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## 'No Simple Explanations'

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This editorial essay introduces the Sean Bonney special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. We begin by setting Bonney's writing on plague and temporality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which in some ways it seemed to anticipate, arguing that 'in 2020, reality, its landscapes, both internal and external, seemed to become a Sean Bonney poem'. We then outline the content of the special issue in more detail, offering summaries of the essays that follow, as well as the critical writing by Bonney and the bibliography of his work reprinted as part of the issue. A concluding section entitled 'No Simple Explanations' suggests the range of Bonney's artistic and political interests and concerns, arguing that '[Bonney's] work consistently challenged the borders and boundaries of what poetry might mean, whether in his late prose poems, or in his critical work', and offering a comparative reading of Jayne Cortez's poem 'No Simple Explanations', which, we argue, offers a mode of poetics that 'draws out a genuinely social realism'. We end by suggesting that Bonney and Cortez 'help us to think of a poetry that moves through grief, despair, and sorrow into new forms, new ways to think through the temporal urgency of this and any moment'.

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## Introduction: Gods of the Plague

The author of numerous pamphlets and full-length collections, including *Our Death* (2019), *Letters against the Firmament* (2015), *Happiness* (2011), *The Commons* (2011), *Document* (2008), *Baudelaire in English* (2007) and *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (2005), Sean Bonney (1969–2019) was a crucial part of contemporary poetry communities in the UK and Ireland and internationally. Formatively shaped by the influences of Maggie O’Sullivan and Anna Mendelssohn and by Bob Cobbing’s Writers Forum workshops, Bonney’s work drew from the aesthetic practices of the ‘British Poetry Revival’, and from Left-wing political and aesthetic radicalism, including the Angry Brigade, the Black Radical Tradition, Punk, the Situationists, Surrealism and Revolutionary Marxism and Anarchism. Predominantly based in London, but also in Liverpool and Nottingham and, in his final years, Berlin, Bonney’s work was in dialogue with a much wider range of international poetries past and present. With Frances Kruk, Bonney ran the small press *yt* communication, and he was an active publisher and organiser, committed to an aesthetic drawn from Punk and DIY traditions, as well as the legacy of the Mimeo revolution, samizdat publishing and radical pamphleteering. A critic and scholar as well as a poet, his critical work challenged the boundaries of academic writing, as he aimed at conceptualising what he called a ‘militant poetics’, in doctoral work on Amiri Baraka and in essays on Louis-Auguste Blanqui and Sun Ra, among others. His work in poetry, poetics and critical prose was extraordinarily wide-ranging in its field of influences, and in turn exerted a powerful influence on those poets around him. We hope that this feature will give a sense of the full richness of his career in poetry in its many different phases and dimensions, as well as taking into account Bonney’s unswerving commitment to political activism and to thinking through the relation of politics and aesthetics.

Stepping aside from our official, summarising role, we’d like to begin with a brief reflection on what it meant to edit this issue when we did, between the spring of 2020 and the spring of 2022. Sean Bonney died in the autumn of 2019, during the UK general election which saw Boris Johnson elected as prime minister, and a month or so before the first strains of COVID-19 emerged. We first began to edit this issue during a national lockdown in the UK, and a condition of lockdown in many countries worldwide, at a time when social norms, expectations and safety nets were even more radically dissembled, with no immediate end point in site.

During this time, reality seemed to have become a Sean Bonney poem. He had, after all, titled a blog *Gods of the Plague* (after an early Fassbinder film).<sup>1</sup> The word ‘plague’ appears frequently in Bonney’s work, often as part of a catalogue at once expansive and restricted, agoraphobic and claustrophobic all at once. Here’s one example, from ‘Letter against Hunger’, written in 2013:

Hunger as beginning of thought [...] All of those empty shops, full zombie, the absolute calendar. Comedy. History. Masks and plague sores. Mass renunciation, reactionary weather systems, everything.<sup>2</sup>

In 'Letter against the Firmament (Two)', written at the turn of the following year, the metaphor itself comes under interrogation:

Plague is a bad metaphor, that's its accuracy, it refers to both sides, all sides, in quantitatively different ways. Hegelian 'aspects' and all that, yeh? But primarily, its dirt simple: It runs in both directions. Means both us and them. Is a jagged rip through all pronouns. The thunder of the world, a trembling, a turbine. Cyclical desperation, clusters of walls.<sup>3</sup>

Recalling a specific conjuncture of plague and political unrest, the Moscow Plague Riots of 1771, Bonney notes:

Around 200,000 people died, not including those who were executed. It's a grisly map. Disease as interpretation and anonymity. The plague itself as injection into certain subsets of opinion, those predominantly generated within hegemonic diagrams of running water and digital electricity. Plague sores, each basilica split open to various popular songs, calendars folded within them, recorded crackles through the forcibly locked houses, code etc., LEDs and meth. Basic surrealism.

Given this, Bonney suggests, plague becomes:

The opposite of solidarity. Or rather, solidarity itself: the solidarity of isolation and quarantine, of the bomb-zone or the ghetto. The great silence is full of noises. And that's what I mean when I talk about poetics. A map, a counter-map, actually, a chart of the spatio-temporal rhythm of the riot-form, its prosody and signal-frequency. A map that could show the paths not taken. And where to find them, those paths, those antidotes, those counter-plagues.

