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'Speaking with the voices of the dead': Sean Bonney, Amiri Baraka, Arthur Rimbaud and revolutionary poetics

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The essay considers Sean Bonney's work in the period 2008–2014. It focuses on his PhD thesis on Amiri Baraka, (completed in 2013) and the publications *Baudelaire in English* (2008) and *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015). The thesis explored tensions between aesthetic and political commitment in Baraka's work during the 1960s, a period of particular importance in Baraka's development, as it marked his shift from 'beatnik' bohemianism to Black nationalism. The essay uses the thesis to examine Bonney's own exploration of the possibilities of a revolutionary poetics in this period in the context of the political events of the time. It traces his attempts to dissolve bourgeois subjectivity and the transformation of the individual subject into a collective subjectivity through his engagement with Baudelaire and Rimbaud and his arrival at a militant poetics which aims to express 'complex, multiple ideas ... with a singular directness'.



In October 2012, Sean Bonney completed a PhD, under the supervision of Will Rowe at Birkbeck, on ‘Tensions Between Aesthetics and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka’. The thesis explored aesthetic decisions made by Amiri Baraka in relation to his deepening political commitment during the 1960s. It focused on the 1960s (specifically 1960–67) because of the particular importance of this period in Baraka’s development: these years marked Baraka’s shift, after his 1960 visit to Cuba, from an involvement with ‘beatnik’ bohemia to a commitment to Black nationalism.¹ The issues it addressed were obviously relevant to Bonney himself in this period: the tension between aesthetics and political commitment is evidenced in his own contemporaneous writings, while the relationship between the bohemian figure of the *poète maudit* and the revolutionary poet haunts Bonney’s life (and death). As a result of the banking crash of 2008 and the Government policy of austerity that followed, the years 2009 to 2012 were also significant years politically.² Through Baraka’s career – and his aesthetic and political choices – Bonney’s thesis explored the larger issue of the possibilities for (and of) a revolutionary poetry. This was the subject of the conference Bonney co-organised at Birkbeck on ‘Poetry and Revolution’ in May 2011.³ It was also the matter of his own poetry during this period.

Rimbaud and the Paris Commune

On 25 October 2010 Bonney had gone to a talk by Sebastian Hayes on ‘Rimbaud and the Paris Commune’ at the Marx Memorial Library. In a blog post he criticised Hayes’s repetition of ‘the spurious myth that has grown up about Rimbaud as proto-punk rebel living a life of sex and drugs, writing a handful of brilliant poems before burning out around the age of 19’.⁴ Bonney proposes, instead, a reading of Rimbaud’s work (and avant-garde poetry generally) as ‘the subjective counterpart to the objective upheavals of any revolutionary moment’. He noted that, in May 1871, contemporaneous with the massacres of the communards that concluded the Commune, Rimbaud laid out his poetic programme in two letters, ‘*Lettres du Voyant*’ – one to his teacher, Georges Izambard, written 13 May 1871, and the other to his friend, Paul Demeny (15 May 1871). In the letter to Izambard, Rimbaud declared his intention to become a poet and recorded his labour to make himself a seer (*‘Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre voyant’*). He also announced the process: *‘Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens’*. And he explained: *‘Je pense: en devrait dire: on me pense ... Je est un autre’*. Rimbaud repeated these ideas in his letter to Demeny. By contextualising these letters in relation to the Paris Commune and Rimbaud’s solidarity with the communards, Bonney reads the ‘long, systematic derangement of all the senses’ (the variant phrasing from the text of the letter to Demeny), not as ‘a simple recipe for personal excess’, but as ‘a process

that will destroy bourgeois subjectivity'.⁵ For Bonney, that 'systematic derangement of all the senses' included the social senses, and the desire for 'I' to become 'another' referred to 'the transformation of the individual subject into the collective during moments of revolutionary upheaval'.⁶

In this same blog, Bonney argues that it is in Rimbaud's later poems, after the defeat of the Commune, rather than those written in celebration of the Commune, that he becomes truly political: 'Those last poems are intensely hallucinatory and fragile, a picture of a mind at the end of its tether and in the process of falling apart'. In interview, he has described the poetry of *Une Saison en enfer* as 'coming out of the pain of that collective subjectivity returning to an isolated, personal one'.⁷ In the blog, Bonney similarly states that he reads these last poems as an account of 'the painful return to capitalist business-as-usual after the intensity of social upheaval, of the agony of the collective I gradually and painfully returning to its individuality as the uprising is defeated'. At the same time, Bonney is conscious that, 'a poetry like Rimbaud's is all too easily recuperable' in the present day as 'a sort of punk romanticism' rather than as 'the carrier for the utopian desire for absolute transformation'. These two possibilities – of recuperation or transmission – remained a concern for Bonney.

Bonney returned to these ideas and extended the argument in his own 'Letter on Poetics' (25 June 2011).⁸ Beginning with a reference to the NUS / UCU protest against student fees on 10 November 2010, which involved the occupation of the lobby of 30 Millbank, the Conservative Party Headquarters, and the flying of anarchist flags from its roof, Bonney reflects on the 'rapid collectivising of subjectivity' that 'equally rapidly involves locked doors, barricades, self-definition through antagonisms' (LAF, p.140). He then recalls the lecture on Rimbaud at 'Marx House' and repeats some of the ideas he had already stated on the blog. This leads to the question: 'How could what we were experiencing ... be delineated in such a way that we could recognise ourselves in it' (LAF, p.140). After rejecting the value of 'a rant against the government' and reflecting self-deprecatingly on the perceived inefficacy of contributing poetry to the student occupation ('frankly, I'd have been better off just drinking'), he then imagines the ideal political poem: 'could we write a poem that (1) could identify the precise moment in the present conjuncture, (2) name the task specific to that moment i.e. a poem that would enable us to name that decisive moment, and (3) exert force inasmuch as we would have condensed and embodied the concrete analysis of the concrete situation' (LAF, pp.140–41).

In the meantime, he turns to Rimbaud's letters and to 'poetic labour' as 'the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity': '& seeing as language is probably the chief of the social senses, we have to derange that', but without turning into 'lame-assed

conceptualists' (LAF, p.141). What is needed is not bourgeois 'anti-communication' but 'a new communication on all levels of practice' (p.141). After a Marxian glance off Charles Olson's take on form and content in 'Projective Verse' ('social being determines content, content deranges form'), Bonney remarks: 'I'd like to write a poetry that could speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity & thus make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism' (LAF, p.142). In a second set of numbered points, he then proposes that a lyric 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' (LAF, p.142). For most of the 'Letter on Poetics' Bonney is concerned with collective experience (the need to register 'what we were experiencing' and to register it in such a way 'that we could recognise ourselves in it'), and, even when he expresses his individual ambition as a poet, this second set of points seeks to combine in the lyric the role of individual interrupter with the insurrectionist collective.

