</sup> For Marx, the lumpen character is unformed and therefore "tractable", containing as it does, the potential for opposing ethical extremes. Such people, unable to act within the domain of production, are likewise unmoulded by the regularity of work and possess no sense of historical purpose, meaning that they are equally unable to maintain a solidarity through struggle that would make them anything other than malleable to reactionary forces. It is this absence of character that enabled the lumpen proletariat to form the ground of support for Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in a

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Hardt, "Pasolini Discovers Love Outside" *Diacritics* 39, no. 4 (2009): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2009.0036>.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings Volume 2*, ed. David Fernbach (London ; New York: Verso, 2010), 62–63. Translation modified. The original translation has *Arbeitszweig*, literally – "branch of labour" – as "trace." While it is certainly the case that the life Marx describes is one that he considered to leave no significant historical impact aside from a capacity to align itself with the political charlatan, Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, I feel this embellishment to be unnecessary and to obfuscate the relation to productive forms of labor central to the distinction between the lumpen and the properly proletarian subject..

<sup>8</sup> Marx, 192.

seizure of power that precipitated the failure of Parisian workers' struggle in 1848 at the same time that it marked Louis-Napoleon himself as the farcical iteration of his tragic, world-historical uncle.

It is not possible, however, to posit the lumpen as simply *outside* of the productive relations. As *Auswerfe*, literally that which is thrown out, they represent the non-integrable product of such relations. To translate *Auswerfe* as "scum" is clearly to posit the lumpen as an excrescence, one that is thoroughly determined by the capitalist mode of production, but which nonetheless cannot be integrated back within it: such scum is simultaneously the thing which is completely reducible to whatever substance it floats upon, and that which is most distant from the center and essential quality of this substance. For Pasolini, this contradiction makes the lumpen a source of resistance. The writing composed in the years following his move to Rome and prior to the filming of *Accattone* is suffused with his fascination with this class, one that Pasolini posits as existing in a state largely uncontaminated by the stifling mediocrity of bourgeois property relations. Not only are such people the result of a productive relation, but they also predate it, forming a circular contradiction within linear notions of progress and economic development. In an article written in 1957 one reads, "In this city [Rome], hope is not political, because the sub-proletariat professes a strange, confused sort of communism. It is a pure hope: the hope of a people who live before history, and so have all of history ahead of them. It is an anarchic, infantile condition."<sup>9</sup> The non-political nature of this hope is such that it does not ossify into a plan, into a historically oriented praxis that evens out and canalizes energy into collective struggle.

Like Marx, Pasolini understands the sub-proletariat to be a site of conflicting extremes. One reads of "shanty-towns, lost under piles of mud, piled against the walls of ruins" in which "we are beyond all definitions: there we find incurable cruelty and angelic goodness, often contained in the same soul."<sup>10</sup> As with the pauper's grave and the mass

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<sup>9</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Stories from the City of God*, ed. Walter Siti, trans. Marina Harss (New York: Other Press, 2019), 148. While it is worth acknowledging that Pasolini undoubtedly romanticizes the life of the desperately poor, something that he would continue to do once his focus turned from Rome to sites of Third World decolonization struggle in films such as the news reel documentary *La Rabbia* (Rage) (1963) and the cinematic work-book *Notes for an African Oresteia* (1970), such a perspective did not, at any point, come at the expense of actual engagement with the subjects of his films. Likewise, as Schwartz argues, Pasolini's stance, while striking in its reference to a pre-historic innocence, was one expression of a more general distrust of conventional Marxist planning that arose amongst the European left following the Stalinist invasion of Hungary in 1956. This latter action openly supported by the PCI, along with other major European communist parties. See Schwartz, *Requiem*, 261.

<sup>10</sup> Pasolini, 151

burial site, the shanty town is an area fully determined by historical development of particular property relations, and which, at the same time, manifests the collapse of such relations into unresolved contraries. For Pasolini at least, these places are where historical relations break-down, determinations loosen, and individuals embody furious contradictions. The sub-proletariat were immured: “A headstone had been placed above their graves, but they, poor souls, continued to exist.”<sup>11</sup> For Pasolini’s imagination, this class had been abandoned by an Italian society, and the active repression of knowledge of their existence was a condition of the enjoyment and promulgation of the economic boom the country enjoyed from the late 1950s onwards. The sub-proletariat do not simply form a class that has been forgotten or left behind, but rather one whose immuring is a condition of possibility for progress elsewhere.

The contradiction embodied by the lumpen is written into the history of modern Rome and in its onscreen representation. John David Rhodes notes the centrality of the *borgate*, an area outside of the old city constructed to house working class and sub-proletarian individuals whom Mussolini had forcibly ejected from their traditional areas of residence within the Aurelian walls, to the tradition of neo-realist cinema in which Pasolini’s first films participated. In his account of neo-realism’s influence on these films, Rhodes comments on a classic of the genre, De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948). In this film, a man’s life is ruined when his bicycle is stolen, meaning that he loses access to his only way of journeying from the *borgate*, where he lives, to the city proper where he has a job pasting signs onto buildings. Contrary to its usual assignation as a universal drama of hope, loss and desperation, Rhodes argues that De Sica’s film represents the “material embodiment of a very recent [...] and highly specific trauma, [...]”<sup>12</sup> This trauma relates immediately to the pseudo historicism of fascist urban planning. The construction of the *borgate* was accompanied by the active demolition of earlier self-constructed workers’ residencies “to make way for the construction of middle-class housing and to make the city *dentro le mura* (within the [Aurelian] walls) more visually tidy.”<sup>13</sup> The apotheosis of the brutal cleanliness of the commodity, urban fascist aesthetics required the absolute removal of those who had constructed the spaces it now claimed as its own. As Maria Sophie Quine notes, the construction of the *borgate* also tied directly to the privatization

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<sup>11</sup> Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> John David Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini’s Rome* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Rhodes, 9.

of the housing market in Italy, as the areas were developed by financiers with state backing. Such a movement transferred the “urban proletariat to the outskirts of the city into dreary rented accommodation in areas that often-lacked transport facilities, other public services and even basic amenities like roads and drainage.”<sup>14</sup> The material facts of life in such places belied Mussolini’s triumphalist claims regarding popular building projects and the general capacity for fascist organization to work for the welfare of the general population.

What for Pasolini is the location in which history disintegrates into a series of blinding, fragmentary shards of hope and failure is, itself, the result of a series of brutal, highly determined interventions aimed both at the integration and the expulsion of sections of the Italian working class. For Rhodes, these conditions define the sub-proletariat as a liminal class:

Residents of the *borgate* were more than simply displaced, they were nearly quarantined. In many cases it would take years for the municipal transportation system to reach some of the new neighborhoods, and even when they did, commutes on the buses and trams cost a worker two hours a day or more in transit, on top of their actual monetary cost.<sup>15</sup>

This liminal quality is key to the tangible reality of the area in question. In this location, “one is not in the ‘here’ of the city centre, but neither is one exactly banished to there.”<sup>16</sup> Topographically, this situation confirms the resident of the borgate as an *Auswurf*, both in terms of their surplus relationship to a mode of production that has ejected them and in terms of their existence as individuals who have been literally evicted from a residence within the city proper.

This was the class that formed a needed antidote to the bourgeois hatred that Pasolini insists came close to consuming him in the months prior to his move to Rome. The precise quality of such a hatred is important to identify, especially as it holds a specific relation to the development of the systems of security and homogenization from which, at this moment in his life, Pasolini considered the sub-proletariat to be exempt. One can extrapolate this quality beginning with a small prose piece published in 1961, in which Pasolini describes what he considers to be a fundamental difference between the

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Sophia Quine, *Italy’s Social Revolution: Charity and Welfare from Liberalism to Fascism*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 122.

<sup>15</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Rhodes, 53.

inhabitants of Milan, the heart of Italy's northern industrial centre, and the sub-proletariat of Rome. The former location is described as an essentially "moralist city" with "puritan aspects."<sup>17</sup> In contrast, those who live on the outskirts of Rome are "pre-Christian: stoics or epicureans."<sup>18</sup> The latter group of people, Pasolini insists, have no deep intuition of the evangelical message of the Church, and their children are not even familiar with its doctrines, to the extent that many people are not even aware of how to make the sign of the cross.<sup>19</sup> The ethics of the Roman slums are those of a kind of "personal honor", one which judges the honor of others rather according to a specific social standard possessing its own integrity.<sup>20</sup> Pasolini insists such an autonomous, pre-Christian ethical framework means that the resident of the *borgate* will not develop into a type that would simply "oppress" others.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this, the Milanese are "Christians, Catholics, counter-reformists [...] They repress, and are therefore malcontent. And every malcontent wants others to be malcontent, they hate the liberty of others."<sup>22</sup> It is this capacity for repression and for wishing their own unhappiness on those around that, according to Pasolini, allows the Milanese to participate most fully in the neo-capitalist boom of the late 1950s.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between these two ethical structures, the first of which enables the other to live unoppressed in their freedom, and the second of which demands that one's own suffering be a general state and condemns any who do not suffer in the same way as immoral, recalls the structure of *ressentiment* as it features in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. This concept, which Nietzsche adopts untranslated from the French, designates a specific feeling of hatred which emerges from the weak towards the strong. In his speculative history, Nietzsche develops the morals of the latter according a lived experience of activity which requires no justification beyond its own immediate "vigorous, free, joyful activity."<sup>24</sup> Such an activity involves the positing and the generation of particular values based on the criteria of something being either good or bad in relation to its capacity to promote as full a feeling as possible of health or of life. That an unhappy individual could wish their unhappiness on another is utterly alien to this manner of thinking. In contrast, the ethics of *ressentiment* finds its values and

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<sup>17</sup> Pasolini, *Entretiens*, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Pasolini, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Pasolini, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Pasolini, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Pasolini, 60.

<sup>22</sup> Pasolini, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Pasolini, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 33.

justifications through a reactive movement, one which inverts notions of good and bad by condemning the kinds of enjoyment from which an individual might be excluded. Nietzsche writes that “the ‘well born’ felt themselves happy; they did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their enemies, or persuade themselves, *deceive* themselves that they were happy (as all men of *ressentiment* are in the habit of doing.)”<sup>25</sup> Such self-deception resembles Pasolini’s proto-typical neo-capitalist Milanese who hates the freedom of others for no reason other than that they themselves are unable to participate within it, and therefore assigns a standard “decency” to their own spiritual impoverishment.

Max Scheler, in his treatment of Nietzsche, insists that *ressentiment* breeds a world in which moral value may only be accorded either to oneself or to one’s fellow people by means of comparison within a closed system, i.e. in which a person may “only experience his value and that of another if he relates the two, and he clearly perceives only those qualities which constitute possible differences.”<sup>26</sup> While the individual unaffected by *ressentiment* is able to feel a sense of good which endures in and of itself, and express this sense through their own action – in a direct challenge to Nietzsche, one with which Pasolini would likely have been sympathetic, Scheler posits the figure of Christ as the prime example of such a figure – the world of *ressentiment* is a fixed moral economy, in which value is to be found only in the inter-relation of constituent elements. This economy is one in which one’s own happiness is only tangible because another person is suffering more, or one’s own pain is outrageous purely because there exist those who live without it. The lifeworld of the Roman sub-proletariat in the early 1960s was, for Pasolini, one which refuted such a closed ethical economy. This fact placed the sub-proletariat outside of an industrial Christian puritanism at the same moment that it confirmed their own character as unintegratable within Italy’s consumer economy.

There exists a documented relationship between the development of social insurance and the maintenance of such a fixed economy of comparison. Historians Piven and Cloward, writing of the origin of welfare in contemporary America, describe the function of welfare reforms in terms of their provision of desperate needed relief, and also in terms of the development of particular mode of comportment within the working class itself:

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<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 11.

First, when mass unemployment leads to outbreaks of turmoil, relief programs are ordinarily initiated to absorb and control enough of the unemployed to restore order; then as turbulence subsides, the relief system contracts, expelling those who are needed to populate the labor market. Relief also performs a labor-regulating function in this shrunken state, however. Some of the aged, the disabled and the insane, and others who are of no use as workers are left on the relief rolls, and their treatment is so degrading and punitive as to instill in the laboring masses a fear of the fate that awaits them should they relax into beggary and pauperism.<sup>27</sup>

In her short history of the development of social insurance in Germany, Heidi Gerstenberger writes of a resentment that coagulates into a class-consciousness, grounded on a rift between the virtuous, temporarily unemployed and incorrigible poor. The institution of social insurance formalized such a distinction by dividing workers in receipt of insurance pay outs from those seeking or receiving more traditional forms of poor relief which came along with intensified surveillance and rituals of public humiliation. As Gerstenberger puts it, “Because of social insurance, for the first time in history a person in need did not have to appear as a delinquent before the official poor boards.”<sup>28</sup> That the opportunity to be spared such humiliation was a major motivating factor for workers supporting the idea of state mandated social insurance is especially evident, so Gerstenberger argues, given the pitiful size of actual payouts received. In Gerstenberger’s reading, the commitment of German industrial working classes to the institutions providing this insurance led them to internalize and, to an extent, promulgate, the strategies of policing and surveillance that defined previous efforts at poor maintenance. She writes of a situation in which “mutual solidarity amongst the insured’ could replace the poor police in controlling the ‘willingness to work’ of those seeking support.”<sup>29</sup> Gerstenberger goes on to state that “social insurance not only gave its members a right to legal support, but it also established an official dividing line between ‘poverty’ and ‘labour.’”<sup>30</sup> Saving for the right to financial assistance meant that one would be spared both the humiliation of surveillance and the company of the “idle poor.”<sup>31</sup> This aspect of the character of a part of the working class, facilitated in part through the advent of social insurance, finds its ground in an economy of comparison whereby the value of

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<sup>27</sup> Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Heide Gerstenberger, “The Poor and the Respectable Worker: On the Introduction of Social Insurance in Germany,” *Labour History*, no. 48 (1985): 71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27508721>.

<sup>29</sup> Gerstenberger, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Gerstenberger, 71.

<sup>31</sup> Gerstenberger, 71.



one's own existence becomes tangible only when seen in relation to those more deeply wretched than oneself. As Susan Mizurichi argues more broadly, the global insurance industry served a dual historical purpose when it came to the general population of a country in which it operated, that of "inspiring those it protects and intimidating those it protects against."<sup>32</sup>

Within the history of modern Italy, such an economy of resentment dovetails with fascist social policy. A focus on the so-called "demographic problem", aimed at increasing the size and stability of the Italian population, produced a number of social welfare policies aimed directly at integrating areas of the working class that would previously have been excluded or marginalized. The coagulation of disparate areas of Italian society into a *population* formed the precondition of this social integration, as did the provision of state-organized welfare institutions. Countess Daisy Di Robilant, a fervent advocate of women's rights and employee of Mussolini, is quoted by Quine as stating that "demographic increment is not just a question of military prestige, but also a social and economic problem which highlights the importance of improving the living standards and the quality of life of the population whose future we wish to safeguard."<sup>33</sup> As Quine argues, the institution of certain modes of welfare was a response both to material necessity and to the ideological importance of the notion of a *population*: "If the [fascist] regime expected Italians to reproduce prolifically, it had to provide parents with the adequate means to rear their children properly."<sup>34</sup> Italian social insurance policies developed under fascism were inseparable, therefore, from an understanding of national population, which itself necessitated the integration of certain potentially disparate, stigmatized elements into a unified, full Italian whole.

Despite the evident capacity for such developments in welfare to exclude those deemed unsuitable, or those without access to regular work, the policies in question were nonetheless capable of creating a situation in which "Italy's new urban proletariat in the northern industrial triangle was fully integrated into the social citizenry by the investment of statutory insurance risks [...]" and in which "The New State created by the fascist revolution was the guarantor of the well-being of its people, the source of a natural unity,

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<sup>32</sup> Susan L. Mizurichi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 306.

<sup>33</sup> Maria Sophia Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution*, 252.

<sup>34</sup> Quine, 252.

the educator of its citizens in civic virtue and the transmitter of the power of the race.”<sup>35</sup> This integration was double-edged, as illustrated by one major state campaign conducted throughout the 1920s that made several attempts to remove the stigma of illegitimate birth. In 1926, birth certificates could finally be “wiped clean” of the dreaded “ingnoto [unknown] word” when a child was reclaimed or legitimated.<sup>36</sup> However, at the same time, the developing Italian “welfare state” increasingly excluded those deemed unworthy and required a person to produce “a residence certificate, a civil status certificate, and certificate of poverty to qualify for state benefits.”<sup>37</sup> As the decade progressed, houses that would previously have provided a degree of care for women carrying illegitimate children began to refuse entry to those “deemed to be infected with contagious diseases, the abnormal and those whose conduct can be deemed to be immoral [...] alongside foreign and non-Aryan women.”<sup>38</sup> Quine notes further that, while fascism, rather than liberalism, provided the conditions for the generation of recognizably European welfare state in Italy, it remained the case that “Fascism’s obsessive need to be totalizing made welfare policy in the inter-war period overly ambitious and deeply unfocused.”<sup>39</sup> Crucially, the actual policies that did exist functioned at the evident expense of working class autonomy: “Under fascism, social policies affecting the working class were predicated upon the destruction of the labour-movement and the disempowerment of workers by a repressive authoritarian dictatorship.”<sup>40</sup> The *ressentiment* underpinning social insurance systematically and intentionally precluded anything like solidarity as a motivating factor for an action taken for collective betterment on the part of the insured. To participate within the welfare system post-fascism was, at least in the decades in which Pasolini wrote his Roman novels and made *Accatone*, to participate within a society still grounded on the resentful exclusion of those whose suffering remained a necessary ground of comparison for the purportedly “good” life promised by the Italy’s burgeoning capitalism.

The perfection of such a feeling of resentment is representative of the full integration of the working class within industrial production: “To the extent that it [integration] is achieved, those who are integrated have participated in the process

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<sup>35</sup> Quine, 252.

<sup>36</sup> Quine, 252.

<sup>37</sup> Quine, 275.

<sup>38</sup> Quine, 273.

<sup>39</sup> Quine, 297.

<sup>40</sup> Quine, 297.

through their own desires, hopes and fears, which also opened up the possibility of even more severe repression of all the others who had not been integrated.”<sup>41</sup> Within the Italian context, the target of such feeling were both those outside of production and those who engaged in direct political organization from within it. Workers who were sacked as a result of their involvement in strikes or because of their “addiction to idleness or alcohol” would automatically lose both their right to relief in the future, as well as their past benefits.<sup>42</sup> The continuing right to social insurance necessitated a commitment to the maintenance of conditions as they were, while any attempt to struggle for the improvement of conditions or, in Marxist parlance, any attempt to enter history proper, would obviate both one’s present status as integrated and condemn one to the status of a pariah in the future. In a logic that recalls Kant’s stricture against lying, once one has proved oneself to be inimical to the maintenance of present conditions, one’s entire history as a trustworthy, insurable person evaporates.

*Ressentiment*, a judgement of oneself over and against others, is the ground for the historical development of particular aspects of the welfare state and of a conservative self-image that Pasolini saw both as the result of fascism and as one of its primary modes of survival within a reconstructed, free Italian society. It is, in this sense, a constitutive element of the pre-history of the Italian industrial worker, and of the “bourgeois hatred” that Pasolini found equally rife within the emissaries of the PCI and the municipal moralists responsible for his professional dismissal. It is the capacity to escape such a feeling that drew Pasolini to the *borgate*, and it is this feeling’s refutation that, I will argue, forms the focus of his first film as a director.

### *Accattone*

In an interview conducted several years following the release of *Accattone*, Pasolini describes his view of the world as fundamentally religious, insisting this involves “a mutilated religion because it hasn’t got any of the external characteristics of religion, but it is a religious vision of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Fabio Vighi, amongst others, argues that this religious vision is related to specific understanding of sacredness of reality, a understanding that itself connects directly to a specific understanding of cinema as an

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<sup>41</sup> Gerstenberger, “The Poor and the Respectable Worker,” 84.

