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As Simple as Music: Kinds of Noise in Sean Bonney's Poetry

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This article considers Sean Bonney's texts *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011), *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015), *Our Death* (2019) and *antimatter* (2019). I write about each of these texts in terms of Bonney's representation within them of music and noise. Rather than discussing this from a musicological perspective, or in relation to particular musical works, I address the metaphorical use that Bonney makes of figures of music and noise in general. I argue that in each case, the way in which Bonney conceives of music is indicative of a wider perspective on political and social reality and its capacity to be transformed by collective action. The article begins by elaborating the relationship between music and noise as I understand it to exist in Bonney's writing. Following this, I elaborate the conditions of economic austerity under which Bonney lived during the writing of *Happiness* and *Letters Against the Firmament*. The article then aims to elaborate the relationship between a thinking of music and a thinking of community in *Happiness* before considering how harmony functions as a metaphor for class-domination in Bonney's prose poetry. The article ends with a consideration of *antimatter* as a work whose use of rhyme and song-like structures is indicative of a specific ontology of catastrophe developed in *Our Death*.



1) Noise

Sean Bonney loved music. References to music run through his earliest pamphlets up to the last work that he published. At points, Bonney wrote as if the idea of musicality expressed the capacity for the world to be transformed according to its most brilliant immanent potential. At other points, the very notion of musical structure, of a stringing together of notes so as to produce something like a sequence of coherent, complex sounds, is the most fitting metaphor for the tortures of class-domination. Music, simply put, means a lot in this writing. It is, I think, significant that, despite music and musicality being a subject of Bonney's passion and his intellectual enquiry, it was not, as far as I am aware, until 2019's *antimatter* that anything like a conventional song-structure featured in his writing. Prior to this pamphlet, there were moments of musical fluidity and moments of jagged noise, but very little rhyme and no properly song-like prosody. That Bonney kept such a direct musicality out of his work until this pamphlet is, I want to argue, important for understanding the precise nature of his thinking about music, both as something that he loved as much, if not more than poetry, and as something whose status in his writing is inextricable from the wider historical, political reality as he perceived it. As I will aim to show in what follows, considering the way in which music features in some of his poetry provides a way of understanding the shifting political and social conditions under which Bonney wrote, as well as the precise manner in which he perceived the contours and content of what constitutes transformative action.

Music is not a stationary object in Bonney's poetry. There are moments in which the word music can describe something as 'simple' as 'drunken speech'¹ and in which an experience of a song can be as incomprehensibly nightmarish as being injected with a 'burning dog'.² Likewise, the reality of even the most transformative pieces of recorded music changes depending on whether it is played in an avant-garde music venue or whether it is, hypothetically, blasted at full volume over the public address system of a North London shopping centre or in his flat to annoy the neighbours.³ Music is one kind of sound that exists in relation to other sounds which it either drowns out, intensifies, or joins with in a fusion of noise and melody that becomes a way of understanding radical collective action. At points Bonney seems to think that music is only musical at the point at which it tips into noise and threatens to transform its own structures, together with the social conditions in which it is constructed. Elsewhere, noise is precisely musical because the word *music* names the moment of unity between incomprehensible distortion and clarity as these two are unified in collective action.

In any case, the form that music takes in Bonney's poetry depends upon the noise, metaphorical or literal, with which it is surrounded and which it either negates or

intensifies. The poems that I discuss in the second and third sections of this article were written and published during the implementation of a program of austerity begun in force in 2010 by the newly-elected UK coalition government. To understand how music works in this poetry, it is necessary to briefly elaborate certain elements of the political and economic rationale which, as Bonney puts it in his 'Letter on Poetics', constituted this 'surprise attack by a government of millionaires',⁴ an attack that as of June 2019, had led to at least 130,000 premature deaths in the UK.⁵

Austerity is noisy. It is a monstrous combination of the moral and the economic in which the former legitimates the latter. In the years following 2010, categories such as 'skiver' and 'striver' demarcated elements of the working population into those who were worthy of receiving state support and those who could justifiably be subjected to rationalised starvation.⁶ According to China Mills, these strategies of legitimation were so effective that 'public mourning for those who have died through suicide [resulting from the despair induced by austerity related changes to their situation] can only occur if they are positioned as worthy and "deserving" of benefits, i.e. hard-working, too proud to receive "state handouts" and living a frugal life'.⁷ Studies of workers involved in the direct implementation of welfare sanctions reported that these people instinctively felt a keen sympathy towards those who demonstrated a 'willingness to take responsibility for themselves and to participate in the labour market, with strong judgement attached to those who fail to become financially independent'.⁸ These strong judgements work according to a zero-sum logic which proclaims that those who receive financial support without direct participation within the labour market do so at the expense of those who contribute to the national welfare budget through the payment of income taxes. Justice for the second demographic is found in the spectacularised suffering of the first. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions from 2010–2016, Iain Duncan Smith, intoned in 2014 that the overhaul of the welfare system he had orchestrated during the preceding four years was intended to restore a sense of fairness for those who identify as taxpayers and, at the same time, to restore a sense of 'pride' amongst those who work.⁹ Within this framework, the pride and serenity of those not reliant on benefits has its necessary opposite in the despair and fear of those who live under the threat of losing access to them.

One should note that austerity's moral framework did not come into being overnight, and neither was its invention an openly right-wing political project. Tony Blair's so-called 'New Project' invested heavily in a rhetoric that 'distinguishes between those who are socially integrated (mostly in terms of labour market and employment) and those who are excluded as a "moral underclass"'.¹⁰ It did so, according to a 1998 report on the New Labour project, with the aim of transferring the 'responsibilities of

the state to a variety of institutions: individuals, families, trade unions, cooperatives, friendly society, charities, non-profits, private insurers and providers'.¹¹ Government and media discourse throughout the Blair years and into those of the coalition worked to generate and maintain communities of sympathy whose sense of worth was, and is, based on a supposed moral distance from the unproductive. This process solidified the unquestionable value of work at the same that it laid the ground for the mandated deprivation and condemnation of those judged incorrigible.