Unsurprisingly, Bonney's blog post and his 'Letter on Poetics' draw on (and are in dialogue with) the research he was engaged in for his thesis.

Towards a Theory of Revolutionary Poetics

Bonney's thesis discusses that part of Baraka's early writing career that coincides with the Black Liberation movement and Baraka's involvement in the 1967 Newark Riots, where he was arrested and nearly beaten to death by the police.⁹ That is, Bonney situates the work in the context of the first phase of Baraka's political activism. Bonney starts, however, with the more general question that underlies the thesis by advancing the possibility of a revolutionary poetry that is distinct from agitation or propaganda, but carries out the tasks of both simultaneously through the expression of complex ideas with 'a singular directness' (p.8). At the same time as he proposes this utopian possibility, as part of the dialectical thinking that characterises Bonney's work, he is careful to distinguish it from the surrealist idea of poetry as 'a privileged zone of emancipated thought' (p.9). Bonney's thesis was (and remains) the site of an important negotiation of his own politics and poetics through a reading of Baraka's political and aesthetic decisions, which, for Baraka, involved a negotiation of the European vanguardism of Dada and surrealism and the American late-modernist example of Charles Olson as well as an engagement with the African-American experience and the art-forms it produced.¹⁰

At the outset, Bonney provides a series of contexts in which to situate his thesis. First, he cites Cedric J. Robinson's work on the blindness of mainstream European Marxism to the histories of African peoples and to the experiences of people descended from slaves,

despite Marx's acknowledgement in *Capital* that the development of the European bourgeoisie was built on the labour of slaves.¹¹ He then notes Robinson's statement that 'the preservation of a particular social and historical consciousness' was the first form of struggle 'in the Black radical tradition'. Finally, he further contextualises his project by referencing Aldon Nielsen's account of the neglect of a tradition of radical Black poetics and the continuing marginalisation of Black literary modernism – including both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.¹² As he observes, Fred Moten places Baraka as central to Black Aesthetics and shows how Black Aesthetics can question 'the normative values of mainstream modernist discourse' (p.26).

Bonney then briefly (and productively) traces Baraka's debt to – and difference from – Olson. In this account, when Olson writes about the necessity of avoiding 'the lyrical interference of the individual as ego', he rejects the 'bourgeois ideal of the self-contained, privatised individual as the only legitimate conduit for the expression of experience within poetry' (p.21). However, for a Black poet like Baraka, 'the assertion of ego – precisely because it is an ego that is not permitted by the white world – becomes absolutely necessary' (p.21). Bonney accordingly arrives at the position (contra the Olson of 'Projective Verse') where the ego can be asserted as an interrupter, as 'an *antagonistic* interference that is essential to the political workings of the poem' (p.21). Bonney's perception that Baraka 'must express the interference of the ego' because it is 'the interference of a white society that would deny the reality of Baraka's own experience' (p.22) chimes with his own need to shatter the bourgeois subject, to counter bourgeois subjectivity as a form of subjection. The struggle within the poem, for Bonney (as for Rimbaud), then becomes the expression of 'a social pain that emerges from out of the poem to become a social antagonist' (p.22), making visible the social oppression that is 'the invisible content of liberal bourgeois democracy' (p.22). More than just protesting or bearing witness, the poet, at their best, is able 'to jam the signal of official reality' (p.23) through the production of counter-images. However, that jamming of 'the signal of official reality' still falls short of 'the transformation of the individual subject into the collective' in the moment of social struggle that Bonney contemplates in both the blog and the thesis (p.104).

Aesthetics and Political Commitment

Following in the footsteps of Fred Moten and Nathaniel Mackey, Bonney's thesis begins with a discussion of the importance of music to Baraka's aesthetics (and to the Black Radical Tradition generally). He draws on Baraka's idea of Black Music as a 'survival code' within a hostile white culture, carrying ideas and attitudes (and messages) that could not be expressed openly, but Bonney then suggests that these survival codes also had the potential to become 'attack codes', the expression of an 'explicitly oppositional

culture', capable of turning into 'actual revolt' (p.43). As Moten puts it in relation to Baraka's poetry: 'Syncopation, performance, and the anarchic organization of phonic substance delineate an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work'.¹³ In this context Bonney instances the politically-committed Black Music played by Charles Mingus and Archie Shepp and their effect on the Civil Rights Movement and the later Black Liberation Movement.

Bonney's first chapter, however, begins with an epigraph from Duke Ellington: 'You have got to find some way of saying it without saying it'.¹⁴ Bonney's chapter initially addresses silence, the enforced silence of Black Americans, and then presents instrumental jazz as a means of communication – more specifically as 'an expression of revolutionary desire' (p.32), which, after periods of hermeticism and irony, eventually breaks out in explicit social protest, involving the remembrance of past and current oppression, and the assertion of African origins. The chapter draws on Baraka's writings about jazz, *Blues People* (1963), and his early prose pieces.¹⁵ The African-American 'Sorrow Songs' occupy an important place in this stage of the argument. These spirituals were, in W.E.B. DuBois's words, the 'message of the slave to the world'; for Baraka, the suppressed and 'unvoiced longings' expressed in these tales of 'death and suffering' were a potential source of strength.¹⁶ For Bonney, the 'oppressed past' that is the latent content of Black music becomes an energy stored within the artwork that can be activated in the right circumstances (p.44). In the context of the Black Liberation Movement, Bonney argues, the implicit became explicit (p.44), as he evidences through the words of Charles Mingus and Archie Shepp, where sorrow has been transformed into anger, its antagonism no longer coded (as in Ellington's music) but even made 'clear to its enemies' (p.53). (The issue of opacity and whether antagonism should be 'clear to its enemies' is one to which Bonney regularly returns.) At the end of the chapter, in a characteristic movement, Bonney confronts 'the limits of music' (p.61) and, with that recognition of a limit, the necessary turn from artwork to action. He focusses on Baraka's poem 'Rhythm and Blues (1 (for Robert Williams, in exile)', which, as Bonney notes, is dedicated not to a musician but to a political figure: Baraka had met Williams, a pre-Black Panther advocate of armed-self defense and author of *Negroes with Guns*, in Cuba, where Williams was in exile after fleeing the US government.¹⁷ While looking back to the past of Black experience, this poem also looks forward to a future. This view to the future raises for Bonney another question: namely, 'the fate of the artwork ... in the moment of revolutionary transformation that the artwork points towards and actually helps usher into being' (p.66). Is the revolutionary artwork working towards its own supersession? What becomes of the revolutionary artist in the post-revolutionary period? For Bonney, the career and writings of Mayakovsky provided one answer (p.208).¹⁸

