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## ARTICLE

# Thinking the Working-Class 'Aven't Gard

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This essay will explore the idea that while innovation and formal experiment within poetry have been persistently figured as the fruits of male, predominantly bourgeois literary production, the material conditions and the pressured social contexts of working-class women's lives exert a peculiar power over the rhetorics and aesthetics of our poetry, driving a relentless innovation. Such innovation has the potential to reinvent poetic method, to renegotiate terms of social as well as textual encounter, and to resist the tyranny of 'good' middle-class prosody.

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**Keywords:** Jane Burn; Kimberly Campanello; Harryette Mullen; Zheng Xiaoqiong; working-class poetics; materiality; working-class women's poetry

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I have recently taken on editorship of the Soul Food column in *Communist Review*, an appointment likely to sensitise anyone to conversations surrounding 'accessibility' in contemporary working-class poetry. As a working-class person and a practising poet, I am far from a disinterested participant in such debates, and over the last year my most persistent *bête noire* in conversations with colleagues, comrades and friends has been this notion of 'accessibility' as elevated to the status of an absolute moral category, especially as it applies to the poetries of working-class writers.<sup>1</sup>

The kinds of argument I encounter both in print and in person tend to focus on the notion of 'accessibility' as an ethical imperative for individual creative practitioners, an argument in which the poem's communicative responsibilities rest solely with the writer's formal choices, and with the strategies they deploy to either evade or to facilitate readerly comprehension. It is an argument that valorises simplicity, legibility and directness. It is an argument that stakes radical political claims upon a poem's ability to be 'understood', and upon the frictionless transfer of meaning

between writer and reader. Any attempt to theorize the aesthetic disposition of a working-class poetics inevitably circles back to this notion of 'accessibility'. It is cited as both the defining feature and the unique moral obligation of working-class poetics, especially so for those poets working outside the academy who align themselves with radical left-wing politics.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument would seem to prefer a form of poetry that barely resembles poetry at all; suggesting that poetry must always coarsen into verse – or slogan, or journalism – before it can meaningfully influence change or incite action. I often joke that since Marx renounced his own literary efforts in 1837, consigning them to a past defined as 'immature, unreal, and inauthentic', there has been an uneasy relationship between certain branches of Marxism and poetry, reflecting perhaps a broader unease about the increasingly porous boundaries between politics and culture.<sup>2</sup> For Marx in 1837, poetry belonged to the realm of 'broad and formless feelings thrown together, where nothing is natural, everything constructed from out of the moon, the complete opposition of what is and what should be'.<sup>3</sup> Marx ascribes to poetry the opposition 'between the actual and the possible that is peculiar to idealism', and strains of this conviction are echoed in contemporary discussions surrounding the nature and purpose of poetry within any programme of radical social change. It's also a persistent anxiety for poets. We worry that poetry doesn't 'change anything', that poetry – to quote Auden – truly 'makes nothing happen'. At its most trenchant edges, this discussion calls into question the viability of poetry – any poetry – as a tool for political criticism, suggesting that poetry, as a highly organised and 'artificial' form of language, is too enclosed within its own set of formalist processes to relate directly to wider social practices; further, it positions poetry as an overwhelmingly bourgeois – thus ideologically compromised – literary production (more of that anon).<sup>4</sup> It is an argument that treats with equal mistrust the experimental practices commonly attributed to an academic 'avant-garde', and the mainstream 'lyric mode', which is seen to temper both historical injustice and current crisis with aesthetic pleasure.

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Contemporary lyric writing is seen as ethically suspect for its failure to acknowledge its own 'object status'; for an ability and willingness to elide the material nature of its composition, and thus evade a reckoning with the economic, social, and historical forces that produced and contoured it.<sup>5</sup> In this reading the lyric poem is an artificer of order: it directs its readers towards a single monolithic interpretation of experience which it proceeds to proclaim as a universal truth; its signature manoeuvre is a disavowal of context in favour of a privileged interiority, with the poem's speaker originating insights from a position of individual exceptionalism. In other words, the lyric is seen to prettify and repackage experience. It is predicated upon a controlled and highly selective mastery over its materials; on the translation of raw experience into an ideal of emotional expressiveness. In its very impulse to manage or to resolve collective political abjection in measured moments of individual catharsis, the lyric poem denies, abets and replicates the coercions of wider capitalist culture. For working-class poetry in particular this manifests most regularly in the form of a 'lyric nostalgia', a sentimental fetishizing of the scenes of working-class domesticity or industrial labour in ahistorical and often highly aestheticized ways. This vignette from 'Christmas Eve' by Liz Berry would appear to fall into this category. Berry evokes a Black Country with the edges softened, an 'urban pastoral' characterised by what Peter Davidson in *The Idea of the North* has termed 'a benign pastness':<sup>6</sup>

Tonight the Black Country is tinselled by sleet  
falling on the little towns lit up in the darkness  
like constellations – the Pigeon, the Collier –  
and upon the shooting stars of boy racers  
who comet through the streets in white Novas.  
It's blowing in drifts from the pit banks,  
over the brown ribbon of the cut, over Beacon Hill,  
through the laploved chimneys of the factories.<sup>7</sup>

The argument states that any poem so lucid and meticulously crafted must speak from a contemplative position impossible for most working-class people under capitalism – Wordsworth's much vaunted 'bliss of solitude' is not a luxury afforded equally to everyone. The poem itself becomes a source of redemption, offering a restoration of dignity and an alleviation of suffering that society can or will not; its loving metaphoricity obscures the grim economic and social conditions to which its speaker is subject. The universalising ends of contemporary lyric conceal the fatal extent of the inequality that exists between persons and communities; promoting cathartic absolution, dissolving the serial oppressions of capitalism in a vague, rose-tinted gesture towards empathy: the beauty of the scene functions as a tacit justification for the inequalities that produced it.