Vulnerability to such judgements, signalling as it does the potential to have one's means of life cancelled with almost no notice, impresses itself into people's lives as a series of 'atmospheres' that form a persistent, torturous background noise. This noise occasionally intensifies into moments of extraordinary anxiety precipitated by a 'capability to work' examination or the arrival of a letter from the Department of Work and Pensions'.¹² These moments are simultaneously a reduction and an amplification of an underlying, omnipresent dread within daily life. Austerity's incessant white noise is, I think, part of what Bonney refers to in *Happiness* as 'bourgeois anti-communication', a kind of vicious hum whose primary effect is to suffocate both sympathy and potential antagonism.¹³ In a prose-poem dated the week after the 2011 London Riots, an event often read, imperfectly, as a response to government policy, Bonney suggests that any challenge to the legitimacy of dominant relations of property and law is capable of amplifying this noise to a dismal universal, uniting magistrates, journalists and all those in whom riots produce moral indignation in one 'complicated monstrous hiss'.¹⁴ It is against such a hiss that what *Happiness* calls 'music' defines itself.

2) Music

Bonney's writing is indelibly associated with what has elsewhere been termed the 'era of riots'.¹⁵ Regardless of how useful one finds this periodization, it is undeniable that *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011) and *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015) were formed in the experience of social unrest in several areas of the UK, first in the form of the student movement of 2010–2012 and then in the London riots of August 2011. 'Letter on Poetics', which is the concluding text text in both books, opens with the assertion that 'November the 10th', the date on which hundreds of students ransacked the government headquarters at Millbank, London, was 'ridiculous' and that 'we were all caught unawares'.¹⁶ Bonney's text moves quickly to express his dissatisfaction with academic attempts to engage with the subsequent events of the student movement before moving on to formulate a hypothetical poetry that could potentially engage with radically oppositional forms of social organisation. Such poetry could:

speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity and thus make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism, where the lyric I [...] can be (1) an interrupter and (2) a collective, where direct speech and incomprehensibility are only possible as a synthesis that can bend ideas into and out of the limits of insurrectionism and illegalism.¹⁷

This poetry would function as part of a process of simultaneous interruption and construction, community formation and deindividuation. Within this process, the lyric I understood as collective supersedes a distinction between ‘direct speech’ and ‘incomprehensibility’, between clarity and noise.

One can conceive this kind of collective more clearly by comparing its oscillation between visibility and invisibility with what the ‘Letter on Poetics’ describes as an experience of desiccation in the face of the State’s enquiries. This latter process is one in which: ‘Everything is forced to the surface. I don’t feel I’m myself anymore. I’ve fallen to pieces, I can hardly breathe. My body has become something else, has fled into its smallest dimensions, has scattered into zero’.¹⁸ Being forced to the surface is an experience of annihilation, and of atomization. Subjectivity is defined by an oscillation between visibility and invisibility. This constitutes a movement of continuity in discontinuity which maintains a fidelity to possibility and avoids becoming a fixed element in a sealed environment. To be a subject is to avoid becoming either an ossified, financialized citizen or a reified aliquot part of a dead history whose elements are ‘reanimated as zombies’ for the sake of avant-garde citational practice.¹⁹

Bonney’s understanding of a living community capable of holding together poles of clarity and incomprehension is immanently musical. The Acknowledgements section of *Letters Against the Firmament*, a book which includes extracts from *Happiness*, as well as a number of other works, describes the poems within it as participating in the tradition of the so-called ‘Cuckoo Song’. In this tradition, a singer

will intersperse their own lyrics alongside whatever fragments of other songs happen to come to mind, thus creating a tapestry in which the “lyric I” loses its privatized being, and instead becomes an oppositional collective, spreading backwards and forward through known and unknown time.²⁰

Bonney’s ideal reader, he tells us, will understand at least some of the references which litter his poems and, in doing so, will find that both their own self and the self who wrote the poems they read begin to be deindividuated, and connected across historical periods and geographic locations. To return to ‘Letter on Poetics’, we can say that this process is not politically neutral; rather, the community formed within and by the Cuckoo Song is measured according to its negation of ‘police realism’.

Bonney's use of the above term recalls Jacques Rancière's understanding of the police and, by association, of properly political action. For Rancière the police are

above all a certitude about what is there, or rather about what is not there [...] The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving, circulating [...] Politics consists in transforming that space of circulation into the space of the manifestation of a subject [...] It consists in refiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see or name. It is a dispute about what is perceptible to the senses.²¹

For both Bonney and for Rancière, making visible that which is rendered invisible is a process that involves antagonism, the 'manifestation' of subjects through action. Rimbaud's 1871 '*Lettre au voyant*', with its famous declaration 'I is an another', stands conspicuously behind both writers, and Bonney is emphatic that the young poet's statements only make sense as a description of collective antagonism: '*The "systematic derangement of the senses" is the social senses, ok, and the "I" becomes an "other" when it all kicks off*'.²² Poetic labour is thus, for Rimbaud as read by Bonney, '*the destruction of the bourgeois imagination*'.²³ This destruction does not occur purely through the will of the individual. Poetry expresses and can hope to intensify transformative energy within a historical moment: '*It's simple, social being determines content, content deranges form etc*'.²⁴ Action precedes poetry, but poetry has a role in understanding whatever new limits we have for understanding action. For Bonney, it is less the case that, in Auden's oft-cited phrase, 'poetry makes nothing happen' – as if anyone would ever think that it could – but that nothing ever really *happens* without having an effect on what the poetry of its moment can, and perhaps should be. Given its placement at the end of the book, one can read 'Letter on Poetics' as either theorizing or responding to the long poem that makes up the majority of *Happiness*. One can say that Bonney conceives of the 'labour' of his own poetry as being precisely to engage in and to communicate the moments of collective antagonism that formed it.