The second chapter explores Baraka's search, after his visit to Cuba, for an appropriate form of effective political action. The chapter explores the nature of Baraka's politicization on that July 1960 visit to Cuba with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and his subsequent dissatisfaction with New York bohemia. Bonney argues that the central insight Baraka brought back from Cuba was that the American social and political system was built on lies, and that perception extended to the world that Baraka had previously inhabited of New York bohemia and its products. Bonney explores Baraka's critique of bohemia in the poem 'The Politics of Rich Painters' (1962) and presents this as the context for the violence of works such as the play *Dutchman*, the essay 'The Revolutionary Theatre' (1965), and the poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus' (1963), where the violence is read as Baraka's attempt to 'get out from under' the lies (p.68).¹⁹ Bonney presents this work as a confrontational literature, as an attempt to make art that would contribute to the political struggle, but also as work that grows out of Baraka's arguments with himself about what a politically committed writing might be (p.70).²⁰ In this context, he points to the poems of *The Dead Lecturer* as 'self-lacerating', 'continually undermining himself' (p.71), as engaging with Baraka's sense of his own complicity in a regime of lies. Bonney's own work in this period (from *Baudelaire in English* through to *Happiness: Poems after Rimbaud*) is engaged in a similar argument with himself and a similar process of self-undermining dialectic.

Bonney acknowledges the attempt to opt out of an America of conformism, anti-communist paranoia and potential nuclear annihilation by a sub-culture that developed in opposition to what Michael McClure described as an 'undeclared military state'.²¹ However, the question that arises is whether this bohemian refusal is effectively a disengagement, a dream of individual freedom that was ultimately complicit with (and reliant upon) what it claimed to resist, mistaking artistic revolt for political change. For Baraka, the world of bohemia stands contrasted with the speeches of Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, and Patrice Lumumba. While acknowledging a degree of unfairness, in this account, to the politicised counter-culture that developed out of bohemia through opposition to the Vietnam War, Bonney contrasts The Poetry Project at St Mark's Church (and its use of government funds intended to support youth from deprived communities to instead provide support for the largely white bohemian arts community) with Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (and its support for Black working-class youth) in terms of anti-establishment posturing versus real political work within an oppressed community (pp.82–83). Here Bonney's account might be compared with Moten's description of Baraka's work in relation to collectivity: 'Lingering in the broken rhythms of the field where blackness and black radicalism are given in and as black (musical) performance, in and as the improvisation

of ensemble' (*The Break*, p.86). As Bonney puts it, with the Black Arts project, 'Art is forcing open a new ground from which to act socially' (p.86). The question Bonney then addresses is: What should a political poem do? He rejects protest poems that tell us what we already know and invite the reader to understand and sympathise: all this does is flatter the reader into thinking they are exempt. The issue Bonney addresses is how to turn a bohemian poetics into a visionary social poetics. It is at this point that Bonney turns to Rimbaud and the Paris Commune. As in the blog, Bonney presents this moment in 1871 as an historic conjuncture in which 'the individualist "I" dissolves into the convulsive "we" of the Commune' (p.104). He compares this to Baraka's own 'convulsive transformation into collectivity' which extends into revealing 'a history that has been stolen and then deliberately made invisible' (p.105). In contrast to the left-wing liberal position that collapses into idealistic morality, appealing to the better nature of the bourgeoisie (p.106), Bonney contemplates a poetry that can carry the content of panic, hatred, irrationalism, a poetry whose work is to produce counter-images which can become apparent and effective at specific historic conjunctures.²²

The third chapter offers a reading of Baraka's novel, *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), as just such a production of counter-images. In the 'Projective Verse' essay, Olson described the poem in terms of 'energy transferred from where the poet got it ... all the way over to, the reader', but, as Bonney notes, Olson has nothing to say about what happens to that energy once it reaches the reader (p.128). Here Bonney picks up Baraka's idea (in 'The Revolutionary Theatre') of imagination as a 'practical vector': the imagination 'stores all data'; it is 'the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things"'; the 'initial circumscribed energy' creates the image, and so begins 'that image's use in the world'.²³ In Bonney's account, as noted above, counter-imagery can jam the signals from the data-store of official imagery. However, this is not just an individual project: Bonney cites again Baraka's account of the work of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem in 1965 and its transformative effect on the collective by offering 'an engagement with and a contribution to the everyday life of the Black working class' (p.134). In this radicalising of Olson's concept, energy transfer to the reader aims to influence the reader's subsequent action on the world and to further the creation of new meanings in the world. In Bonney's account, Baraka's engagement with the community meant the creation of new concepts of what art is and what it does, with new art forms and new social forms developing simultaneously.

In this context Bonney turns to the surrealists as an earlier attempt to combine radical poetics with radical politics – and, more specifically, he turns to Aimé Césaire. Bonney figures surrealism in terms of the creation of strange worlds with an antagonistic relationship to the bourgeois world, exposing the barbarism that that world conceals in

the conditions of oppression in the everyday. However, where European surrealism is concerned with the 'marvellous', Bonney argues, Black surrealism is grounded in the nightmares embedded in the collective black unconscious.²⁴ For Césaire, as for Baraka, the new disassociated image 'smash[es] through the barriers' put in place by the old image system, and it does this while drawing on 'actually lived reality' (p.142). Rimbaud's cultivation of the visionary fractured the everyday through the evocation of an elsewhere (*ailleurs*) through images of arctic seas, deserts, infernos, swamps, dazzling snow, and rubies, 'the life of adventure of children's books';²⁵ by comparison, Bonney suggests, the image in Césaire and Baraka is both revelatory and connective. Bonney concludes: 'Avant-garde poetics are, ultimately, only legitimate, in political terms, if they can push themselves out of art categories and into the fault-lines between poetics and revolution.'