<sup>42</sup> Gerstenberger, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Thames, 1969), 77.

aesthetic medium capable of capturing a reality itself.<sup>44</sup> As Pasolini famously remarked elsewhere: “Cinema expresses reality with reality.”<sup>45</sup> While this statement may appear to be naïve, especially coming from a self-proclaimed Marxist whom one might expect to be significantly invested in uncovering the historically mediated aspects of any immediate presentation, it may nonetheless explain key elements of Pasolini’s film-making. According to Fabio Vighi, it is cinema’s potential to provide a uniquely unmediated approach to such “reality” that explains Pasolini’s decision to move into the domain of filmmaking in order to depict the sub-proletariat in the first place. Vighi insists that it was film, unlike poetry or the novel, which possessed “the mimetic element that could act as a reminder of the underlying sacredness of the real world” via the cinematic representation of “the ones who live on the margin of, and outside, Western civilization.”<sup>46</sup> The theological and the material are intertwined in this vision, and one may be used to comprehend, highlight and articulate the other. Cinema is the medium most obviously suited to expressing this interrelation.

Pasolini foregrounds his “religious vision” in the first seconds of *Accatone*. Prior to the film proper, we see an epigraph from Dante’s *Purgatorio*. These words are worth elaborating as they contain an insight into the kind of moral economy which I argue Pasolini seeks to refute throughout the film. They read,

l’angel di Dio mi prese, e quel d’inferno  
gridava: "O tu del ciel, perché mi privi?

Tu te ne porti di costui l’eterno  
per una lagrimetta che ’l mi toglie

The angel of God took me, but the one  
from Hell cried: ‘O you from Heaven, do you deprive me?  
You carry off the eternal part of him /  
because of a little teardrop that takes him from me.’<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fabio Vighi, “Beyond Objectivity: The Utopian in Pasolini’s Documentaries”, *Textual Practice* 16, no. 3 (2002): 497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360210163444>.

<sup>45</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), 133.

<sup>46</sup> Vighi, “Beyond Objectivity,” 497.

<sup>47</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 83.

The lines occur in Canto 5 of *Purgatorio* and form part of the self-narration of Bonconte de Montefeltro as he describes the moment of his own death. Fatally wounded in battle, Bonconte staggers away from the scene of combat, bloodying the ground as he goes. Seemingly destined for hell, he repents at the very last second, crying a single tear as he breathes his last. This one instant of true sorrow and humility is sufficient to guarantee Bonconte's salvation, and his soul's transport to the outskirts of purgatory where Dante encounters him.<sup>48</sup> The demonic angel, sent up to claim Bonconte's soul for hell, witnesses his target's salvation and cries out in indignation that he has lost what is rightfully his for the sake of one *lagrimetta*, a diminutive neologism that Robert Durling argues is loaded with spiteful contempt.<sup>49</sup> Following the loss of Bonconte's soul, the demon declares its capacity to control the material world, announcing that, while it may have lost the eternal aspect of the man, it will "govern the other otherwise" (*ma io farò de l'atro altro governo!*).<sup>50</sup> Saying this, the demon summons clouds and rain to wash away Bonconte's body, ensuring that it is never found and can never receive an earthly burial.

The central concern of these lines is a distinction between body and soul, with the repetition of "altro" in the line above serving to emphasize the strict demarcation between body and soul, a demarcation that in this case delimits the boundary of the power and authority of hell. Along with this, the passage describes the miraculous refutation of a fixed economy of proportion and of rightful ownership. The infernal angel feels rage not simply because he is denied a soul that he considers to be rightfully his, but because the cause of such denial, the repentance manifest in Bonconte's tear, appears to be so wildly insignificant in relation to the manner of his death. As one who dies a violent death, Bonconte should, by rights, be damned, a fact whose uncompromising logic is responsible for the overwhelming sympathy that Dante feels for Francesca di Rimini in the equivalent canto of *Inferno*. Bonconte is saved via the entrance of divine grace manifest in a tear i.e., by something impossibly small, but infinitely intense. Bonconte's tear enacts a rupture in the profane economy of action equivalent punishment. Bonconte's redemption is, in this sense, extra-legal.

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<sup>48</sup> That Pasolini takes his epigraph from the "Antepurgatory" adds even further to the sense of the liminal that the lines invoke. Not only does Dante meet Bonconte's soul in a place that is neither heaven nor hell, but he meets him in a place that is not even properly purgatory.

<sup>49</sup> Alighieri, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Alighieri, 83.

It is not an accident that Pasolini begins *Accattone* with a statement like this. In more than one way, the film is concerned with questions of proportion. Stephen Snyder compares *Accattone* with Pasolini's earlier Rome based novel, *A Violent Life*, in which a young hooligan spends time in prison, finds redemption by joining the PCI and ultimately dies a heroic death after succumbing to an infection caught while rescuing a number of people from a flashflood. Snyder argues that *Accattone* contains no such triumphant entrance into history and that instead it concerns an individual whose "redemption, while small in terms of socialist yardsticks, is large by virtue of its emergence from within his own soul."<sup>51</sup> While I do not agree that redemption in *Accattone* emerges purely from the individual, as if such a thing could be possible, it no doubt represents a shift from the kinds of historical agency represented in the novel. The "redemption" in question is that of the title character, a pimp in the borgate played by the twenty-six-year-old Franco Citti. Accattone, whose name translates as "beggar," learns early on in the film the woman who works for him, Maddalena, has been injured in a random motorcycle accident. This event drives Accattone to intensifying states of desperation and poverty. After having visited the mother of his son to beg for money, and after having been repudiated, Accattone begins to find hope in the figure of the young and almost impossibly innocent Stella, whom he meets as she engages in the archetypically lumpen occupation of sorting through trash on the outskirts of the city. After courting Stella and developing genuine affection for her, Accattone begins to revert to his old ways and forces his lover to work the streets. When he realizes that she will never be able to do this, Accattone resolves to provide for the both of them, but finds himself unable to stand the abject indignity of wage-labor and quits his job after only a day. After a dream sequence in which he witnesses his own funeral and burial, Accattone decides to join a group of associates from the *borgate* in an attempted robbery that, after it is interrupted by police, results in his death when the motorcycle he has stolen to escape collides with a truck. Lying on the ground, with a thick slant of sunlight across his face, Accattone experiences a moment of Bonconte -like peace, and declares "Now I'm fine" before dying, as the camera pans to one of the companions surrounding him giving a clumsy version of the last rites.

The plot of *Accattone* begins and ends with two off-screen motorcycle accidents, the first of which involves Maddalena and the second of which brings about Accattone's death. In other words, it is a film in which contingency plays a significant role, and in

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Snyder, *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Woolbridge: Twayne, 1980), 25.

which such contingency provides access to a certain kind of pathos. Pasolini himself described the work as concerned with a kind of “pre-historic anguish,” an anguish he insisted was categorically different from that described by Sartre and the existentialists of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>52</sup> As discussed in relation to Bachmann, the pre-historical is the domain of the *accident* thought both in terms of something inessential and contingent, and in terms of a random misfortune. To insist that *Accatone* expresses a pre-historical feeling, therefore, is to suggest that it is a film that is, in some way or another, about contingency, and with it a danger that, I will argue, is the precondition of what Pasolini understands as the positive potential of the *borgate*, as opposed to the secured, industrialized urban center. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset, however, that there can be few lives more utterly determined by recent historical events than those lived within the Roman slums of the 1950s and 1960s.

Pasolini opens the film with a shot of a man’s smiling face that Rhodes argues serves as a kind of anti-establishing shot which, while it appears to locate the film in some particular location, does not establish where this location actually is. Rhodes observes, “It is difficult to work out exactly where we are” and that “this is because we are in the *borgate*, that zone where city meets field and high-rise meets hovel.”<sup>53</sup> The *borgate* in its essence is a domain of contraries without any resolution or sublimation and it is, in this sense, a topographical expression of the unresolved contradictions that Pasolini located in the hearts of its residents. The unresolved nature of such contradiction is essential. In a much-cited interview, one reads, “I am against Hegel [...] Thesis? Antithesis? Synthesis? It is too easy. My dialectic can no longer be trinary, only binary. There are only unreconcilable oppositions.”<sup>54</sup> Aside from demonstrating that Pasolini had, almost certainly, not actually read Hegel, this sentiment fits precisely with the environment of the *borgate*. As a realm of restless contraries, the area is inassimilable to notions of progress, integration and reconstruction. The contradiction is so intense that is able to invert historical order, allowing what Vighi describes as the “excremental subject” to appear as ontologically and historically prior to the mode of production that created it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Don Ranvaud “Deliberate Evil,” in *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. Paul Willeman (London: BFI, 1977), 25.

<sup>53</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ranvaud, “Deliberate Evil,” 27.

<sup>55</sup> Fabio Vighi, “Pasolini and Exclusion: Zizek, Agamben and the Modern Sub-Proletariat,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 5 (1 October 2003): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764030205005>.

In the sequence that follows the immediate opening shot, Accattone makes a bet with his companions that he will be able to eat an entire meal of potatoes and then dive into and swim across the Tiber. Two of his companions insist that this will kill him as the cold-water shock will cramp his digestion, causing him to drown. The next scene shows Accattone stuffing his face with potatoes, revealing his bet to be largely a trick to acquire free food, and engaging in lively conversation with his companions, in which he insists, laughing, that if he dies he wants his epitaph to read “do it yourself!” Citti’s character is then pictured standing on a bridge flanked by a stone angel, wearing gold jewelry and insisting to onlookers who question his attire that he wishes to die with all of his gold on him, “like the pharaohs.” Pasolini next shows Accatone looking nervous before cutting to wide angle of him diving from the bridge. The scene then cuts to him and his companions playing cards at a table near the banks of the river as he victoriously taunts those who insisted that he would die.

According to Rhodes, the shot of Accatone in front of and then on top of the bridge is the first time that one is able to locate the film in Rome. The site used is one with a tangible historical connection to Mussolini and the bridge from which Accattone jumps and is therefore “exactly the kind of urban space from which Accattone and his companions are excluded.”<sup>56</sup> Accattone at this point represents the trash, the historical detritus that had been cleared away from the city as it embarked on its fascist, and then neo-capitalist, developments. He is both pre-historical remainder and the inassimilable excrement. Before he jumps, Accattone is shown flanked by marble angels, choosing to risk his life in an act that is simultaneously cunning, pointless and heroic. Excluded from history, trespassing on the stones of the masters, Pasolini is nonetheless able to wrestle a moment of victory from necessity.

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<sup>56</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City*, 44.





Figure 1.<sup>57</sup>

This victory is achieved by taking a risk, the benefits of which are two-fold. Accattone's jump is a cunning response to material necessity, one through which poverty is momentarily circumvented and Accattone is both fed and gains a certain status amongst those who doubted him. At the same time, this action grants a real, albeit desperately brief, moment in which, through the act of risking his life, Accattone is raised above the level of the things that surround him. While interpretations of Pasolini's visuals typically draw attention to the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane within the scene, one can affirm that the placement of Accattone next to the stone angel, a montage of competing histories, passes judgement not on him and the apparent futility and finitude of his jump, but on the static quality of the eternal, the unchanging and the dead. There is something reminiscent in Accattone's actions of Hegel's statement that "the individual who has not risked his life may admittedly be recognized as a *person*, but he has not achieved the truth of being recognized as a self-sufficient self-consciousness."<sup>58</sup> In the process of becoming fully self-aware, the act of risking one's life is a constitutive, although evanescent, moment in which a consciousness affirms its own autonomy over and above the one with which it struggles and, as a result, over the mere objects of the material world. The

<sup>57</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo. Director. 1961. *Accattone*. Brandom Films.

<sup>58</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.

condition of possibility for this to occur is a kind of open future, one in which the future can conceivably be different to the present.

Gerd Reith argues that a belief in an open future is itself a kind of pre-modern, or early modern temporality, one in which that which is to come is thought as manifestly outside of the present.<sup>59</sup> Part of Accattone's triumph in this scene is not simply that he has fed himself and bested his friends, but also that, even though he jumped to secure food, he has nonetheless proven to himself and to others that he is not bound to the necessities of self-preservation. Without the potential for such an opening, the flash of an alternative that the risk brings about is foreclosed before any action is taken.

Pasolini gives a fuller account of the development of a self through action and risk in *Medea* (1969), in the opening third of which Jason is promised by his king that his own rightful power will be restored provided that he succeeds in capturing the golden fleece. When he succeeds in doing this, largely as a result of Medea's intervention and her betrayal of her own kin, Jason is informed curtly that kings do not always keep their promises. Rather than reacting with indignation, Jason calmly informs his ruler that his quest has shown him that the world is larger than he had previously thought, and that he is no longer concerned with the world as it previously appeared to him, a realization that causes Jason to depart for Corinth, making him Pasolini's most straightforwardly forward-looking and "progressive" protagonist.<sup>60</sup> Along with their characters, the distinction between Accatone and Jason lies in the worlds that they inhabit. Jason, a hero of modernity, exists in a world in which subjective action tames and molds contingency: his is a historical agency that realizes itself in and through a world that is, at least partially, receptive to it. Excluded from productive labour by both his character and his topographical position within the *borgate*, Accatone is unable to develop along traditional Hegelian-Marxist lines. His risk makes him a temporary hero of the slum, but it does not allow him to raise himself out of these circumstances, the essential contingencies of which assert themselves immediately following the jump sequence in the form of the film's first off-screen motorcycle accident. The accident leaves Maddalena unable to work, and her and Accattone's destitution is confirmed soon afterwards when the latter tries and fails to beg for money from those around him, eventually winding up at the door of his former partner, only to be turned away as the despicable manipulator that he is.

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<sup>59</sup> Gerda Reith, "Uncertain Times: The Notion of "Risk" and the Development of Modernity," *Time & Society* 13, no. 2–3 (1 September 2004): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X04045672>.

<sup>60</sup> Adelmo P. Dunghe, "Pasolini's Semiotics of the Sacred," *Italica* 89, no. 4 (2012): 585.

At one point in this portion of the film, Accattone returns to his house, where Maddalena is recovering in order to shout at her to go back to work. In a cruel joke, he insists that she cannot stay there as she is not “claiming unemployment.” The spiteful substance of this statement, which is shouted at Maddalena as she lies recovering, is grounded on a shared understanding of their position as excluded, sub-proletarians who bear a particular, unmediated relationship to risk. Quine argues that the institutions of social insurance within Italy required the generalization and the mediation of such risk in a process that involved accepting particular conditions of work as natural and as taken for granted:

By making insurance (for an accepted occupational risk) rather than compensation (payable because of employer fault) the basis for protection, the enactment [of social insurance policies] sought to strike a balance between the rights of workers and the responsibility of employers. It freed the employer of the burden of liability for accidents and threat of civil lawsuits.<sup>61</sup>

Social insurance provided a minimal protection against loss of earnings by generalizing a certain risk across a working population and, in doing so, binding potentially antagonistic classes within a unity mediated by what Jacques Donzelot describes as a kind of shared obligation:

By the method of insurance it [the burgeoning welfare state] establishes between individuals and social classes the federating bond which makes everyone's interdependence tangible, even where the structures of production tend to make social classes think that they are irreducibly opposed to one another.<sup>62</sup>

Donzelot argues that such a situation was one in which “it was possible to forgo a reorganization of society while compensating for the distress caused by its existing organization.”<sup>63</sup> According to this thinking, in order to gain the protections offered by social insurance policies, it is necessary to accept the mode of production which generates the accidents from which one needs protecting as a social fabric within which one is integrated, and for which one bears a degree of responsibility. In this sense, protection is offered at the expense of the possibility to condemn the world as utterly wrong.

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<sup>61</sup> Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution*, 76.

<sup>62</sup> Donzelot, “The Promotion of the Social,” 17.

<sup>63</sup> Donzelot, 424.

Writing in 1966, Mario Tronti theorized that it was precisely such condemnation, informed by class-hatred, which ensured that “the working class can [potentially] know everything of capital, grasp the whole thing.”<sup>64</sup> Tronti insists that if we “base ourselves on capital, the whole can be understood only from the perspective of the part. Knowledge is connected to the struggle. Whoever has true hatred has truly understood.”<sup>65</sup> For Tronti, writing at the genesis of Italian workerism, an intellectual movement which overlapped with Pasolini’s output, but has not, as far as I know, been put into conversation with it, the loss of this hatred would mean the complete loss of any potential for a proper understanding of capitalist relations. It would mean resigning oneself to the perspective of the bourgeois economists whom Marx described in the postface to the second edition of *Capital* as “hired prize-fighters” acting according to the “bad conscience and evil intent of apologetics.”<sup>66</sup> The latter position is one amenable to institutions of social insurance as they encouraged the exchange of such a potential grasp of the totality for a kind of pseudo-safety that naturalized historically determined relations of production and made use of a notion of mutual responsibility between classes which preemptively neutralizes the capacity for transformative understanding.

As with the previous examples of Austria and Germany, Italian social insurance policies worked to inculcate a degree of consistency within the people who drew from them, while also excluding those unable to take a regular part in a particular productive cycle. Quine writes, “Being a member [of a state insurance fund] required habitual work to be taking place, something that evidently disqualified the majority who were engaged in casual work of some kind another.”<sup>67</sup> As individuals entirely outside of productive relations, as those who most certainly do not claim unemployment, both Accattone and Maddalena are in a position to hate the totality rather than to resent its individual components, and, according to Tronti, such hatred is the only conduit through which one may grasp the real nature of the social. Accattone may be a despicable character, but he is someone whose capacity for hatred, and with it the potential for a “true” understanding of the reality of exploitation, is undiminished.

Pasolini affirms the unintegrateable quality of Accattone’s character in the film’s final act, in which the protagonist becomes appalled at his own treatment of Stella and

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<sup>64</sup> Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (London ; New York: Verso, 2019), 16.

<sup>65</sup> Tronti, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Quine, *Italy’s Social Revolution*, 76.

makes a serious effort to provide for them both by taking on a job for the first time in his life and attempting to earn an “honest” living. His is unable to do this for more than a day, however, and comes home distraught, screaming at Stella about the brutality of the exploitation he faces at work, before collapsing onto the bed and insisting, tensed like a cat, that either he will kill the world or it will kill him.



Figure 2.<sup>68</sup>

This hyperbolic childishness is exemplary in terms of understanding the character in whom Pasolini invests a degree of hope. Unable to work consistently, unable to make any kind of meaningful effort that could attach him to the products he produces, Accattone remains firmly unintegrated. He has no claim over the products he might make, and, as a consequence of this, he has no part in the reproduction of the conditions of his exploitation.

Marx describes the position of the productive worker as “not a piece of luck, but a misfortune”, one which “stamps the worker as capital’s direct means of valorization.”<sup>69</sup> The extent of this misfortune, together with irrevocable nature of Accattone’s own exclusion, is the focus of a dream sequence which follows his histrionic refusal to return to work. The dream begins with Accattone walking through the borgate and seeing the

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<sup>68</sup> Pasolini, *Accattone*.

<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 644.

group of young men laid dead in a pile of rubble, an image of the kind of productive *Unfall* from which he has, apparently, been saved at the expense of the continuation of his, and Stella's, poverty.



Figure 3.<sup>70</sup>

Following this, Accattone sees associates from the Borgate dressed in funereal attire who, when he asks them why they are carrying flowers, inform him that “Accatone is dead.” From here, the dreamer walks with quiet desperation behind his own hearse and, after having been forced to climb the walls of the cemetery into which his own coffin is carried, witnesses a clownish gravedigger making a grave in a shadow against the backdrop of the Roman countryside. When Accattone implores the digger to dig him a grave in the light, the former responds with a histrionic grin, insisting that this is not possible. Eventually, after repeated pleas from the dreamer, the gravedigger relents and begins to dig in the sun and the camera pans upwards into a wide shot of the surrounding hills.