The main body of *Happiness* begins as follows:

*I'm a temporary resident, worried but outwardly calm, of a thoroughly modern city. Each house is a plan of the entire circuit: with its animated shop-signs, raw water, other monuments to superstition, ethics & language.*²⁵

This subject blows through and over a city whose topography is reproduced in each of its units. This city is chartered down to its atoms, but still maintains the potential

for an incandescent electric life persisting within its circuits. This life is predicated on a kind of openness in which ‘*Whatever / secrets I’ve got are entirely shared*’ and where ‘[...] *it’s all so hypnotic I can’t / imagine what crime might be*’.²⁶ At no point does the poem refer to a specific event which has taken place to stimulate a derangement of its elements. Rather, generative contradictions begin to manifest themselves as a series of networks and lived historical moments that enter into flux and are resolved into new constellations.

Bonney uses a combination of dates throughout the poem in a way that makes history itself into a Cuckoo Song. The significance of these dates moves between the evidently world-historical to the seemingly personal. One reads of 1871 (the year of the Paris Commune), 1917 (the year of the Bolshevik Revolution), 2003 (the year of the second Iraq War and mass-mobilizations against it), 2009 and 2010 (the date of the election of the coalition government). As they recur throughout the poem, years do not solely mark specific moments but also the capacity for these moments to be rearranged in mobile hierarchies relevant to a collective memory:

early 2012. the latest news is
 political flashes superimposed on our rooftops
 it is thin, our cynicism, the latest distinct word
 sometimes, when a specific distortion in the vowels is achieved
 we can hear heaven. it is a kind of wall
 all of our clear, musical nouns[.]²⁷

That these nouns are ‘ours’ is a condition of their being ‘musical’, and music is synonymous with a distortion in the vowels, in the rearrangement of structural elements, be they structural, geographic or literally linguistic. This is a ‘heaven’ that only a collective subject could hear, a music that exists in and through antagonism. By contrast, in the preceding poem of *Happiness*, ‘the alphabet [that] was, ultimately not ours’ is designated according to its ‘mythological shells, its crumpled octaves & / spectra, zilch’.²⁸ According to these lines, the alphabet cannot be designated as musical because it is that from which ‘we’ are ‘locked out’.²⁹

The collective energy that the poem envisages joins the destruction of the bourgeois imagination with collective action. In the following lines, a staccato rhythm built around caesuras mimics interruptions in thought processes, resolving into a qualitative shift:

fire is physical time. is absolute unrest
 or total war < interior logic of music’s
 new definitions. o friends > build bonfires[.]³⁰

These lines enact a release of energy as a transition from intellectual experiment to concrete action. In doing so, the verse makes evident its investment in the capacity for action to expand imagination and *vice-versa*. The lines contain an echo of a chant sung to the tune of ‘Oh My Darling Clementine’ by comrades and friends on the student protests: ‘Build a bonfire, build a bonfire, put the Tories on the top, / Put the Lib Dems in the middle and we’ll burn the fucking lot’. The phrase ‘music’s / new definitions’ suggests that conditions of ‘absolute unrest / or total war’ redefine the ‘interior logic’ of music. In turn, music—in this case, the ‘build a bonfire’ chant—acts as the container for new definitions of social conditions, for the mutually expanding unity of action and imagination.

This visceral combination of clarity and distortion relates *Happiness* to the history of the slogan. Slogans mediate between musical and chanted phrases and what Amiri Baraka calls poetry’s ‘musicked speech’. Bonney introduces these kinds of speech acts in ‘Letter on Poetics’ with the vituperative barb that ‘the reason the student movement failed was down to the fucking slogans. They were awful. As feeble as poems’.³¹ Bonney complicates what may appear to be a relatively straightforward dismissal of poems in favour of an at least hypothetically effective slogan, by insisting that a poem that could conceivably form ‘the subjective counterpart to the objective upheavals of any revolutionary moment’ and that one might find embodied in it a ‘concrete analysis of the concrete situation’.³² Here Bonney echoes a statement of Lenin’s in ‘On Slogans’: ‘Every particular slogan must be deduced from the totality of specific features of a definite political situation’.³³ The point, it seems, is not to replace poetry with good slogans, but to sublimate a false distinction between the two, informed by concrete political understanding.

The history of the slogan relates it, again, to the unity of clarity and distortion that defines Bonney’s thinking both of musicality and of community. The word, from Scots Gaelic, has its origin in the 18th century where it referred to the ‘distinctive note, phrase or cry, of a person or body of persons’.³⁴ As a distinctive, surface-level cry, the slogan serves a strategic purpose. Robert Denton notes that slogans were ‘utilized primarily as passwords to ensure proper recognition of individuals at night or in the confusion of battle’.³⁵ The purpose of the slogan is, therefore, two-fold: it individuates in a chaotic environment and it affirms the individual within a collective identity. A good slogan is immediately recognisable as a dynamic unity of direct speech and incomprehensibility: it is clear to those who know it and one amongst many noises to those who do not.