The final chapter, 'Towards a Militant Poetics', begins by reading Baraka's *Black Magic: Poetry 1961–1967* (1969) through Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The chapter addresses the overcoming of the bourgeois self; the writer becoming part of the collective; and the use of vernacular to expand the meanings that society uses to explain itself. The chapter lays the ground work for a militant poetics at the same time as it displays an ambivalence towards the political efficacy of poetry. This ambivalence is evidenced in the replacement of poetry by the term 'writing' in alternation with 'action'. It is manifested in Bonney's attention to George Jackson's letters from prison, *Soledad Brother* (1973), which Jean Genet, in his Introduction to the Penguin edition, described as 'poetry'.²⁶ This is the context for Bonney's own turn to 'Letters' and for his frequent comments, at this time, that he might have given up writing poetry for full-time political activism.²⁷ Instead of 'literature', the chapter proposes what Fanon called 'combat literature' and what Baraka called 'struggle forms'. However, while promoting 'combat literature', Bonney also considers the issue that Baraka's plays of this period raise from their status as 'the combat literature of a failed revolution' (p.162). What is the value of such writing if the revolution it is designed to promote fails? Bonney argues that, precisely because the revolution failed, such works continue to carry 'trace elements' that are potentially active.²⁸ In this context he examines Baraka's poem 'Leadbelly Gives An Autograph', which resuscitates Nat Turner and Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) and brings those energies of militancy and aborted revolt into the present along with the history of four centuries of American brutality. Through this analysis, Bonney also affirms the continuing value of poetic form as a vehicle for highly-compressed historic knowledge.

He then approaches Baraka's 'Lady Bug' from a different perspective – where the poem is not the bearer of a charge that can be reactivated in the right circumstances, but rather a charge that can be defused and a revolt that can be recuperated. He considers

Voloshinov's concept of 'alien words' (in this case the use of Black vernacular) as 'the active carriers of non-official meaning'. In 'Lady Bug', Baraka's repeated use of the alien word 'motherfuckin'' acts as the poem's rhythmic centre. It represents an aggressive assertion of the ownership of language, but this shocking use of 'bad language' has proved easily recuperable. Bonney resolves the issue by proposing that such poems are tests, preparatory studies, for works that would put pressure on the materials of the poem 'until something that could not previously have been said could emerge' (p.186).²⁹ This is perhaps the context for Bonney's poem beginning 'for "I love you" say "fuck the police"', where the repetition of 'fuck the police' has a similar repetitive rhythmic function to 'motherfuckin'' in 'Lady Bug'. Raoul Vaneigem's comparison of Benjamin Peret's use of invective in his poetry to the 'chants' that can kill an enemy dead (which Bonney cites in this chapter) is also relevant here, although Bonney is also wary of such magical thinking.³⁰ Indeed, he repeatedly returns to Baraka's idea of the poetic image as a form of magic in order to qualify and secularise it. Thus, the poetic image becomes 'the ability to call on the emotional effect of magic without tumbling into superstition and irrationalism' (p.106); it is a way to 'recruit the forces of irrationalism' but 'without tumbling into fascism' (p.107). Later on, magic is redefined as 'the impossible, the forbidden action that will have transformative effect on immediate social reality' (p.204).

Frantz Fanon's conception of the poet as 'the spokesperson of a new reality in action' turns into Bonney's vision of a poetry that reaches forward 'towards a content that has yet to appear, in order to make it happen' (p.200). Here Bonney turns, finally, to the pre-revolutionary Mayakovsky of 'A Cloud in Trousers', and he makes an argument that recalls his reading of Rimbaud's work in relation to the Commune and the post-Commune period. He argues that, in this 1914 poem, Mayakovsky's subjective being is shattered from the inside, but in the resulting rubble he sees the spirit of revolution approaching from the future. Essentially, he argues, the poem is an account of individual social being in the process of being transformed into a collective subjectivity by which the revolutionary spirit of the future can enter (p.208). The poems included in *Letters Against the Firmament* map a similar transformation in Bonney's own work, but oriented, as Andrea Brady puts it, towards 'how and why poetry might persist in spite of defeat'.³¹

The Interrupter

In his pioneering essay, 'An Interrupter, a Collective: *Sean Bonney et l'outrage lyrique*', David Nowell Smith explores Bonney's negotiation of what he describes as 'two opposing impulses – the expression of individual outrage, and a desire for collective practice'.³² On the one hand, there is the impulse to give expression to the individual's rage; on the other hand, there is the desire to articulate a politics of collectivity 'not just

as the basis for socio-economic organisation, but also as a metaphysical claim about human freedom' – that is, 'a human freedom predicated upon collective structures'. However, what Nowell Smith initially presents as a 'double bind' – 'caught between the individual and the collective, between vehemence and critique' – Bonney has theorised in terms of an objective to be achieved: 'the transformation of the individual subject into the collective during moments of revolutionary upheaval'. In the essay itself, Nowell Smith explores Bonney's working through of the question of the collective in his poetry and poetics of the 1990s and 2000s. He shows how Bonney updated the figure of the *poète maudit* through his engagement with two French poets via *Baudelaire in English* (2008) and *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011), and argues that the figure of the poet as rebel is re-oriented, in the process, towards 'collective consciousness, collective political action'.

As Nowell Smith reminds us, 2008 was a landmark year: it saw the collapse of the US housing-bubble founded on 'sub-prime' mortgages and the subsequent world-wide financial crisis with the collapse of banks and the beginning of the Great Recession. This was also the year Bonney began his important work, the series of fractured sonnets, *The Commons* (2008–11) and also his engagement with Baudelaire. As Nowell Smith observes, *Baudelaire in English* stages a 'confrontation between two eras of high capitalism', giving the reader 'Bonney's updating of Second Empire Paris to post-Thatcher London' with the necessary registering of differences between the two eras and between the two poets. For instance, to take one of Nowell Smith's examples, the '*regards familiers*' of Baudelaire's '*Correspondances*' are no longer the experienced presence of the natural world but rather a response to the surveillance state: 'they WATCH US like satellites, cameras & Eyes'.³³ Similarly, in '*Le Cygne*', where Baudelaire laments '*Le vieux Paris n'est plus*' ('Old Paris no longer exists') – instead, there are '*palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs*' ('new palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone') – in Bonney's version, the Baudelairean list becomes simply the single phrase 'yuppie flats', a synecdoche for the process of gentrification that transformed London over this decade.³⁴ Where Baudelaire refers to the demolition by Haussmann of an older Paris to construct new boulevards and describes his response as '*mélancolie*', Bonney is pointing to the situation he describes in his 'Notes on Baudelaire': 'an asocial abandoned space in the inner city / rapidly being cleared in the last push of the alleged creation of a smooth-surface postmodern city / safe for faux-bohemian yuppies' (BE, p.86). In '*Cygne*', however, Bonney's response is far from melancholy: 'London will change / us, we'll hate it just the same'. He thinks of 'haggard eyes' and 'ALL WHO ARE LOST' – 'missing persons / hostages / crushed ones'; and he dreams of 'BARRICADES'. Nevertheless, both Baudelaire and Bonney register a moment of change which represents the triumph of the enemy. In

addition, Bonney's 'Notes' also register a recognition of how the bohemian life itself can be commodified and recuperated.