When speaking of his film in 1964, Pasolini remarked that its central content was “the salvation of a single soul.”<sup>71</sup> In the same interview, the director insists, somewhat cryptically, that Accattone's dream is of absolute importance for understanding this salvation and that Accatone begging the grave digger to dig a little more in the sun is

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<sup>70</sup> Pasolini, *Accattone*.

<sup>71</sup> Pasolini, *Entretiens*, 90.

especially crucial, as if the desire not be buried in shadow were commensurate with a desire to live in the light.<sup>72</sup> As I read it, the dream has a contradictory, but coherent meaning. It affirms Accattone's exclusion outside of history, suggesting that he will receive a burial which pushes himself further and further away from the cemetery, towards the anti-historical no-man's-land of the pauper's grave. At the same time, the dream affirms that Accattone's exclusion is the condition of an ahistorical grace available to him at the expense of security. As his imminent death reveals, one thing that the dream is not is a warning that enables Accattone to avoid danger. Instead, its function may lie in enabling him to avoid disappearing into the pseudo-safety of the properly employed, a safety for which the potential of his annihilation in the kinds of accident associated with labour is a precondition. In this rejection of this latter mode of safety, Accattone re-enters a world of the pre-Christian morals and actual "risk" which Pasolini found in the Roman borgate: he swaps industrial *Unfall* for pre-historic *Zufall*. That this choice ultimately results in death is insignificant with regard to the substance of his salvation. What is important is that Accattone, much as Pasolini tended to do in his own personal life, eschews a kind of safety which reproduces a repugnant social order.<sup>73</sup>

Accattone awakes from his dream exhausted and arranges to join a criminal enterprise. After walking into Rome proper, specifically, as Rhodes observes, the traditionally working-class neighborhood of Testaccio, he and two others set their eyes on a van carrying salami, which they insist heaven has placed in their path.<sup>74</sup> They spend an afternoon sitting and joking amongst themselves before one member of the group sees an opportunity, runs to the van and steals the salami and the others hide it in the flower cart which they carry through the city. Accattone invokes Stella and insists that providence will provide for those who believe in it. As the trio round a corner, however, they are stopped by police, and while Accattone's companions submit to arrest, he attempts to flee on a motorcycle. This sequence, as Rhodes argues, references the end of *The Bicycle Thieves* in which, driven to desperation, De Sica's protagonist attempts to

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<sup>72</sup> Pasolini, 90.

<sup>73</sup> Pasolini's own life was one in which, as his companions frequently remarked, he consistently risked his own safety for the sake of libidinal experience. One New York interviewer described how the director would spend his time in New York "looking for the dirty, unhappy, violent America that suits his problems and his tastes, and he goes back to his hotel Manhattan at dawn, with his eye lids swollen, his body aching with the surprise of being alive.": David Forgacs, "Dirt and Order in Pasolini," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini, Framed and Unframed: A Thinker for the Twenty-First Century* ed. Luca Peretti and Karen T. Raizen (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 11.

<sup>74</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City*, 66.

steal a bicycle in order to replace the one he has lost earlier in the film, only to be overpowered by bystanders and disappear into the Roman crowd.<sup>75</sup> In Pasolini's more anarchic version, the viewer sees Accattone speed off and the audience hears the sound of a crash before witnessing they witness his final moments in a sequence which defies the humanist tragedy of De Sica's finale.

Rhodes argues that a proper understanding of this ending is impossible without paying attention to Pasolini's specific "documentation of Roman geography and architecture."<sup>76</sup> Specifically, there exists a topographical inconsistency between the shot in which Accattone steals the bike and rides off and that one in which he actually dies. While the first takes place in Testaccio, in the second, which, in terms of the narrative, takes place at the most only a few minutes after the first, Testaccio looms in the background. Accattone has traversed an impossible distance between the two shots. For Rhodes, the contradiction between topographic and temporal consistency is deliberate:

Accattone's last, desperate attempt to improve his situation results in his being hurled (across the invisible space that separates two pieces of film edited together) *outside* Testaccio, across the river, away from the city. While Testaccio is the site of the theft that results in his death, the death itself must happen outside *even this* impoverished neighbourhood.<sup>77</sup>

For Rhodes, the fact that Accattone must be hurled outside of even Rome's most traditionally working class district marks the character's irrevocable exclusion, and articulates Pasolini's refutation of the humanist sentimentalism of neo-realism, a genre that, even in its tragedies, cleaved to an idea of progress for which the sub-proletariat is the living refutation.<sup>78</sup> One can add to this reading that to locate Accattone's death in a space whose very *outsidedness* appears as the result of a necessity so inexorable that it defies the laws of physics, is also to insist that it is in this outside, in an uninsurable, dangerous and generative location and in the soul of an uninsurable character, that the possibility of salvation lies. Accattone dies, literally, outside of the economy of resentment that constitutes a certain kind of modernity, an economy that he had emphatically rejected only the previous day. His final words, "Mo, sto bene," *I'm alright now*, are not grounded in a bitter comparison with any other individual but refer purely to

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<sup>75</sup> Rhodes, 66.

<sup>76</sup> Rhodes, 66.

<sup>77</sup> Rhodes, 66.

<sup>78</sup> Rhodes, 66.



his own state; they are as far as it is possible to be from the dung heap of bourgeois hatred that Pasolini had narrowly avoided ten years previously.

In the next section, I argue that Pasolini's final completed film presents a world in which the capacity for such action directed towards an open future is all but obliterated, and in which the idea of risk itself undergoes a transformation whereby it denotes little more than a tautology that, rather than denoting an open future, forecloses possibility and serves to annul a meaningful distinction between existence and its opposite.

### *Salò*

A loose adaptation of De Sade's *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, *Salò* (1975) is set in the titular Italian town where Mussolini based his minor-fascist republic during the final months of the war. In the fourteen or so years between this film and *Accattone*, Pasolini made ten feature length films, eight documentaries and contributed to several anthology films. To move from *Accattone* to *Salò* is, therefore, to elide much. It is also, unfortunately, to invest the latter film with a sense of finality that it was never meant to possess. Pasolini planned to make at least two more full-length films after *Salò* and had done significant work on the screenplay for one of these. Moving between Pasolini's first and final cinematic works therefore creates a sense of teleology that is by no means accurate, as if the seeds of the latter work were contained in the former, and as if, to paraphrase another thinker accused of resignation, Pasolini had known it all along and now he was confessing.<sup>79</sup> Despite these problems, however, there is, I think, a continuity of concern and of content that means a reading of *Accattone* can be productively followed by a reading of *Salò*.

Both films are, I would argue, concerned with notions of risk and of security. While the earlier work presents this risk from a firmly proletarian perspective, whereby there are things to be really either won or lost, and in which pathos and grace emerge from the incapacity of a "pre-historic" world to allow such risks to lead to progressive development, the latter is concerned with a kind of bourgeois pseudo-transgression that, taking place within a situation of complete security, operates entirely without negativity. This latter understanding of risk maps onto contemporary notions of security and of a fully integrated population whose "safety" is inseparable from the capacity of its

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<sup>79</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xxi.

individual components to be annihilated without concern. I argue that *Salò* is not only a statement of resignation concerning the impossibility of the kinds of actions that dictated Pasolini's previous encounters with the sub-proletariat, it is also an accurate, if extreme, cinematic topography of the subject's position within a contemporary "population."

The film begins with a section entitled the "Ante-Inferno," the opening scene of which shows four fascist libertines, the Duke, Bishop, Magistrate and President, sit around an antique table and sign a contract, before declaring that "everything taken to excess is good." Following this, the libertines employ foot soldiers to round up a group of nine young men and nine young women in order to transport them to a large mansion where the young people are informed that they will be totally subject to the will of their captors. The film then moves through three different "circles," evidently reminiscent of Dante: The Circle of Manias, the Circle of Shit and the Circle of Blood. Each of these chapters features a variety of tortures and humiliations, ranging from rape to forced coprophagy. The final sequence features several of the male and female captors being brutally tortured to death by three alternating libertines, while the other looks on through a pair of binoculars. The last shot shows two of the young guards dancing in an intimate, tender embrace.

*Salò* is a film of complete immersion. It illustrates the flattening of the historical social body into the constituent elements of a secured population. For Pasolini, this situation represents a catastrophe that radiates backwards into history. In his "Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life," (1975) a text in which he acknowledged what he considered to be the now fatal limitations in his previous three, broadly faithful, adaptations of selections from *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *the Thousand and One Nights*, Pasolini wrote of "collapse of the present."<sup>80</sup> Such a collapse was one in which anything non-identical to what he termed the "vast (but false) tolerance" of "the consumerist establishment" had been eviscerated.<sup>81</sup> The "repudiation" of the essay's title is necessary not simply because the pre-capitalist worlds that the three films attempted to portray no longer existed, but because the current state of things has a retroactive effect and because "the collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past."<sup>82</sup> To attempt to film the kind of "innocent" sexuality that Pasolini describes as having once been the final "bulwark of reality" against the near total reification of life would now be nothing but

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<sup>80</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, xix.

<sup>81</sup> Pasolini, xviii.

<sup>82</sup> Pasolini, xix.

mere nostalgia and an act of unforgiveable indulgence.<sup>83</sup> To take Pasolini at his word here would be to read *Salò* as depicting a situation of near total stasis, one in which history is dead, and *always was* dead, and in which life appears as “a pile of insignificant and ironic ruins.”<sup>84</sup>

This collapse has a linguistic element, one that I would maintain is essential for understanding what is at stake in *Salò*. Having published novels in the dialect of the *borgate*, alongside his earliest works of Friulian verse, Pasolini viewed dialect as the living sedimentation of non-integrated modes of life. In an essay entitled “New Linguistic Questions,” he discusses the abstractions associated with the notion of an Italian national language. The essay begins with the assertion that such a national language does not exist and every attempt to assert its existence necessarily covers over a “fragmentary historicosocial body, both in a vertical sense (historical diachrony, its formation in layers, and in an extensive sense (the different events of regional history which have produced various, virtually contemporaneous little languages, dialects [...]).”<sup>85</sup> For Pasolini, the kinds of language one encounters in a country are defined by a series of historical ruptures, contradictions and incommensurabilities. This is especially the case in Italy, a country where he once commented that “it was possible in ten minutes by bicycle to pass from one linguistic area to another more archaic by fifty years, or a century, or even two centuries.”<sup>86</sup> To study dialect, therefore, is to encounter history as a series of magmatic, conflicting desires and life-worlds, each of which poses an irrevocable challenge to its own homogenization. As Patrick Rumble puts it, Pasolini’s life and work up to *Salò* is comprehensible according to the belief that such fragments of a living past were capable of placing the present into a profound state of crisis.<sup>87</sup>

For Pasolini, one of the most significant mistakes that a writer can make is to treat a reified, standardized Italian as if it were historically neutral, “as if it weren’t produced and developed historically by that very bourgeoisie but were found paradigmatically in history” and was therefore a “normally functioning mechanism.”<sup>88</sup> Diagnosing the functioning of this mechanism, Pasolini writes of the language of televisual media, one

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<sup>83</sup> Pasolini, xvii.

<sup>84</sup> Pasolini, xix.

<sup>85</sup> Pasolini, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, 121.

<sup>87</sup> Patrick Rumble, *Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Trilogy of Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing, 1996), 58.

<sup>88</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 6–7.

in which “communication [of information] prevails over every possible expressiveness, and that little bit of silly petit-bourgeois expressiveness that remains is subservient to a brutal instrumentality.”<sup>89</sup> The most evident “function” of such a language relates immediately to the world of commodities and to their transport and consumption. When analyzing the aspects of speech that he finds most indicative of these particular linguistic relations, Pasolini cites a speech given by Aldo Moro, Italy’s Christian Democrat Prime Minister from 1963-68 and again from 1974-1976, concerning the benefits of investments in the country’s new *autostrada* or highway plan. Pasolini quotes Moro’s banal statement that the success of such investments depends upon a capacity to “resolve disequilibrium, eliminate obstructions, reduce the waste of competition among the different means of transportation, and, in a word, give life to an integrated system on a national scale.”<sup>90</sup> For the highway plan, a piece of infrastructural development designed explicitly to speed up transport between cities, homogenizing the space in between such places and, as a result, demolishing their singular characteristics, to be successful, the process of its development must clip away inefficient elements. It follows from this that language with which the highway is described, and which its construction necessitates, is “typical of a new movement of linguistic unification,” one which directly relates the homogenization of space to the deadening of life.<sup>91</sup>

As Rhodes argues, for Pasolini, the *autostrada*, a straight line through a fragmentary, historically stratified space, is “an embodiment and a representation of the forces that have undermined the vitality of human life.”<sup>92</sup> As Pasolini himself puts it, the linguistic effect that contemporary capitalism has had on the life of the Italian language is equivalent to “osmosis with the technological language of a highly industrialized civilization [...] In a word, it can be said that the creative centers, processors, and unifiers of language are no longer the universities, but the factories.”<sup>93</sup> The transportation of commodities requires a kind of fidelity to brute, inexpressive information that, for Pasolini, forms an exemplary case of capitalist reification.<sup>94</sup> The space of the *autostrada* is, in sense,

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<sup>89</sup> Pasolini, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Pasolini, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Pasolini, 14.

<sup>92</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City*, 146.

<sup>93</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 14–15.

<sup>94</sup> It is worth noting that in one memorable scene in *Mama Roma* (1962) the titular character is taken for a ride on her adolescent son’s motorcycle, depicting the highway as a space of potential, unmediated joy. A clear distinction exists, however, between the normal functioning of the road and its appropriation by sub-proletarian characters who momentarily escape from the geographic limitations that define their lives.

a space of visceral abstraction. As with the Middle-Passage, objects that pass along the autostrada are insured against the perils that they might face on their journey, and this insurance derives from the collection and analysis of complex information. The fact of being insured, however, offers no actual protection for the material body of either these things or those transporting them. The language that, in Pasolini's eyes, was effectively colonizing the Italian tongue, is a language intended to mediate between the ideality of the commodity and its finite, material body, and to do so at the expense of the living bodies of those who produce and who carry these commodities.

Roads play an important role in the Ante-Inferno section of *Salò*. In the scene immediately following the libertines' signing of their contract, Pasolini makes use of a stationary panning shot to establish the semi-provincial location for the film and then shows three adolescent boys cycling down an empty road and coming to an abrupt halt when they see a military vehicle and several soldiers waiting for them. As the boys turn and attempt to flee, they are pursued by plain clothes collaborators who block their escape with a car and ask where they were going. In this sequence, Pasolini transfigures a typical situation of youthful freedom, one that he himself prized, into a situation of entrapment. Several scenes later, one of the captured boys attempts to escape from the libertines' convoy, jumping out of the back as the truck transporting them to the villa slows down in order to cross a bridge. Rather than panicking, the four older libertines watch on from the vehicle at the front of the convoy as the boy is gunned down by guards. As the convoy starts again, the President comments dispassionately that there were "nine boys and now there are eight," before telling a childish joke about the number eight to the amusement of his three companions. The boy himself may as well never have existed, and he is never mentioned again.

The correlation between these scenes on the road, language and the brutality of a certain policed abstraction is most evident in the final scene of the Ante-Inferno, in which the captors are inducted into their new "lives." The scene features a speech from the Duke which he intones from a balcony surrounded by the other libertines and the women whom the captors are told will entertain the libertines every evening with lascivious stories in order to enflame desire. In this speech, the Duke informs his captors that they should abandon any hope of escape, that the "ridiculous freedom" they are granted elsewhere will be denied to them and that "to the outside world" they are "already dead." This proleptic assertion is directly reminiscent of the language of *risk* as seen from the

perspective of capital. As noted in the introduction, *risk*, from the perspective of one who insures their stock, serves a unifying, reifying quality. In his discussions of the concept, Frank Knight insists that dealing with risk involves establishing the specific qualities of an object so as to properly establish the group to which it belongs and that the principle of insurance itself is developed according to an understanding that, while individual pieces of stock may be destroyed for whatever reason, effective insurance against such destruction enables the continuation of an enterprise regardless of a loss of a number of essentially fungible items. It is of no importance, Knight insists, which objects are destroyed, or how they go, what matters is that any one of them *can* be wiped out without troubling the whole.<sup>95</sup> To be insured against a particular risk is, in this sense, to find that the potential for one's arbitrary destruction is written into one's continuing existence. Again, as noted in the introduction, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century development this logic pushes further and further into the creation of a-temporal structures, as described by Vogl in his claim that the primary telos of "financial theory is to be found in the figure of a system that achieves stability by rendering its processes atemporal."<sup>96</sup> The end point of such thinking is a mode of trading and organization which, through its focus on an essentially "abstract" notion of risk "deals with the things of this world only on condition of their manifest absence or obliteration."<sup>97</sup> The Duke's words, and the libertines' entire perspective is founded on the voiding of the subjectivity of their captors, a voiding which is the paradoxical result of their near complete safety.

In Maurice Blanchot's reading of Sade, a text that Pasolini includes as part of a reading list at the start of *Salò's* opening credits, there is a similar proleptic logic informing the relation between the sadist and their victim. Blanchot writes that Sade's victims exist in a situation of desperate vulnerability, as if they were

annihilated beforehand by an act of total and absolute destruction. They are *there* and they do die but only to bear witness to the original cataclysm [...] the executioner does not seize upon their life – he *verifies* their nothingness. He becomes master of their non-existence and draws great pleasure from that.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, 213.

<sup>96</sup> J.Vogl, *Specter of Capital*, 82.

<sup>97</sup> Vogl, 67.

<sup>98</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Lautreamont and Sade*, trans. Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 25.





Figure 4.<sup>99</sup>

The Duke declares the *non-existence* of his subjects as the final act prior to the processes that verify their evisceration. Armando Maggi notes a peculiar relation between the town of Salò, the villa to which the fascist libertines take their victims and the rest of the world. This relation constitutes a crucial difference from the source text, in which Sade's libertines seclude themselves within the Black Forest, shutting out the world in order to seal themselves within the realm of perversion. In contrast to Sade, Maggi argues, the manor in *Salò* functions as microcosm, a void that expresses what the world is, rather than a fortress put up against it. Maggi writes,

In *Salò* the libertines already have what they need and long for [...] They are members of a society that is only apparently separated from the rest of the world [...] In the film, the libertines already live in a void [...] unlike Sade's libertines, Pasolini's four Fascists exist to manifest an existing void that includes them.<sup>100</sup>

For Maggi, the fascists inhabit a space that radiates outwards, covering the world: the villa is exemplary, not exceptional. The Duke's words to the captors describe a state in

<sup>99</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini. Director 1975. *Salò*. Produzioni Europee Associati.

<sup>100</sup> Armando Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini from Saint Paul to Sade* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 126.

which existence and non-existence are all but equivalent. As has been argued in previous chapters, this state is one towards which the insurance of commodities tends. The irony, to build on Maggi's reading, is that there is no longer any "outside world" to which the Duke's words could actually refer. Rather than being abducted, as are Sade's victims, Pasolini's victims are effectively initiated into a universal reality.

In short, what takes place between *Accatone* and *Salo* is, I argue, a transformation in an understanding of risk, one which reflects real historical changes. Where this term may previously have denoted an action taken which is dangerous but, as a result, is carried out within and against an open, changeable world, it now operates as a way of enclosing, of "colonizing" the future for the sake of the continuity of the present.<sup>101</sup> Such a colonization is one in which individual differences in contingent circumstances are smoothed over into "an overall uniformity" grounded on projected futures.<sup>102</sup> As Reith, following Anthony Giddens, argues, this process itself serves to "eliminate the future, replacing it instead with an endlessly extended present."<sup>103</sup> One returns here to the insured commodity, an object that passes an undifferentiated time mediated by institutions and insurance practices that subsume the destructibility of its physical body under the need to protect its socially determined exchange value.