Happiness forms its own slogans while distorting and appropriating those of the past through a kind of historical parapaxis. One example of this comes on the final page of the verse section of the book: ‘[A]ll power / to the occupations. all power to

the imagination'.³⁶ Bonney here cheerfully adapts the revolutionary demand, 'all power to the Soviets', to the student occupations at which he read drafts of the poem. Significantly, Bonney codes this statement with a kind of tragi-comic defiance of the same Lenin from whom he draws inspiration. In Lenin's 'On Slogans' one finds a condemnation of 'All power to the Soviets' as a political statement which failed to understand the impossibility of its own demands and risked underestimating the force of the counter-revolution. Bonney's joke is both to place the student movement within a revolutionary history while simultaneously giving a license to the poetic, utopian imagination.

Bonney's lines about the 'interior logics of music's / new definitions', connect slogans and music in figuring poetry's transformative capacities. Musicality again appears as a point of comparison and qualification in what are perhaps the most memorable lines of *Happiness*. Here, Bonney once more draws on the power of slogans while suggesting their limits, inventing a slogan-like phrase that could not, by nature of its extremity, have functioned as a slogan proper, even as these lines have been passed between friends and readers of his work more than any others from this poem:

When you meet a Tory on the street, cut his throat
 It will bring out the best in you.
 It is as simple as music or drunken speech.
 There will be flashes of obsolete light.
 You will notice the weather only when it starts to die.³⁷

The imperative in these lines serves an immediate political function: it distinguishes almost instantaneously between those who find it fascinating or amusing and those who find it repellent. In an interview conducted with the American poet and publisher Richard Owens, Bonney claims that this moment contains the 'least violent' poetry he has written.³⁸ Danny Hayward is probably right to suggest that Bonney may not have known why he said this, as he is to suggest there would be no poetry in saying that these were Bonney's most violent lines.³⁹ Still, it is, I think, worth taking Bonney's claim about this moment seriously, as the non-violence of the action seems so close to its proximity to music.

In his 'Critique of Violence', Walter Benjamin makes an admittedly well-worn distinction between mythic and divine violence. The former is defined as the mediated violence of everyday life, a violence that either founds or preserves a law. This kind of violence maintains a specific relationship to an ontology of fate and guilt, marking those whom it strikes as at least responsible for their own suffering. It is, according to Benjamin's formulation, 'violence crowned by fate'.⁴⁰ Mythic violence, conducted

against punishable objects according to the mediations of law and legal institutions, establishes laws and boundaries. Its victims 'mark the border between human beings and gods', between the punishable and the punishers.⁴¹ In other words, mythic, mediated violence turns those it strikes into examples and its processes reaffirm the legal mediations and ruling hierarchies whose transgression, potential or real, it is employed to prevent.

However, not every instance of violence results in the founding or the preservation of a boundary: 'If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates them [...]'.⁴² The quality of this violence is not strained; its divinity is not measured by the amount of force exerted, nor by the range or duration of its consequences, but by the effect that it has on the law and on the social relations within which it occurs. If we understand mythic violence as the violence of mediations that founds a boundary beyond which transgression is immediately punishable, then we can agree with Bonney's insistence that his lines do not describe this kind of violence. Rather than either founding or preserving law, the act described brings about the erosion of a reified historical continuum, one that opens cracks in a sedimented, ossified possible, allowing the intrusion of 'obsolete light' into a world saturated by contemporary anti-illumination.

'When you meet a Tory on the street' is one of the only instances of a second person pronoun in *Happiness*. This does not mean that the passage above is less concerned with community formation than those that came before it. In one literal sense, the passage enacts a deformed version of the fantasy of a liberal recognition theorist for whom the correct identification of, and comportment towards, an individual fellow citizen is the limit of political aspiration. This recognition is provided by a person who lacks determinations and the act itself involves nothing more or less than doing what it suggests is the right thing at the right time. Its musicality is a sublimation of difference, of clarity and noise, in an act of self-assertion. The one who is cut is a Tory; the one who cuts can be anyone.

3) Harmony, Screech and Whine

While music in *Happiness* denotes the sublimation of difference in dynamic, collective antagonism, the prose poems included in *Letters Against the Firmament*, especially the six texts which deal explicitly with 'harmony', offer a distinct understanding of musical structure as paradigmatic of the most rigid frameworks of class domination. The shift in the significance of musicality corresponds, perhaps, to a transition from moments of transformative collective activity to its aftermath in which life transitions into the daily necessities of survival under an increasingly brutal regime. Pushing this reading too far

would be reductive, but it is true that the prose pieces in *Letters Against the Firmament*, while they contain ‘Cuckoo Song’-style references and moments of rupture, are written in a more fundamentally isolated register than is *Happiness*. Indeed, their genre as letters from one writer to one imagined interlocutor demarcates the extent to which their ‘I’ can act as a cypher for dynamic collectivity. Discussing how Bonney writes about music in these prose texts therefore allows one to gain insight into the crushing quotidian of the early to mid-2010s in the UK, and into one possible model for political art in a situation where the representation of actually-occurring transformations is not an option.

Bonney’s ‘First Letter on Harmony’ opens with a description of a judge ‘who somewhere in London, every seven days, pays a prostitute to re-enact the crimes of those he has sentenced, while he looks on and masturbates’.⁴³ This vision of harmony between deed, sentence and performance is followed by the thought that these performances give off ‘emissions’ that are themselves:

The source of a central vibration through which the judiciary could impose a new and extremely rigid analysis of the city, within which a sterile atmosphere could be maintained for the propagation of a limited number of official sentences (say, for example, seven) from which all possible thought could be derived[.]⁴⁴

The capacity for the judge to assign guilt is re-enacted here as a model for the demarcation of social possibility, one that involves an evident play on the word ‘sentence’. In the ‘Second Letter on Harmony’, these restrictions are thought explicitly in terms of musical structure. Bonney makes reference to Lenin’s notes on Hegel and writes of ‘the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres proposing a perfect cosmology, a hierarchy built on scalar realities that justifies social conditions on earth, where everybody is in their place, and nobody is able to be questioned’.⁴⁵ From the position of the suffering individual, the very idea of musical harmony is a cypher for a class-society in which the sadistic enjoyment of the elite exists in full mathematical justification.