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If the contemporary lyric is suspect, then the 'radical unintelligibility' proposed by some experimental poetry cohorts is doubly so. Their characteristic strategies – fragmentation, disruption, parataxis and collage – are perceived as 'elitist' and wilfully alienating. Although they may enhance the intellectual status of individual poets and the small substrate of readers willing and able to access their work, in their deliberate and polarising impenetrability; in the absence of grammatical and logical connections between words and phrases, such poems undermine their author's stated intention to forge affective solidarities beyond their own avant-garde enclaves. The 'difficulty' of a poetic text is not merely a stumbling block towards a shared understanding, but is actively productive of hierarchy, requiring as it does a priest-class of interpreters with their own specialist jargon whose job it is to parse the work and to adjudicate on its merit.

For working-class women the negotiation between 'lyric' and 'experimental' modes of poetry has been doubly fraught: feminist critique of innovative practice questions both the ethics and the efficacy of destabilising the female speaking subject when 'positive female identification is still culturally and politically vulnerable'.<sup>8</sup> Does experimental poetry's decentring of the lyric 'I', simply compound and complete a project of erasure already at work within wider society? In renouncing

subject and voice do poets deny the very mechanisms by which solidarities are forged and social conditions changed? Or, is an identity-centered poetics instrumental in coercing particular kinds of gendered and class-based performance, performances that tend to comfortably confirm the assumptions of a predominantly middle-class readership? These anxieties are not new. The construction and status of the gendered self, and the lyric expression of that self have long been driving and dynamic forces in the work of writers such as Denise Riley, Wendy Mulford, Maggie O'Sullivan, and Geraldine Monk. However, at a cultural moment so preoccupied with notions of identity, and in a political climate in which the position of working-class people – and working-class women in particular – is increasingly precarious and straightened, these questions take on a renewed urgency.<sup>9</sup>

In this extract from 'form ever follows function' Kimberly Campanello approaches these questions, retaining the lyric impulse while subjecting her text to various kinds of disruption on the level of syntax and structure: the poem incorporates a sonorous musicality appropriate to liturgy or prayer, but communicates in unpunctuated, non-narrative fragments.

unpadded kneelers and a framed poem on the shrine wall for saint margaret  
clitherow pressed to death on lady day good friday her zeal led her to har-  
bour spread out on the ground sharp stone at her back pray for us

Did she have children? Or was faith her focus?

*amenorrhea*

oh England thy fruit in the fields in the trees rotting thy work and pensions  
pressed on borrowed time wrong word stolen sugar and butter this year  
foreign merry christmas surge in spending drone takedown pray for us<sup>10</sup>

Campanello absents the lyric 'I' in favour of a porous 'us', united through prayer in moments of collective abjection: 'pray for us'. The text becomes a place of investigation into the categories of belonging that are summoned by use of the word 'us', and by extension the persons not easily accommodated within those categories. The 'us'

of the poem exists in uneasy relation to an unnamed and ambiguous 'she' who is subject to various kinds of critical scrutiny: from the poem's unspecified interlocutor, from an all-seeing God and the religious authority that God represents, and from the prying interventions of the DWP. Campanello seems to question what is at stake in rendering identities – especially poor female identities – legible.

The word 'form' allows for multiple constructions of meaning, and Campanello uses it to relate biologically female bodies to textual bodies; interrogating the ways in which both lyric form and female form have been instrumentalised in the service of nationalistic, political and religious scripts. Here, the poem's use of 'amenorrhea' as a punctuating refrain is significant. 'Amenorrhea' is a medical term for the absence of menstruation, or 'flow'. The word appears five times as an italicised interjection between stanzas, itself a disruption to the harmonious 'flow' of the text. Within the poem's religious context these interjections have an almost responsorial quality, and the sonic affinity between 'amenorrhea' and the liturgical 'amen' is intriguing. However, what feels most significant is that although menstruation itself has been traditionally figured by Christian orthodoxy as 'unclean', a woman who cannot menstruate is perceived as unwomanly or unnatural. A poetic practice that is not predicated upon lyric flow is equally unfeminine. Campanello uses the notion of 'flow' to address how the lyric form has been co-opted to create and contour particular kinds of gendered – specifically feminine – subjectivity. Campanello's poem is, therefore, a particularly useful lens through which to understand the interplay between 'innovative' and 'lyric' forms, and the anxiety that surrounds both modes of practice for contemporary working-class women.

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Both of these positions have their analogues within the academy: the anti-lyric tendency is perhaps best exemplified within those poetry cohorts most indebted to the American avant-garde of the previous century, particularly those figures typically associated with Language poetry. As Lyn Hejinian stated in her landmark essay 'The Rejection of Closure', Language poetry opposed the lyric's 'coercive epiphanic mode', its 'smug pretension to universality', attending instead to the materiality of the text;

to poem as substance, poem as sound.<sup>11</sup> This attention to sound continues to be of particular significance within the poetry of working-class women, where our accent or vocal identity is inseparable from our status as working-class women, and from the expectations that identity engenders.<sup>12</sup> Within the elite space of the university sound becomes a way of speaking to and through shifting perceptions of education and class, and subverting or denouncing the political, social and poetic assumptions contained within notions of 'accent' or 'dialect'. Strong vocal identity often complicates and undercuts the decentering of the lyric 'I' in ways that explore and critique the notion of a 'post-identity' poetic moment as something either tenable or ethical.

A focus on the materiality of text allows us to use the structural aspects of language to critique the unconscious and invisible organisations of linguistic power: the position of words within linguistic structures echo and evoke the positioning of living subjects within the structures of contemporary society. At a time when working-class visibility within both popular and political discourses is increasingly vexed, this interrogation of positionality assumes a critical importance. Radical poetry, that is poetry alive to the exploitation inherent to working-class existence, can only challenge capitalist ideology by first challenging notions about language, for it is through language that ideology is encoded and transmitted.

