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## Bonney's Militant Poetics: Political Aesthetics, Black Poetics and Modernism

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This essay looks at Sean Bonney's relationship to the Black Radical Tradition, initially thinking of him as a bridge-like figure between the Marxist strains of the British Poetry Revival, and Black modernist poetics. Through looking at his relationship to Amiri Baraka, I interrogate the role of aesthetics and politics, and turn to Bonney's conception of 'militant poetics'. This links disparate formations within avant-garde aesthetics under the dialectic of Surrealism and Marxism where poetics synthesises creative and critical thought. Bonney's work allows an opening of the apparent aporia between Black poetics and the British Poetry Revival, harnessing a subaltern trace in the structure of modernism, Marxism and politics which articulates a fractal subjectivity of sorts, which could be read along paraontological lines. Bonney's engagement and embrace of Black poetics hints at an untetherable capacity for an embodied poetic practice, but a practice indicative of the wider structural faultlines of racial capitalism through the failed meeting of the British Poetry Revival and Black poetics. Bonney's failure to engage with the Caribbean Artists Movement also raises questions around wider responsibilities of countercultural political aesthetics that operate across the revolutionary Black Atlantic.

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This essay is concerned with exploring Sean Bonney's relationship with the Black Radical Tradition. My exploration is undertaken to think through the apparent aporia between linguistically-innovative poetry of the British Poetry Revival and Black poetics more generally. What emerges through examining Bonney's study of Amiri Baraka is that Black poetry enters his work as an iteration of a larger pantheon of revolutionary and militant poetics that includes surrealism, situationism, and various formations in avant-garde aesthetics. Crucially, his study centres a deep attention to the relationship of aesthetics and politics within the poetic mode, where poetics is understood as a method of thought itself, diverging from critical and creative partitioning. I very much endorse and am influenced by Bonney's poetic mode, and so am interested in both tracing and engaging with his method as part of a wider movement with regard to political aesthetics and radical poetics under the rubric of 'militant poetics'.<sup>1</sup>

Bonney's work manifests a drive to understand the historical present through moments in which the oppressed rise up, and from where the history of their voices strike back into the world, out of the repressed psyche of contemporary capitalism. Constantly, Bonney undertakes to explore the dialectic between modernist socio-political poetics and revolutionary Marxist theories, building on the work of Rimbaud, André Breton, and the Situationists, and thinkers such as Bertolt Brecht, Vladimir Lenin, and Angela Davis. Bonney argues that his study of Baraka is explicitly not part of the discipline of Black Studies, but instead forms part of this larger project:

Although the thesis argues out of the poetics of the Black Liberation Movement, I do not consider it to be a contribution to Black Studies. My idea is that the convulsions that Baraka's work went through as his political commitments gained in intensity are roughly applicable to any number of revolutionary moments. But at the same time, in terms of specifics, questions of Blackness are necessarily at the centre of the thesis.<sup>2</sup>

Bonney sees Black Liberation and the anticolonial liberation struggles of the 1960s as 'the key movement that inspired and informed the much more widely advertised revolutionary and countercultural struggles played out by white radicals during the same period'.<sup>3</sup> This trajectory has important ramifications for understanding fissures and engagements between the British Poetry Revival and the Black Radical Tradition. During the 1960s, within what was felt to be a formally and politically conservative national poetry culture dominated by the poets of the 'Movement', the British Poetry Revival sought to reengage with modernist poetics, with particular reference to developments in the United States, including the Black Mountain poets, the New York School and the Beats. The Revival provides an important backdrop for Bonney's own

emergence.<sup>4</sup> While much Revival work has been incorporated into the discourse of ‘linguistically-innovative poetry’, Bonney is concerned with the specifically political-aesthetic aspects of the relationship between modernism and Marxism: a historical relationship, rooted particularly in the developments of the 1910s and 1920s around the various avant-garde currents, such as Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism, but one that Bonney insists is of importance to the contemporary moment, through a temporal theory developed in close conjunction with the work of Walter Benjamin. Bonney’s urgency is derived from a commitment to radical anarcho-communist politics, and his analysis of and influence by modernism lead him in 2012 to the idea of a ‘militant poetics’, as a concept related to revolutionary political aesthetics.<sup>5</sup>

The Black Radical Tradition, a term coined by and theorised most prominently by Cedric Robinson, is an understanding of the myriad intellectual and political formations that shaped Black Atlantic life and its relationship to struggle.<sup>6</sup> Integral to Black Studies as a discipline, the Black Radical Tradition also intersects with various aesthetic lineages, particularly with regard to Black modernism in music and literature, though it is often not afforded the prominence it deserves within those lineages. Bonney’s interest in Baraka’s Black poetics as a limited and discrete instance of a revolutionary moment belies a wider structural fault that imbricates post-war, postcolonial Britain, raising questions about race, politics and aesthetics in the context of the British Poetry Revival, as well as re-articulating received notions of European modernist traditions and legacies. His understanding of the Black liberation struggles of the 1960s as a key revolutionary moment of universal importance, particularly in the Anglophone world, provides the basis for inaugurating Baraka’s work as part of an itinerant canon of ‘militant poetics’. More one-sidedly ‘class first’ Marxist readings have often overlooked this moment, something for which Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, along with the writings of Black Marxists such as Angela Davis, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, and C.L.R. James, stands as corrective. Similarly, a normative modernist genealogy would also bypass such an analysis in a show of Eurocentrism and, in the American academy more acutely, overt racial prejudice. In their anthology of Black Surrealist writings, *Black, Brown and Beige*, Robin D.G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont convincingly articulate the radical anti-Eurocentric roots of Surrealism, demonstrating its width across the Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean as well as Black America.<sup>7</sup> In this frame, we can read Bonney’s influence by Aimé Césaire—an important reference point in Bonney’s theoretical writing in particular—as an entry-point for thinking the obverse relationship between the Black Radical Tradition and the British late modernists and counterculturalists. Nathaniel Mackey, too, has done work to build a cross-cultural frame of thought, linking white Black Mountain poets such as

Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley and Charles Olson to Black modernists such as Wilson Harris, Kamau Brathwaite and Baraka.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, however, Bonney's writings on Black poetics do not address the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), formed in 1966 in London, and the British Black Power Movement with which it intersected: in particular, the work of Braithwaite, Harris, and Linton Kwesi Johnson.<sup>9</sup> We cannot really read this as an oversight, considering the weight of these writers in the modernist and avant-garde literature of the post-war Black Atlantic period. What would be more fruitful is to think about this as symptomatic of a wider inability to contend with and comprehend the multiple British Poetry Revivals, wherein subaltern Black strains were present in the very formations of post-war aesthetic modernism, but within a fragmented and divergent historicity. To critique this element in Bonney is to critique a wider tendency within British late modernism as it conceives of itself intellectually, institutionally and aesthetically.