This restrictive coherence is not the preserve of the ruling class. Bonney insists that it is hopelessly naïve to think that any kind of disruption exists within disinterested avant-garde practice. He states clearly that ‘our system of harmony knows so well it contains its own negation that it has mummified it and while we know we live in a criminal harmony, we also know that we are held hopelessly within it as fixed subjects, or rather as objects of cadavers of an alien music’.⁴⁶ Following this, Bonney writes about a different, lateral view of musical organizations. He makes reference to Ernst Bloch and Federico García Lorca in order to speak of ‘music as a slicing through of harmonic

hierarchies etc, poetic realities as counter-earths where we can propose a new stance in which we can see and act on what had previously been kept invisible. Ourselves, for one thing'.⁴⁷ The possibility of this music is again dependent on antagonism, and Bonney repudiates any idea of avant-garde experimentation cut off from the social being that determines content and that demands a distortion of form. This, the letter writer tells their addressee, is why 'I still hate *Mojo* magazine', a publication that is little more than the embodiment of a 'nasty little rich kid fluttering his hecatombic chromosomes all over our collective history'.⁴⁸ Such a thoroughly reified relationship to music offers no exit from a social world organised and held fast by arbitrary rearrangement of judges' sentences.

A changed perspective on music requires a changed understanding of noise. Later in the 'Second Letter on Harmony', Bonney makes use of an extended citation from Amiri Baraka, whose relationship to music is one of the central concerns of his doctoral thesis, in order to describe what the negation of this hierarchical, alien music could sound like: '[M]etallic, musical screeches as systems of thought pushing away from, and through, the imposed limits of the harmonic or social systems, thus clearing some ground from where we can offer counter-proposals. Slogans. The battle-cries of the dead'.⁴⁹ Bonney insists that examples of this specific kind of 'screech' do exist, and that their existence is tied directly to their relation to the conditions in which they were made. He writes that John Coltrane's 1965 album *Live in Seattle* contains

one of those examples of recorded music that still sounds absolutely present years after the fact, because it was one of the sonic receptacles of a revolutionary moment that was never realised: that is, it has become a Benjaminian monad, a cluster of still unused energies that still retain the chance of exploding into the present.⁵⁰

Bonney both affirms and ironizes the reality of this energy through a speculative, bathetic demonstration: 'Play it loud in the Walthamstow shopping mall and you'll see what I mean. Yeh yeh yeh'.⁵¹ Still, the correlation of the aesthetic as aggressive negation with a missed revolutionary moment enables a definition of song as combative, as something whose purpose is 'not only to raise the living standards of the working class, but to prevent the ruling class from living in ways that they have been'.⁵² This sound is noise: Coltrane's screech tears a portal for the entrance of antagonistic, forgotten history into the present. The 'metal-bone' of his horn represents 'the irruption into present times of the screams of the bones of history, tearing into the mind of the listener, unambiguously determining a new stance towards reality, a new ground outside of the official harmony from which to act'.⁵³ The actual potential for any such action is, again,

stated bathetically: 'Or put it another way, next time some jazz fan tells you that late Coltrane is unlistenable, or something, laugh in their ridiculous face. Seven times. More later'.⁵⁴ Any humour in this line does not, however, remove the aesthetic seriousness of Bonney's judgement: the conditions in which he lives render musical harmony a cypher for sadistic social control, and certain kinds of music-become-noise, existing as they do within a constellation of real historical potential, prefigure what it might sound like for these structures to be overwhelmed. Still, while Bonney's phonic attack on the jazz fan – one which involves the number seven, the same number of arbitrary sentences available to the judge – may be funny, it is nonetheless *necessary*, if one is to remain faithful to those 'bones of history' whose resurrection may sound something like a moment on Coltrane's album.

There is nothing either simple or musical about this moment because there are few more effective images of isolation than a solitary, regimented laughter. As the infernal harmony of class-rule persists, its extreme ends meet in a shared knowledge of the truth of social life. In his 'Third Letter on Harmony', Bonney writes of an 'unshielded harmonic condition common to everyone with less than five pounds in their pocket' and of

the weird gnosticism we live inside these days. The social truths that only those who live far below the hunger line have access to. Them, and of course the very rich. As if the rich were some kind of jagged knife, out on the social perimeter and we, the very poor, were scraped against that knife, over and over.⁵⁵

This knowledge comes with its own noise. In the same text, Boney writes of waiting in a job-centre and listening to 'All of the latest chart hits, converted into a high, circular whine, and in the centre of that whine an all too audible vocabulary. Money. Sanctions. Etc'.⁵⁶ Earlier, in 'Letter Against Spectres', the reduction of different examples of moral indignation over riots to a 'complicated monstrous hiss' enabled a kind of insight into the banal and ridiculous content of ruling class commentary as it responded to property destruction, and into to the 'perfect English' spoken by 'the rioters'.⁵⁷ Here, the revelation of economic cruelty as the content of a certain kind of music generates no insight past its own intensification. This music is the apotheosis of anti-communication:

That whine, that disaudibility is fascinating [...] I'm surprised there aren't CDs, gigs in the Café Oto. I mean, it's a very interesting listening experience. You move in slow motion. You feel like you've just been injected with 300 mg of burning dog. Grammar and syntax can no longer be controlled.⁵⁸