The argument against unintelligibility finds its most articulate and perhaps most militant expression in the New Work Writing inaugurated by North American poets Tom Wayman and Jim Daniels.<sup>13</sup> Conceived, in part, against the tendency of socialist realism to privilege politics above concrete descriptions of actual work, New Work Writing nevertheless shares with socialist realism, and indeed with the proletarian literature movements of the 1930s, a scepticism and disdain for 'non-realistic modernism and experimental poetry', which it classes as inherently and problematically bourgeois or 'elitist'.<sup>14</sup>

The limits of the former argument are easy to discern. To reject the 'lyric mode' wholesale is to dismiss its ability to 'form or confirm a body of felt mutuality'.<sup>15</sup> That is, a denial of its myriad origins in song, appealing beyond the printed page alone, and moving towards intuitive communal response, towards orality and improvisation. As feminist scholars have frequently reminded us, the lyric impulse is rooted



– to name but one of its several sources – in the *goll* or *caoin*, belonging to a charged, politicised iteration; to a 'traditional, shared mnemonic of resistance in its collective performance and transmission'.<sup>16</sup> It did not, in other words, emerge in its entirety from within the privileged precincts of western capitalist patriarchy; it is not a total or totalising structure, but an ever-evolving hybrid. It carries this long cross-cultural continuity within itself; its ethics are those of incorporation, adaptation and riff. In reality, there is no single homogeneous entity named 'the lyric', but a shifting mass of intersecting practices or modes, the most dominant of which – under western capitalism – have instrumentalised and exploited poetry's embracive and mellifluous dimensions, its generous eloquent impulses, toward its own ideological ends.

The argument against lyric, against the 'beautifying' or sentimental 'sugar-coating' of experience tends to underestimate the value of tenderness in anticipating and summoning the revolutionary moment. It insists on seeing any expression of love or care as reality-adverse; as anaesthetised – or anaesthetising – to the inequalities that confront and beset us. Yet, in the poetry of working-class women in particular, even in poems without an explicitly radical agenda, those very inequalities inform a work of militant cherishing. Berry's 'Christmas Eve' is not so much an effort to archive a 'benign' past, but to inscribe a loved and perpetual present. The poem knows that sleet is not 'tinsel'; it is not asking the reader to accept that boy racers are 'like' comets, or that a polluted river resembles, in any real sense, a 'ribbon'. The poem provokes a dissonance 'between the actual and the possible'; against cold, against grot, against alienation and unemployment in all its reductive brutality it erects an alternative dialectical tenderness.

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The argument against 'impenetrability' is harder to deconstruct, not because poetic innovation is a less valid or 'authentic' approach to working-class poetry, but because criticism of this mode has always felt more vociferous and entrenched. Outside of the academy accusations of 'elitism' abound, and within Marxist-feminist circles this often finds rhetorical expression in Audre Lorde's assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.<sup>17</sup> Lorde's revolutionary feminist dictum

springs from a basic principle: we cannot disrupt our exploitation by using the logic that justifies our exploitation. Feminism, for Lorde, had coalesced around a false – predominantly white, predominantly middle-class – consensus, one that excluded the bodies and voices of women not comfortably cradled within its narrow and prescriptive limits. The politics of exclusion and hierarchy were – are – patriarchy's weapons; an acceptance of identity categories as defined and policed by the oppressor is simply not good enough. It is not good enough because it fails and erases those women – queer women, black women, working-class women – who are not recognised or accommodated within those definitions. It is not good enough because it is only through sustained attention to the granular particularities of women's experience that revolutionary feminism can truly succeed. As Lorde states, what is required is a recognition of the 'fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic'.<sup>18</sup>

Lorde's is a demand for alterity and polyvocality as a precursor to radical change. But over time the nuance and specificity of her message has been eroded and misapplied. 'The master's tools' has come to figure for anything useful or powerful: and as in strategies of resistance – particularly with regard to armed struggle – so too within discourse. Attacks on the 'elitism' or 'wilful obscurantism' of innovative working-class poetry often emanate from a botched reading of Lorde in which poetic 'difficulty' is seen to represent the language tactics of a privileged oppressor.

But as Lorde herself would be the first to point out, and as Deleuze and Guattari later demonstrate in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, it is very often the case that the dominant powers appropriate and absorb our tools to their own ends. It is only because they repeatedly and forcefully assure us of their ownership that these tools become naturalised as their own.<sup>19</sup> Or, as Joelle Taylor writes in the long poem 'everything you have ever lost':

how your skin became insignia  
how they sold black back to you  
at inflated prices [...]

how they gentrified your streets  
 how they forced you out of your own mouth<sup>20</sup>

To claim that innovation or radical formal experiment are solely the fruits of bourgeois literary production is to be wilfully blind to the social conditions and particular pressured contexts that produce innovation. It is also to misrepresent the language tactics of the dominant powers.

For many working-class people, myself included, innovation is not a disinterested intellectual exercise; its roots are not theoretical and abstracted, but vividly embodied. Indeed, the compulsion to write poetry at all often stems from the material conditions of working-class life. Poetry, as an artistic medium, is the perfect mode of production for those who are poor in both resources and in time: it does not require specialist tools or training. It is portable. It is cheap. It can be practised anywhere. Poetry communicates in fragments and flashes, in moments or phrases pulled from the true. As Lorde writes in 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference': 'when we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art'.<sup>21</sup>

Lorde describes how 'a room of one's own' is an untenable dream for most working-class women, whose writing is often snatched back from the jaws of unloveable labour and domestic responsibility. Our moments of narrative and lyric cohesion are hard-won; the care and control they evince is a care and control that is seldom afforded us as citizens or subjects. The poems that contain this care function as small units of resistance: they struggle to hold their shape; the distortional stresses of working-class life continually threaten their integrity. For women, this is particularly acute, existing as we do at the intersection of multiple and competing demands. Our identities as artists and thinkers will always be compromised and undercut by our position as workers, and by our status as sources of domestic, sexual and reproductive labour. Beneath such stresses, rupture at the level of both syntax and subject is inevitable. When Campanello writes:

oh England thy fruit in the fields in the trees rotting thy work and pensions  
 pressed on borrowed time wrong word stolen sugar and butter this year<sup>22</sup>