My contention, through reading Bonney, is to think of militant poetics, and strands of modernism, as something culturally-defined, but exceeding any strict historicism. By 'historicism' here I mean to suggest an understanding of aesthetic and social expression which correlate normatively to linear theories of causation and historical development. By contrast, the modernist break dislocates discrete capitalist time, often lingering on the ephemeral and disjointed nature of social experience. Drawing closely on the work of Benjamin and Rimbaud, Bonney's poetry and criticism presents socio-political irruption as temporal fragmentation.<sup>10</sup> This conception of time allows us to explore the intellectual and aesthetic links between Bonney's poetics and radical Black poetics whilst also being attentive to the wider discursive failings with which Bonney contends.

In a recent essay, Andrea Brady argues that: '[Bonney's] poetry longs for a revolutionary temporality which enables us to return to subjective time, time whose measure is not quantifiable units of production but lived experience [...] and an echo of past epochs which shows the continuities of domination and resistance'.<sup>11</sup> In drawing influence from, and reinscribing, the ranting dissension of Abiezer Coppe through the intoxicated 'derangement of the senses' espoused by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Bonney, for Brady, 'attempts to reconnect these deliria to the consciousness of the revolutionary classes'.<sup>12</sup> This, she goes on to argue, forms part of a gothic romanticism that figures throughout Bonney's work, particularly in the context of political defeat, which feeds a melancholic utopianism, one in which he turns to the esoteric and occult figures of the vampire, ghost and zombie. Brady's bridge from Bonney's poetry specifically to Black poetics occurs through the idea of 'social death', a term which, in the recent Afro-Pessimist theories popularised most notably by Frank B. Wilderson,

III, has been adapted from Orlando Patterson's earlier coinage of the term to refer to conditions of enslavement and to the ontological condition of Blackness *per se*.<sup>13</sup> Brady employs this idea critically, arguing that the poet-observer is mediated by 'mnemonic devices' in Bonney's work, providing access to a tradition accessible and legible to a countercultural whiteness, whereas Black people live in the 'afterlife of slavery' and thus need not access history through the esoteric cargo that lies latent in the city's fissures, but rather are constantly contemporaneous to the violence of racial capitalism as a transhistorical event.<sup>14</sup> Where I might depart from this reading is, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to think about the inconceivable future as already seeded in subaltern history, and thus to assert the general alongside the specific.<sup>15</sup> The subaltern, and subalternity, I situate doubly, as both a non-elite subject position and an unrecognisable trace within the ideological structure of civil and political society. While there may be limits to Bonney's discursive framework, his foregrounding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, both in Amiri Baraka's and in his own work, consciously outlines the limits, and arguably, trap, of existing framings of both the lyric subject and political subject. Political failure is imbued throughout his work, and we would do well to think about what is staked, and how this informs Bonney's melancholic utopianism, one that signals both limitations in both a specific and general sense. In this way we are grounding openings that take root in the here-and-now; the historical present. What should be asserted is that, while Bonney occasionally cites Wilderson, his work in general operates much more within the frame of Black utopianism than the Afro-pessimism that Brady suggests: his conception of revolutionary subjectivity and temporality is indebted to an esoteric anarcho-communism that reads 'modernism-from-below'.

### **Bonney's Poetry Revival**

In order to map the ways in which the movement of Sean Bonney's thought leads to a deep engagement with the Black Radical Tradition, we must locate Bonney as poet, intellectual and agitator within multiple convergences. The convergences I explore evince the various cultural contexts in which his poetics is engaged, and furthermore allows an interrogation that elucidates the historicities that a Marxist poetics both espouses and involves itself with. The signposting of Bonney's biographical development is a historicist imperative that is nevertheless resisted within the poetic and intellectual work itself. Bonney's counter-cultural modernism finds itself in multiple cultural-political frames of historical circumstance, which in turn offer the multiple ways through which we can track his mode of poetics. I argue there is a subaltern trace that lurks within this mode, attendant to the conditioning socio-political forms, which, in

Spivakian terms, leads historiographical mapping to cognitive failure and the crisis of subjectivity within historical time, of which Bonney is all too aware.<sup>16</sup>

Sean Bonney's journey begins within the political context of Thatcher's Britain as an anarchist, anti-fascist and organiser.<sup>17</sup> Importantly his political convictions were developed concomitantly with his involvement in the cultural scenes of punk and rave. Early poetry pamphlets at this stage were heavily influenced by the Beats and the Surrealists, including *Marijuana in the Breadbin* (1992) and *Now that all the Popstars are Dead* (1996). Here we must note the importance of subculture and counterculture: movements that emphasise social arrangement and organisation as much as aesthetic arrangement. This framing has bearing on the purpose, function and production of radical poetics for tracking Sean Bonney's work, and sets him apart from many of his contemporaries within the context of 'innovative poetry'.

Bonney's earlier subcultural involvement provides a backdrop for his descent into London, ostensibly to undertake a PhD on Charles Olson at King's College London. While he ultimately abandoned this project, London nonetheless became a key site for entering various poetic and political circles. He attended Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum and organised the Xing the Line reading series with Jeff Hilson and David Miller, amongst other activities. What we can see are a series of moving constellations through which Bonney travels. By engaging with this poetic circuit he was exposed to literary precedents, such as Maggie O'Sullivan, Anna Mendelssohn and Bill Griffiths, who operated within the genealogy of the British Poetry Revival. While I largely study the larger collections published in his life-time, the more informal and tactile method of circulation via pamphlet, performance, and later blogs provided the social bedrock for his poetics and for the larger sociality of the poetry scene.