The gap between Baudelaire and Bonney is also marked in other poems. In '*Paysage*' ('Landscape'), for example, Baudelaire's dreamy appreciation of church-bells and workshops full of singing and gossip from his mansard room becomes Bonney's wish to 'rent a piece of sky' ('to try & stop my heart from break') and the urban soundscape where 'tha car-alarms are / wedding screech'. Baudelaire's anticipation of evenings spent at this high window ('*Il est doux, à travers les brumes, de voir naître / L'étoile dans l'azure, la lampe à la fenêtre*' – 'It is pleasant, through the mists, to watch the stars being born in the blue sky, or the lamp appearing at a window') becomes Bonney's more grudging 'it's kinda pretty' – although he undermines this moment of aesthetic pleasure by linking the gaze to 'twitch seasons', suggesting not only Bonney's own convulsive poetics but also curtain-twitching voyeurism. More importantly, where Baudelaire dreams of eternity ('*réver d'éternité*') and ignores the riot outside ('*L'Émeute, tempêtant vainement à ma vitre*' – 'the riot beating vainly at my windows') to lose himself in dreams of spring and summer, Bonney will 'scratch dreams into / petrol //riots'. As Nowell Smith suggests, we can read this line in two ways: 'The poet's dreams will be actualised as petrol riots, or petrol rioters will, through the poet's words, start to dream, so that the riot is no longer merely a nihilistic act, but the basis of revolutionary change'. Where Baudelaire dreams of escape from the city into an imagined or remembered countryside, Bonney locks down on his personal situation ('will stop drinking') and responds to the idea of riots with the thought of 'smelting / these ferocious desires'. Again, it is left open whether 'these ferocious desires' are external ('the nights ferocity') or internal, providing the 'vocabulary', the consciousness, that converts spontaneous acts into a collective project.³⁵

As the analysis above suggests, there is a significant shift in mood from the original in these translations. Baudelaire's '*La Cloche fêlée*', for example, begins with an evocation of a domestic scene, sitting by a smoking fire on a winter's night, recalling memories, while the angelus calls through the fog. Baudelaire's opening words, '*Il est amer et douce*' ('it is bitter and sweet') give way to Bonney's 'It is murder / to listen to rooftops' / slow palpitations'; '*son cri religieux*' becomes 'their fucking prayers'; while '*mon âme est fêlée*' ('my soul is flawed') and the '*voix affaiblie*' ('weakened voice') merge to produce 'my voice is cracked', a voice which 'rasps' when it tries to sing. Similarly, in '*Recueillement*' ('Composure'), Baudelaire's '*Sois sage, ô ma Douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille. / Tu réclamaïs le Soir; il descend; le voici*' produces Bonney's more abrupt 'be quiet / is evening now &&& voice-fall'. The visual word-play that renders *voici* as 'voice' is followed by homophonic translation later in the poem where '*se pencher des défuntes Années*' ('the bygone years are leaning') leads to Bonney's 'pinched

& defunct YEARS'. Bonney says in his 'Notes on Baudelaire': 'there is a lyric I in these poems & it is annoyed by perpetual efforts to destroy it. The I is now an interferer, an inconvenience, a potential parasite within the clean capitalist body' (BE, 85). However, although he rejects Baudelaire's aristocratism, strips out the countryside and religion from the poetry, and replaces dandyism with abjection, there is not yet a sense of the transformation of the individual subject into the collective. Baudelaire has been translated into English, but he remains, as Nowell Smith puts it, an outsider 'knowingly playing up his outsider status'.

In an interview, Bonney says of his translations: 'Baudelaire appears, through the static of the typewriter, in contemporary Hackney, sometimes as a bored office worker, sometimes as a psychopath drinking White Ace and harassing people'.³⁶ This characterisation suggests that this volume might be limited to the expression of individual boredom and anger. However, the compressed, fragmented and damaged lines of these poems also anticipate the 'counter-rhythmic interruption' where 'the language folds and stumbles for a second' (LAF, p.116). And that reference to 'the static of the typewriter' also points us to another way in which *Baudelaire in English* is different from the original: namely, its visual appearance on the page. To call these translations 'typewriter poems' registers one aspect of this visual effect – the broken letters and cancellations of the typed page. This description also extends to the use of typographic symbols characteristic of this old technology – the ampersands, slashes, brackets, dashes, repeated colons (and so on) that punctuate and visually articulate the text. This is not the use of the typewriter as a scoring device of Olson's 'Projective Verse' essay. Instead, the way Bonney uses this retro-technology takes us back (as a visual language) to the 1960s and 1970s and the work of Bob Cobbing. Cobbing was creating visual texts of overlapping typewritten words in the late 1960s.³⁷ Some of the other texts in *Baudelaire in English*, with their collaging of textual elements of different fonts and sizes, resemble Cobbing's more Lettrist productions.³⁸ The visual aspect of *Baudelaire in English* thus brings in another context: namely that of Cobbing's Writers Forum, which Bonney had attended since the late 1990s. Another element is signalled by the dedication to Frances Kruk, Bonney's partner. One of the later poems in the sequence is given the title of a Latin poem by Baudelaire, 'Franciscae Meae Laudes' ('In Praise of My Frances').³⁹ This dense little poem picks up a couple of lines from the original – 'Novis te cantabo chordis' ('I will sing to you on a new note'); 'velut stella salutaris' ('like the star of salvation'); and 'quae imbuta es magnete' ('you who were given a magnet's strength') – and takes fragments from them before ending with a play on the names Frances and Francesca. Two pages later, in 'Brumes et Pluies', Bonney produces a more coded reference: 'CROOKED SEASONS / of white shadows / where you

&& I are / CURLED'. As Bonney says in his 'Note': 'it is just plain dishonest to have one room with political poems in it, another with love poems and so on' (BE, p.86). The translations of Baudelaire are situated in this relationship and in the London poetry and political groups of which both he and Kruk were a part.