We know well what she means, despite her use of disruptive paratactical strategies. The rotting fruit as metonym for the slow clock of nature collides with the pressured, mandated context of Work and Pensions appointments, a 'malignant rapidity' to which the speaker is subject.<sup>23</sup> Pressing is what happens to apples: squashed down and aged out of sweetness, bled of their useable, saleable nectar. This is also what happens to the bodies of poor women under capitalism. In connecting 'rotting' to borrowing and to wrongness through their sonic properties, Campanello links scenes of financial precarity with those of decay. Multiple levels of dependency and indebtedness meet in an ambiguous entity called 'England'. England is our damaged environment, where climate change has rendered the seasons out of whack. It is also a political territory and the government agencies that administer us within it. If each of these Englands is rotten, then working-class women will be the first to feel the pincer jaws of scarcity. The anxiety about using a 'wrong word' that permeates this poem is the very real fear that aid will be denied if our requests for assistance are not couched in bureaucratically correct terms.<sup>24</sup> The prayerful invocation is a measure of this desperation. No 'elitist' academic training is required to 'decode' this poem. Its strategies are simultaneously the result and the expression of a lived experience common to many of us.

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Working-class writers do not read in the same way as our middle-class peers; we have an entirely different relationship, both to language in general, and to the written word in particular. For middle-class persons the act of reading is most often conceptualised as a leisure activity, as inherently pleasurable and restorative. However, it is an exercise of pleasure through which the reader participates in the acquisition and confirmation of cultural status. It is a prestige-seeking activity, which situates the reader within a cohort of similarly well-read peers. Indeed, reading and being seen to have read the 'right' books contributes to a sense of shared class identity; contributes to a 'house-style', a shared fund of formal tropes and characteristic concerns. This identity is further moulded through discourse: literary journals and broadsheet book reviews; Radio 4 interviews with prize-winning authors. It is fostered through book-fairs and festivals; readings and signings, private events and exclusive content;

cottage retreats and weekend courses. For the middle-classes, who have had access to literature, literary discourse, and literary spaces from a young age, to read is to connect to a community of others like oneself. There is, in fact, often a significant overlap between the life experiences of readers and the writers whose work they consume. There is a level of identification, comfort; between writers who submit their work, and the journal editors who decide what is published. There is a level of identification, comfort, and entitlement that is impossible to imagine for even the most joyful and voracious of working-class readers, the most driven and devoted of aspirant writers.

Our reading experiences are different. Our scenes of reading are different: although we may read for pleasure we do so, often, in omnivorous and opportunistic ways, clawing back time and attention from myriad material demands and the uncondusive conditions of home and work. We cannot afford magazine subscriptions, our local shop does not sell the *London Review of Books*, and the library has been shut down. When we read, we read in part, with a sense of alienation and shame. We do not recognise affirmative reflections of ourselves in literature or in literary discourse. When we see ourselves in print at all we are routinely dehumanised and reduced. We are claimants or criminals in the language of the state. We are 'feral youth', 'benefit cheats' and 'scroungers' in the vocabulary of political propaganda. We are 'chavs' and 'pikeys' in popular imagination, the brunt of and the punch-line to a thousand classist jokes. This is not to portray the working-class reader as uniquely victimised, but to demonstrate that our relationship with language is qualitatively different. We are never quite comfortable or habituated enough to develop orderly habits of reading or writing, and this discomfort not only exerts a peculiar power over the rhetoric and aesthetics of our poetry, but can be deployed by poetry as a transformative tool, one that has the potential to renegotiate terms of social as well as textual encounter, to contest the instrumental articulacy demanded of us by government departments, and to resist the tyranny of 'good' middle-class prosody.

The rhythms of our lived experience are often punctuated and messy. Against the relentless routinized scheduling of work there is every conceivable kind of disruption or incursion: writing this essay I am assailed by barking dogs, wailing sirens,

the stutter of drills and the screaming of kids. I hear the stereos and televisions of my neighbours, and the general interruptive bustle of three adult people trying to occupy a ridiculously bare minimum of space. Naturally, this affects how I read, how I write and how I study. It is the same for the majority of working-class women: our default is not silence and space. This translates onto the page in a variety of ways.

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Jane Burn's 'So, I Grabbed Ahold of My Own Cunt' refuses to behave on the page. The poem links women's work in a number of 'unskilled' occupations to their victimisation by predatory men, and in doing so interrogates the misogyny that is an inherent and structural feature of capitalism:

Better that than under the thumb of the wrong man.  
The one that shits a brick cos your hemline's above the knee,  
the one who sights a level with your breasts.  
Come, you upskirters,  
gropers,  
fiddlers.  
Roll up, roll up to where we're stuck,  
behind our desk, our till, our bar, our counter top, our stall.  
Come<sup>25</sup>

A labour market that devalues women as workers also contributes to their victimisation as women: a woman in poorly paid, low status work is fair game for male predation, not merely because the material conditions of her job expose her daily to harassment, but because her lack of worth as defined by the capitalist patriarchy effectively excludes her from protection or respect.

In contrast, the men in the poem are identified with skilled labour. Although not explicitly shown engaging in trades, their status as artisans or craftsmen is signalled numerous times: they are measurers and assessors of hemlines and breasts, coolly 'sighting a level'. The association of the thumb as a crude instrument for gauging size or distance, and the evocation of the building trade through 'shits a brick' also

contribute to a reading of the men as connected to particular forms of skilled labour. Because their labour is valued, the men have greater agency within the poem. They are defined by their actions as 'upskirters', 'fiddlers' and 'gropers', while the women are characterised by inertia, 'stuck' behind the bars, tills and counter tops at which they work; this sense of stuckness is further emphasised by the impediment and delay present in the alternate meanings of 'bar', 'till' and 'stall'.