Bonney's first full length book, *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (2005) collates early pamphlets touching on many themes that reoccur both in his poetry and politics. In particular, his focus continually turns to the urban cityscape as site of violence, escape, engagement and, ultimately, sociality. From 'Lyric Poetry: Surveillance':

The city boundaries have their origins in motions of trade. The herm stone, the boundary stone between two cities, sacred to Hermes, patron of thieves and poets, would be the site at which trade exchanges would take place [...] The old boundary was now hemmed in by the walls of the city, and everything that took place was defined by the act and speech of trade.<sup>18</sup>

Defining the scene of exchange through its urban architectural arrangement then descends into a fragmented scatter of poetic shards, 'like 3 a.m. / the dogtaxi sblaring / y



/ living / wanton / kissing / like rain is / footsteps / beakprint'.<sup>18</sup> Here reside vignettes of socio-poetic duress that are open to the dialogic understandings of semiotic meaning-making. We see this too in the DIY micro-press stylings of *yt communication*, which Bonney ran along with Frances Kruk and with whom he published pamphlets including *Document: Hexprogress* and *Blackwater*, as well as bulletins. These were punkish self-organising actions in both poetic and publishing form typifying a deeper desire for, and actualisation of, sociality.

The year 2010 was something of a turning point with the election of the coalition government in the UK triggering mass student protests against fee increases, and the subsequent 2011 riots responding to the murder of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police. We see the emergence of a more complicated poetic form in Bonney's work, one grounded more explicitly in both hope and defeat which he would go on to explore for the remainder of his life. In particular, Bonney shifts to writing prose pieces in the form of 'Letters', which find their way into *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015), though many of the ideas present regarding utopia and collectivity had already been explored in *The Commons* (2011) and *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011). In 2015 Bonney moved to Berlin to undertake research into US poet Diane di Prima and Greek anarchist poet Katherina Gogou, having completed his PhD on Amiri Baraka in 2012 at Birkbeck. His last collection, *Our Death* (2019), which I turn to later in the essay, continues his engagement with European modernism in particular.

First, however, I turn to *The Commons*, a book-length sequence consisting of fourteen-line stanzas, as the blurb reads: 'wherein voices from contemporary uprisings blend into the Paris Commune, into October 1917, into the execution of Charles I, and on into superstitions, fantasies of crazed fairies and supernatural bandits'.<sup>19</sup> The stanzas lead in multiple directions but, in particular, Bonney is interested in ghostly irruptions that are constantly sparked in the historical present:

but ghosts are necessary  
 a chart of / a collective  
 inarticulate harmony  
 item: minor surface noise  
 item: a basement strata  
 its bibliographic shell  
 I mean, its celestial arc  
 has got us surrounded.  
 Anyway, here in 1917  
 we're having a right laugh

no point in waking you  
 love's solar boat is slashed  
 is trickling down our thighs  
 the chatter of the past<sup>20</sup>

Invoking Mayakovsky's final poem, included in his suicide note, and often read as symptomatic of the dashed hopes of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in the era of Stalinism, collective malaise is here heard through 'the chatter of the past', that speaks to the contemporary conjuncture, 'a collective/inarticulate harmony / item'. Temporality is self-consciously interrogated and reinscribed as a predicate for thinking beyond capitalist reification—or what Mark Fisher terms 'capitalist realism'—a process in which 'ghosts are necessary'.<sup>21</sup> Arguing that 'we are haunted by futures that failed to happen'—of which the communist society promised by the Soviet revolution looms large—Fisher's thought, as expressed in books such as *Ghosts of My Life*, and often figured through examples taken from contemporary popular culture, arguably risks a melancholic nostalgia. In Bonney's poetics, the situation is more complicated. This complication, which I address in more depth later in this essay, primarily arises in relation to Bonney's engagement with literary tradition. In particular, he views ghosts as cultural precedents which are immanent at the aesthetico-political cut of social life. So instead of a fixed subjectivity that yearns nostalgically—a criticism which may be levelled at Movement poets, as well as at the more melancholic elements of Fisher's work—for Bonney, the thrust of revolutionary socialities are subterraneously already present at the contemporary point of incision, and poetics provides a way of presenting and mediating these traces.

In historicising Bonney's work, it is important to think about what drives him towards Black poetics, particularly within a British tradition which has largely been unable to bridge that gap. Despite the apparent failed meeting with forms of Black British poetics in his work, I nonetheless situate the subcultural and countercultural stylings of Bonney as part of a rigorous practice of study, one bound up with and affected by an irreducible sociality that is intrinsic to the aesthetics of his literary production.<sup>22</sup> He thus writes in, of, and through a counter-historical tradition that irrupts and reverberates through regimes of temporality and capitalist reification, leading him through the British Poetry Revival, European modernism, anarchism, English radical nonconformists and Black modernist poetics, particularly Amiri Baraka but also Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Black theorists such as Frantz Fanon and George Jackson. His attention to militant and revolutionary poetics as at once contemporaneous and historical, at once social and aesthetic, leads him to seek multiple sites and contexts for



understanding the historical present in a culturally materialist fashion, one that seeks to understand both continuity and temporal disjuncture. Here, poetics is conceived as a method of thought, one rigorously improvised and practiced, yet not reducible to normative theory or history.