The Collective

If 2008 introduced the Great Depression and years of austerity, it also initiated, as Nowell Smith notes, what Bonney experienced as 'a new political conjuncture: the Occupy movement, the student protests, and the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands against a Conservative-led government espousing the very ideology that the financial collapse should have discredited, now seemingly hellbent on dismantling what remains of the welfare state'.⁴⁰ In response to the economic crash and the policy of austerity adopted by the Government, and in response to these various popular mobilisations, the 'collective' becomes a key question for Bonney. In particular, as Nowell Smith puts it: 'It is at this moment that the sensory derangement of radical poetics can contribute to working through what such a collectivity might look like'. *Baudelaire in English* can be aligned with *Blade Pitch Control Unit* as what Nowell Smith calls the performance of a political anger that is also aware of its impotence in the face of general political anaesthesia. However, this was no longer the case with the poetry written during these years of political re-awakening immediately after the financial crash. Poetry had literally moved out of the private rooms above pubs and into the streets.⁴¹

Early in his thesis, Bonney notes Baraka's sense of paralysis when faced with 'a social order that seems to be fundamentally unjust' (p.16) and his constant self-questioning as to whether poetry was 'the appropriate medium for his increasingly political concerns' (p.17). The result, as Bonney puts it, is that Baraka 'scratches incessantly at the limits of the form he uses, constantly risking the collapse of the poem itself' (p.17). As mentioned earlier, Bonney went through his own period when he insisted he was no longer writing poetry. For both men, the articulation of political rage meant a shattering of form under 'the pressure of political urgency' (p.17). Bonney argues that Baraka's concern, in the interchanges between poetry and activism, was not the 'making of individual masterpieces', but rather the creation of 'a body of work' that can 'act on the world from a variety of fronts' (p.18). *Letters Against the Firmament* evidences some of that variety of fronts in the formal range of Bonney's writings from this period: the fractured sonnets of *The Commons*, the assemblage of freer and hybrid forms in *Lamentations* and *Corpus Hermeticum*, the various letters, and the combination of sonnets and freer forms in *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*.

The letters with which the volume begins are situated in the collective events of 2011–12. The first, ‘Letter on Riots and Doubt’, begins with memories of the 26 March 2011 anti-cuts protest in London: a demonstration organised in London by the TUC, one of the largest UK demonstrations since the protests of February 2003 against the Iraq War. Later that day there were clashes with the police in London’s West End. This is what Bonney recalls: ‘when I was walking around Piccadilly looking at the fires that night in March’ (LAF, p.8). In this context, Bonney affirms ‘the need for a new prosody’ and states that he has ‘totally changed’ his method. The new method is presumably evidenced in his use of the letter form, but the method might also relate to modes of political action. In this case the letter is addressed to an adversary who rejects violence and refuses to ‘leave the seminar room’ (as part of Bonney’s negotiation of the academic environment to which he was now connected). Bonney concedes that he might be ‘making a fetish of the riot form’, but then, after an *ad hominem* attack on his addressee, offers a critique of rioting from another perspective: ‘in the very act of breaking out of our commodity form we become more profoundly frozen within it’, translated into the price of breaking glass or the cost of police overtime. The important switch in these lines is from the ‘we’ of what is presented as personal memory, of a private experience shared with the addressee (‘We had taken a lot of MDMA that night’), to the collective ‘we’ of rioters. The final part of the letter juxtaposes the ‘pressure’ which is the speaker’s experience of the political atmosphere of the city to the creation of metallic hydrogen (‘a substance never seen on Earth’) and its possible use as a superconductor. This glimpse of a transformation produced through extreme pressure is countered by a more negative, concluding reference to the possibility of metallic hydrogen in the interior of Jupiter and Saturn: ‘The metallic hydrogen sea is tens of thousands of miles deep’ (LAF, p.9). This less optimistic image returns us to another ‘frozen’ form.

‘Letter on Riots and Doubt’ is dated 5 August 2011. On 6 August, rioting broke out in London (and then in other cities in England) in response to the police-killing of Mark Duggan.⁴² By 10 August, there were more than 3,000 arrests. The next two letters are written out of this context. After observing ‘we are beginning to suffer here’, ‘Letter Against Spectres’ begins ‘Obviously I’ve not been getting much writing done’ (LAF, p.10). ‘Letter on Silence’ begins similarly (‘It’s difficult to talk about poems in these circumstances’), before going on to discuss ‘working on an essay about Amiri Baraka’, in which meditation on the ‘surrealist image’ turns it ‘inside out’ into ‘that phrase from Baraka “the magic words are up against the wall motherfucker”’ (LAF, p.12). The energy of ‘Letters Against Spectres’ is articulated through a play of pronouns. Who is the ‘we’ in the opening statement? Is it a household or a community? The pivotal contrast in the Letter between ‘my part of town’ and ‘your part of town’ suggests the

latter. Two sentences later, the speaker invokes ‘the conversation we had’ about Milton, a different grouping, where the ‘we’ includes the ‘I’ and the addressee. However, any retrospective closeness this might suggest is immediately denied: the addressee’s ‘obvious bourgeois response’ to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* leads into the alignment of ‘the middle-class, the magistrates, and you’ as against the speaker’s identification with ‘the rioters’. In another pronominal play, the speaker slides from this attack on the addressee to ‘You know how it is when you read an account of a situation you’ve been directly involved in ...’, but this ‘you’ is clearly not the addressee: the speaker’s charge is that the addressee does not get involved in such situations and very precisely does not know ‘how it is’. The ‘monstrous hiss’ from the telephone, recalling the reception of Satan in Pandemonium (‘a dismal, universal hiss, the sound / Of public scorn’ [*Paradise Lost*, Bk X, 508–9]) and Satan’s subsequent transformation into a snake, prompts thoughts of another transformation: ‘after the tape containing all your reason and superstition runs out and everything’s revealed as it really is for one beautiful moment, all brightly lit in shopping mall reds and flickering striplight yellow’ (LAF, p.10). This epiphanic moment is obviously not a celebration of the commodity, but the product of the rioters’ attack on the shopping mall (producing, perhaps, the reds and flickering yellow of flames). In the time of the riot, ‘everything’s revealed as it really is’. It is the space-time of lived experience of the Situationists, a revelatory experience in the very space that epitomises the manipulation of experiences and desires in the ‘time of things’.⁴³ It is also the moment when the ‘I’ becomes ‘we’, the individual transformed into the collective: ‘I’ve been wearing a black balaclava for days’ (LAF, p.10).

The idea of transformation is explored further in the ‘Letter on Silence’. The current ‘circumstances’ (on August 30) are defined in terms of ‘all the police raids, the punishment beatings, the retaliatory fires’ (LAF, p.12). This leads to Bonney’s ‘small thesis on the nature of rhythm’, an account of the violent arrest of Jacob Michael, a young man of dual heritage, and his subsequent death in police custody. The witness’s account of the punches and beating with batons involved in the arrest chimes with Bonney’s registration in his thesis of Langston Hughes’s ‘bitterly witty interpretation of the origins of the term Bebop’: that the music derived its name, in Hughes’s words, from the sound of ‘the police beating Negroes’ heads’ (p.41). In the punitive aftermath of the riots, when courts were encouraged by David Cameron to hand down harsh sentences, Bonney repeats the statement of Césaire’s friend, the Marxist Surrealist René Ménil, that poetry ‘transforms itself dialectically into the voice of the crowd’, but counters it with the question ‘What if all it can do is transform itself into the endless whacks of police clubs’ (LAF, p.12). These ‘police whacks’ then transform ‘into the dense hideous silence we’re living inside right now, causing immediate closing of the eyes, difficulty breathing, runny nose and coughing’ (LAF, p.12). Instead of that ‘one beautiful moment’

when ‘everything’s revealed as it really is’, eyes now are closed, but even as the body suffers the after-effects of smoke or tear-gas, the experience is presented as collective rather than individual. Nevertheless, Bonney’s vision of ‘our collective history’ as certain energies, locked out, but capable of being taken back, is replaced here by the apprehension of police violence as what keeps ‘their systems in place’ (LAF, p.13) and by the negative impact of police-killings on the collective subjectivity.