It is not, however, at the lexical level that this poem is at its most radical or interesting. In its irregular lines, staggered syntax, broken and contracted vernacular, the poem itself becomes part of a performance of seemingly 'unskilled' labour: it breaks with the mannered meter of the 'well made' poem and invents for itself a jagged 'unladylike' prosody, where a long line will suddenly snag and retract, leaving a single sharp syllabic unit – 'come' or 'catch' – like a textual hangnail. The poem's sonic patterning suggests a deep familiarity with difficult and ill-remunerated work, a difficulty inscribed at both the level of language and of grammar. Burn will veer from an inventive lyric line to a readymade colloquialism – 'bite our tongues', 'get the boot' – or a tired sexist joke – *'While you're down there, pet'*, identifying the poem itself with a kind of shoddy materiality. As the working lives of women are riven by and cobbled from numbing, repetitious instances of sexual harassment, so the text is similarly cobbled. Burn's poem manifests the difficulty for working-class women of mounting any form of lyric resistance, either within capitalism or within language itself.

Of course, the emphasis on poetry as material production is hardly new. Marjorie Perloff was writing as early as 1990 about 'renewed Marxist' attention to text as work site, text that should 'exhibit signs of the work that produced it, a work that has less to do with individual intentions as with the general economy within which it functions'.<sup>26</sup> And in 2001, Denise Riley astutely noted that 'the materiality of the words isn't the secondary but the primary stuff of the political'.<sup>27</sup> However, there is something unique about this attention to materiality within the poetry of working-class women, and it is a quality that is routinely left out of discussions surrounding text as labour.

The poetry of working-class women exposes the uneasy intersection between the work that women do and the work of being women, by which is meant the

coercive social pressure to reproduce certain values and embodied forms. Late-stage capitalism – and indeed its myriad global variations – demands and extracts something particular from us quite apart from our daily labour. It is not enough that we perform our work, we must also perform – in quite a different sense – our identities as women to the degree deemed acceptable by our employers and by wider culture: while engaged in difficult, demanding work, you must, nevertheless present as a smiling facilitator to other people's needs; ideally you are pretty, ideally you are slim, ideally you are young. For women, the signifiers of race and class, such as accent and grammar, are intimately linked to perceptions of femininity, sexual availability and moral worth. In Burn's poetry, but also in the writing of international working-class women poets such as Harryette Mullen in the US and Zheng Xiaoqiong in China, these syntactic tensions often appear in the poems as elegantly aestheticized lyric lines suddenly jammed into blunt descriptions of exploitative employment practices. This short excerpt from Xiaoqiong's 'Iron Nails' begins with an idealised depiction of young assembly-line workers, where their 'calm flesh' is penetrated by 'soundless nails', muting and stilling the scene within the idealised space of the page:

How many soundless nails pass through their calm flesh  
Their youth flows with virtue and purity, separated from profit, back pay  
Labor law, homesickness, and an unknown love<sup>28</sup>

There is a deep sublimity to Xiaoqiong's description of her fellow workers that evokes those virgin martyrs common to Catholic iconography, smiling benignly as their torturers gouge and lop at their prepubescent limbs. This image is suddenly undercut and its meter disrupted by a profoundly unmusical recitation of market forces: 'profit', 'back pay', 'labor law'. Although the poem's speaker separates the virtue and purity of the workers from those forces, they are nevertheless inseparably yoked within the space of the poem, producing a profound dialectical tension between the 'frailty' of youth and the crushing brutality of labour. What is demanded from the workers as women and what is demanded from them as workers exists in maddening and irreconcilable conflict. How is one to preserve or manifest 'virtue' or 'purity' under such dehumanising conditions? The workers' status as young women is simul-



taneously acknowledged – it is, in fact, the very argument *for* their exploitation – and erased by the work they perform. Xiaoqiong's 'unknown love' figures in part for that very tenderness or passion denied to them as women within a system which extracts their labour. It is, first and foremost, a love or recognition of the self.

Woman-worker, or indeed woman/worker is an identity or mode of being imperfectly recognised and held within words; an identity or mode of being that is governed by the language and the logics of the provisional, that cuts across and partakes of multiple categories of belonging. Something working-class girls learn to do early on in our lives is to switch registers; we are far more dexterous than boys at pin-balling back and forth between modes of speech; between restricted and elaborated language codes and the social roles that engender them. Working-class girls will often have a 'school voice', a 'home voice' and a 'street corner voice'. This gives us a superficial social mobility, but it also condemns us to daily acts of self-induced schizophrenia, to multiple improvised and competing 'performances'. This often manifests in our poetry as a concern with the ephemeral and impermanent nature of the aural. Burn, Xiaoqiong and Mullen all use their poetry to enact and critique language's relationship to authority and coercion.

For Xiaoqiong, particularly within the poem 'Language', the machinery of labour becomes conflated with the machinery of voice:

I speak this sharp-edged, oiled language  
of cast iron – the language of silent workers  
a language of tightened screws the crimping and memories of iron sheets  
a language like callouses fierce crying unlucky  
hurting hungry language back pay of the machines' roar occupational  
diseases<sup>29</sup>

Through an intimate – but by no means gentle or loving – and tactile relationship to the hole punch hardware she operates, Xiaoqiong begins to speak as the machine and the machine begins to speak through her, entangled in her writing and thinking processes. This is Clarice Lispector's 'Água Viva' reimagined for the exploited worker, so that when Lispector wrote:

What am I in this instant? I'm a typewriter making the dry echo in the dark,  
humid  
dawn. I haven't been human for a long time. They wanted me to be an  
object. I am an  
object. An object dirty with blood. An object that creates other objects and  
the machine  
creates us all. It makes demands. Mechanisms make endless demands on my  
life. But I  
don't totally obey: if I have to be an object, let me be an object that screams.<sup>30</sup>

Xiaoqiong speaks of the 'hurting hungry language' of machines. There is something inside of both of them that hurts, but Xiaoqiong's poem specifically takes to task the identification of women workers with their difficult and unappealing labour; an identification that culminates in the shutting out of their rasping roaring 'hungry' voices, voices that would draw attention to processes and practices we do not wish to openly acknowledge.