### Militant Poetics

In thinking Bonney's relationship to the Black Radical Tradition, we have to treat it as part of his focus on 'militant poetics'. His most extensive theoretical writings on his relationship to Black poetics are found in his PhD titled, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka'. As David Grundy remarks, 'while aware of his compromised position as a white man writing on the Black Radical Tradition, and the dangers of fetishising past artefacts, [Bonney] insisted that poetry provided a valuable counter-history to the official record, enabling the unthought to express itself'.<sup>23</sup> This reading is more limited and discrete than Brady's analysis of social death as key conceptual bridge. What is important to note here is that, for Bonney, the Black Radical Tradition, as seen through Baraka and the 1960s Black Arts Movement, was only one such site of revolutionary poetics that could inform contemporary formations.<sup>24</sup> Other sites included European modernists such as Jean Genet, Rimbaud and Artaud, and radical religious nonconformists such as Thomas Müntzner and Abiezer Coppe. As Bonney notes, 'my idea is that the convulsions that Baraka's work went through as his political commitments gained in intensity are roughly applicable to any number of revolutionary moments'.<sup>25</sup>

Given such statements, we must locate this tendency of Bonney's poetics in the austerity politics of post-2008 financial crash Britain—particularly the social unrest following the accession of the Coalition government in 2010, a conjuncture Bonney conceives as a revolutionary moment—while also attending to the non-linear temporal irruptive nature of poetics foregrounded in his work.<sup>26</sup> A neat historicism cannot suffice for understanding literary production, though that framework can allow us to bring out some of the tensions between the aesthetic and political that interested Bonney, one that provided the limits of his poetic mode. At the same time, political temporality itself does not suffice to explain the socio-poetic project that Bonney is entangled within and is here something of a double-bind. In *Letters Against the Firmament*, we find some of the best examples of Bonney's thinking in this regard:

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 etc. Ourselves for one thing. That sounds great,

absolutely tip fucking top, until you remember that, equally, the harmony of the money fetish is that of the commodity fetish only now become visible and dazzling to our eyes, i.e. we don't have any kind of monopoly on harmonic invisibility, and all of those occultist systems that some of us still love so much have always been bourgeois through and through. That is, it's not a question of gentrification, but that the whole process has always started from the invisible spot where your feet, tapping whatever fetishised rhythms right into the star encrusted ground.<sup>27</sup>

There is a utopianism here ('poetic realities as counter-earths'), but one both scathing and melancholic, decrying bourgeois occultist systems, while also thinking about collective failure. The formal narrative internal to its content revolves around the harmonic/disharmonic conceptions, where counter-history is mobilised through righteous turn to Marxist theory ('the harmony of the money fetish is that of the commodity fetish'), reinstating a central tension between fixity of meaning and poetic form. The self-consciousness that takes shape is part of this dialogic address that seeks to reinscribe bourgeois-self into wider collective form. So the hermetically-sealed subject that politics engenders is cut through and subverted. This conceptually only operates for Bonney through the incessant tracing of temporal warping that eschews historicist mapping. This is a historical materialism that relies on the ineffable 'secret cargo' of history, one in which the imperative of modern time is decomposed through an occult that hides all that would melt that which is solid.

In turning to his PhD proper, Bonney perhaps sets out the terms which we are interrogating most comprehensively:

My thesis is concerned with revolutionary poetics. My interest is in two linked areas: I am interested in what happens to a poem as a textual object when it emerges from a lived revolutionary moment, and, secondly, how a new poetics emerges from the tension the relationship between a commitment to a poetics, and a commitment to a politics produces in the poems, and what this does to the relationship of the poem to the idea of literature itself, as opposed to its relationship to political struggle. [...] But although the thesis concentrates on a particular writer, and on a particular historical moment, I hope that the questions it asks, and the answers it proposes, may have some bearing on wider concerns *about the relevance of poetic writing and poetic thought to current revolutionary moments*.<sup>28</sup>

Quite clearly, we see the entanglement of the literary object – the poem – as aesthetic and as political. Bonney conceives of this project as one that goes back to 'the idea of literature itself'. This is to reiterate the point that his relationship to Black poetics is

mediated through a wider desire that is sedimented through a particular reading of the aesthetic and political in literary form. The poetic emerges then as a sort of cathexis, an intense sublimation of energy rooted in the tensions of the temporal and historical.

For Bonney, a key touchstone in exploring temporal and historical questions is in the work of Walter Benjamin in thinking this multivalent axis of the aesthetic-political and the temporal-historical: 'For Benjamin, esoteric poetry carries a "cargo" which can become apparent at specific social moments: his "this is the moment" gives the claim a properly revolutionary charge, in its implication that specific historic conjunctures enable us to see into poetic content in a new way'.<sup>29</sup> This cargo is a latency that lies under the temporal structures of a modern capitalist framework ready to irrupt at the revolutionary moment. Importantly, it is poetic content on which light is initially shed, the implication being that this 'revolutionary charge' then feeds back into the political situation. Bonney goes further: 'Ultimately, poetry allows us to recruit the forces of irrationalism for the rationality of the revolutionary moment, *without* tumbling into fascism'.<sup>30</sup> While there is a point being made here about the politicisation of aesthetics, there is a tension playing out between what the temporality of politics demands, and how that grinds against the historicity of the aesthetic object. Bonney argues: 'Perhaps a poem is, from a revolutionary perspective, a "mystified" form of revolutionary knowledge'.<sup>31</sup> This mystified form, the esoteric, refers to the internal content to poetic form, and the terms whereby it asks to be understood. Bonney's continual invocation of the revolutionary is a consideration of the esoteric nature of poetic form:

A poem that had previously been a monument to a historical moment was now a poem that could audibly summon the living energies of that moment. The revolutionary, or potentially revolutionary, moment alters the way we read the artefacts of the past in the same way that it alters the way in which we use the energies of the present for our own writing.<sup>32</sup>

Here, Bonney comes back to the notion of critical reading and writing practices as forming a cultural lineage with previous revolutionary moments. This tension between the political and aesthetic, both of which constitute this conception of revolutionary poetics, is something Bonney interrogates in Amiri Baraka's work.