In all three letters, the addressee is presented as an adversary: the ‘I’ is defined through antagonism. But the I is also subjected to constant self-questioning. In *Happiness: Poems after Rimbaud*, the I dissolves into the collective or becomes a voice among other voices. Thus the first poem, a sonnet, begins with a date stamp followed by the word ‘we’: ‘september 2003: we were wondering why the poets were silent’. On 27 September 2003, there was the fifth demonstration that year in London against the US/UK invasion of Iraq. Although the biggest demonstration was in February 2003 when about a million people took part in London alone, 100,000 protesters marched from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square on 27 September under the heading ‘Blair Must Go’. While it explicitly questions the silence of poets, the line also implicitly raises the question of the identity of this ‘we’. The second poem, also starts with a date stamp, ‘mayday. the alphabet was a system of blackmail’. Here May Day, the international Workers’ Day, chosen by the Second International to commemorate the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Affair, fuses with the distress signal ‘mayday’ (based on the French *m’aider*). This ambiguous start renders unclear whether the poem is a celebration, the renewed commitment to struggle or a cry of distress. All these options – and the possible relationships between them – are brought into play.

The poem draws in other voices. In subsequent lines, for example, Bonney cites Ione’s words to Panthea (‘sister, I hear the thunder of new wings’) from Shelley’s revolutionary text *Prometheus Unbound* (line 521). This speech heralds the arrival of the Furies to torture the bound Prometheus, who is being punished for stealing fire from Zeus to give to humanity. Bonney’s poem ends with another scene of punishment. Bonney concludes the poem with extracts from the speech of August Spies, one of the Chicago anarchists executed for the Haymarket bombing, that he made from the scaffold: ‘The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today’. In between, Bonney riffs off Rimbaud’s lines in ‘Delirium II’, in which Rimbaud revisits his earlier sonnet ‘Voyelles’:

J’inventai la couleur des voyelles! – A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert. – Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d’inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l’autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction.

(I invented the colour of vowels! – A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. – I regulated the form and the movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible some day to all the senses. I reserved all rights of translation.)⁴⁴

Through an assemblage of fragments and the collaging of voices, together these two poems by Bonney contemplate defeat, but also the continuing struggle for freedom. They work across different ideas about silence, regulation and derangement, and the ownership of language. The ‘opacity of poets’ plays against the idea of deferred accessibility. The penetrable opacity of the poem is set against the enforced transparency of the surveillance society.

Bonney says on the cover of *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*: ‘these poems have NOTHING TO DO WITH RIMBAUD’. These are not translations of Rimbaud’s poems, not even in the sense implied by Bonney’s translations of Baudelaire. As Nowell Smith puts it, they are ‘after’ in the sense that they ‘ask what Rimbaud’s work and legacy demands of his descendants’. However, Bonney’s cover-statement concludes: ‘In the enemy language it is necessary to lie’, and a number of the poems return to Rimbaud’s linking of colours and vowels, recasting and re-arranging them to produce disparate listings. Similarly, Rimbaud’s ‘*Mauvais sang*’ (‘Bad Blood’) – ‘*J’ai de mes ancêtres gaulois l’oeil bleu blanc*’ – seems to lie behind Bonney’s assertion ‘from the English I inherit my love of alcohol, idiocy and violence’ (LAF, p.129) and its variant ‘from the English I inherit / my mean & bitter divisions’ (LAF, p.130). Nevertheless, Rimbaud’s is only one of the voices present in these poems: others include Louis-Auguste Blanqui, John Milton, Karl Marx, Ulrike Meinhof, André Breton, and Édouard Glissant. Bonney constructs a multivocal text, suggesting what Glissant calls the ‘penetrable opacity of a world in which one exists, or agrees to exist, with and among others’.⁴⁵

As Andrea Brady notes, what had seemed like an ‘unveiling of solidarity’ in 2010 and 2011 soon revealed itself as ‘the reinforcement of the police state and the strengthening of the Tory government’.⁴⁶ The problem now was not so much the supersession of the revolutionary poet by the revolution as the survival of a revolutionary poetics as an unfulfilled project. In these conditions of political defeat, the poet’s task, in Brady’s words, is ‘to channel the past and survive the present’ (p.132) and to plant the seed of resistance for a future generation. Unlike the early letters, the later *Letters Against the Firmament* are written in a time when ‘whatever movement may have been developing’ has collapsed and been replaced by ‘the growth of the far right, and consolidation of Tory power’.⁴⁷ The question then was what to do with those energies of struggle, how to resist ‘the process of falling apart’, during ‘the painful return to capitalist business-as-usual’

that Rimbaud had also faced. Bonney speculates, in his 2014 conversation with Paal Bjelke Andersen, that perhaps poetry is to be found in 'the dialectic between silence and the political slogan'. What he advocates, however, is a militant poetics, an antagonistic poetry, not a protest poetry, 'a poetics that can speak directly without sacrificing any of its complexity'. Poetry now becomes the repository for the energies revealed in that period of political upheaval: in Bonney's own words, 'Poetry continues because the chance for its realisation was missed' (BE, p.88).