A person waiting at a Job Centre is primed for the interrogation necessary to receive welfare payments, a situation in which one's means of life can be removed for a missed appointment, or a misunderstanding of an intentionally opaque application form. In this situation, language itself, even one's own speech, is antagonistic. The music that plays in these rooms is revelatory of the precise cruelty of this social situation; it achieves, for Bonney, an aesthetic of extraordinary, damaging alienation beyond the standards of any experimental musical practice.⁵⁹ Bonney's subject freezes into a kind of self-preservative, anxious loop, a *mise en abyme* of excessive entrapments:

Speech, which would usually be your means of entry to actual lived time, is compressed and stretched into a network of circles and coils, at its perimeter a system of scraped, negative music, and at its centre a wall. And then you wake up after a night of terrible dreams to find you are that wall.⁶⁰

This 'scraped, negative music' is a black hole into which a subject's capacity for actuality sinks along with her capacity for expression. *Whine* is the dense inversion of music as it appeared in *Happiness*: it is the torturous deadening of subjective potential, the reduction of difference to a brutal, individualised clarity.

At more than one point, *Letters Against the Firmament* feels as if it channels a profound anxiety over self-preservation into a hallucinatory anxiety. Bonney writes at one point of being fired into

some kind of future constructed on absolute fear. Or that future is a victorious vacuum, a hellish rotating disc of gratuitous blades, and they are speaking to you, those blades, and what they are saying is: 'one day you will be unemployed, one day you will be homeless, one day you will become one of the invisible, and monsters will suck whatever flesh remains from your cancelled bones.'⁶¹

The anxiety in this text is a motor for a continuously frustrated attempt to transcend its own conditions. This contradiction gives Bonney's prose an astonishing density correlated to an internal vibration, a visceral hesitation that is itself a motor of critique and that, I think, manifests a kind of musicality unique to these pieces of writing. The effort of breaking out of this furious, frozen self-preservation feeds back into the means of its intensification, and the poem renders this process somatically within blocks of text. Listen to: 'And the grotesque and craggy rhythms of those monsters are already in our throats, right now. In our throats, our mouths, the cracked centre of our language, fascist syllables, sharp and barking'.⁶² The prosody in these sentences is dense and limited; they possess a gravity that can have no hope of a release. The energy crammed

into these words adds to their weight, as does their clarity. At points, these poems are simultaneously magmatic and frozen. They manifest the synapses of a lyric impulse that runs continually against its objective limitation. The impulse is individual; it does not join with any kind of group that could simultaneously stabilize and deindividualize its 'I'. The presentation of music and noise within these texts forms a tangible aesthetic expression of individualising, terrifying and continual trauma, of the 'expected shocks' that populate a life subject to the arbitrary will of the Department of Work and Pensions.⁶³

4) Song

Bonney's collection, *Our Death*, is composed from a number of sequences of verse and prose poems written and published between 2014 and 2019. For the majority of this period, Bonney lived in Berlin, having left London in 2015 to take up a post-doctoral research project on the Bay Area poet Diane di Prima at the Frei Universität. Bonney's relocation shows through in the places and personalities that appear in *Our Death* and a change of style in much of this collection is, I think, partly explicable by the personal security granted by a stipend that removed the concerns over personal self-preservation so tangible in his London-based work, both in terms of its content and its prosodic energy. Any possible relaxation of financial insecurity was mediated, however, during the years in which Bonney wrote *Our Death*, by the increasing visibility of global fascism, the build up to and result of the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum, the ongoing EU border crisis, with whose victims Bonney's work showed continuous solidarity throughout the period, and the election of Donald Trump and correlate rise to prominence of Steve Bannon and other alt-right media celebrities. These events take on the significance of global, enveloping catastrophe in *Our Death*, something that I want to argue is important for how we read Bonney's eventual use of rhyme and song in *antimatter*.

The titular prose poem in *Our Death* moves from the experience of seeing a dead person on the street to a reflection on catastrophe as totality. The poem opens:

You walked past a dead man the other day. You think maybe he'd jumped from his balcony, but you don't know. [...] You hurried past, went home and tried to make some kind of structure out of what you were feeling. Like, for instance, there was a moment before he jumped and there was a moment after and both of those moments were the same moment and at their center was entire calendars negated.⁶⁴

This dead man is a totality within himself – a sealed space of identical moments that fold in on each other so that every element, temporal and physical, indifferently contains the others: 'You said to yourself, the missing half of his skull is the sky, and

somewhere inside it is the center of our earth. There is no name that can justify this. No hermetic system that can alter it. No bank statement or judge's sentence'.⁶⁵ The fact of this person's death is a fragment without justification which reduces the world of the poem to an aggregate of pieces. Hence the poem's accumulation of indifferent detail and surreal affect: 'There were several people laughing. You had a mouth full of rain'.⁶⁶ Particulars in this poem pile up without generating any coherent force of explanation: the world is a series of demarcated, meaningless details, horrific in their safety. Upon returning to their apartment, whoever is speaking in the poem insists that 'you say you care only for trapped things, falling invisibly, un-photographed and un-named'.⁶⁷ The poem ends with a final, general indicative: 'These cities and these deserts. All taken by the earthquake'.⁶⁸ Catastrophe informs and delimits the poem's reality; it sweeps away distinctions between being and non-being, noise and clarity. It is, perhaps, within the greater catastrophe – the earthquake which reduces the infinitely divisible particularity of the dead person's existence to participation within an obliterated *all* – that things can be rescued from an indifferent inter-changeability.

antimatter is less concerned with establishing this catastrophe than with writing from within it. The pamphlet consists of two parts, the first of which, *antimatter 1*, is divided into six sub-sections of one page each, and the second of which covers a single, two-page spread. The majority of the poem is written in free verse; however, sections two, four and six of *antimatter 1* each contain moments of italicized, metrical rhyme. *antimatter 2* is split between two blocks of free verse, six quatrains and one tercet. There is little continuity between the prose and the rhyming sections. Rather, one is left with a sense of involuntary anamnesis as songs bubble up within the prose.