While critics tend to map a chronology onto Baraka's various tendencies, from bohemian avant-gardist to Blacknationalist and Third World Marxist, Bonney dislocates this narrative by asserting the importance of his 1960 trip to Cuba as inseminating many of the ideas that would bear out more prominently in the late 1960s and 70s.<sup>33</sup> Bonney outlines a similar development that Fanon details in *Wretched of The Earth* wherein the

revolutionary writer embarks on a three-stage path: from assimilated Europeanist writer, to political writer concerned with revolutionary politics, to finally wholly revolutionary actor who overcomes their bourgeois self and develops their writing seamlessly into revolutionary action.<sup>34</sup> Such writing becomes, for Fanon, ‘combat literature’, filled with what Baraka terms ‘survival codes’ and Bonney ‘attack codes’, respectively. Such a narrative relies on an origin-point of a bourgeois aestheticism and a linear historicism, which arguably does not well describe the trajectory of Bonney’s own poetic work. The dislocation between this narrative and Bonney’s development is at the point where revolutionary energy within poetic content exceeds its own form and the very experience of historical time. In turn, ontological development is reoriented and deranged, through accessing collective consciousness at the moment of temporal irruption. For Spivak, the subalternist has a similar insight, tracking the sign-change from the religious subject through the political subject, and the cognitive dissonance that ensues within both historiography and subjectivity itself, at edge of the socio-aesthetic.<sup>35</sup> The esoteric holds the explosiveness of an anticolonial, unsovereign subjectivity immanent to sociopoetic form that Nahum Chandler terms ‘paraontology’, a term used to explicate the non-human subjectivity of Black life that works alongside and against political ontological subjectivity. Moten expands: ‘The relative nothingness of black life, which shows up for political ontology as a relation of nonrelation or counterrelation precisely in the impossibility of political intersubjectivity, can be said both to obscure and to indicate the social animation of the bridge’s underside, where the im/possibilities of political intersubjectivity are exhausted.’<sup>36</sup>

Bonney carries through such arguments in a different form in his *Notes on Militant Poetics*, initially published on his blog *abandoned buildings*. Here, the central dialectic of poetry and Marxism is addressed through the work of Jean Genet and George Jackson in particular. In this frame poetry is an artform in crisis, one precipitated by the crises of political subjectivity: ‘aesthetic enclosure is, obviously, the counter-prison’.<sup>37</sup> Enclosure here might be read in terms of claiming territory strategically from the subaltern position, at moments of contingency, rather than the enclosure associated with the hegemonic rise of private property through the Enclosure Acts. At the same time, Bonney is keen to stress the ambivalent position of most Anglophone poetry as it pertains to a revolutionary situation in the face of commodification and advertising, as well as Fascist esoteric thought: ‘If esoteric poetry is potentially the unspoken expression of the destruction of capitalism, then it is just as potentially the unspoken expression of the fascism that is always lurking at capital’s centre’.<sup>38</sup> The secret at the heart of poetry, and revolutionary time more generally, is one that must be eeked out, ‘that can be somehow prior to itself’.<sup>39</sup> In this same vein of thinking, the counter-historical

lineages that Bonney maps can also be animated and embodied retroactively by the judge, the prison guard, and the oppressor through the very machinations of capitalist reification that the oppressed channel their frustration within and beyond. So the secret cargo is both the hegemon's idea as well as the 'collective voice of the victims of those ideas',<sup>40</sup> which brings the dialectical nature of our predicament to the fore. The invocation of poetry 'aims at meanings not yet articulated, meanings not catered to in the currently available aesthetic and social networks', rather than direct, unmediated forms of communication.<sup>41</sup> What Bonney sees in Benjamin's theorisation is the potential of 'forming new constellations of meaning and a new rationalism absolutely alien to bourgeois forms of logic'.<sup>42</sup> So, in fact, poetry is not a direct political tool, but one associated with epistemic and social concerns which Bonney understands through the aesthetic. This finds its form in the clarion call: 'We need new forms. New modes of speech [...] Speech as descent into unofficial history and non-cognitive cosmology'.<sup>43</sup> Black poetics, read through George Jackson's prison letters, is understood as an instance of this unofficial history, a cosmological view that continually errs out of sight and pulls back in through iterations of revolutionary irruption. Its secret, the magical cargo, is something incumbent and inert, yet constantly enacted if we think about the social locations of poetic activity, rather than the finite political militancy that delimits a revolutionary approach to historical time. There is a link here between the Benjaminian idea of poetry's secret cargo and the hold of the slave ship during the Middle Passage, expounded by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney as the dialectic between the logistics of shipping as derived from the slave trade and the aesthetic sociality developed in the hold of the ship, the haptic nature of shared consciousness as 'modernity's insurgent feel'.<sup>44</sup> This subaltern history is one guided by social poesis, something felt as a consequence of and mediated through socio-poetic form.

I am trying to show here the manner in which instances of Black poetics are integrated into a larger discourse regarding the relationship of Marxism and modernism that speaks to the contemporary situation: Baraka represents a key figure for Bonney in working out these problematics. What Bonney is not doing is entering the Black Radical Tradition as a practitioner or theorist, but rather pulling elements into his own standpoint which have been mediated through various genealogies of British and European poetry and anarchic subcultures, which I have outlined above. If we look at some of the poetry from this later Bonney (particularly after the political irruptions of 2010–11) where these ideas around militant poetics are more solidified, we can see more explicitly where critical thinking met creative practice.

The shift to the prose-poem, marked by the 'Letters' published in *Letters Against the Firmament*, signals a turn where Bonney's writing becomes more lucid and peripatetic.

Bonney himself notes that, while this prose voice was ‘an embellished literary guise’, it allowed him to use his subjectivity in a way that was still seemingly forbidden in avant-garde poetry. Importantly, Bonney sees that ‘poetry can be a place where subjectivity can go into political discourse’.<sup>45</sup> In ‘Letter Against the Language’ in *Our Death* (2019), Berlin provides the urban backdrop to revolutionary musings on Pasolini and Hölderlin:

And we could, if we wanted, I thought to myself, spinning round and round in 920 degree circles, we could translate that whole thing into geography, so these spittle-flecked unpronounceable syllables would become the sheer disks of unliveable landscape. The death-cell. The plague-pit. The city of sun. Utopia. All of the dreams of all of those dry fuckers who neither believe nor remember their dreams.<sup>46</sup>

This psychogeographical move, where the dream of utopia emanates from the ‘unliveable landscape’, is a map that denies the supremacy of geography in actual fact. Language is the prime wielder of subjectivity, and wry self-conscious irony is constantly at play and in tension with radical desire for emancipation. The letter ends:

[...] alien as the pitiful groan I mumbled as I stood up and staggered back to my temporary flat in one of the more fashionable areas of this hopelessly gentrified and haunted city. I did a shitload of speed, stared into space for a while, then wrote you this. Hope you don’t mind that I haven’t been in touch for so long. We are not completely defenceless. We have not yet been consumed in fire.<sup>47</sup>

Found somewhere between melancholia and defiance, the writer is coming to terms with collective failure and fractal subjectivity. This turn is also perpetuated in the shorter poems that populate the collection. In the sequence ‘Cancer: Poems After Katerina Gogou’, this continues where ‘we survive / at random. pissed out of our heads’,<sup>48</sup> in a burst of political dysphoria which leads into a defiant rally call, ‘for those who never made it’.<sup>49</sup> We are told to ‘reinvent time. reinvent violence’ because ‘only then will you disappear / only then will you learn the magic’.<sup>50</sup> This bond between temporality and the occult is made into a slogan, but it is also undergirded by an attention to subjectivity – in its ludic quality – that instantiates militancy as an iterable historical irruption, channelled through the performative act of the text.