It is significant that the Duke becomes utterly enraged when his speech is interrupted by the appearance of the villa's serving staff, who peer around the corner of the house in order to witness it. The servants are chased away by Ezio, a young guard whom we have previously seen briefly in an earlier part of the Ante-Inferno, but not before Ezio experiences a moment of mutual attraction with the servant girl with whom he will be found having forbidden relations later in the film. In insisting on this exclusion of such people from his field of vision, the Duke demands the enforcement of a certain logic of production, whereby the labour necessary for commodity production is forced out of view, at least in the moment in which such commodities are to be admired, exchanged or consumed. His rage matches what Adorno describes as the "marketplace's idiosyncratic commandment that the traces of the human in the product are erased, that the product itself exist purely in itself."<sup>104</sup> Brian Degrazia argues that this Ante-Inferno

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<sup>101</sup> Reith, "Uncertain Times," 384.

<sup>102</sup> Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 115.

<sup>103</sup> Reith, "Uncertain Times," 392.

<sup>104</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 126.



scene is one that “strips the victims of life and of meaning outside the boundaries” of its “hellish a-temporal setting.”<sup>105</sup> To consider these two quotes together would be to say that in this moment qualities of the commodity and of sadistic enjoyment meet. The Duke’s rage is the rage of one who demands that the objects present for his enjoyment appear as seamless and ahistorical. It is significant, therefore, that this is the moment in which Ezio and the servant girl establish their mutual attraction. At this stage, the fissure in the commodity form, the persistent restlessness of not-thing that is made a thing, remains a funnel of hope on the outskirts of hell.

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The tautologies of contemporary risk inform not only the fate of the captives within *Salò*, but also determine precisely what the libertines are able to “do” with them. The torturable bodies featured in *Salò* were understood by their director as ideal representatives of a process that had evacuated them of any purchase on the world. For Pasolini, the worker of Italian neo-capitalism, whom Workerism christened the “mass-worker,” is the product of a catastrophe that eviscerates the contradictory, fragmented history that would previously have separated her from the demands and drives of capital. This catastrophe took the form of what Pasolini, during the same period as he made *Salò*, described as the “genocide” of the Italian people, one conducted not by fascism but by the capitalist reifications that followed it.<sup>106</sup>

The effects of this “genocide” are visible in the manner in which actual bodies appear within *Salò*. Vighi argues that, in Pasolini’s earlier documentary *La Rabbia* (1964), constructed entirely from news footage, the film-maker generates a political discourse in which “the body stands firm against the reach of capitalism and, more generally, of the Western logocentric tradition, as a vector of historical truth that exceeds verbal and rational discourse.”<sup>107</sup> The capacity for the physical body, as captured by Pasolini’s camera, to maintain its own essential mode of resistance is a crucial element of Pasolini’s own relation to cinema per-se. When describing his transition from prose

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<sup>105</sup> Brian DeGrazia, “To Hell with Narrative: Inferno and Irony in Pasolini’s *Salò*,” *The Italianist* 38, no. 2 (4 May 2018): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2018.1477310>.

<sup>106</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milano: Garzanti Libri, 2015), 130.

<sup>107</sup> Vighi, *Beyond Objectivity*, 500.

production to cinema, he states that his attempts in the former were defined by a feeling that he had placed a “screen of words” between himself and reality, but that his cinema had, instead, permitted him to “maintain contact with reality, a physical, carnal contact” one of a specifically “sensual” order.<sup>108</sup> The capacity for the human body to present such an “irreducible reality” is constitutive of a particular kind of negativity possessed by these bodies, one capable of exerting resistance through the irrefutable fact of its existence. The bodies of the captives in *Salò* possess no such negativity. Rather, they are subject to a potentially infinite violence, while at the same moment, the capacity of these bodies itself to signify beyond the domains of a strict semiotic regime is denied. As corporeal subjects, they now have no purchase on history, the space of non-identity between them and the smooth movement of capital is erased and they are rendered completely secure and utterly vulnerable. Bodies held in such security are entirely open to being abused and are paradoxically inessential to the fulfilment of the sadist’s desire.

This situation is, ironically, unsatisfying and self-defeating for the sadist. As the Duke, in an echo of Freud, remarks after a female captive has urinated on his face, the true libertine desires to be both victim and executioner. Such a libertine, unable to realize their actual desire, is pushed into a state of furious “transgression,” mowing down unresisting bodies as they go. Adorno and Horkheimer write of how the “humiliation of those already visited by misfortune brings the keenest pleasure. The less danger to the one on top, the more unhampered the joy in the torments he can now inflict.”<sup>109</sup> Security functions here in a two-fold manner: the sadists position fully secure, and therefore fully unresistant, bodies in order to realize an impossible auto-erotic ideal and, at the same moment, have the absolute absence of danger to themselves as a condition both of their highest enjoyment and of the incapacity for this enjoyment to ever be fully real.

Fascist pseudo-transgression resolves into a mere bad infinity of actions that, ultimately, signify nothing. The libertines’ own awareness of this underlies a scene in *Salò* in which the libertines judge which of the captors has the most beautiful buttocks, a judgement that the Bishop suggests should result in the immediate death of the individual chosen. The young boy selected is named Franchino, played by Franco Merli, the male protagonist of the framing narrative for Pasolini’s *1001 Nights*. After having been selected the winner, the guards immediately rush to hold the boy, and while the Bishop

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<sup>108</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Les dernières paroles d’un impie / Pier Paolo Pasolini ; entretiens avec Jean Dufлот* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1981), 29.

<sup>109</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 90.

holds a pistol to his head Franchino braces himself for death. The bishop pulls the trigger, revealing that the gun is not loaded, and shouts “Idiot!” before informing Franchino that he is a fool for thinking that he would be killed, as the fascists wish to murder him one thousand times, “to the limits of eternity, if eternity could have limits.” Portrayed in this scene is an essentially lateral structure to sadistic transgression, one that emerges from the inability of the torturer to close the gap between themselves as subject and themselves as object. The fascist / sadist moves horizontally over whatever social norms they have chosen to transgress, motivated, ultimately, by their inability to consummate the need to be both the subject and object of their own relation.

The Bishop states his desire for such a state as the principle of such repetition, what Pasolini himself described as an “infinitely cold accumulation,” immediately prior to the group’s selection of the winner of their contest.<sup>110</sup> In a conversation with the Duke, he insists that his companion is wrong to claim that the act of sodomy is more violent than the act of execution on account of the fact that its perversion may be repeated. On the contrary, the Bishop insists “there are methods through which to repeat the act of the executioner.” The world of *Salò*’s libertines is one of a facile dialectics without negativity, one accompanied by a vision of a *world* in which any antagonism between different classes has given way “to a simple pragmatism.”<sup>111</sup> The idealism of the fascists’ environment is one in which beauty is rewarded with death, in which executions can be “repeated” and in which contraries slip into each other anarchically, but with no potential to change or rupture the actual state of things. Any talk of transformative risk or even actual danger emerging from such actions is an unfunny joke.

### *Ezio*

It is possible to exaggerate the extent of the resignation represented in *Salò*. Biographically speaking, throughout what would be the final years of his life, Pasolini continued to profess a documented faith in the power of the PCI to provide some kind of organized opposition to a general cultural erosion and to the flattening of historical,

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<sup>110</sup> Gideon Bachmann and Pasolini, “Pasolini on de Sade: An Interview during the Filming of ‘The 120 Days of Sodom,’” *Film Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1975): 40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1211747>.

<sup>111</sup> Flaviano Pisanelli, “La violence du Pouvoir : le regard de Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *Cahiers d’études italiennes*, no. 3 (15 June 2005): 100, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cei.277>.

cultural difference that took hold within Italy's boom period.<sup>112</sup> In this concluding section, I will argue that *Salò* does more than make visible the genocide neo-capitalism has carried out against the Italian people. Rather, it can also be read as containing attempts to locate a site of resistance within the structures of domination that it depicts. There is one clear moment of resistance in the film, and I will end this chapter with an explication of this moment as it revolves around a specific understanding of what Marx termed the "capital-relation."

In an interview conducted during the filming of *Salò*, Pasolini insisted that "the exploitation of one human being by another is a sadistic relationship."<sup>113</sup> One particular passage in *Capital* can be read as manifesting a particular sadism within the capital-relation with near perfect clarity, while, at the same time, showing how this relation itself contains the potential somatic rupture within the regime of accumulation. In this passage, Marx focuses on the mutually constitutive personages of the "money owner" and the "owner of labour-power." Having demonstrated the legally assured "equality" of the employment contract into which these two enter, Marx then introduces a fundamental change in the "physiognomy" of his personae:

He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as *Capitalist*; the possessor of labour-power follows as *his Worker*. The one smirks, full of meaning, and intent on business; the other is shy and holds back, like someone who has worn his own skin to market, and now has nothing other to expect than the - *Tanning*<sup>114</sup>

This image is of two figures who, as a result of differing roles in the production process, maintain a fundamentally different relationship to time. The worker is *widerstrebsem*, translated by Fowkes as "shy." It is worth dwelling on this word. "Widerstreben" as a verb translates as to go against the grain or to go against one's interests. The word is a compound that could be literally figured as "counter-striving." Following behind the capitalist, the worker lives a contradiction rooted in fear and suppressed self-assertion. This contradiction moves them simultaneously forwards and backwards. This state is one of fear, a fear rooted in the worker's exposure to actual conditions of production. The capitalist's confidence is grounded on the capacity to abstract from the material consequences of these same conditions and, instead, to understand the potential accident

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<sup>112</sup> Pasolini, *Les dernières paroles d'un impie*, 181.

<sup>113</sup> Bachmann and Pasolini, "Pasolini on de Sade," 42.

<sup>114</sup> Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 280.

as a *risk* that could conceivably be covered, precisely the kind of risk that Knight considers it possible to hedge against, and precisely the form of risk to which a secure working population is exposed on a daily basis. The capitalist strides forward as one whose interests are, as far as possible, protected. The worker, as a piece of the variable capital, exists as protected, only so far as they are immanently destructible. The somatic reality of this vulnerability is registered in the latter's counter-striving, in the shudder of one who is subservient to and non-identical with the time of the capital relation.

This vulnerability grants the worker a homogenizing simplicity, one that enables them to understand the potentially infinite modes of labor through which value can be extracted from him as one single motion: the tanning. This reduction, through which any number of variations are anticipated in their uniform, tortuous monotony, has something again in common with Sadean torture, an activity that may take a seemingly endless degree of permutations, and that may involve any manner of objects, but that nonetheless is experienced by the victim as, first and foremost, *pain*. While this victim's insight may be minimal, it is vital. As Adorno puts it in his lectures on the history of sociology, the true nature of the structures governing society only become properly evident when they begin to hurt.<sup>115</sup> This registration of a pain which comprehends the reality of the world is an accompaniment to Tronti's class hatred; it is something through which the true nature of the totality may begin to be grasped. More than anything, the hesitation within the worker speaks of a fundamentally distinct relationship to time. The capitalist's is smooth, confident and calculated; the worker's is jagged and, potentially explosive.

Maggi writes that "human beings, *Salò* tells us, have metamorphosed into monsters of an eternal present. Their monstrosity lies in a denial of time; they have changed into beings who do not change."<sup>116</sup> For the most part this latter point is true. Transgression thought according to a lateral bad infinity takes place in a sadistic register, and in a static environment. In a certain sense, the libertines do more or less nothing throughout the majority of the film. This is not to say that transgression in and of itself is useless. Rather, it is to suggest that any such transgression must involve the disruption of the security that is the precondition for the libertines' enjoyment. This mode of transgression requires an eruptive moment, one that moves directly against the preservative norms of a social structure without merely seeking to move horizontally

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<sup>115</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 36.

<sup>116</sup> Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 336.

across them. Pasolini affirms the possibility for this kind of transgression in his writing on the avant-garde, and, I want to argue, in one scene in *Salò*.

The potential for such action is the focus of an essay from 1970 entitled “The Unpopular Cinema.” This piece interrogates the possibility of an authentically disruptive art within contemporary society. The potential for such art is inseparable from an understanding of freedom as “*an autolesionistic assault on self-preservation*” and as something that cannot “be manifested other than through a small or great martyrdom.”<sup>117</sup> The pre-existence of a self-preserving norm is an essential constituent of such freedom, as “every martyr martyrs himself by means of the self-preserving executioner.”<sup>118</sup> Freedom occurs as a moment of self-cutting which is itself a confrontation with forces of self-preservation, a confrontation that must be highly visible and “exhibited” if it is to produce the desired effect.<sup>119</sup> The history of cinema, Pasolini claims, contains so-called “martyr film-makers,” those who “always find themselves on the front line” of such transgressions.<sup>120</sup> This kind of film-maker achieves a degree of “freedom by “opposing to the extreme the norm of self-preservation”, and does so in an act that enables the spectator to achieve her “own freedom: that of enjoying their [the martyr film-maker’s] freedom.”<sup>121</sup> Freedom, a state opposed to self-preservation, is achieved through an absolute challenge to the norms of self-preservation, and it is intended to invigorate and, if necessary, to terrify those who witness it.

The effect that Pasolini speaks of cannot be achieved through lateral transgression, through a desire to push as far as one can past the boundary of a certain norm. The opening mantra of *Salò*’s libertines is that everything is good when taken to excess, a statement whose universalism precludes the specific *cut* required in Pasolini’s formulation. The philosophy of the libertines has more in common with the figure to whom Pasolini opposes the martyr film-maker, one fixated with lateral transgression, to the extent that they become “carried away by their heroic impetus or by the incitement and applause of the “few”” and “push themselves beyond the frontline of transgressions.”<sup>122</sup> To go beyond this frontline is to find oneself “on the other side, in enemy territory” where artists are “crowded together into a concentration camp, which they then, as happens, transform

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<sup>117</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 267.

<sup>118</sup> Pasolini, 268.

<sup>119</sup> Pasolini, 268.

<sup>120</sup> Pasolini, 268.

<sup>121</sup> Pasolini, 268.

<sup>122</sup> Pasolini, 274.

equally into a ghetto.”<sup>123</sup> While the metaphor of the prison or concentration camp appears as early as Pasolini’s sketches of Rome in the 1950s, here it serves a radically different purpose. Whereas previously the *borgate*, described as such a camp on more than one occasion, had served as a reservoir of intense contradiction, a domain of potentially tragic risk and a perennial outside to capitalist reification, here the “camp” is the location in which the actual danger required for actual risk, and for freedom, gives way to impotent pseudo-action:

There, where everything is transgression, there is no more danger; the moment of the fight, the one in which one dies is at the front. The victory over a transgressed norm becomes immediately incorporated into the infinite possibilities of modification and expansion of the code [...] “Whoever has crossed over the line on which combat occurs has nothing left to risk [...] within the concentration camp, where everything is transgression, the enemy has disappeared: he is fighting elsewhere.”<sup>124</sup>

Those filmmakers whom one may immediately encounter as avant-garde are precisely those who, Rumble argues, “are easily categorized, fetishized, and neutralized.”<sup>125</sup> Opposing such an easily neutralizable fetishism, Pasolini invokes a kind of moderated transgression, one that crystallizes around a moment of danger, and involves a travelling backwards

to the firing line [...] Only in the instant of combat (that is of invention, enforcing one’s freedom to die in the teeth of self-preservation), only in the instance in which one is face to face with the rule to be broken and Mars is ancipital, under the shadow of Thanatos, can one touch the revelation of truth.<sup>126</sup>

Aesthetic truth, a real insight into the nature of things, their historical determinations and their real contingencies flashes up in moments of such transgression. These are moments in which a norm is perceived, and acted against, not as a barrier to be crossed, but as a self-preservative shell to be exploded.

The two modes of transgression opposed in “The Unpopular Cinema” bear a striking resemblance to two notions of risk. One of these enables a capitalist to hedge against potential loss and achieve “safety” by obviating the distinction between existence

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<sup>123</sup> Pasolini, 274.

<sup>124</sup> Pasolini, 274.

<sup>125</sup> Rumble, *Allegories of Contamination*, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 274.



and non-existence of their stock, while the other defies the possibility of non-existence in the embrace of an open future. While *Salò* is primarily concerned with the sadistic, lateral form of transgression and its correlative pseudo-risk, there is one scene, I maintain, that represents an echo of the second form. This scene concerns Ezio a guard who is caught sleeping with a serving girl, played by Ines Pellegrini, the same young actor who starred as the primary female character in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Ezio makes small but important appearances earlier in the film. In the Ante-Inferno he is shown saying hello to children as he is escorted away by soldiers, in another scene soon after he tells female captors he is “following orders” and, as discussed above, he chases servants away from the Duke’s speech, an act in which he first makes eye contact with the girl with whom he will later be caught.

Immediately before Ezio dies he makes a gesture, punching the air in a salute reminiscent of the militant black activists with whom Pasolini had spent time in America, and whose politics he favored over the apparently petit-bourgeois Oedipal struggle he saw manifest in the actions of the Italian students of 1968. The libertines stop dead in response to Ezio’s action. They are momentarily hesitant in the face of a kind of Ezio’s desperate confidence; roles are momentarily reversed; the murderers cower, if one for a second. The reversal does not last long, as Ezio is executed by an improvised firing squad, and falls, Sebastian like, full of bullet-holes. His partner is then executed with a single gunshot from the Duke.

Schwartz describes Ezio’s action as one that represents a moment both of brief resistance, and also of “hope,” although it is immediately followed by the “triumph” of the libertines, and of power, throughout the complete world of the film.<sup>127</sup> Whether or not this hope is real, or whether one can reasonably describe the gesture as an act resistance, it is nonetheless possible to observe also that Ezio’s death appears to fit with the formula for freedom in “The Unpopular Cinema.” It comes about as a result of a series of three acts of self-preservation by different captives throughout the same night, each of which is intended to placate the anger of the Bishop by moving him onto another who is deemed to have transgressed more severely than they have. Rather than attempting to placate the fascist’s anger by sacrificing another, he moves forward. This movement is the film’s own actually “free” action, although it is undoubtedly still a doomed one. Ezio comes forward in an act of self-assertion, one that reveals him as a communist and, in doing so,

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<sup>127</sup> Schwartz, *Pasolini*, 604.



introduces a history of resistance into the vacuum of the villa. This scene is the only moment in the film in which the libertines appear to be shaken by anything other than rage at the finitude of the people they torture. What was equated with grace in the discussion of *Accattone*, i.e., the topographically minute moment of infinite intensity that wrests an individual away from the arms of the devil, reappears here as an admittedly hopeless militant gesture. As an audience member, Ezio's status as doomed does prevent the effect of his action from being contagious; one still witnesses danger and risk in an environment that had previously insisted on their absence.

In his essay on Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno describes hell as a state of affairs in which time is entirely bound within space.<sup>128</sup> Such a state is one of complete security, one in which any possibility for change or decay is precluded. The production of commodities by hesitant, counter-striving workers, necessitates the persistence of an a-temporal shudder at the centre of this pseudo-eternity. Ezio's action is one that invokes a historical rupture and a break within this idealized hell-scape; his is the natural gesture of Marx's *worker*. To return to Pasolini's metaphor in "The Unpopular Cinema," it is significant that Ezio is gunned down by an improvised firing squad. For a brief moment, the firing line is visible, and an action is conducted that breaks the infernal tautology of security. That this gesture is a militant, partisan one, is entirely fitting. The moment of hope, the moment in which reification is revealed as incomplete, is one that carries a historical reference and a genealogy that runs against the grain of the present. The fear of the face of the libertines, even if only for a brief moment, as their own void is revealed as historically determined, and therefore as mutable.