For Mullen, authority is inscribed across multiple linguistic registers and language is in a constant state of fraught negotiation inside of competing and conflicting systems: 'speak this way or you will not be employable ... you can't hang with us if you talk too proper'.<sup>31</sup> For Mullen, language is implicated in a series of power relationships; it exerts a violence and a pressure with which her texts flirt, debate and which they ultimately resist.

In the US there is already a vibrant and established scene in which working-class women poets – particularly BAME poets – consciously incorporate the interplay between orality and literacy; situating their work within both performance and experimental cohorts. Speaking to Elisabeth A. Frost for *Contemporary Literature* in 2005, Mullen states that she writes 'for the eye and the ear at once'; that she is always experimenting, striving to create in her poems a space that is 'neither completely spoken nor completely something that exists on the page'.<sup>32</sup>

When Mullen engages 'aurality' it is necessarily mediated through the printed text; it reaches the reader as a kind of multi-voiced ecstatic vernacular performance, one that interrogates the hybrid nature of identity, and plays with 'the conventions

of orthography, pronunciation, and socially determined meaning'.<sup>33</sup> This is best exemplified in the 'hip hyberbole' of 'Trimnings', collected as part of *Recyclopedia* in 2006:

Dress shields, armed guard at breastwork, a hard mail covering. Brazen  
privates, testing their mettle. Bolder soldiers make advances, breasting hills.  
Whose armor is brassier.<sup>34</sup>

Here Mullen plays two sets of meaning against each other. One is suggestive of sexual seduction, and the hidden defensive potential of women's clothes, specifically the sharp metal underpinnings of underwired bras. The other, playfully but with purpose, addresses the military's co-option of the body – specifically the working-class body. Only 'bolder soldiers' are able to advance, and power dynamics are evoked through her use of 'brassier', a play on 'brassiere', but also brass as in money, and brass as in 'the top brass'. It is impossible to decide which reading is intended as primary, thus the poem eludes any effort on the part of the reader to identify a fixed tenor or vehicle. By retuning attention toward sound, Mullen guides her readers toward a model of close listening, exposing the parallel meanings and hidden valences of words: 'a hard mail' is aurally indistinguishable from a 'hard male', for example, 'mettle' from 'metal' and 'armor' shares a suggestive sonic affinity with 'amour'.

Mullen rejects the privileging of written text, and the subordinate position in which traditional literary studies have held oral transmission; the tendency of its scholars to use literature unreflectively as a model for language, to construct grammatical rules on the basis of written texts alone, and to study the meaning of words primarily through print media. While advances in technology and the proliferation of new media have made it possible to record, store, archive and study more ephemeral and embodied forms of poetry, Mullen would argue that the privileging of the printed text has been naturalised to such a high degree within the precincts of a predominantly white academia that its status as the dominant model for language forms a powerful and unconscious bias. Mullen is also engaged in demonstrating that 'the codes of oppressed people also have their aesthetic basis', and that their discourses are every bit as 'rich', 'aestheticized' and 'metaphorical' as those of white

western literary canons. This recognition disrupts the easy and commonly held perception of an 'authentic' black culture defined by orality, and an 'authentic' black vernacular voice.<sup>35</sup>

This is the political basis for Mullen's dual appeal to eye and ear. Because aural/oral and written authority are encoded in different ways, Mullen's work traverses their points of divergence and intersection, with particular emphasis on both the language of advertising, and that of the traditional, conservative – white, middle-class – poetic canon. Canonical works derive their special status from being written down: they preserve and enshrine a fixed point in the history of literature, as part of a long continuum, and they speak with the weight of that history behind them. In *Muse and Drudge*, Mullen plays the conventions and conceits of typical canonical literature against the ephemeral forms of improvised blues, patois, slang and infomercial. The collision of these multiple discourses, and the corresponding sets of material conditions these discourses reveal, critique what Mullen refers to as the 'language of power' and the ways in which the speech of 'African Americans reflects our historic separation from mainstream [and literary] culture'.<sup>36</sup>

The poetic practices of working-class women writers in the UK are doubtless indebted to the work of Mullen, as well as to that of Patricia Smith and Claudia Rankine, all of whom navigate the shifting terrain between race, class, and gender to produce what Evie Shockley describes as not a 'Black Aesthetic' but a

black aesthetics, plural: a multiferous, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing.<sup>37</sup>

To 'race' we may also add 'class' and 'gender' and the multiple conflicts provoked at their intersection. Working-class innovation is driven by these conflicts.

\*

Working-class innovation is also driven not merely by an intellectual determination to use every available poetic resource – the metaphor, the simile, the epigraph or pic-

togram; the aphorism, joke or pun, the slang expression, the advertising slogan – to further the reach of our art. It is, rather, a textual counterpart to the resourcefulness and pressured improvisation required from us in daily life. Material necessity drives invention, and these acts of repurposing, jerry-rigging, cobbling and borrowing are the substantial and integral feature of our writing. We learn early how to stretch what we have, how to take the unlovely or the shoddily made and turn it into treasure, nectar, sustenance.