Notes

- ¹ See Fred Moten's brief discussion of Baraka's work in the period 1962–66, which he sees as 'the location of the interplay between nationalism and Marxism', even though 'neither he nor his commentators would characterize this moment as occurring within either his black nationalist or Marxist-Leninist "phases"' (Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.86.
- ² During 2009, as a result of the global economic downturn, UK unemployment figures rose from nearly 2 million in January to 2.5 million in December, and the economy was officially in recession for the first time since 1996. There were protests against the G20 summit in London in April; the MPs' expenses scandal; a swine-flu pandemic (which killed 474 people); and an October report that showed that the UK had the worst quality of life in Europe.
- ³ The conference ran from 25–27 May with Joan Retallack, Jack Hirschman and Mark Nowak as keynote speakers.
- ⁴ Sean Bonney, 'Rimbaud and the Paris Commune', <https://thecommuene.wordpress.com/2010/11/19/rimbaud-and-the-paris-commune/> (Accessed 16/03/2021).
- ⁵ As Bonney notes, the addition of the word 'systematic', which appears in the letter to Delmeny, is important: it shifts from merely personal liberation to a larger political statement (p.104).
- ⁶ Rimbaud was also important for Barry MacSweeney. His first book, *The Boy from the Green Cabaret tells of his Mother* (London: Hutchinson, 1968) referenced Rimbaud's poem 'Au Cabaret Vert'. Clive Bush and William Rowe have both discussed Rimbaud's importance to MacSweeney: see Clive Bush, *Out of Dissent*, London: Talus, 1997), pp.338–9; William Rowe, 'Barry MacSweeney: Pain, Anger, Politics', in Paul Batchelor (ed.) *Reading Barry MacSweeney*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2013), pp. 76–86, pp.82–3.
- ⁷ Kit Toda, Daniel Eltringham and Annie McDermott, 'Interview with Sean Bonney', *The Literateur* (10 February 2011). Accessed on 22 March 2021 at <http://literateur.com/interview-with-sean-bonney/>.
- ⁸ Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), hereafter cited as LAF.
- ⁹ The riots took place between July 12 and July 17. They were sparked off by the arrest and beating of a Black cab driver, John William Smith, by two white Newark police officers.
- ¹⁰ Charles Olson had been the subject of the PhD he had started (and abandoned) some years earlier at King's College, London.
- ¹¹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). The UCL project on the Legacies of British Slave Ownership has revealed the immense wealth generated by slavery and, in particular, how the compensation received by slave-owners, and those who derived financial benefits from slavery, for expropriation as a result of Abolition funded the Industrial Revolution in the UK.
- ¹² Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ¹³ *In the Break*, p.85.
- ¹⁴ This is a paraphrase of Ellington's comment on *Jump for Joy*, his 1941 musical: 'I think a statement of social protest in the theatre should be made without saying it, and this calls for the real craftsman'. See Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun*

- Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p.95. I have written elsewhere of Jeanne Heuving's exploration of the resonance of the apparently innocuous title 'Mood Indigo' and how it encodes a long history of trading, slavery and enforced technological transfer. (See Jeanne Heuving, *Mood Indigo* (Chicago: selva oscura press, 2019); Robert Hampson, 'Mood Indigo', *Tears in the Fence*, 73 (Winter / Spring 2021), pp.135–44).
- ¹⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1963).
- ¹⁶ W.E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.169; Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963), p.80; cited by Bonney, pp.37, 38.
- ¹⁷ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *The Dead Lecturer: Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p.44. Bonney's final chapter similarly turns to George Jackson.
- ¹⁸ After the revolution, Mayakovsky was a leading member of the Left Art Front (LEF) and co-edited the journal LEF, produced over 600 agitprop posters for ROSTA, and wrote poems like 'Left March' [1918] and 'To the Workers of Kursk who extracted the First Ore' [1923], but he later ran into criticism once Stalin took over after Lenin's death.
- ¹⁹ 'Dutchman' was first presented at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village in March 1964; 'The Revolutionary Theatre', *Liberator* (July 1965); 'Black Dada Nihilismus' (first published in *Evergreen Review* in 1963, reprinted in *The Dead Lecturer* in 1964).
- ²⁰ There are issues around homophobia and anti-semitism, for example, which Bonney does not address.
- ²¹ Michael McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p.124; cited Bonney, p.78.
- ²² This also raises the question: how to 'recruit the forces of irrationalism ... without falling into fascism' (p.107).
- ²³ Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashik Books, 2009), p239; quoted Bonney p.128.
- ²⁴ Bonney cites Robin D.G. Kelley, *Black, Brown and Beige*, p.353.
- ²⁵ 'Oh, la vie d'aventures qui existe dans les livres des enfants', Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.44.
- ²⁶ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Penguin, 1973).
- ²⁷ Olson's *Maximus* poems also have their roots in letters or use the form of the letter.
- ²⁸ Bonney here echoes Vaneigem in 'Terrorism or Revolution: An Introduction to Ernest Coeurderoy' [1972] (Black Rose, 1975), where he argued that cultural work could not be reduced simply to spectacle or pure commodity, but the 'trace of human practice within it' remained the site for 'the reversal of perspective, the point at which the creativity brought forth in the past is re-invested in the project of generalised self-management'.
- ²⁹ Baraka, *Black Magic: Poetry 1961–1967* (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1969), p.102.
- ³⁰ Bonney cites Raoul Vaneigem, *A Cavalier History of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1999), where Vaneigem mentions Julius Caesar's account of 'chants intoned by Welsh bards' that 'struck such terror into enemies that they had been known to fall dead on the spot' (p.84) in discussing Peret's work.

- ³¹ Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015); Andrea Brady, 'Sean Bonney: Poet Out of Time' in Ruth Jennison, Julian Murphet (eds.), *Communism and Poetry: Writing Against Capital* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp.131–59, p.132.
- ³² David Nowell Smith, "An Interrupter, a Collective": *Sean Bonney et l'outrage lyrique*, *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, (2013), p.45.
- ³³ Sean Bonney, *Baudelaire in English* (London: Veer, 2008), p.50; hereafter cited as BE.
- ³⁴ All translations from French and Latin are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- ³⁵ See Vaneigem, 'Terrorism or Revolution', for a discussion of the relation between spontaneous action and consciousness, situationist actions and explanatory texts.
- ³⁶ Toda, Eltringham, McDermott, 'Interview with Sean Bonney'.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Cobbing's 'Whisper Piece' (1969) or the text beginning 'logico' in Bob Cobbing, *ABC / Wan Do Tree*, *Collected Poems*, vol.2 (London: EL UEL UEL U Publications, 1978).
- ³⁸ See, for example, Bob Cobbing, *sign writing* (London: Writers Forum, 2000).
- ³⁹ This was recorded by Juliette Nouredine in 2005 on her album *Mutatis Mutandis*.
- ⁴⁰ Nowell Smith, Op. Cit.
- ⁴¹ This is evidenced in the work of other London poets in this period. See, for example, Nisha Ramayya's *In Me the Juncture* (Sad Press, 2021).
- ⁴² Mark Duggan was shot and killed by officers of the Specialist Firearms Command while under police surveillance.
- ⁴³ See Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Practical Paradise Publications, 1972), pp.227–35; Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.57; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1973), p.141.
- ⁴⁴ *A Season in Hell*, pp.50–51; translation by Louise Varèse.
- ⁴⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p.114.
- ⁴⁶ Brady, 'Sean Bonney: Poet out of Time', p.132.
- ⁴⁷ Sean Bonney and Paal Bjelke Andersen, 'You'd be a pig not to answer: a conversation', <http://www.auditur.no/festival/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/02-Sean.Bonney.pdf>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