Grace, that which cannot be incorporated within a coercive, reciprocal economy of resentment, is not absent from *Salò*, and neither is Pasolini's religious vision of the world. On the contrary, both of these elements are preserved in the figure of the communist militant. Ezio, the "normal and angelic young man forced to be a guard," taps a sedimented history that has run consistently contrary to the slow integration for which *Salò* is a fitting end point.<sup>129</sup> The aggressive mobilization of such a history in a moment of genuine danger exposes the cracks and fissures of this integration at the point that it seems most nightmarishly complete.

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<sup>128</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 274.

<sup>129</sup> Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 58.



Figure 5.<sup>130</sup>



Figure 6.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Pasolini, *Salò*.

<sup>131</sup> Pasolini.

## **On the Poetry of Sean Bonney, 2011- 2019**

This chapter addresses the work of the UK poet Sean Bonney from 2011 to 2019. It focuses initially on Bonney's work in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent austerity policies pursued by the UK coalition government, elected in 2010. I begin by discussing austerity as an economic practice which involves the mobilization of both “scientific” and ethical principles, and by relating this understanding to a particular conception of moral character founded on work and productive participation within a national economy. The enforcement and legitimisation of such policies requires a zero-sum rhetoric, whereby particular groups are deemed unworthy of support and consequently abandoned by a receding welfare apparatus, often to their death.

Following this, I discuss Bonney's poetry as reacting directly to the conditions of austerity in which it was formed and as attempting to enact and engage with alternative modes of community outside of the economy of moral condemnation and material impoverishment that is generated by, and that actively facilitates, austerity politics. I begin with a reading of the book *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011) in which I argue that this work deliberately eschews conventional understandings of character and moral responsibility in favour of enacting a radical community of self-defence. Following this, I consider excerpts from Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015), reading these poems within the political context of austerity and arguing that they represent a shift from self-defence to self-preservation under intensifying austerity and the closure of political possibility following the decline of the student movement. Finally, I consider Bonney's book *Our Death* (2019) from the perspective of securitisation, a term which denotes a continually intensifying process of enclosure for the sake of profit generation.

### ***Austerity***

Austerity policies within the UK are most often viewed as a direct response to the 2008 financial crisis. For David Harvey, any such crisis is a situation in which openly repressive technology is mobilized in order to facilitate exchange relations in a situation of increasing difficulty and scarcity. The difficulties of maintaining such relations are an index of the severity of the coercion with which they are enforced. Harvey writes, “Crises embrace the legal, institutional and political framework of capitalist society and their

resolution increasingly depends upon the deployment of naked military and repressive power.”<sup>1</sup> This repressive power falls both on those who live within particular national borders, and also on those who may attempt to gain access to a country from the outside.

Understanding austerity as a response to crisis can involve understanding it as a series of “endeavours to restore a particular economic equilibrium that has been disturbed by seismic economic events.”<sup>2</sup> The choice of the methods pursued in order to restore such equilibrium is grounded in a general belief in the necessity of reducing government borrowing in the face of uncertainty, with a particular focus on the reduction of spending on so-called “non-productive” areas of society, such as welfare. These reductions involve a strong normative rhetoric and a reversal of the movements of integration which underpinned the formation of European welfare states. In essence, it involves a re-personalization of risk in the sense that an individual must now be considered, at least potentially, responsible for the harm that they suffer as a result of capital’s vacillations. Reductions to welfare budgets function, therefore, “as part of an ongoing individuation of social risks, [through which] the non-productive elements of support are simply being removed within the framework of cuts [...]”<sup>3</sup> Austerity measures can be conceptualized as a redistribution of risk whereby the state, through a combination of budget management and moral rhetoric, enforces responsibility for the vicissitudes of employment and unemployment onto the individual. Such a process is one in which specific notions of moral culpability play a key role in determining the apparent justness of a systematic removal of person’s means of life. This policy of rationalized starvation had, as of June 2019, led to at least 130,000 premature deaths within the UK.<sup>4</sup>

These measures require a minimum of legitimation and necessitate a “reconfiguration of social policy that protects only the “deserving” and the politically important.”<sup>5</sup> Insa Koch notes a correlation between an active participation with the labour market and the notion of “active citizenship” defined according to the capacity for a person to show “willingness to take responsibility for themselves and to participate in the labour market, with strong judgement attached to those who fail to become financially

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London ; New York: Verso, 2007), 329.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Farnsworth and Zoë Irving, “Austerity: More than the Sum of Its Parts,” in *Social Policy in Times of Austerity*, ed. Kevin Farnsworth and Zoë Irving (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Farnsworth and Irving, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Toby Helm, “Austerity to blame for 130,000 ‘preventable’ UK Deaths,” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/01/perfect-storm-austerity-behind-130000-deaths-uk-ippr-report>.

<sup>5</sup> Farnsworth and Irving, “Austerity,” 25.

independent.”<sup>6</sup> Such judgements revolve around a basic notion of *fairness*, whereby those who subsist without labour market participation are deemed to receive that which they do not deserve at the expense of those who “contribute” to the national welfare budget through the payment of income taxes. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions from 2010-2016 and the major architect of the specifics of UK welfare reform, Iain Duncan Smith, intoned in 2014 that the overhaul of the welfare system was itself intended to restore both a sense of fairness for those who identify as tax-payers and at the same time restoring a sense of “pride” amongst those who work.<sup>7</sup> The structure of such a “pride” repeats immediately the *ressentiment* elaborated in the previous chapter, whereby the individual defines the value of their life within a closed economy of comparison. A government legitimates such processes via the capacity of large numbers of individuals to invest heavily in the moral value of work and, following from this, in a condemnation of those who do not participate within the labour-market: “Fiscal consolidation chimes with the shared values of a self-identified hardworking taxpayer group – thereby appearing to close a legitimacy gap between the experiences and expectations of this group.”<sup>8</sup> Other studies have noted that those working within the benefits system maintain moral categories that rigidly demarcate individuals as deserving of help or justifiably abandoned.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, one should observe that the process did not begin with the coalition government, but that Tony Blair’s so-called “New Project” invested heavily in a rhetoric that “distinguishes between those who are socially integrated (mostly in terms of labour market and employment) and those who are excluded as a “moral underclass.””<sup>10</sup> One needs to note, therefore, that the entirety of Sean Bonney’s writing life took place within a context in which the ground for austerity was prepared, and in which hegemonic conceptions of the positive character of work were formed through the legitimization of the spectacular suffering of the incorrigible. The rest of this chapter will argue that this writing remains absolutely committed to manifesting the vileness of such thinking.

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<sup>6</sup> Insa Koch, “The Guardians of the Welfare State: Universal Credit, Welfare Control and the Moral Economy of Frontline Work in Austerity Britain,” *Sociology* 55, no. 2 (2021) : 245, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520936981>.

<sup>7</sup> Iain Duncan Smith, “2014 Speech on Welfare Reform – UKPOL.CO.UK,” <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/iain-duncan-smith-2014-speech-on-welfare-reform/>.

<sup>8</sup> Liam Stanley, “Legitimacy Gaps, Taxpayer Conflict, and the Politics of Austerity in the UK,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18, no. 2 (1 May 2016): 401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148115615031>.

<sup>9</sup> Koch, “The Guardians of the Welfare State,” 13.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley, “Legitimacy Gaps, Taxpayer Conflict, and the Politics of Austerity in the UK,” 396.

Prior to the period in question, during the final years of Tony Blair's premiership, Bonney published a number of books, with a consistent feature of his poetry being the, perhaps semi-serious, rejection of reified modes of sociality in favour of radical, even arbitrary rearrangements of social life. Such processes frequently involve the abandonment of normatively acceptable modes of safety and security as accompanied by a desire to explore a potential in the contingent. In *Document: Poems, Diagrams, Manifestos July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005-June 17<sup>th</sup> 2007* (2009), one finds the statement: "If any time each of us had a coin in our hands we had to write our name upon it and then when exchanging that coin for another we had to adopt that other name, well what then", followed by the statement, "If we wrote cryptic instructions on the coins that passed from hand to hand all other information would be surplus."<sup>11</sup> While the first of these statements appears to dismiss itself as an arbitrary game, the repetition of the suggestion demands, in some sense, that its efficacy be taken at face value. In these lines, Bonney invokes the simple, realisable possibility of a kind of arbitrary community, one inimical to the self-formations required by financial and moral consolidation, in favour of a relation regulated by a kind of cryptic chance. In the following section of the chapter, I will demonstrate how such a notion of oppositional community is central to Bonney's writing as it emerged in the context of actual austerity and the UK student movement. Such community responds to the retraction of welfare not by seeking a kind pseudo-safety felt by the securely employed, but through the mobilization of collective a "I" founded on the anamnesis of historical fragments made tangible in a moment of crisis.

### *Happiness*

*Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* was published in the final third of 2011. The book followed a year of organized student activism, beginning en-masse with the temporary occupation of the government headquarters at Millbank, London in November 2010, an event that occurred at the tail-end of a National Union of Students demonstration organised against the proposed trebling of tuition fees for undergraduate students in England. *Happiness* also appears within the context of the London riots of August 2011, a week of mass civil unrest precipitated by the killing of Mark Duggan by police in

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<sup>11</sup> Sean Bonney. *Document: Poems, Diagrams, Manifestos, July 7th 2005 – June 27th 2007* (London: Barque Press, 2009), 14.

Tottenham, North London. The book consists of one long sequence, several “revolutionary legends” in the form of quotations from figures including Louis Auguste Blanqui, Karl Marx and John Milton, and a “Letter on Poetics.” This latter discusses Bonney’s experience of the November 10<sup>th</sup> student demonstration and formulates a contradiction that I take to be of primary importance for a reading of *Happiness* within the context of austerity.

Bonney writes of wanting to write a poetry that “*moves against bourgeois anti-communication*” and that could

*speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity and thus make visible whatever is rendered invisible by police realism, where the lyric I [...] can be (1) an interrupter and (2) a collective where direct speech and incomprehensibility are only possible as a synthesis that can bend ideas into and out of the limits of insurrectionism and illegalism.*<sup>12</sup>

Bonney’s poetic project as formulated here involves rendering *visible* that which is actively pushed out of a given social situation. His formulation recalls what Jacques Rancière identifies as “police reality” thought in terms of a contestation and control over perceived possibility. Rancière states:

The police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather about what is not there [...] The Police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving, circulating [...] Politics consists in transforming that space of circulation into the space of the manifestation of a subject [...] It consists in refiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see or name. It is a dispute about what is perceptible to the senses.<sup>13</sup>

Police operate within a closed economy of risk. The future, which is foreclosed within financial risk calculation, is maintained in its tautologies by their action; what is possible is what has already been deemed to be possible, and a primary role of policing is to ensure that the proleptic tautologies of financial calculation are brought as close as possible to real life. Within urban space, this correlation is especially important in terms of the circulation of individuals in and through a city, with police and technologies of security engaging in processes through which “good circulation,” the circulation of capital and capital-bearing individuals, is maximized through a process that simultaneously excludes

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<sup>12</sup> Sean Bonney, *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant Publishers, 2011), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 1998), 177.



those processes and peoples perceived as “risky” - unknown figures who lack obvious indicators of *character*, or who actively manifest themselves as undesirable.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon has historically intensified as the maintenance of property value in London becomes an increasingly significant feature of a financialized national economy, meaning that the correlation between the security of a physical space and the security of a financial asset becomes a growing priority for the management of urban populations.<sup>15</sup>

*Visibility*, as Bonney understands it in the above quotation, functions as an opening that can call immediately into question whatever enclosures are imposed on the immanent potential of the everyday. “Visibility,” however, is to be kept separate from a *being seen* which is, in effect, equivalent to oblivion. Bonney writes,

*I've kept my head down, as you have to do in a contra-legal position like mine. But now, surprise attack by a government of millionaires. Everything is forced to the surface. I don't feel I'm myself anymore. I've fallen to pieces, I can hardly breathe. My body has become something else, has fled into its smallest dimensions, has scattered into zero.*<sup>16</sup>

The act of being “brought to the surface” is commensurate with an experience of atomization. It announces an acute mental suffering while, through the inverse of this suffering, it also suggests that the possibility of a subjective unity is to be found precisely in that which eludes a petrifying gaze through which a person’s actions, attitude and speech becomes increasingly mobilized as a justification for depriving them of already meagre means of life.<sup>17</sup> For Bonney pure visibility is as useless, and as deathly, as pure darkness. In opposition to both of these, he calls for a dialectical oscillation between visibility and invisibility, a movement of continuity in discontinuity that is able to maintain a fidelity to possibility without itself becoming a fixed element of a closed temporality.

It is, I think, possible to formulate this movement as one of self-defence. Danny Hayward has written that a poetry thought of as defensive has two primary characteristics. The first is an oscillation between the absolute commitment to what this poetry values,

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Brenda Goh and Thomas Bill. “Riots May Curb Property Investment in Suburbs,” *Reuters*, 10 August, 2011, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/uk-property-riots-idUKTRE77934M20110810>.

<sup>16</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Matt Wilde, “Eviction, Gatekeeping and Militant Care: Moral Economies of Housing in Austerity London”, *Ethnos* 0, no. 0 (24 February 2020): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1687540>.



and a deep, somatic understanding that these same things may be literally *nothing* in the eyes of those who have the power to crush them. Hayward writes that while defensive poetry recognizes relativity, it is not at all relativist. Rather, such poetry is “a furious and bloody-minded response to the fact that what it values absolutely is even capable of being relativized. Everything and nothing become for the defensive like two differently coloured floodlights that can be switched on and off alternately.”<sup>18</sup> Secondly, writes Hayward, defensive poetry is “pre-emptive.” It is a poetry that

wishes to empower its readers by confronting pre-emptively the violation that it realistically foresees for itself, by seeing more deeply and compassionately into its own brokenness and limitations [...] than could any representative of the class who profit from these limitations and who write obituaries in which they call them a ‘tragedy’.<sup>19</sup>

Defensive poetry figures here as a message in a bottle, an impassioned counter-word to the sentimental eulogies of the ruling class, and a document smuggled out to those who will understand it. For Hayward, the subject of the poem of self-defence is a singular isolated individual. The poetry of such an individual oscillates between the belief in one's own subjective sovereignty, and an intense awareness of the capacity for this sovereignty to be crushed by its circumstances. While I would argue that this understanding of defensive poetry is applicable to *Happiness*, I also want to use Bonney's writing in order to stretch the concept. In particular, Bonney's writing demonstrates the manner in which such self-defense constitutes a collectivity, an “I” that functions more as a cypher for several combinations of selves than as the marker of a single, destructible subject.

This collectivity manifests via a series of feints and evasions, covering and uncovering itself in rapid succession. The “I” of *Happiness* gains a universality that stems from the energetic transience of these evasions. One reads,

I am a temporary resident, worried but outwardly calm, of a  
thoroughly modern city. Each house is a plan of the entire circuit:  
with its animated shop-signs, raw water, other monuments to  
superstition ethics & language.<sup>20</sup>

This nameless subject blows through and over the city, one whose most microscopic

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<sup>18</sup>Danny Hayward. *Wound Building: Essays from Contemporary UK Poetry* (Galeta, CA: Punctum Books, 2021)

<sup>19</sup> Hayward.

<sup>20</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 10.

elements replicate themselves in the largest structures. In the Acknowledgements section of his *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015), which itself contains extracts from *Happiness* along with other works, Bonney makes direct reference to a tradition of the “Cuckoo Song”, noting that the singer of such a song

will intersperse their own lyrics alongside whatever fragments of other songs happen to come to mind, thus creating a tapestry in which the 'lyric I' loses its privatised being, and instead becomes an oppositional collective, spreading backwards and forward through known and unknown time.<sup>21</sup>

The *temporary* quality of the “I” in this context exists in defiance of permanence, deriving an effervescence that enables it to positively register a connection to the invisible and to the possible. Such a movement recalls Du Bois’ sorrow song, whereby participation in a continuum of tradition enacts a significance which goes beyond a person’s knowledge of the specificities of this tradition. *Appearing* here becomes a mode of participation and defence, and defence is likewise a mode actuality. However, this state itself persists only for as long as this “I” does not become entirely fixed in place, for as long as it does not belong to a particular, examinable being with its own private determinations.

The language of *Happiness* is marked by alternate movements of entrapment and explosion, confusion and clarity. Writing about the book in 2013, Will Rowe notes that it is shot through with a particular kind of restlessness, one “which allows no place, no voice, between the colliding states of being that continually force their way one into the other.”<sup>22</sup> According to Rowe’s view on the text, the energy contained within *Happiness* emerges via the breakdown of closed enclosed structures, something that comes about via a kind of restricted historical fission, and not from any illusory outside to the enclosed structures mediating contemporary urban life. The world of the poem is one in which enclosure operates down to a cellular level, and in which the internal dissolution of these structures releases an energy preserved within an alphabet and a series of ossified names which, for Bonney, are “ultimately not ours” and which consists of “mythological shells [...] crumpled octaves & / spectra, zilch [...]”<sup>23</sup>

The following lines provide an example of such fission:

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<sup>21</sup> Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015), 144.

<sup>22</sup> Will Rowe, “Reflections on Sean Bonney’s *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*” in *Hi Zero XIX*, ed. Joe Luna (Hi Zero Press: Brighton, 2013), 33.

<sup>23</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 13.

fire is physical time. is absolute unrest  
 or total war < interior logic of music's  
 new definitions. o friends > build bonfires.<sup>24</sup>

Within these lines, a staccato rhythm built around various caesuras represents interruptions in thought processes that likewise manifest moments of expansion, of qualitative shift. The energy created concerns both the imagination and the physical body. The final line above enacts both a progressive release of energy from the start to the end, and a transition from speculative intellectual content to material concrete action. In doing this, the verse makes evident its investment in the capacity for action to expand imagination and vice-versa, with the start and end of the line entering into a kind of self-amplifying speculative unity, mediated by the presence and action of “friends.”

The notion that everyday life contains untapped reserves of energy to be released in the collapse of its routines recalls Situationist thinking and practice. In their “Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism,” first published in 1961, Attila Kotanyi and Raul Vaneigem write of the desire for the “liberation of the inexhaustible energies contained within petrified life.”<sup>25</sup> Change, for these authors, is not to come from the outside, but from the reinvigoration of existing structures. Vaneigem and Kotany qualify the process of such a release via reference to the concept of *détournement*, misleadingly translated by Tom McDonough as “appropriation.” This process aims at “de-alienation” through a process that is not simply one of appropriation, but also of transformation. Such transformation is a mode of self-defence: “We must defend ourselves at every moment from the epic poetry of the bards of conditioning – and turn the rhythm of their poems upside down.”<sup>26</sup> Distortion, a crucial part of the meaning of *détournement*, becomes a form of appropriation, and of ownership. Distortion is necessary for a self-defence the end of which is “unlimited enrichment and triumph.”<sup>27</sup> Such actions take place within enclosed, demarcated spaces. With reference to the city of Paris, Vaneigem and Kotanyi write,

All space is already occupied by the enemy who has domesticated it for its own use down to the elementary rules of this space (beyond legal authority to geometry itself). The moment of authentic urbanism's appearance will be the creation, in

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<sup>24</sup> Bonney, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Attila Kotanya and Raul Veigem, “The Critique of Urban Planning,” in *The Situationists and the City: A Reader*, ed. Tom McDounough, (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2010), 149.

<sup>26</sup> Kotanya and Veigem, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Kotanya and Veigem, 149.

certain areas, of the absence of this occupation.<sup>28</sup>

The authors qualify this by suggesting that “materializing liberty means first shielding from a domesticated planet a few small fragments of its surface.”<sup>29</sup> The struggle envisioned in this text is one of occupation and counter-occupation. To free a space from occupation by “the enemy” requires that one occupy it oneself. The strategy of occupation itself was a crucial element of the UK student movement, with students taking over buildings in campuses around the country, occupations at which Bonney would read the work he was composing. The final stanza of *Happiness* contains the sentences: “All power / to the occupations. All power to the imagination.”<sup>30</sup> Bonney here himself appropriates and distorts the Bolshevik slogan “All power to the Soviets!” In doing so he both ironizes his own action, as if an isolated series of student occupations could seriously be compared to the convulsions of actual revolution, and, at the same time, enacts this irony within a register of complete commitment to a minute, but nonetheless existent, transformative possibility.