In his 2019 essay 'Janky Materiality: Artifice and interface', Jeff T. Johnson describes the poetic disposition of 'jankiness' as being one that invokes or evokes 'poor quality', 'reclamation, or the reclaimed, the reused'.<sup>38</sup> The janky construction, Johnson states, is

loved together, not slipshod or cheap; but loved, constructed in amorous desperation, for love of the thing, and recognition of embodiment, our objecthood. Janky materiality is real, is ambient artifice, aesthetic use value, provisional utility.<sup>39</sup>

This quality of 'provisional utility' is a pervasive quality in the poetry of working-class women, as is Jankiness' aesthetic of appropriation 'of material, of culture' and 'between contexts', producing unstable, shifting textual assemblages, the function of which is 'unpredictable', a

sub-heterotic hybrid, with strange vigor. The components, in other forms and formats, might have worked better, but janky constructs do something else. Their contexts, meanwhile, conflate the histories of their components: hyperspatial hauntologies that put us in the here and then.<sup>40</sup>

Hybridity is a feature and a function of working-class life too, and this has as much to do with food, furniture and clothes as with language. Ultimately, it has to do with identity itself, and in our poetry these hybrid identities are registered through cant or vernacular; through parataxis, fragmentation and disruption, through *other* kinds of music infiltrating and undermining the orderly poetic habits of contemporary

lyric prosody. Sometimes this manifests as the blurring and bending of genre, as in Rankine's *Citizen* or Burn and Bob Beagrie's *Remnants*.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes this manifests in the collision of grammars and logics, sometimes in the poem's imperfect accommodation on the space of the page. A recent experience editing a long poem by Melissa Lee-Houghton for *Culture Matters* which quite literally refused to politely occupy the form into which our traditional print media was attempting to compress it, was an invigorating reminder that the poem-on-page/poem-in-book is not always the primary or 'best' version of the text. Houghton's long, unbroken lines demanded breathing room, and argued forcefully for an expression of working-class experience not curbed or sanitised by the logistical or social demands of cultural space.

For working-class women, our relationship to the world is often characterised by transition, impermanence and precarity on the one hand, and by impediment, obstruction and awkwardness on the other. Our poems are accordingly governed by those same logics: poetry as a textual equivalent to squatting, couch-surfing, living out of suitcases in single rooms with flimsy walls; the occupation of inadequate structures in new and inventive ways; acts of repurposing, recycling, subverting, making do and making new. In much the same way as a derelict office block becomes a makeshift gallery or a community café, under the shaping stress of poetry, English – by which I mean the conservative literary canon – becomes other, is invested with 'strange vigour'. English isn't 'home' to us. We are not its implied audience; we enter its spaces with a sense of unease, unsure if we are speaking 'properly', if we have a right to be there. Poetry is a way of forcing this unhomey home to make space for you.

\*

Any vision of working-class poetry that aspires towards radicalism must hold these diverse strategies close; must bear in mind Lorde's call for alterity and polyvocality. This alterity is frequently both a theme and a strategy in the poetry of working-class women, in poems that use words, phrases and poetic fragments omnivorously and from a variety of sources, in – for example – Romani čhib, or Shelta, together with a wide range of literary, historical and pop-cultural references, to form a palimpsest of image and information.<sup>42</sup>

For Édouard Glissant this unquantifiable alterity, or 'opacity', signals a diversity that exceeds any attempt from the outside to impose categories of identifiable difference. It exposes the limits of representation, and thus the failures of any cohesive and totalising claims of identity as a lens through which to understand – or dominate – the myriad perspectives of the world, its political processes, or its peoples. It resists the hierarchies of absolute othering.<sup>43</sup>

To those who would represent concern for 'alterity' as an 'elitist' strategy, the rebuttal would appear to be a resounding: 'where have you been?'<sup>44</sup> The tactics of the 'oppressor' have long since ceased to rely upon wilful obscurantism, if they ever did. We are not living in an era when the dominant powers wish to 'shut us out'. Rather, they wish to absorb us. Ours is an age of compulsory visibility and mass digital surveillance, a surveillance in which we are encouraged to participate through a succession of infinitely assessable images; an endlessly scrolling torrent of data. Social media normalises neo-liberal surveillance culture by dressing it up in warm fuzzy buzzwords: 'connectivity', 'togetherness', 'frictionless sharing'. It isn't just that the digital footprints we generate can be used to monitor, profile and feedback information to a variety of agencies for political or consumerist ends, it's that this process acclimatises us to the idea of living without privacy; it diminishes our understanding of our own autonomy – and the autonomy and difference of others – as something necessary and significant.

Meanwhile politicians harness the language of mass appeal, boiling complex issues down to a code of plain statement from which every shred of nuance has been shaved. Advertising is accessible, as are tabloid headlines and political soundbites. Capitalist discourses use ease of assimilation to slide their toxic messages past us on the sly. *Those* are the enemy's tactics. Our poetry must do more.<sup>45</sup>

And it does. Our 'cants', dialects and patois, frequently described in pejorative terms as being less language than tactic, are nevertheless imaginative and supremely resistive. We make use of multiple linguistic parries and evasions: reversal, metathesis, affixing and substitution. We drop or transpose consonant clusters. We alliterate and metaphoricalise; we play and pun. We incorporate the bejesus out of Romani, Polari, slang. We cultivate and remix idiolects. We force literary and historical