But this also opens up a problem latent within Bonney’s poetics, one that can be drawn out by thinking about this poetics on its own terms. To follow Andrea Brady’s line of thinking, if there was an element of ‘social death’ in Bonney’s pessimism, his revolutionary optimism was predicated on an occult radical lineage that required



activation at certain socio-political or cultural moments. Bonney might here be understood to operate in the movement of optimism from which Fred Moten, contrasting his project to that of Wilderson, also operates, where the Black subject—being rendered as commodity—can nonetheless ‘speak’ in socio-aesthetic excess of certain oppressive structures.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the relationship between past and present is occluded through the failure of subaltern elements to maintain autonomy outside of commodifying bourgeois operations, a failure not specific to Bonney but one he nevertheless is haunted by. Where Baraka would emphasise the collectively-accessible role of jazz and blues music as central to his project, Bonney’s recourse to the Black Radical Tradition, conscious as he is of his role as a white writer drawing on the collective aesthetic socialities of Black music and Black poetry, is more limited and focused within his own revolutionary subjectivity, one that is mediated through British subculture and European modernisms, finding kindred spirit in Black radicalism at a later date.<sup>52</sup>

In *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*, there is a stanza which deals with the Motenian idea of the speaking commodity, itself *détourned* from Marx:

but, if commodities could speak > their  
 imaginary friends grabbed your arm, their  
 barren life > is as simple as blossom, as a  
 musical phrase < beautiful as driving nails  
 deep in the skull of William Hague, that  
 vicious punk < imagine cultivating warts  
 as if commodities could speak > or fired  
 lived bullets & teargas, as crackling words  
 encircled the last of the liberated cities  
*or the fierce buzzing of flies* > but anyway  
 imagine commodities could think, their  
 scraping hands on your sleeve > musical  
 beams of love < barren, respected life<sup>53</sup>

Bonney enacts, through his own idiom, the Motenian theory of subjectivity, or sociality, wherein the nature of the speaking commodity—in Moten’s case, the slave—is, prior to exchange, ‘a kind of anticipatory sociality and historicity’.<sup>54</sup> Bonney’s ‘imaginary friends’ partake in a subjunctivity that Moten sees as real and historical. Here, too, the ‘musical phrase’ and ‘musical beams of love’ seem in conversation with how Moten theorises music:

To ask this is to think what's at stake in the music: the universalisation or socialisation of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances.<sup>55</sup>

Bonney, too, is working at the edge of word, sound and political instantiation, mediated through the dual poles of Marx and Rimbaud. Moten's *In the Break* opens with a passage in which the idea of the speaking or screaming commodity is addressed in relation to a passage where Frederick Douglass describes the screams emitted by his Aunt Hester when beaten by slavers. Moten uses Douglass' deployment of music and speech in reference to Aunt Hester's screams as follows: 'The first element is the transference of a radically exterior aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical'.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, in the afore-quoted passage from *The Commons*, Bonney is very much in his element: 'the fierce buzzing of flies', 'crackling words' and 'vicious punks' all leap from the page, residing prior to graphic transcription in a sociality akin to Moten's theorisation, emphasising, to borrow Marx's phrase, the senses as '*theoreticians* in their immediate praxis'.<sup>57</sup> The shift between Moten and Bonney occurs in Moten's second move, where Moten emphasises the 'wounded kinship' and 'sexual cut' that relate Douglass and Aunt Hester, elements that bear an 'always already unavailable and substitutive origin'<sup>58</sup> which disrupts Enlightenment forms of sovereignty and reproduction. Bonney's recourse, by contrast, is to 'barren life', a phrase which echoes Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life', a form of life without political or civil rights, but utterly beholden to sovereign biopower, and thus, unlike Moten's theorisation, demonstrating a difficulty in breaking out of political subjectivity.<sup>59</sup> In his PhD, Bonney invokes Moten's writing on Aunt Hester's scream in relation to Baraka's poem '*An Agony. As Now*', which presents the self as enclosed within 'flesh, / white hot metal', concluding 'It burns the thing / inside it. And that thing / screams'.<sup>60</sup> Bonney writes:

The key, then, is to recognise that Baraka's screaming "thing" is the true content of social life, and the form that expresses the content is, quite simply, the "scream". The capacity of poetry, its transformative force, is to articulate this, and by doing that to turn the content of bourgeois reality inside out.<sup>61</sup>

This demonstrates a discursive understanding of the situation, but perhaps belies the problem of sensuality and poetic form in the first instance. In the poem from *The Commons*, the speaking or screaming of the commodity, connected to 'a musical

phrase', is fixed within the political, in the guise of Tory politician William Hague: '< beautiful as driving nails / deep in the skull of William Hague'. Ed Luker has worked through Bonney's insistent naming of political figures via Moten's 'socio-poetics of riot' and Olson's 'poetics of the open field' to argue that such naming is an instantiation of poetic resistance and expropriation which calls into being a radical, social life.<sup>62</sup> Yet, arguably, such naming still relies on an instantiated immediacy that calls into being something that is already at work, revealing discursively an ontology that differs from the paraontological condition of Black life in the 'afterlife of slavery'. Or, put another way, the liberation of the city is always already happening, and the pull of political life can occlude that social activity. At the same time, one might argue that Bonney is in fact reflecting on this very issue of the paraontological distinction that pervades a racial delineation. There is a knowingness to how he writes: as, for instance, the deep irony of a sentence structure in which the phrase 'driving nails / deep in the skull of William Hague' is the culminating comparative term for the speaking commodity, following 'blossom' and 'a musical phrase', the structure at once collapsing and emphasising distinctions between the terms of the comparison.