Bonney’s subject is one that simultaneously seeks to occupy space and to disappear into it. This action involves a basic problematization of the relation between depth and surface, and of the communication and processing of information, and of judgement that forms a necessary part of the enactment of austerity. The problematizing of this depth-surface relation, one which underpins notions of character from the early modern period into the present, is closely related to an understanding of *strategy*, most notably strategy within the context of occupation. In his “Algeria Unveiled,” Fanon delineates a series of strategic actions taken by Algerian women throughout the Algerian War for Independence. The essay focuses specifically on the strategic use of tradition for the sake of struggle. At certain points in the war, the wearing of an Islamic veil enabled female resistance members to pass without hassle through checkpoints, and to smuggle weaponry and equipment to other fighters. Such dress was not rigidly adhered to, however. Rather, when occupying forces maintained a policy of searching every woman wearing a veil “a mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution” and “the veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary struggle.”<sup>31</sup> Strategy, in the context of an

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<sup>28</sup> Kotanya and Veigem, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Kotanya and Veigem, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994), 63.

engagement with occupying forces can therefore be defined as the selective mobilization of an aesthetic, cultural tradition for the sake of specific aims and purposes. Such strategy requires secrecy and planning, but also surface. It is defined by the manner in which one takes advantage of the mistaken belief that intention and character can be read expressly through appearance: “In the presence of the occupier, the occupied quickly learns to dissemble, to resort to trickery. To the scandal of military occupation, he opposes the scandal of contact. Every contact between the occupied and occupier is a falsehood.”<sup>32</sup> Strategic secrecy is not the absence of disclosure. Rather, it manifests itself as a refraction in which the actual meaning is communicated only to those for whom it is intended. This simultaneous disclosure and disguise recalls the structures of conspiracy considered in relation to *Zong!* and it is a key feature of the defensive aspects of *Happiness*. This feature emerges through specific détournements and references to events which, like the quotations that pepper his work, Bonney insists that his ideal reader will recognize.

History enters *Happiness* as a series of networks and living relations brought into a new constellation. Dates refer to real moments in the composition of the poem, and to moments within the wider history of leftist struggle. Bonney uses this combination of dates and references to develop a community of distortion. One stanza begins:

early 2012. the latest news is  
political flashes superimposed on our rooftops  
it is thin, our cynicism, the latest distinct word  
sometimes when a specific distortion in the vowels is achieved  
we can hear heaven. It is a kind of wall  
all of our clear, musical nouns<sup>33</sup>

These lines mix a fragmented journalism with a diary form and manifest the structure of objective restriction as it is mediated by a subject able to move through rigid channels of distortion. Austerity itself is lived as a series of “atmospheres” which form a persistent “background noise”, one that functions by occasionally breaking into moments of extraordinary anxiety precipitated by events such as a capability to work examination or the arrival of a letter from the Department of Work and Pensions.<sup>34</sup> Within these conditions, the further distortion of such noise becomes a condition both of

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<sup>32</sup> Fanon, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Esther Hitchen, “Living and Feeling the Austere,” *New Formations* 87, no. 87 (24 March 2016): 108, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.87.6.2016>.

communication and of survival. The poem registers a profound anxiety in its oscillation between affirmation and withdrawal, while affirming the utopic potential in distorting this distortion. Bonney continues:

[...] this is harmony  
every possible combination of peoples and phantoms  
our sobriety and victims, this is our alphabet  
sometimes, we get sick of our pious barbarism  
we leap screeching into hell  
our immense, unquestionable affluence<sup>35</sup>

This insistence that an alphabet can be *ours* relates one immediately to the structure of the slogan. This term has its origin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where it referred to the “distinctive note, phrase or cry of a person or body of persons.”<sup>36</sup> As a distinctive surface level cry the slogan serves a directly strategic purpose. Robert Denton notes that slogans were “utilized primarily as passwords to insure proper recognition of individuals at night or in the confusion of battle.”<sup>37</sup> The purpose of the slogan is two-fold: it individuates in a chaotic environment and it affirms this individual according to their inclusion within a kind of collective identity.

The understanding of literature as a slogan, as bearing an affinity with tools for clandestine, strategic recognition has been suggested by Walter Benjamin as a way of understanding the writing of the cohort of surrealists. Benjamin maintains that works by such authors “are not literature but something else – demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries[...].”<sup>38</sup> According to this metaphor, the surrealist writers had succeeded in producing writing that provided access to previously undisclosed areas of experience, but that were nonetheless, in some sense, only recognizable to the initiated. The forgery deceives the expert at the same time as establishing a community of the criminal, of those capable of recognising its trickery. Such a community is one which, in the increasingly blinding light of scrutiny, provides a way of hiding in plain sight.

The aesthetics of the slogan is a central concern for Bonney’s “Letter on Poetics,” the prose piece that closes *Happiness*. At one point he writes, “I started thinking the

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<sup>35</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> George Earle Shankle, *American Mottoes and Slogans* (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1941), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Robert E. Denton Jr, “The Rhetorical Functions of Slogans: Classifications and Characteristics,” *Communication Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1 March 1980): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378009369362>.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol 2 Part 1: 1927-1930*, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 219.

reason the student movement failed was down to the fucking slogans. They were awful. As feeble as poems.”<sup>39</sup> The irony of the final sentence is not out of place in a text which, like much of Bonney’s writing, is deeply aware of the political limits of art as a force in the world, but that nonetheless insists that only art which manifests a commitment to transforming the social is worthy of the name. Indeed, one can argue that the forceful repudiation of “poems” here and elsewhere functions as an index of a commitment that, given Bonney’s vocation, can only be manifest through continued writing. Rather than documenting, repeating or echoing contemporary turns of phrase, *Happiness* détourns slogans of the past, in turn generating new constructions through a kind of historical parapraxis. Bonney opens a stanza with a direct invocation of the Paris Commune, followed by a location featured in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, followed by an echo of Rimbaud. The lines read:

complaint registered March 18<sup>th</sup> 1871  
 what I liked were crumbled octaves, fruit markets  
 xenography, petticoats, reservoirs  
 where mathematical fluid and relics of social movements might  
 no verb: complaint registered Nov 1989  
 we are still in Cimmeria  
 the point is a total reworking of all definitions  
 that means history, senses, cellular matter<sup>40</sup>

These final lines contain an echo and a distortion of Rimbaud’s “seer” letter, dated the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1871, a date which, as Bonney notes is “one week before the communards were slaughtered.”<sup>41</sup> Rimbaud’s letter contains his infamous statement that the poet is a figure who must render themselves a seer via what he terms a “long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.”<sup>42</sup> Such a derangement has, for Bonney, an explicitly political meaning in the deconstruction of bourgeois subjectivity, of the lyric I’s “privatised” being, a deconstruction which is synonymous both with political action and the “freeing” of occupied space through an act of counter-occupation, an event whose resonance is felt in the explosive rearrangement of dates events and practices. The community invoked and enacted within Bonney’s poetry is one that strives after a

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<sup>39</sup> Bonney, *Happiness*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Bonney, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Bonney, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Selected Poems and Letters*, trans. Jeremy Harding and John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2004), 203.



formation in which an individual may exist outside of the kind of the moral and ethical frameworks inculcated by the political rhetoric of capitalism and its accompanying actual brutality. This poetry moves against the kind of community formation which underpins austerity, and even against Marx's own visions of communally shared labour, while gesturing towards a mode of security palpably different to that promised to a diminishing number of the economic elect.

One final aspect of the poetry of self-defence that *Happiness* presents is the potential for this defence to ground a subject in a moment of self-certainty, and for an action to manifest subjective actuality in a manner that does not immediately devolve into reified economic determinations. The most well-known lines in *Happiness* run as follows:

When you meet a Tory on the street, cut his throat  
It will bring out the best in you.  
It is as simple as music or drunken speech.  
There will be flashes of obsolete light.  
You will notice the weather only when it starts to die.<sup>43</sup>

These lines affirm the subject in an act of violence and in a direct opposition to another figure, one whom it recognizes in a manner appropriate to its concept. In an interview conducted with the American poet and publisher Richard Owens, Bonney claims that this moment contains the "least violent" poetry he has written.<sup>44</sup> It is, I think, worth taking this claim seriously. In his "Critique of Violence", Benjamin posits so-called "mythic" violence, the violence of everyday life and the violence of the state, as a violence that either founds or preserves a law. This violence maintains a specific relationship to an ontology of fate and of guilt, demarcating those it strikes as responsible for their own suffering. For Benjamin, mythic violence, conducted against punishable objects, is contrasted with an immediate, "divine" violence: "If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets up boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them."<sup>45</sup> The quality of this violence is not strained: it is not measured by the force of an act, or even exactly by its consequences, but by the effect that it has on the law and on the social relations within which it occurs. It is this last point which chimes

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<sup>43</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Owens and Sean Bonney, *Sean Bonney in Conversation*, 2012.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHkj96Vl08c>.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Walter Benjamin: 1913-1926 v. 1: Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 249.



with Bonney's insistence that his lines do not describe an act of violence. Rather than either founding or preserving law, the act described, within the world of the poem at least, brings about the erosion of a reified historical continuum, one that would allow the intrusion of "obsolete light" into a lifeworld saturated by contemporary anti-illumination.

In one quite literal sense the passage enacts a deformed version of the fantasy of a liberal recognition theorist, for whom the correct identification of and comportment towards a fellow citizen is the limit of political aspiration. At same time, the recognition is provided by a person who lacks more or less any subjective determination. This absence of qualities, itself an absence of readable characteristics, manifests a visceral fidelity to a certain community. As with Ezio's gesture in *Salò*, this action, as it features in the poem, involves nothing more or less than doing the right thing at the right time. It is an act of self-assertion that demonstrates that the individual who carries it out is constituted by nothing more than a collectivity whose potentialities are inassimilable to the boundaries and demarcations of the contemporary economy of safety. The one who is cut must be a Tory; the one who cuts could be anyone

### *Letters*

Following the London riots of August 2011 and the petering out of the student movement, Bonney began producing prose blocks in the form of "letters" addressed to an unnamed interlocutor. Although some of the dates for the letters overlap with the composition of *Happiness*, and although certain events are mentioned in both texts, I will argue here that Bonney's prose poems function in a fundamentally different register from the verse considered above, and that they represent a different mode of self-relation. While *Happiness* presents a position characterizable as one of self-defence, I argue that Bonney's letters represent a position of self-preservation, itself a response to, and a somatic experience of, the lived atmosphere of the UK, and specifically London, during the years of their composition.

Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that "to wish to preserve oneself is a sign of distress, of a limitation to the truly basic life-instinct."<sup>46</sup> Such an instinct aims at the "expansion of power, (*Machterweiterung*) and in so doing often enough sacrifices self-

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrien del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 207–8.

preservation.”<sup>47</sup> I do not agree with the idea that the basic drive of life is an increase in control over others. However, what I take to be useful about the thought as cited, is the insight that a concern for self-preservation as an end in itself takes place only when a subject encounters a kind of objective limitation, one that, in contrast to a subject in a position of self-defence, it is unable to assert itself against. Self-preservation is a mode of life that emerges when the capacity for a life to reproduce itself is threatened: it transforms a fluid process of self-expansion to a trembling rigidity overwhelmingly concerned with the meeting of basic needs. Such a process is simultaneously individualising and reductive. Self-preservation is not something exclusive to the financially destitute. However, I would argue that an immediate, terrified concern for one’s own capacity to live occurs more frequently in the lives of those for whom removal of the basic security and means of life is an actual possibility.

Asborn Wahl writes that, aside from its integrative function, desire for actuality is ingrained within the historical development of the welfare state, a desire that aimed to enable members of the working class “to live outside of work.”<sup>48</sup> Marx himself argues that it is only when an individual is free to think outside of the confines of work, or of the need to secure their own means of life, that political action proper can begin.<sup>49</sup> The relationship between actuality and insurance can, I think, also be seen in the concept of moral hazard. This term has a complex history, but it generally denotes the tendency of those who feel themselves to be insured to take risks which they would otherwise avoid.<sup>50</sup> From a perspective informed by Nietzsche, the capacity for subjective actuality, which takes the form of a process in which self-preservation itself is placed second to self-expansion and fulfilment, requires a minimal degree of security, or at least a feeling of confidence in the fact that a subject is able to act within a world that, in and of itself, possesses the capacity to receive and be moulded by such action.

Preservation is itself a form of negation; it moves away from such actuality; it holds back; it does not embrace the kind of open future of a certain kind of risk. Hegel elaborates this beautifully in a passage of the *Science of Logic* in which he states that,

Even to preserve (*Aufbewahren*) already includes a negative note, namely that something, in order to be retained (*erhalten*) is removed from its immediacy and

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<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, 208.

<sup>48</sup> Asbjørn Wahl, *The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 416.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Baker, ‘On the Genealogy of Moral Hazard’, *Texas Law Review* 75, no. 2 (December 1996): 238.

hence from an existence which is open to external influences. – That which is sublated is thus something at the same time preserved (*Aufbewahrtes*) something that has lost its immediacy but has not come to nothing for that.<sup>51</sup>

Hegel moves between two different German words, both of which can be translated with reference to preservation. *Erhalten* carries the dual meaning of preservation and maintenance. *Aufbewahren* means to preserve by keeping out of reach, by holding back or by putting away. Self-preservation denotes a state positioned between actuality and nothingness; it maintains the contours of a subject but moves that subject away from conditions in which it could become properly actual. Self-preservation figures as a kind of oscillation that holds existence and non-existence within view, but which resolves itself into neither of them.

This condition can produce a kind of visceral knowledge of social formations as they enact their limitations. In this “Third Letter on Harmony”, Bonney writes of an “unshielded harmonic condition common to everyone with less than five pounds in their pocket” and of

the weird gnosticism we live inside these days. The social truths that only those who live far below the hunger line have access to. Them, and of course the very rich. As if the rich were some kind of jagged knife, out on the social perimeter and we, the very poor, were scraped against that knife, over and over.<sup>52</sup>

Within *Happiness* the continuous, tortuous distortions of everyday life under capital become noise to be further distorted through action and imagination. In his letters, Bonney figures the former kind of noise as radiating with its own singular knowledge, a knowledge for which a quasi-lumpen status is a precondition. In the same piece of prose, Bonney talks further of how the manner in which he usually experiences language is subverted and twisted by conditions of austerity, describing his experience of the banal music played over public speakers in a UK jobcentre as “All of the latest chart hits, converted into a high, circular whine, and in the centre of that whine an all too audible vocabulary. Money. Sanctions. Etc.”<sup>53</sup> The subject position delineated here moves from a transient effervescence to a state of being held fixed by its own determinations. This subject is primed for the interrogation necessary to receive welfare payments, and for the

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<sup>51</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Bonney, 40.

perennial threat that such payments, and with them one's means of life, can be removed for no greater misdemeanour than a missed appointment, or a misunderstanding of the conditions necessary to receive them.

Austerity does not simply redistribute risk from the state to the individual, but it also engineers situations through which the withdrawal of state support is made the direct fault of the individual. Within this context, language itself, including one's own speech, becomes potentially antagonistic towards one's own survival. Bonney writes of a situation in which

Speech, which would usually be your means of entry to actual lived time, is compressed and stretched into a network of circles and coils, at its perimeter a system of scraped, negative music, and at its centre a wall. And then you wake up after a night of terrible dreams to find you are that wall.<sup>54</sup>

Self-preservation is a condition shot through with dreams and nightmares, anxiety and fear, somatic experiences that themselves reinforce the boundaries of subject at precisely the moment at which it attempts to overcome them. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes of the nightmares suffered by those who had been a part of the First World War, insisting that these dreams should be understood as attempts to retroactively master trauma through the inducing of anxiety after the fact. "These dreams" he writes, "are endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the trauma."<sup>55</sup> This anxiety can be understood as a kind of internal oscillation, taking place within and against a sedimented layer of protective, dead tissue. Freud posits a hypothetical proto-subject that exists as a

little fragment of living substance [...] suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires the shield in this way: Its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thence-forward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli.<sup>56</sup>

This subject is secured in the world through the negation of part of its capacity for life,

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<sup>54</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, The Vol 18: 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 'Group Psychology' and Other Works v. 18*, ed. And trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), 27.

<sup>56</sup> Freud, 27.

through a denial of its own expansion. It is preserved, maintained and *kept going* through its own death, and through the rigidity with which this death maintains its capacity for existence. The success of such preservation, together with the necessary thickness of the preservative layer is conditional upon the relative strength of external stimulation: “By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate – unless that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield.” Trauma is defined as “excitations from outside which are enough to break through the protective shield,”<sup>57</sup> with an infinite reservoir of anxiety serving to strengthen this shield, either to protect the subject from coming trauma, or to retroactively master a trauma which has already occurred. In either case, self-preservative anxiety takes a hostile position towards the external world and enables the continued functioning or maintenance of a subject in its current state, without enabling any actually negative, transformative relation to this world. Such a state is the apotheosis of preservation *as* negation.<sup>58</sup>

The prose poetry of Bonney’s “letters” embodies a state of solidification and rigidity that precludes a defensive actuality and relates directly to the historic conditions of trauma and deprivation lived through in the period of their composition. Such a state has preservative and prophetic effects. Bonney writes in “Letter Against Ritual” of Margaret Thatcher’s 2013 funeral at St Paul Cathedral in London as a “voodoo routine” in which the ruling party’s class domination constitutes

some kind of future constructed on absolute fear. Or that future is a victorious vacuum, a hellish rotating disc of gratuitous blades, and they are speaking to you, those blades, and what they are saying is: ‘one day you will be unemployed, one day you will be homeless, one day you will become one of the invisible, and monsters will suck whatever flesh remains from your cancelled bones.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Freud, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Self-defence may evidently be employed for the sake of self-preservation, however the former cannot be reduced to the kind of anxiety ridden self-negation of Freud’s purely reactive proto-subject. While self-defence may be a form of self-preservation, forms of self-preservation actively preclude self-defence. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* Freud speaks of a “the state of anxiety is in every instance inexpedient, and its inexpedience becomes obvious if it reaches a fairly high pitch.” This anxiety “interferes with action”, and the most evident difference between self-preservation and self-defence is related to this fact. With regard to the latter, Freud claims to have heard anecdotes from individuals who have “been through a real great mortal danger” while hunting big game and who told him that, free from a useless anxiety, they were able to aim “their rifle at the wild-beast – and that is unquestionably what is most expedient.” See: Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVI: Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Part III)*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (Vintage: London, 2001), 430. Self-defence relies on the capacity to ground oneself in the world, to name and understand a threat, and to act accordingly; it means to enter into a kind of reciprocal relation with an object through which one’s own subjective actuality is developed. Each of these aspects of self-defence are precluded by the overwhelming anxiety associated with the extremes of self-preservation.

<sup>59</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 99.