allusions up against pop culture; our clipped and cantering rhythms, our t-stopped compressive poetry against iambic pentameter. Writing about Shelta in 2014, Sharon Gmlech points out that Shelta's special function is in 'concealing meaning from outsiders, especially during business transactions and in the presence of police. Most utterances are terse and spoken so quickly that a non-Traveller might conclude the words merely had been garbled'.<sup>46</sup> We take the 'garbled' and we play it against the eloquence of the contemporary lyric. We turn erudition into a taunt. Out of necessity, by intuition, with purpose and on purpose.<sup>47</sup> We manifest forms of fugivity and resistance to produce a working-class poetics every bit as diverse, dynamic and contingent as class consciousness itself.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See the endlessly proliferating fall out from Rebecca Watts 'The Cult of the Noble Amateur', *PN Review* 239, Vol. 44 No. 3, January – February 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Parker (1996) 'Re-Marx: Prehistory, Rethinking Marxism', 9:4, 1–15, DOI: 10.1080/08935699608685505 Accessed 11.03.2021.
- <sup>3</sup> Letter from 'Letter from Marx to his Father In Trier', transcribed by Paul M Schafer in *The First writings of Karl Marx*: [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/letters/37\\_11\\_10.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/letters/37_11_10.htm) Accessed 11.03.2021.
- <sup>4</sup> A hangover, perhaps from New Criticism, with its attention to the poetic text as a closed self-referential aesthetic unit.
- <sup>5</sup> Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in *Onward: Contemporary Poetry & Poetics*, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). Also see Carla Harryman, *The Middle* (San Francisco, GAZ: 1983).
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of the North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 199.
- <sup>7</sup> Liz Berry, 'Christmas Eve', from *Black Country* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2014): <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/26704/auto/0/0/Liz-Berry/CHRISTMAS-EVE/en/list> Accessed 10.03.2021.
- <sup>8</sup> Caroline Bergvall, 'No Margins to This Page: Female Experimental Poets and the Legacy of Modernism', *Fragmente* 5 (1993), 30–33.
- <sup>9</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley', *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter, 1996), 620–670, offers a useful account of this scene in Britain during the 1990s.
- <sup>10</sup> Kimberly Campanello, 'form ever follows function', in *Witches, Warriors, Workers: An Anthology of Contemporary Working Women's Poetry*, ed. Jane Burn and Fran Lock (Newcastle: Culture Matters, 2020), p. 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in *Onward: Contemporary Poetry & Poetics*, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Geraldine Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan are perhaps the most significant foremothers for the current generation of working-class women writers. Geraldine Monk, *Selected Poems* (Cambridge: Salt, 2014), and Maggie O'Sullivan, *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*, (Cambridge: Salt, 2010).
- <sup>13</sup> Tom Wayman, *Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing* (Canada: Harbour Publishing, 1983).



- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley and the "Awkward Lyric"' in *The Fortnightly Review*. <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2016/10/denise-riley/> Accessed 11.03.2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Angela Bourke, 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry', in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 55.
- <sup>17</sup> Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2012), p. 110.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 111.
- <sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), p. 417. Deleuze and Guattari speak specifically about 'warfare' as initially stateless and nomadic, appropriated into the machinery of capitalism.
- <sup>20</sup> Joelle Taylor, *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* (London: Out-Spoken Press, 2017), p. 131.
- <sup>21</sup> Lorde, p. 114.
- <sup>22</sup> Campanello, p. 20.
- <sup>23</sup> A term coined by the great experimental poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis to describe the speeding up and compression of time to which we are subject under capitalism. See 'Take your time: The ethics of the event in *Drafts*' by Catherine Taylor: <https://jacket2.org/article/take-your-time-ethics-event-drafts> Accessed 10.03.2021.
- <sup>24</sup> In the blurb to *Interregnum* (London: Creation Books, 1994) Geraldine Monk describes this condition as being subject to 'language magic', where a simple yes or no has the power to grant or deny a whole range of opportunities.
- <sup>25</sup> Jane Burn, *Witches, Warriors, Workers: An Anthology of Contemporary Working Women's Poetry* (Newcastle: Culture Matters, 2020), p. 57.
- <sup>26</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 291.
- <sup>27</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 112.
- <sup>28</sup> Zheng Xiaoqiong, *A Needle Hole Through Constellations* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2019): <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/24307/Zheng-Xiaoqiong/en/tile> Accessed 12.03.2021.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012), p. 78.
- <sup>31</sup> Quoted in *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics*, ed. Deborah Brown, Annie Finch, and Maxine Kumin (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2005), p. 283.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Elizabeth A. Frost in *Contemporary Literature*: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/harryette-mullen>. See also Elizabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City IA: University of Iowa Press, 2005), p. 136–155.
- <sup>33</sup> Quoted in "'The Eye and the Ear at Once": Collapsing the Speakerly/Writerly Divide' *Generic Pronoun*: <https://genericpronoun.com/2014/02/18/the-eye-and-the-ear-at-once/> Accessed 12.03.2021.
- <sup>34</sup> Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T, and Muse & Drudge* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006), p. 20.
- <sup>35</sup> Harryette Mullen, interviewed for *Generic Pronoun*, 'The Eye and the Ear at Once: Collapsing the Speakerly/Writerly Divide': <https://genericpronoun.com/2014/02/18/the-eye-and-the-ear-at-once/> Accessed 12.03.2021.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>37</sup> Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City IA: University of Iowa Press, 2011), p. 10.
- <sup>38</sup> Jeff T. Johnson, 'Janky Materiality: Artifice and interface': <https://jacket2.org/article/janky-materiality> Accessed 12.03.2021.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, (New York: Penguin, 2015), and Jane Burn and Bob Beagrie *Remnants*, (Newton-le-Willows: The Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2019) respectively.
- <sup>42</sup> I will confess to having a horse in this particular race, but I'm not the only one. Sarah Wimbush's recent *Bloodlines* also partakes of this strategy, as does *Apple Water: Povel Panni* by Raine Geoghegan. Obviously there are other variations: poems that incorporate Yiddish, Polari, West Indian patois, but Shelta is the example nearest to my heart.
- <sup>43</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 194.
- <sup>44</sup> For example, Tom Wayman in 'The Lost Platoon': [http://tomwayman.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/tomwayman-com\\_essay-02\\_avant-gardeorlostplatoon.pdf](http://tomwayman.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/tomwayman-com_essay-02_avant-gardeorlostplatoon.pdf) Accessed 12.03.2021.
- <sup>45</sup> My thinking on this area has been shaped by my reading of The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
- <sup>46</sup> Sharon Gmelch, *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman* (London: Souvenir Press, 1986).
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid. and Sharon Gmelch and George Gmelch, *Irish Travellers: The Unsettled Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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