In what could be a fruitful avenue for understanding Bonney's foray into Black poetics, and is an important precedent for Moten's arguments, Nathaniel Mackey asks us to think about the move from Noun to Verb, from other to othering, from an exchangeable commodity to an active process.<sup>63</sup> While this practice is incumbent in Black musical tradition, Mackey posits the insurgence of music as an integral part of Black poetry. In positions of marginality and other/othering, the warp and weft of the modernist, avant-garde, innovative poetic form conceived is more readily produced. Mackey implores us to ponder the generative antagonism at points of contact, something he conceives through the rubric of 'discrepant engagement':

It is an expression coined in reference to practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world. Such practices high-light – indeed inhabit – discrepancy, engage rather than seek to ignore it [...] In its anti-foundational acknowledgement of founding noise, discrepant engagement sings "base," voicing reminders of the axiomatic exclusions upon which positing of identity and meaning depend.<sup>64</sup>

As Mackey suggests, we must think about social and epistemological marginality as conducive to revolutionary poetics, and *vice versa*, wherein the poetic form becomes a site of a particular concatenation. In fact, 'anti-foundational acknowledgement of

foundling noise' could aid in thinking about (white) British engagement with Black poetry in discursive and structural manners. Bonney provides tools for unpacking this discrepant engagement, his reading of Baraka being one such site of contestation. What Mackey provokes is a thinking of historicity as it is sedimented in language, but one emanating out of a larger semiotic field of subaltern sound, that works alongside Bonney's Motenian encounter to position roots of engagement and traction that can be built upon.

In conclusion, I wish to briefly return to the wider question of the relationship between the Black Radical Tradition, as embodied in Black poetry such as that of Baraka and Césaire, and the late modernists of the British Poetry Revival. In his engagement with Black poetics, Bonney can be seen to redress this seeming historical aporia between the Black experimentalism of CAM and the largely white experimentalism of the British Poetry Revival. At the same time, Bonney himself does not take on the responsibility of addressing this issue within a specifically British context, perhaps evading the baggage that that confrontation may reveal. A wider look at such questions would further situate the New Left's position where cultural politics, literary innovation and artistic virtuosity appear discontinuous amid the crises of the post-colonial British state and its decaying imperial ideology.<sup>65</sup> For his part, Bonney conjures a motley-crew of lineages and predecessors through his Benjaminian conception of militant poetics.<sup>66</sup> It allows us a model to think through structural faults on a level that recognises the latency of the contemporary moment, saturated with the urgency that political aesthetics demands, while attuned to the pitfalls and failures of a (white) militant avant-gardist position. To position the paraontological sweep of the Black Radical Tradition alongside Bonney's militant modernism is to query the theorisations and expressions of subjectivity that resist bourgeois conceptions, raising the fraught relationship between politics and aesthetics that Bonney tackled throughout his work. The social worlds and embraces of the fractal collective subject provide seeds for thinking about the historical present where the cross-culturality of subalternity could desediment the whole artifice.

What I have attempted in this essay is a tracking of Bonney's poetics as a critical and creative endeavour in keeping with a conception of poetics as a method of thought. That tracking, with a keen eye on its relationship to Black poetics, led to a focus on militant poetics as discursive and historical formations. Ultimately, Bonney's poetics places Black radical poetics within a modernist canon, while shearing it from certain social specificities, recognising, as he does, that his own project originates out of its own specificity. This cross-cultural move allows for an opening up of subjectivity, I argue, which is apparent in later work by Bonney, particularly with the advent of a more experimental prose style. At the same time, this work at times overshadows the

precedence of the subaltern trace that appears as poetry's 'secret cargo'. To understand this on Bonney's own terms is to understand that difficulty and failure are incumbent and ever-present, while aesthetic sociality provides respite, it also reorients subjectivity and positions itself in opposition to normative historical accounts mediated through linear political time. The key, then, is to not view Bonney as the bridge-figure between Blackness and (white) British avant-garde poetry. For this, we might turn to the work of contemporary Black British experimental or experimental-oriented poets such as D.S. Marriott, James Goodwin, and Anthony Joseph, along with the poets of the CAM, as well as cross-continental lineages of Black Surrealism, for instance. Instead, Bonney can be viewed as a political aesthete who recognised certain structural faults that he attempted to redress, to a limited extent, within his own sociopoetic practice, one indebted to the anti-Eurocentrism of Surrealism. In these occluded fragments, in this magical Marxism,<sup>67</sup> we find seeds of a cross-cultural radical poetics predicated on anticoloniality and paraontology, but one that requires an attentive approach to cultural specificity and subaltern historicity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bonney refers to Anna Mendelssohn's poetry as a mode of thought. However, it should be stressed that his own work should also be understood under these terms, as very much implicit within his oeuvre, of which I expand upon under the rubric of 'militant poetics'. 'Mendelssohn's work insists on poetry as a specific method of thought. These poems are saying something, something that can be only reached by means of the poem itself. That is, contrary to a few received ideas, poetry does communicate. If you are able to listen, if you are not a cop, you will be able to hear'. (Sean Bonney, 'Minds do exist to agitate and provoke / this is the reason I do not conform - Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter* (Feb/March 2011, No. 226), p.17).
- <sup>2</sup> Sean Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka' (Unpublished PhD: Birkbeck, London, 2012), p.10.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1945–2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005) provides a history of the British Poetry Revival as part of a larger theory of 'Linguistically Innovative Poetry'.
- <sup>5</sup> The 'avant-garde' is another term of relevance and importance. However, sustained engagement with the term falls outside of the remit of this specific essay.
- <sup>6</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Introduction: Invisible Surrealists', in *Black, Brown and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, Eds. Rosemont and Kelley, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- <sup>9</sup> See David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), and Ann Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992).
- <sup>10</sup> See Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2007).
- <sup>11</sup> Andrea Brady, 'Sean Bonney: Poet Out of Time' in *Communism and Poetry: Writing Against Capital*, Eds. Ruth Jennison and Julian Murphet (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) p.133.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 134.
- <sup>13</sup> See Frank B. Wilderson, 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?' *Social Identities* (Volume 9, Number 2, 2003).
- <sup>14</sup> Brady, 'Sean Bonney: Poet Out of Time', 155.
- <sup>15</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *In Other Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, repr. 1998), pp.270–277.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.