Bonney's fear is the real fear of death by homelessness, starvation or stress which affected over two thousand individuals between 2011 and 2014.<sup>60</sup> Self-preservation transfigures fear into a hyperbolic libidinal anxiety that is both a mode of security and the motor for a continuously frustrated attempt to transcend its own conditions. This contradiction gives Bonney's prose an astonishing density; unlike *Happiness*, the letters hardly seem to move at all. Rather, their density is correlated to an internal vibration, a visceral hesitation that is itself a motor of critique. The effort of breaking out of this density becomes the means of its intensification as a furious helplessness is rendered somatically within the blocks of text. Listen to, "And the grotesque and craggy rhythms of those monsters are already in our throats, right now. In our throats, our mouths, the cracked centre of our language, fascist syllables, sharp and barking."<sup>61</sup> The prosody in these sentences is dense and limited; they possess a gravity, that, unlike previous citations, can have no hope of a release. Rather, the words' energy adds to their weight, as does their clarity. At points, these poems are simultaneously magmatic and frozen, manifesting the synapses of a lyric impulse that runs continually against its objective limitation. The very linguistic matter of this poetry enacts the process of self-preservation in which a neurotic, libidinal anxiety attempts to escape the conditions of its own possibility. They form a tangible aesthetic expression of the individualising, terrifying and continual trauma, and of the "expected shocks" of the life subject to the arbitrary will of the Department of Work and Pensions.<sup>62</sup>

### *Our Death*

In the summer of 2015, Sean Bonney was awarded a fellowship to complete a research project at the Free University of Berlin. As a result of this award, he was able to secure at least two years of living expenses in the German capital, alongside the prospect of further teaching work once his project, a monograph on the San Francisco based anarcho-communist poet Diane di Prima, was completed. The material changes in Bonney's circumstances of living are reflected in the work produced from 2015-2019.

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<sup>60</sup> Frances Ryan, "Death Has Become a Part of Britain's Benefits System," *Guardian*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/27/death-britains-benefits-system-fit-for-work-safety-net>.

<sup>61</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 99.

<sup>62</sup> Hitchen, "Living and Feeling the Austere," 111.

During this period, Bonney wrote and published one book with the Berlin-based small press A Firm Nigh Holistic Press, entitled, *Cancer: Poems After Katerina Gogou*<sup>63</sup>, *Ghosts* published with Materials press in 2017 and *Our Death*, published by the American press Commune Editions, in which re-edited versions of the poems from the previous two books also appeared. Having considered Bonney's writing in terms of self-defence and self-preservation, I argue that these works should be seen in relation to processes of securitisation.

Like austerity, securitisation is, in part, an act of naming. According to N. M. Ahmed, the term refers to “to a ‘speech act’ – an act of labelling” that enables a state to proceed with an intensification of technologies of security following the successful designation of an exceptional threat.<sup>64</sup> This “discloses a deeper ‘dual’ structure of the state in its institutionalisation of the capacity to mobilise extraordinary extra-legal military–police measures in response to an existential danger.”<sup>65</sup> While these actions most often stop short of the declaration of a full state of emergency, they nonetheless consistently reveal the capacity of state technologies to intensify the measures whereby they secure and maintain specific social relations. As with austerity, the rhetoric of securitisation permeates contemporary political discourse, fixing both states and individual citizens within a continuing context of disaster. Mark Neocleous writes that the modern state functions as a continual namer of exceptional threats with the process of this naming orienting states towards a continually catastrophic future, making one of their “key tasks” the process of imagining “the worst-case scenario, the coming catastrophe, the crisis-to-come, the looming attack, the emergency that could happen, might happen and probably will happen, all in order to be better prepared.”<sup>66</sup> Securitisation, in one sense, can be understood as Freudian self-preservation played out on the level of international politics. The nightmares of the survivors of war are repeated a hundred years later as actuarial calculations that make use of “threat multipliers” in order to transform the suffering of those expected to experience the worst of climate change to a quantity of *existential* risk,

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<sup>63</sup>Gogou was an Athens-based anarchist poet who, despite holding a key position within Greek radical culture, has received relatively little academic attention and only one translation of her work into English. See: Taxikipal, *Gougou, Katerina: Athen's Anarchist Poetess*. <https://libcom.org/history/katerina-gogou-athens-anarchist-poetess-1940-1993>.

<sup>64</sup> Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, “The International Relations of Crisis and the Crisis of International Relations: From the Securitisation of Scarcity to the Militarisation of Society,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 3 (2011): 350, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2011.601854>.

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, 350.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Neocleous, “Resisting Resilience,” *Radical Philosophy*, March / April 2013, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience>.



a transformation which enables the contemporary state to, mathematically at least, “think the unthinkable.”<sup>67</sup>

These calculations remain as neurotic as the dreams that were their precursors. As Ahmed puts it, the “securitisation of global crises does not render us safer. Instead, by necessitating more violence, while inhibiting preventive action, it guarantees greater insecurity.”<sup>68</sup> The contemporary notion of the “existential threat” is less concerned with eradicating such threats entirely than it is with securing a specific proportion of a global population against them. Technologies of security and the material fact of insecurity grow in direct relation to each other. Securitisation denotes a continuous process, a bad infinity whose existence is proof that the purported goal of *security* is unreachable. This contradiction is expressed clearly in the reality of the contemporary national border which generates profit both from its capacity to keep out perceived threat and from the need for continual securitisation emerging from the inevitable failure to fully neutralize the risk at hand. This is true to such an extent that it is now possible to speak “of a burgeoning border-security-industrial complex selling everything from security fences to surveillance technology, from visa-processing centres to detention centres.”<sup>69</sup> Securitisation denotes a process in which a particular risk, once it has been named as such, will continually overflow the methods which are used to contain it. Border technologies are a continual source of profit because they are able to offer tighter and tighter restrictions within a framework whereby absolute *security* itself is neither desired nor attained.

The modern, urban subject is tied to the border through the discourse of resilience, one which aims to strengthen subjective resolve in the face of adversity, a movement which mirrors the state’s own process of consolidation in times of crisis. Neocleous maintains that the liberal state’s attempts to cultivate a culture of “resilience” amongst citizens serves directly to “connect the emotional management of personal problems with the wider security agenda and the logic of accumulation during a period of crisis.”<sup>70</sup> To live in a state that is engaging in securitisation is to be actively encouraged to internalise

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<sup>67</sup> Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, Ben Hayes, Nick Buxton, Ben Hayes, “A Permanent State of Emergency: Civil Contingencies, Risk Management and Human Rights,” in *The Secure and the Dispossessed: How the Military and Corporations are Shaping a Climate-Changed World*, ed. Nick Buxton and Ben Hayes (London: Pluto, 2016), 95.

<sup>68</sup> Ahmed, “The International Relations of Crisis and the Crisis of International Relations,” 352.

<sup>69</sup> Ben Hayes, Steve Wright and April Humble, “From Refugee Protection to Militarised Exclusion: What Future for Climate Refugees?” in *The Secure and the Dispossessed: How the Military and Corporations are Shaping a Climate-Changed World*, ed. Nick Buxton and Ben Hayes (London: Pluto, 2016), 112.

<sup>70</sup> Neocleous, “Resisting Resilience”.



this process as the dominant manner of understanding and experiencing mental and emotional life. The resilient person is firmly individualized and braced to deal with the continuing challenges of second, and first, nature. Within the context of contemporary securitisation, to be resilient is to take the border within oneself, to sharpen one's own defence mechanisms, while simultaneously restricting any field of action in which one's actual subjectivity could conceivably become manifest. In the following section of the chapter, I want to argue that *Our Death* takes place in a world in which these movements are ever-present, and that this writing is cognizant of their subjective, together with their material consequences. Rather than enacting a direct opposition to these processes, Bonney's poetry makes tangible the capacity for a profoundly fragile subject to perceive their unravelling.

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A reedited version of what was originally published as *Cancer* forms the first major sequence of *Our Death*. It opens with an epigraph from Pasolini that affirms a solidarity with an excluded, excremental class: "I would like to spin a eulogy / of filth, of poverty, of drugs and suicide / drugs, disgust, rage."<sup>71</sup> The first lines of the sequence read:

Lumpenproletariat. And other adventures in vocabulary.  
They say I am Katarina. A force from somebodies past. Not Yours.<sup>72</sup>

The first word of this opening reads as a definition and an affirmation. The concept of the lumpen is posited as an adventure, as something that does, and perhaps cannot, fully match up to its object, but whose meaning will be realised alongside the dynamic life of this object. A resistance to definition is in keeping with the character of the lumpen itself as a class containing polarizing contradiction and as one whose definition, at least in this reading, is only ever akin to speculation. This invocation mimics the kind of naming discussed above. However, rather than designating a threat, Bonney's verse admits its own speculative quality, a quality which enables the unravelling of the disparate elements momentarily collected together under the fragile, unstable word *Lumpenproletariat*. The

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<sup>71</sup> Sean Bonney, *Our Death* (Chico, GA: Commune Editions, 2019), 22.

<sup>72</sup> Bonney, 23.

second line quoted above mixes an invocation of Gogou, with Pasolini's declaration, "I am a force of the past / My only love lies in tradition."<sup>73</sup> In Bonney's rendering, the precise quality of this past is mangled in a grammar that discloses a historical parataxis and insists on a genealogy for Katerina while also demanding a precise distinction between the presumably traceable past of the reader and the unknown disparate timeline from which the former draws their history.

For Pasolini, the lumpen lay under a kind of pre-emptive headstone and the *borgate* functioned as a kind of grave for the living, one sundered from the progress experienced by those who participated within the economic miracle, but equally one in which the capacity for non-capitalist values endured. Bonney's "somebodies", a contraction that maintains the degree of indeterminacy present in the word's possessive homophone, itself discloses a kind of community of the dead. Katrina emerges out of a deathly, chaotic indeterminacy, one not unlike the Potter's Field, or the burial sites within the dreamlife of Bachmann's *Ich*. This indeterminate quality of such a community does not prevent it from providing the potential for a kind of affirmation, or at least a movement that defines through its capacity to exclude someone else: the past is a generative plurality, but it is not "yours."

Later in the sequence Bonney includes line which explicitly invoke the pauper's burial as a historical paradigm:

New Signals. Isolated. Inseparable  
*all colours are fascist*  
   in the holding cell  
 the unmarked grave is ALL history

or abattoir.<sup>74</sup>

The "holding cell" is a liminal space, one in which a person might await either interrogation or sentencing. This liminality itself discloses a view of history as the mass grave, with the mere aggregate of remains that one finds in the unmarked burial serving as the true content of historical progress. This capacity to affirm such space is compromised by contemporary geo-politics, as following the declaration of the War on

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<sup>73</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. & trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2015), 311.

<sup>74</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 46.

Terror, liminal space, that which for Pasolini and Bachmann had prised open for the sake of the non-integrated, colonised by the notion of a “black site”, a space outside of international law in which those suspected of terrorism may be subject to so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” in locations in which sensory disorientation and false identities are used for the sake of the extraction of information from utterly vulnerable captives.<sup>75</sup> Liminality remains generative of a certain kind of knowledge, although Bonney’s verse runs close to evacuating this of any potential for antagonistic hope, presenting the mass grave as a site of continued violence rather than repressed, resurrectable possibility.

In other points in the same sequence, Bonney’s writing maintains a kind of de-rigidifying fluidity in the form of a voice that, while it attempts to take part in a socially sanctioned world, consistently collapses into disparate and counter-intuitive desires:

Subutex. Give me the prescription  
and I will be you. I'll pretend to be you  
and if I cannot, well, I'll tell you about your walls  
the interpretation of the cracks, divination etc  
you probably don't wanna know. give me the paper  
it's fine I'll never remember a thing.<sup>76</sup>

These lines are grounded around the writing of a prescription for a drug that controls anxiety. To break this conversation is therefore to break a banal, but also potentially deeply important transaction, one geared towards maintaining a capacity to act within the normatively sanctioned world. This conversation is typically one in which a subject must qualify action and desires. To interrupt this conversation is to risk losing something that one desperately needs, but it is also to reject the coldness of the contractual relationship. Bonney's lyric voice exists within a closed room at the same moment that it resists the fact of its enclosure. This resistance is enacted across the first two lines of the poem where the static oppositions of the contract are refuted by an immediate reversal of position and a mercurial restlessness. This restlessness resolves its temporal disjunction into a manifest irrationality, a “reading” of the cracks within the wall as an affirmation of subjectivity that gives way to monologue.

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<sup>75</sup> Sam Raphael, Crofton Black, Ruth Blakely, Steve Kostas. “Tracking Rendition Aircraft as a Way to Understand CIA Secret Detention and Torture in Europe,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2015.1044772>.

<sup>76</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 24.



of obsolete methods of communication piled up as bones on the outskirts of a historical continuum:

and we collect little pieces, of resistance etc.  
 don't talk to me about fragmentation. It is  
 rain. Talk about rain. Durruti had it right  
 transubstantiation. Rain. Metallic burning rain.  
 Red rain. Crowbars. The richter scale is  
 a calendar, bones piled like rain beneath the earth.<sup>79</sup>

In these stanzas, the continuity of history falls back on itself in the form of a decayed natural metaphor. Rain here comes to function as an allegory for defeated struggle; nature and history become interchangeable. The verse suggests that a speech act, if it is to avoid being sublimated into a situation of security, must resolve itself into a discourse on defeat. The motion enacted here is not a sublimation or a transfiguration of categories, so much as a temporary revelation of the ruined ground upon which contemporary social relations stand.

The mass grave functions as allegory, itself a way of setting in motion purportedly static relations between history and nature. Speaking on this subject in 1932, Adorno writes, “The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship.”<sup>80</sup> Adorno explicates this relationship to history via an understanding of history and nature as mutually opposed categories which reveal themselves as interwoven within an allegorical moment. He draws on Benjamin’s “Origin of the German Mourning Play,” and quotes a passage in which Benjamin states that history, for the melancholy of the German Romantics, was “writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience.”<sup>81</sup> Adorno attempts to mobilize such transience as a mode of critique, insisting that “whenever ‘second nature’ appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely its transience.”<sup>82</sup> A thinking of natural history manifests the transience of permanent relations by transfiguring history itself into a ruin. For someone attuned to this,

<sup>79</sup> Sean Bonney, *Cancer: Poems After Katerina Gogou* (Berlin: A Firm Nigh Holistic Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Theodor Adorno. “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 263.

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, 263.

<sup>82</sup> Adorno, 263.

“everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments, into just such a charnel house where signification is discovered, in which nature and history interweave and the philosophy of history is assigned the task of their intentional interpretation.”<sup>83</sup> This act of interpretation is both anachronistic and antagonistic. It moves against the progression of secured time and acquires a patience precluded by the frantic enclosures and internal explosions of self-preservation.

Bonney’s awareness of the potential importance of a fluid historical syntax is pre-figured in a prose piece entitled *Letters on Riots and Doubt*, dated 5<sup>th</sup> August 2011, one day after Mark Duggan’s death. One reads, “The main problem with a riot is that all too easily it flips into a kind of negative intensity, that in the very act of breaking out of our commodity form we become more profoundly frozen within it. Externally, at least, we become the price of a pig’s overtime.”<sup>84</sup> The idea that the riot represents a “breaking out” of a universal commodity form directly recalls the text “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy” written in 1966 and published by the Situationist International as a response to the Watts riots of the previous year. The authors of the text state: “People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities [...] The transition from consumption to *consummation* has been achieved in the flames of Watts.”<sup>85</sup> The temporal framework employed by the Situationists here is founded on immanence. It is one in which the temporal immediacy of the proletarian riot moves outside and against the abstract temporality of exchange. Bonney’s insight is that riots do not simply stand outside of a process of securitisation, rather that they form an intensification of one of its opposing moments. From the perspective of finance at least, the consummation of property destruction is achieved in the raising of a premium on an area. This is not to suggest that Bonney is making a direct argument against such damage, he goes on to insist that “if we’re not setting fire to cars, we’re nowhere”,<sup>86</sup> but rather that one cannot simply isolate violence from the intensifications of security to which it is opposed in order to then make the former into a *method*. This latter course of action is as likely to resolve itself into an easily denominated amount of police overtime as it is to sublimate police action into a situation of actual freedom. Rather than a fixed position

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<sup>83</sup> Adorno, 265.

<sup>84</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Guy Debord, Attila Kotanyli, Raoul Vaneigem, “Festival and Urban Revolution,” in *The Situationists and the City*, ed. Tom McDounough (London ; New York: Verso, 2010), 180.

<sup>86</sup> Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 8.

which aims to purely destroy securitised space, and, as a result, intensifies the processes against which it directs itself, Bonney's writing at this point manifests a refusal to settle into schematic systems of behaviour. This refusal is manifest in the futures-past of Bonney's verse, futures summoned by an insurgent nostalgia that moves against both the internal and external system of boundaries that defines a political community.

Any such fluidity has its antithesis in the border, and it is entirely appropriate that the fear sedimented in the contemporary border crossing is a consistent concern of *Our Death*. One prose block runs:

Fearful we'll abandon our history or steal it. Fearful we'll set up borders around that history. Fearful we'll up rents on that history and talk and talk about the old days in meter and rhyme while the pigs close the borders. Fearful we'll be those borders. Fearful we'll confuse those borders with songs and sit inside those songs bas if they were scars on our veins.<sup>87</sup>

The subject here is caught between the revulsion inflicted by news regarding the contemporary border crisis and a frantic sense of their own complicity within this crisis. The *fear* here can be read at least partly as a proper affective response to the manner in which cultures of resilience and self-preservation directly intertwine a subject's capacity for survival within the maintenance of that which they find abhorrent.

Bonney's response to this is an emphatic fragility, one that remains easily colonized by a logic of security. In the opening page of *Our Death*, one reads,

There is no time. Our houses  
concealed like songs, mumble to themselves  
The stars are not stars, the city sounds not  
city sounds. The sirens, the cops, however,  
they are real as algebra or teeth [...].<sup>88</sup>

Liminal spaces in which the poem appears to feel at home do exist. Still such spaces are made unreal by the persistence of structures of security that follow from and emerge directly out of them. While such a relation to the possible may be taken to represent a kind of subjective despair, such thinking again has its objective correlative in "black-sites" and secret prisons. In this manner, Bonney's melancholy is uncompromisingly materialist. To merely affirm the liminal as a kind of redemptive "outside" would, in this

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<sup>87</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Bonney, 13.

context, be to fail to understand that, in our contemporary situation, it is precisely within the liminal that the state expresses its most relentless brutality: “Our houses” persist in memory and in song, as part of an archive of past havens, both purely linguistic and actual, that have now been foreclosed:

There are four cardinal points.  
 The first is the sky, it is where they have buried us.  
 The second, the earth. There they question us. It is very silent.  
 The other two points were recently taken out of commission.  
 No explanations were offered.<sup>89</sup>

### *Data*

Foucault comments at one point that a governmental state which “calls upon and employs economic knowledge as an instrument” would be one which is entirely controlled by “apparatuses of security.”<sup>90</sup> This state of affairs is imaginable if one considers relations between so-called “big data” and the innovation of predictive policing, in which methods of actuarial calculation are utilized directly for the purposes of urban security. Data, the contemporary form of the information that traditionally provides the ground for the insurance contract, makes possible the maximum utilization of the economic. Bonney’s nostalgic invocation of the liminal, together with the apparent repudiation of its present potential, relates *Our Death* to the contemporary existence of such data, which functions in the book as a demonstration of a closure of historical possibility resulting from the intensified mobilization of economic knowledge. Bonney writes,

All human data is scrawled across the sky. There is the date of your birth, for example, that arbitrary pivot. There, next to it, perhaps, a set of fairly random memories. Somewhere further off are the names that are given to human love. But then unfortunately those names get entwined with the screams of the victims of the Peterloo Massacre, get entwined with plague doors, with the hideous noises that business leaders would make if they were to look into a mirror at midnight.<sup>91</sup>

*Data* is constitutive of a closed universe. At the same time, however, it provides the capacity for cross correlation and juxtaposition of flattened historical moments.

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<sup>89</sup> Bonney, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 119.

<sup>91</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 110.