The prose of *antimatter 1* begins by addressing an anonymous interlocutor in whose mouth the word 'kindness [...] has the consistency of raw sewage' and whose laugh 'sounds like boiling lice'.⁶⁹ Bonney opens with a depiction of a chartered gentility conditioned by the capacity of those on the outside of its boundaries to be disappeared: 'While you were scratching your name into the mirror / another few hundred people died. I guess they exist / outside the border of what you call kindness'.⁷⁰ Later in the poem, the earthquake returns, reported with a statistical indifference followed by a bleak surrealism: 'The night of the earthquake. The 300 houses destroyed. The mouths scratched to pieces'.⁷¹ Besides the potential for personal repudiation, contained within lines such as 'be kind / but do not be kind to me / be clean but do not be clean near me',⁷² there is little possibility in the prose of *antimatter*. History appears flat. Names such as Surrealist Antonin Artaud and the anti-Nazi student organizer Sophie Scholl appear within its pages as evidently, immanently dead. The latter, we are told, died 'in great pain'.⁷³

If there is a kind of antagonism in *antimatter*, it is in its rhymes. At one, point these enact a temporal disruption that pushes against its own enclosure:

*for we've been dead before we'll be dead again
we were dead just now but we ain't no more*⁷⁴

The internal rhyme on 'before' and 'no more' is, I think, the closest that this poem comes to the shifting constellations of dates and meanings that was an integral part of thinking the collective in *Happiness*. Rhyme in earlier poems by Bonney would have been unthinkable because music was the name for the prefigurative sublimation of noise and clarity in collective action, and not something to be aspired to within poems themselves. Music always came from a time outside of the poem; it was either a 'heaven' breaking into the profane or a rush of angry dead tearing through from the past. This was not a kind of song to sing in the world as it is. Rhyme is a form through which to express devastated social being.

The third and fourth quatrain of *antimatter 2* run:

the fascist is the ferryman
from the stolen to the lost
it knows the words for everything
the baby knows the cost

we'll be this way forever
the rats are in the sack
vengeance is a pretty word
fight them back⁷⁵

The first quatrain cited presents the 'fascist' as the psychopomp-master-of-information, the one who knows and is capable of precise definitions. The next stanza uses the self-evident quality of rhyme to denote a self-evidently valid action. There is a literal harmony to an act of anti-fascist resistance which requires no further elaboration. The closure of an economy of meaning – the rats being 'in the sack' – is no excuse. As moments in rhyming quatrain, these sentiments are both constrained and obviously correct. Even here, however, there is still a tangible metrical disjunction in 'fight them back' that allows the line to retain a disruptive force, locating it between a slogan and a poem. The last words of the quatrain follow naturally, but the three syllables jolt a reader in a manner that retains the force of an unpoetic imperative.

The presence of ‘songs’ in *antimatter* suggests finally that Bonney is no longer conceiving of music as something defined by its relation to an extremity, by its capacity to tip over into noise and, in doing so, to sustain and be sustained by an antagonistic collective life. Rather, rhyme and song here mirror the self-evident nature of resistance within a disaster that has no tangible outside, no walls between the past and the present that a particular kind of ‘screech’ could break through or through which heaven could be heard.

antimatter 2 features the following passage on its last page:

We count the coming of the debt. The persecutions. Our enclaves boarded up, even those of the past. It feels as if the only inhabitable places left in the city are its songs, the forgotten ones and the sad ones. The sounds they begin to make when listening has been made impossible. The sounds they make are destitute and eerie. The names of the name- less, the holes in their necks, running toward us. Their mouths on backwards. Their language clear.⁷⁶

If songs are ‘the only inhabitable places’ in a city that may be because it is in certain songs that one still hears a unity of visibility and invisibility, of direct speech and incomprehensibility. Du Bois wrote about sorrow-songs, in an essay with which Bonney was familiar, that those who listened to and sung them did so knowing ‘little’ about what this kind of song’s ‘words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music’.⁷⁷ The transmission of a song, of a living unity of knowledge and incomprehension, functions as a mode of dwelling when other modes of antagonistic community are foreclosed.

It is easy, in 2022, to ‘count the coming of the debt’ in the form of any number of increasing tangible present and future disasters, and it is easy to claim solidarity with the victims – past, present and future – of these disasters. What is less easy, I think, is to commit to a such a solidarity without any guarantee that it will ever resolve into a collective with a meaning that can include *us* or that could be *ours*. In earlier moments in Bonney’s writing, the capacity for struggle and for negation was evidenced by the capacity for music to tip into noise or for noise to reveal itself as a heavenly sound. The process of this transformation involved a kind of community that included, at least potentially, Bonney’s reader. No such transformations occur in *antimatter*. Noise – the most common of which in the pamphlet is an incessant ‘scratch’ – and song are separate occurrences on the same page. This is not to say that, by this point, Bonney’s writing has given up on either solidarity or collective life. Rather, I would suggest that this pamphlet leaves us with the conviction that, from deep within the catastrophe, these things are as obvious, and as inhabitable, as music.