- <sup>17</sup> Much of this is based on David Grundy, 'Sean Bonney's Life and Work', *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2020/03/sean-bonneys-life-work> [Accessed 12-4-2021].
- <sup>18</sup> Sean Bonney, *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (Salt: Cambridge, 2005), p.37.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.
- <sup>20</sup> Sean Bonney, *The Commons* (London: Opened Press, 2011), back-cover blurb.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.62.
- <sup>22</sup> For a theorisation of the concept of 'study' and sociality, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), pp.67–68.
- <sup>23</sup> Grundy, 'Sean Bonney's Life and Work', n.p.
- <sup>24</sup> We may want to think about Bonney's study of Olson, and the influence of Olson on Baraka as an important entry-point for Bonney's work on Baraka, a tradition highly influential on the poets of the British Poetry Revival, as well as on Baraka himself, but one to which Black British poetry is not so accustomed.
- <sup>25</sup> Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', p.10.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Once the energies that are released within the revolutionary moment have dissipated, they are crystallised within the poem, which then becomes a carrier of, in Benjamin's terms, the "oppressed past". In further potentially revolutionary moments, the energies latent within the poem may once again become alive. A brief anecdote will illustrate what I mean. In August of 2011 I was out on the streets for the nights of the riots. I came out of the Walthamstow tube station to find myself faced with a line of riot police. I stayed around for a couple of hours, watching what was going on, and chatting with the young people who were also out on the streets. It was a very intense experience, and I felt at first hand the meaning of a riot situation, where everyday reality begins to buckle and we see, however briefly, what Benjamin called a "revolutionary chance."' (Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', p.211.) See also Danny Hayward, *Wound Building: Dispatches from the Latest Disasters of UK Poetry* (Punctum Books, 2021) for a discontinuous set of essays on post-2008 poetry culture.
- <sup>27</sup> Bonney, 'Second Letter on Harmony', *Letter Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), pp.33–34.
- <sup>28</sup> Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', p.7 [italics own].
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p.106.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.107. More could be said here about how Bonney does not read the metaphysical esoteric through the lens and tradition of the occult, a movement of relevance both in current intellectual-poetic climate, as well as at the crucible of Surrealism.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p.175.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.212.

- <sup>33</sup> Dhanveer Singh Brar also outlines the prominence of Baraka's 1960 trip. See Dhanveer Singh Brar, 'Baraka, Amiri (1934 – 2014)' in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, Eds. Zake Cope and Immanuel Ness (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- <sup>34</sup> Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', p.161.
- <sup>35</sup> Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *In Other Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, repr. 1998).
- <sup>36</sup> Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)', *South Atlantic Quarterly* (112: 4, Fall 2013), 749. Also see Nahum Chandler, "Paraontology; or, Notes on the Practical Theoretical Politics of Thought" (2018), <https://vimeo.com/297769615>.
- <sup>37</sup> Bonney, 'Notes on Militant Poetics', *All This Burning Earth* (Ill Will Editions, 2016), p.39.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.40.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.39.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.42.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.42.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.45.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.45–46.
- <sup>44</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, p.97.
- <sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Grunthaner, 'Their Own Pantheon: Sean Bonney Interview by Jeffrey Grunthaner', *BOMB Magazine* (Dec 2019) <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/> [Accessed 11-04-2021].
- <sup>46</sup> Bonney, *Our Death* (Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2019), p.18.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.19.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.29.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.30.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.32.
- <sup>51</sup> For a formulation of Moten's "Black optimism" see Moten, 'Black Op', *Stolen Life* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p.155–160.
- <sup>52</sup> Ed Simon argues we should read Bonney through a radical tradition of dissent and political theology, though this may be something underdeveloped in Bonney's work itself. Ed Simon, 'The Bard of Capitalist Realism', *Poetry Foundation* (Jan 2020) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/152135/the-bard-of-capitalist-realism> [Accessed 12-04-2021]. A more in-depth look would read Bonney and elements of British subculture and radical dissent through the approach to the revolutionary Atlantic prior to the consolidation of racial regimes outlined in Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many Headed-Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).
- <sup>53</sup> Bonney, *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant, 2011), p.33.

- <sup>54</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p.10.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.12.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.6.
- <sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, 'Communism and Private Property,' in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), p.356.
- <sup>58</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, p.6.
- <sup>59</sup> Alexander Weheliye's critique of Agamben's theorisation of bare life through recourse to black feminism is very compelling. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke: University Press, 2014).
- <sup>60</sup> Baraka, 'As Agony, As Now', from *The Dead Lecturer*, in *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961–1995)* (New York: Marsilio, 1995), p.61.
- <sup>61</sup> Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', p.23.
- <sup>62</sup> Ed Luker, 'Naming and the riotous: the socio-poetics of Sean Bonney's Letters Against the Firmament', (Unpublished paper) [https://www.academia.edu/30026392/Naming\\_and\\_the\\_riotous\\_the\\_socio\\_poetics\\_of\\_Seon\\_Bonney\\_s\\_Letters\\_Against\\_the\\_Firmament](https://www.academia.edu/30026392/Naming_and_the_riotous_the_socio_poetics_of_Seon_Bonney_s_Letters_Against_the_Firmament) [Accessed 12-04-2021].
- <sup>63</sup> Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, p.276.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.19.
- <sup>65</sup> Another approach would be to look at the poetics of the Black Audio Film Collective in building on that relationship between Black culture and European modernism within a British historical context. See *The Ghost of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, Eds. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
- <sup>66</sup> In addition to Rediker and Linebaugh, *The Many Headed-Hydra*, see Laura Harris, 'What Happened to the Motley Crew?: C. L. R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness', *Social Text* (2012) 30 (3 (112)): 49–75.
- <sup>67</sup> Andy Merrifield, *Magical Marxism: Subversive Politics and the Imagination* (London: Pluto, 2011).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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