The consequences of the capacity for such juxtaposition are ambiguous. The use of economic data for the sake of security is well documented. Big data, defined as “data sets that are generally extremely large in volume” and which are “collected near or in real time, link different sources or levels of information and which contain diverse variables that are detailed and tend to be exhaustive in scope”, is indispensable to the modern carceral state.<sup>92</sup> The generation and proper analysis of such data enables “predictive policing”, defined as “the use of historical data to create a spatiotemporal forecast of areas of criminality or crime hot spots that will be the basis for police resource allocation decisions with the expectation that having officers at the proposed place and time will deter or detect criminal activity.”<sup>93</sup> Such use of data produces increasing brutality. As Jackie Wang puts it, “crime data gathered by the police to determine where officers should go simply sends police to patrol the poor neighbourhoods they have historically patrolled when they were guided by their intuitions and biases.”<sup>94</sup> The use of risk calculation for the sake of security produces an intensifying tautology, one which both “leads to an ossification of racialized police practices” and, at the same time, encourages the extraction of more “data”, justifying “dragnet surveillance and the expansion of policing and carceral operations that generate data.”<sup>95</sup> This designation of spatio-temporal risks in relation to security feeds back into judgements of character, with statistics on crime reinforcing pre-existing notions of the inherent criminality of particular demographics.<sup>96</sup> These techniques themselves dove-tail with an increase in risk assessment methods used by various American states to determine parole decisions in a process that firmly joins together the co-determining history of economic technologies and judgements of character.<sup>97</sup>

Other studies of contemporary urban policing suggest that it is equally possible to invert Foucault’s statement and to observe that information regarding the “security” of an area has an evident relation to its economic value. When discussing the relation between police investigation and the calculation of risk, Erickson and Haggerty write that, given

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<sup>92</sup> Wim Hardyns and Anneleen Rummens, “Predictive Policing as a New Tool for Law Enforcement? Recent Developments and Challenges,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 24, no. 3 (1 September 2018): 202–3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-017-9361-2>.

<sup>93</sup> Jerry Ratcliffe, “What Is the Future... of Predictive Policing?” *Translational Criminology* (Spring, 2014): 4.

<sup>94</sup> Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotexte, 2017), 248.

<sup>95</sup> Wang, 248.

<sup>96</sup> Khalil, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 32.

<sup>97</sup> Bernard E. Harcourt, *Against Prediction: Profiling, Policing, and Punishing in an Actuarial Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 79.

a conviction rate for burglary in England and Wales of 2%, the role of the police in the modern city cannot be understood simply with regard to the actual defence of property, but rather in the provision of information regarding apparatuses of risk. Indeed, the authors note that documents used to report property crime are themselves “designed to suit the risk-knowledge requirements of insurance companies, and in many jurisdictions insurance companies pay for the police reports they obtain.”<sup>98</sup> The same authors observe that “in the management of property crime, the criminal law and its enforcement apparatus gives way to insurance law and its risk management regime” and note further that the current context for insurance is one in which “premium levels, deductibles, exclusion, and policy limits all turn property holders into watchers as well as the watched, and the police become risk-knowledge brokers to the insurance system.”<sup>99</sup> Police both manage the situation in which risk occurs and provide the information necessary to define it *as* risk, with both of these moments generating profit via the conflation of economic and political modes through which the status of an area is determined. In this situation, risk calculations conducted with regard to external space link with judgements on character as progenitors of forms of judgement that seek to secure both urban space and a person’s inner world against the intrusion of the dissimilar and the untrustworthy.

Throughout *Our Death* references to the police and to property are consistently positioned next to descriptions of subjective intention. These correlations position the individual as increasingly implicated in processes of security, due in part to the capacity for this subject to shed data wherever it goes. This fact positions the subject as a constitutive part of a closed, but infinitely divisible situation. *Our Death*’s titular prose poem begins,

You walked past a dead man the other day [...] You hurried past, went home and tried to make some kind of structure out of what you were feeling. Like, for instance, there was a moment before he jumped and there was a moment after and both of those moments were the same moment and at their centre was entire calendars negated. [...] Some things can’t be photographed, you think that. Nothing exists, you say that. Everything is made of cops, you know that [...] There were several people laughing. Your mouth was filled with rain.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Richard V Ericson. & Kevin D. Haggerty, “The Policing of Risk,” in *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* ed. Jonathan Simon and Tom Bataer (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2002), 249.

<sup>99</sup> Ericson and Haggerty, 250.

<sup>100</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 111.

The dead man mentioned here is a totality within himself, a sealed space of identical moments positioned either side of his fall. This totality folds in on itself in a *mise en abyme* whereby each element indifferently contains all others: “You said to yourself, the missing half of his skull is the sky, and somewhere inside it is the center of our earth. There is no name can satisfy this. No hermetic system that can alter it. No bank statement or judges’ sentence.”<sup>101</sup> The fact of this individual’s death exists outside of justification. There is no *name* to be invoked, no detail or weaponizing of information that could reintegrate their death within a coherent sequence. This truth, however, does little to prevent an accumulation of indifferent detail, of forensic data. The details themselves move between the documentary and the surreal: “There were several people laughing. Your mouth was filled with rain.”<sup>102</sup> The particulars of the description pile up without any force of explanation. The world as it is in this vignette in a series of demarcated, meaningless details, indifferent and horrific in their safety.

The melancholy of the poem’s descriptions contains the hope for an epistemology that would do justice to the residue of non-identity within a person’s life: “And you will say you care only for trapped things, falling invisibly, un-photographed and unnamed.”<sup>103</sup> For such an epistemology, transience is, once again, a condition of knowledge, meaning that not even the existence of trapped things can endure. This care, for the trapped and the unnamed is rooted in the contradictory fate of the liminal within contemporary securitised space. It diminishes with the general indicative of the poem’s final sentences: “These cities and these deserts. All taken by the earthquake.”<sup>104</sup> The context of continuing catastrophe informs and delimits Bonney’s reality. It sweeps away distinctions between being and non-being, but it does for the sake of that which is destroyed. It is within the context of the greater catastrophe, of the “earthquake” which reduces the infinitely divisible particularity of dead person’s existence to participation within an obliterated *all*, that such things can be rescued from the lesser catastrophe of securitisation.

Bonney’s last book is proleptic. It recalls Robert Burton’s 1621 description of despair as a state in which a person will already “suffer the pains of hell [...] smell brimstone, talk familiarly with the devils, hear and see chimeras, prodigious, uncouth

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<sup>101</sup> Bonney, 111.

<sup>102</sup> Bonney, 111.

<sup>103</sup> Bonney, 111.

<sup>104</sup> Bonney, 111.

shapes, bears, owls, black dogs, fiends, hideous outcries, fearful noises, shrieks, lamentable complaints.”<sup>105</sup> This despair produces a cornucopia of sounds and fears emerging from the dark spaces of a sealed reality. The non-identity of the things of this reality is saved by the immersion of these things, together with the subject that understands them within a greater, more profound catastrophe. It is within such a catastrophe that a thing’s quality of being trapped is revealed in the first place, and with it, the potential for what may once have been freedom.

### *Nefas*

I will end by arguing that *Our Death* has not entirely abandoned the poetry of self-defence. The longest prose piece in the collection is “Letter Against Language.” This piece was originally included as the final pages of *Cancer*, but in its later form it is presented independently of this sequence. In the final section of this chapter I want to argue that this particular text returns to an aesthetic explored earlier in the chapter, albeit as mediated through technologies of securitisation.

“Letter Against Language” consists of one paragraph across three pages. It contains a discourse on Pasolini and Hölderlin communicated as a vignette in which an unnamed speaker moves from the centre to the outskirts of Berlin, before engaging a stranger in drunken conversation. In this monologue, Bonney’s speaker insists on the possibility of a mode of negation which would be of a qualitatively different order from the incomplete negation which facilitates the strengthening of the same borders it crosses. Bonney invokes the possibility of a “no” that is not “the pinched no of border-guards and the rest” but rather a “no as in the opposite of the sun.”<sup>106</sup> The capacity for this is evidenced, insists Bonney, in Pasolini’s poem *Victory*, in which a group of dead Italian partisans rise from their graves in the mountains only to return willingly to death, disgusted at what they find in the neo-capitalist city below. Bonney writes,

And though it's [*Victory*] a poem of great bitterness and defeat it still carries within it a sense of how to continue, of how not to capitulate, in the face of whatever it is that is breaking our names apart, our names, shattering them, until their meanings change into something terminal and alien, alien as the pitiful groan I mumbled as I stood up and staggered back to my temporary flat in one of the more

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, New Ed Edition (New York: NYRB Classics, 2001), 424.

<sup>106</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 19.

fashionable areas of this hopelessly gentrified and haunted city.<sup>107</sup>

The transition from the self-defence of *Happiness* to the proleptic despair of some of the moments in *Our Death* is marked here in the changed resonance carried by the word *temporary*. Whereas in the former book, this word denoted a position of antagonism and agility, in the latter it delineates the position of a bourgeois gentrifier, someone whose presence drives up rents wherever they live. The fluidity of this movement is commensurate with the liquidity of the capital which moves between financial centres and requires the securitisation of reality. Temporariness is now revolting to Bonney's speaker because it is secured via the false eternity of the value-relation.

There is a kind of despair manifest in the suggestion that any “no” that is not total is potentially equivalent to the minor transgression necessary for the military industrial complex to continue to produce use-values. This grasping for a total refusal carries with it a kind of refusal of language, and an invocation of the inexpressible as a final refusal of *information*; it has a materialist element. Bonney insists that with regard to this inexpressible quality, he is not speaking of either a mystical ineffability, nor of a kind of “comfortably opaque experimental poetry.”<sup>108</sup> Rather, this refusal itself is contained in an act of naming, specifically in the “names” that Pasolini insisted that he “knew” but could not speak:

The names of those who sit on various committees. The “names of those responsible for the massacres.” The names of power. The forbidden syllables. The names of those whose names it is impossible to pronounce in certain combinations and continue simply to live.<sup>109</sup>

Bonney's poem folds a refusal of language into a kind of immanently materialist clarity. The names are not hard to understand, and neither are they pure noise. Still, their enunciation would somehow be directly contrary to the dialectical imprisonment that much of *Our Death* seems to elaborate.

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<sup>107</sup> Bonney, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 18.

<sup>109</sup> Bonney, 18. The essay in question was published in Pasolini's *Scritti Corsari* in 1974, roughly one year prior to the author's death. It is beyond the comment of my research to comment on various conspiracy theories concerning who was or who was responsible for Pasolini's murder, and whether or not any serious connection can be made between this ostentatious display of having knowledge and his death.

Following this assertion, Bonney's speaker describes a process whereby their own "interior dialogue [...] seemed to be coming at me in a language I could no longer commit to, or comprehend, or even hear [...] Things we are not able to tell. Inexpressible things. Accountability. Transparency. Blah blah blah. Hölderlin called it the *nefas*."<sup>110</sup> In these lines, Bonney performs a kind of conceptual onomatopoeia; his anxious sequence of terms begins to evacuate words of their content, ending with a "blah blah blah" which is both a self-deprecating dismissal of his own train of thought and an enactment of the *nefas* itself. When speaking of this concept in Hölderlin, Werner Hamacher writes of a kind of language which has been entirely evacuated of signifying content, and that is tantamount to the meaningless clanging of a weathervane. Such language is "not echoes, still less remembrances, only shrill relics, traces, distorted residues."<sup>111</sup> The *nefas*, as it features in Hölderlin's writing on tragedy, is a destructive unity of noise and clarity. It refers to the point of the inexpressible towards which the poet of tragedy's representation of his experience of life tends with an "infinite" and "ineffable" intensity.<sup>112</sup> In its original meaning, the term refers to the act of speaking the forbidden, as in Hölderlin's own *The Death of Empedocles*, in which his protagonist's crime is speaking out loud his own belief that he has achieved Godhead.

At this point, Bonney's letter speaks of a radical invocation of non-information, but figures this as the communication of something as absolutely clear as a proper name. What is insisted here is that within the contemporary cacophonies of "bourgeois anti-communication" the correct clear enunciation of names, specifically names of those "responsible," will resonate as the kernel of something inassimilable. This speech is directed towards the world; Bonney writes of the need to "pronounce those unpronounceable names" but also of "knowing how to translate those names into sheer anger."<sup>113</sup> This thought is a descendent of the gestures of self-defence within *Happiness*. It involves the correct identification of another, the correct enunciation of *who* and *what* they are. This recognition births a kind of mediated simplicity, one that remains a line of flight and a reservoir of potential actuality in a situation of almost intolerable pressure.

The letter concludes with an image of the firmest possible safety. Bonney

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<sup>110</sup> Bonney, 18.

<sup>111</sup> Werner Hamacher, *Two Studies of Friedrich Hölderlin*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng, trans. Julia Ng and Anthony Curtis Adler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 161.

<sup>112</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles: A Mourning-Play*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 143.

<sup>113</sup> Bonney, 19.

paraphrases the following statement from Hölderlin's letters: "For that is tragic with us, to go away into the kingdom of the living in total silence packed up in some kind of container, not to pay for the flames we have been unable to control by being consumed in fire."<sup>114</sup> "Letter Against Language", and with it the original pressing of *Cancer*, ends with the words: "We are not completely defenceless. We have not yet been consumed in fire."<sup>115</sup> In these final words, the continued capacity for something approaching life is not presented as an equivalent to a state of non-restriction or "freedom", but rather as the continued capacity to feel restriction *as such*, to not yet have migrated from the realm of blameless flames to the domain of total silence. For Bonney, such fire, the consummation of which remains deferred, is the final mode of being from which to lever a resistance that will not settle back into a calculation of profit. What endures from within the fire is the conviction that the existence of a border as border, together with its recognition as *restriction*, is the manifest proof of its failure. From this failure emerge profit, securitisation, and the enduring possibility of their overcoming. The poetics of such an overcoming is of a vital, transparent clarity.

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<sup>114</sup> Friedrich Holderlin, *Essays and Letters*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Alder & Charlie Louth. (Penguin Classics, 2009), 208.

<sup>115</sup> Bonney, *Our Death*, 19.

## Coda

I stated towards the end of my introduction that the purpose of this thesis was not to elaborate the ways in which different artists think, or have thought, about the practice of insurance, but to understand how art may intervene in the logic and continuing history of insurantal reasoning. Elaborating this has involved considering specific historical moments within the development of the insurantal imaginary: the 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade; the European economic miracle; and the 2008 financial crisis together with its continuing aftermath. It has also involved, to a greater or lesser extent, considering the specific biographies and worlds of the artists on whom each chapter focuses. Throughout the chapters, I have aimed to provide an idea of what I take to be a co-determining historical and conceptual movement that ranges from the development of methods for insuring commodities, to the insurance of populations, to the use of the technologies and ways of thinking associated with risk management to maintain and increase control over urban areas. The readings I have undertaken have, I hope, produced an understanding of how the historical moments in which Philip, Bachmann, Pasolini and Bonney lived inflect their art without reducing this work to either straightforward, deliberate critiques of insurance or to a deterministic reflection of the conditions of its production.

One thing that each of the artists I have considered have in common is a commitment to those whose struggles are contained within the history of the formation of a seemingly neutral, even benevolent, insurantal epistemology, as well as the impulse to make the evident non-identity between the actually lived lives of people and the concepts that complete their erasure eloquent. The exclusion of difference is a necessary aspect of any kind of concept formation and it is not, therefore, in itself a criticism of the epistemological framework of Gregson v. Gilbert that it cannot acknowledge the humanity of the Zong's cargo any more than the algorithms used to determine crashing asset-prices can properly articulate the despair of individuals facing eviction. What I have attempted to touch on, however, is the manner in which specific kinds of property relations are reaffirmed by these frameworks and by the manner in which they are employed. In fact, one claim of my thesis is that the above mentioned "texts" *do* express the life and the history whose exclusion is the precondition of their use. Manifesting the fact of this expression, however, requires a particular aesthetic comportment.

The critical elaboration of insurance which I have attempted here has necessarily been the elaboration of the uninsurable, of that aspect of life which is excluded from the



insurantal imaginary and cannot be made equal to it. In the first chapter, this excluded aspect involved a potential for life expressed via a restlessness that persists in an apparently neutral legal discourse; in the second, Bachmann's emphatic denial of the continuity of the everyday was shown to be manifested via a particular agency that, through a repudiation of an apparently reconciled, secure lifeworld, manifests a contradictory solidarity that neither forgets nor "invokes" the victims of an ongoing "war" within the quotidian; in my third chapter, I have attempted to show how actual transformations in the understanding and implementation of notions of "risk" and futurity inform and then preclude Pasolini's capacity to represent a life which is in some manner outside of, or at least not dominated by, the imperatives of what he understood as neo-capitalism; and, in my final chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how Bonney's writing contains moments of a co-determining distortion and clarity that responds to securitisation without collapsing into either pure statements of fact or a comfortably opaque avant-gardism, both of which would be easily assimilated into the kinds of conceptual schemas which I argue that his writing opposes.

Each of the chapters sought to elaborate a movement between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility whereby that which initially registers as noise to be either repressed or explained away by insurantal reasoning can come to function as a reservoir for antagonism and a certain "imagining otherwise." I do not want to claim that the kinds of literary and cinematic effects I identify are completely shared by the four of the artists I consider. I hope, however, that I have shown the manner in which a concern with ideas of noise and clarity, information and distortion, is a point of commonality between them. It would not be going too far, I think, to suggest that a capacity to oscillate between clarity and distortion within the totality of a single work means that the aesthetic per se is a domain of expression and experience especially suited to generating a critique of insurantal rationality.

Delineating an aesthetic of the uninsurable refers us to the repressed struggle and antagonism present within apparently disinterested, neutral concepts. In my first chapter, I suggested that this has something in common with Nietzsche's writing on the manner in which concepts are formed and mobilised. I think that a significant amount of what I have attempted to elaborate throughout other parts of the thesis has something in common with what the same author writes elsewhere: "Our highest insights must – and should – sound like stupidities, or possibly crimes, when they come without permission to people

whose ears have no affinity for them and were not predestined for them.”<sup>1</sup> For each of the people I have written about, the capacity for artistic expression to refer itself to present or past community is often inseparable from this community’s inassimilable quality, from the capacity for its language to sound like mere noise to those who do not understand it, and sometimes like a particular kind of living, instructive noise to those who do. It goes without saying that, for Philip, Bachmann, Pasolini and Bonney, the capacity for a work of art to insist that it is neither stupid nor criminal would, I think, be no guarantee of its value.

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*antimatter*, a short pamphlet published by Bonney in the second half of 2019 features the following passage on its last page:

We count the coming of the debt. The persecutions. Our enclaves boarded up, even those of the past. It feels as if the only inhabitable places left in the city are its songs, the forgotten ones and the sad ones. The sounds they begin to make when listening has been made impossible. The sounds they make are destitute and eerie. The names of the nameless, the holes in their necks, running toward us. Their mouths on backwards. Their language clear.<sup>2</sup>

I will end by saying that one thing which I think that the above text does is to prevent us from taking satisfaction in simply acknowledging the kind of difference which I have attempted to elaborate. There is no way out of our contemporary situation if all that is done is to recognise that the forms of thought and language that underpin it do not cover everything, especially if this recognition forms a soundtrack to the boarding up of “enclaves,” either past or present.

It is easy, in 2021, to “count the coming of the debt” in the form of any number of increasing tangible present and future disasters, and it is easy to claim solidarity with the victims - past, present and future - of these disasters. What is less easy, I think, is to commit to the clarity that some of these people express, either in their speech or in their

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> Sean Bonney, *antimatter* (Salt & Cedar Letterpress: Berlin, 2019), 8. I am grateful to Jackqueline Frost for making me aware of this pamphlet.

song, without a guarantee that this clarity will ever present us with a meaning that can be realised within the world as it is. It is this kind of commitment, one which demands that history is understood as unfinished and as insecure, and that the meaning of speech is understood as inherently tied to the mutable conditions in which it is spoken, that a certain critique of insurance seeks to produce.

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