Notes

- ¹ Sean Bonney, *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant, 2011), p. 37.
- ² Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p. 40.
- ³ *Letters*, p. 40, 43 and 47.
- ⁴ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 65.
- ⁵ Toby Helm, 'Austerity to Blame for 130,000 "Preventable" UK Deaths', *Guardian*, 1 June 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/01/perfect-storm-austerity-behind-130000-deaths-uk-ippr-report>> [accessed 29 April 2022].
- ⁶ For writing on Bonney that places this enforced dichotomy at the centre of its analysis see: Jacob Bard Rosenberg, 'Notes to Sean Bonney (1969–2019)', jacobbr.com, 5 December 2019, <https://jacobbr.com/?p=367> [accessed 29 April 2022].
- ⁷ China Mills, 'Dead people don't claim': A psychopolitical autopsy of UK austerity suicides', *Critical Social Policy*, 38.2 (2018), 302–322, (p. 312).
- ⁸ Insa Koch, 'The Guardians of the Welfare State: Universal Credit, Welfare Control and the Moral Economy of Frontline Work in Austerity Britain', *Sociology*, 55.2 (2021), 243–62 (p. 246).
- ⁹ Iain Duncan Smith, '2014 Speech on Welfare Reform', *UKPOL*, 3 December, 2015, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/iain-duncan-smith-2014-speech-on-welfare-reform/> [accessed 29 April, 2022].
- ¹⁰ Liam Stanley, 'Legitimacy Gaps, Taxpayer Conflict, and the Politics of Austerity in the UK', *British journal of politics & international relations*, 18.2 (2016), 389–406 (p. 396).
- ¹¹ Nigel Ashford, 'New Labour and the End of the Welfare State'. *The Good Society*, 8.2 (1998), 32–36 (p. 32).
- ¹² Esther Hitchen, 'Living and Feeling the Austere', *New Formations*, 87.1 (2016), 102–18 (p. 110).
- ¹³ Bonney, *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*, p. 65. All italics in citations from *Happiness* appear in the original text.
- ¹⁴ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p.10. Bonney's reference here is to Milton, specifically the moment in Book X of *Paradise Lost* that tells of Satan's transformation into a serpent following his initially triumphant return to Pandemonium. This same section is cited directly in two of the 'revolutionary legends' with which Bonney book-ends the main poem of *Happiness*. Due to concerns over space, a longer analysis of the importance of this 'hiss' was excised from the final draft of this article.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, James Day, 'The Edible Book in the Era of Riots', *Third Text* 30.3–4 (2016), 238–252 (p. 238).
- ¹⁶ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 65.
- ¹⁸ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 65.
- ¹⁹ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 65.
- ²⁰ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 144. The cuckoo, a morally ambiguous bird which usurps the nests of other birds, also appears in both the epigraph and the opening lines to Bonney's *The*

- Commons*: “The cuckoo is a – Bang – / he was a big freak.” Sean Bonney, *The Commons*, (London: Opened Press, 2011), p. 1.
- ²¹ Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 1998), p. 177. Quoted in Kristen Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 23. The essay from which Ross quotes does not appear to be included in the English edition of Rancière’s essays.
- ²² Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 64.
- ²³ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 64.
- ²⁴ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 64.
- ²⁵ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 10.
- ²⁶ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 10.
- ²⁷ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 14.
- ²⁸ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 13.
- ²⁹ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 13.
- ³⁰ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 22.
- ³¹ Bonney, *Happiness* p. 63.
- ³² Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 63.
- ³³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, ‘On Slogans’, trans. by R. Cymbala. [Marxists.org https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/15.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/15.htm) [accessed 29 April 2022]. I am grateful to the editors of this volume for pointing out this connection.
- ³⁴ George Earle Shankle, *American Mottoes and Slogans* (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1941), p. 5.
- ³⁵ Robert E. Denton Jr, “The Rhetorical Functions of Slogans: Classifications and Characteristics”, *Communication Quarterly* 28, 2 (1980), 10–18, (p. 11).
- ³⁶ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 49.
- ³⁷ Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 37.
- ³⁸ Richard Owens and Sean Bonney, ‘Sean Bonney in Conversation’. *Youtube*, 22 June 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHkj96VI08c&t=1s&ab_channel=damntheaesars> [accessed 29 April 2022].
- ³⁹ Danny Hayward, *Wound Building: Dispatches from the Latest Disasters in UK Poetry*, (Earth, Milky Way: Punctum books, 2021), p. 188.
- ⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 47.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, p. 55.
- ⁴² Benjamin, p. 57.
- ⁴³ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 32.
- ⁴⁴ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 32.

- ⁴⁵ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 33.
- ⁴⁶ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 33.
- ⁴⁷ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 33.
- ⁴⁸ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁹ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 34.
- ⁵⁰ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 35.
- ⁵¹ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 35.
- ⁵² Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 35.
- ⁵³ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 36.
- ⁵⁴ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 36.
- ⁵⁵ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 40.
- ⁵⁶ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 40.
- ⁵⁷ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 10.
- ⁵⁸ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 40.
- ⁵⁹ My thinking on this passage was significantly influenced by Verity Spott in a paper on Bonney at the *Violence, Cruelty, Avant-Garde* conference at Sussex University in April 2017.
- ⁶⁰ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 40.
- ⁶¹ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 99.
- ⁶² Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 99.
- ⁶³ Hitchen, 'Living and Feeling the Austere', p. 111.
- ⁶⁴ Bonney, *Our Death*, p. 111.
- ⁶⁵ Bonney, *Our Death*, p. 111.
- ⁶⁶ Bonney, *Our Death*, p. 111.
- ⁶⁷ Bonney, *Our Death*, p. 111.
- ⁶⁸ Bonney, *Our Death*, p. 111.
- ⁶⁹ Sean Bonney, *antimatter* (Salt & Cedar Press: Berlin, 2019), p. 3. I am grateful to Jacqueline Frost for making me aware of this pamphlet and for giving me a copy. The poem was also published in *Mute* magazine and on Bonney's blog.
- ⁷⁰ Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 3.
- ⁷¹ Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 12.
- ⁷² Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 8.
- ⁷³ Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 6.
- ⁷⁴ Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ Bonney, *antimatter*, p. 12.

⁷⁶ Bonney, p. 12.

⁷⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 170.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