As ever, Bonney's work is extraordinarily precise and complex in its disentangling of the relation between metaphor, history, and the actuality of conditions like riot, plague, and starvation: conditions, that as the global pandemic that emerged in 2020 revealed, are far from the mere decorative detail of a distant past, outsourced from the murderously complacent centre of 'Great Britain' or 'Fortress Europe'. Here, plague is somehow at once symptom, cause, and antidote. Bonney attempts to stage the impossible: how to conceive of solidarity when enforced isolation and quarantine seem

to make the conditions for collective social life impossible, reinforcing the atomisation that's already built into each facet of life within contemporary capitalism. The poem doesn't pretend that it's reached a new synthesis out of this contradiction: the false balm of a simplified version of dialectics that resolves what remains unresolved in reality, whether in poetry and political theory, or as party line. But with every fibre of its being it wants to push thought past its limit to a synthesis that would move beyond the deadly cost of such contradiction, a desire felt more keenly than ever in the aftermath of Sean's death, in the ongoing conditions of plague and its after-effects we're in now.

We've said that, in 2020, reality, its landscapes, both internal and external, seemed to become a Sean Bonney poem. But this isn't quite the right way to put it. It's not that reality became a Sean Bonney poem. Rather, reality was *already* a poem by Sean Bonney, a report on the affective truth of social life, 'the enormous noises of the border // Kreuzberg. Exarchia. Hackney', taking in everyone from Dante to Ericka Huggins, Blanqui, Ulrike Meinhof and George Jackson: writers who, too, drew their visions from history's prisons, precarious housing, social immiseration, and periods of ideological crisis.<sup>4</sup>

### Issue Summary

The issue contains seven longer essays and three shorter pieces on various aspects of Bonney's work. It also reprints four essays by Bonney that previously appeared in various online locations, along with a detailed bibliography of Bonney's published work. Our aim in editing this issue, a process we began in early 2020, was to convey the range of Bonney's work and its reception. The contributors, whose essays are presented in alphabetical order by surname, address this in a number of ways.

The special issue begins with **Tom Allen's 'As Simple as Music: Kinds of Noise in Sean Bonney's Poetry'**. Allen's essay addresses Bonney's thinking on music and various other kinds of sound: namely, 'noise', 'music', 'harmony, screech, and whine', and finally, 'song'. For Allen, music in Bonney's work serves as a dialectical nexus crucial to his thinking of poetry, politics, and collective and individual life in general. 'At points', Allen suggests, 'Bonney wrote as if the idea of musicality expressed the capacity for the world to be transformed according to its most brilliant immanent potential'. Yet, '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'. Allen explores this contention in relation to the UK government's policy of austerity, as addressed in Bonney's *Happiness*, the theorisation of harmony and the position of the individual subject in *Letters against the Firmament*, and the eventual turn to song in Bonney's late poem *antimatter*, in which

rhyme and song-like forms ‘enact a temporal disruption that pushes against its own enclosure [...] from deep within the catastrophe’.

**Christina Chalmers’ ‘The Involution of the Storm Corner: Sean Bonney’s Occult’** was sparked by a conversation between Chalmers and Bonney in 2019 concerning Stephen Jonas, Ernst Bloch, and the occult. Jonas, associated with the mid-century ‘Occult School’ poets centred in Boston, MA, was a queer, dissident poet, but often adopted Poundian, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, often connected to theorisations of the occult. Bonney, however, insisted that something might be gained from Jonas’ work. As Chalmers writes, ‘Sean cited Bloch’s notion of the “danger zone of the remnant”, a regressive zone of social energy which outlasts its historical moment. Bloch saw these “storm corners” of reaction as not to be ignored, but whose energy had to be recaptured’. Likewise, given the increasing presence of fascist ‘avant-gardists’ within contemporary cultural and political milieu, the recapturing of such energy for the left becomes all the more vital, ‘as if to say, do not let the occult be occupied by fascism’. Focusing on Bonney’s ‘Second Letter on Harmony’, Chalmers draws further on Brecht’s notion of *gestus* and Walter Benjamin’s figure of the constellation to analyse Bonney’s use of citation and its relation to occult traditions. ‘Bonney’s relation to his occult forebears’, she writes, occurs through ‘selective citation, parody and transformation, which allows him to alienate mystical knowledge’s relation to the secret, to the occulted, proposing a new visibility without invoking merely Enlightenment connotations. He proposes a relation to poetic mysticism which preserves and supersedes it’. The final part of the essay compares Bonney’s ‘Second Letter on Harmony’ to a letter that Jonas wrote after the death of Jack Spicer in 1965, published after Jonas’ own death, analysing the way in which these letters, in very different ways, ‘deal with the aftermath of death, and elaborate positions on writing in relation to it’. In the wake of Bonney’s own death, Chalmers’ analysis of this writing aims to reveal its ongoing dialectical force in the present.

**Robert Hampson’s ‘Speaking with the voices of the dead: Sean Bonney, Arthur Rimbaud, Amiri Baraka and revolutionary poetics’** opens with a preamble on Bonney’s re-evaluation of Rimbaud’s famous ‘*Je est un autre*’ as a call for collective revolutionary action, rather than its more common interpretation as a statement of personal, proto-punk excess. Hampson then moves on to an invaluable chapter-by-chapter consideration of Bonney’s PhD thesis on Amiri Baraka, offering up similar revisionist takes, for instance on Charles Olson’s famous attack in *Projective Verse* against ‘the lyrical interference of the ego’, an ego which Bonney argues was necessary for Baraka as a weapon against white social hegemony. The opening chapter also focuses on the political efficacy of Black music (in particular, the jazz of Charles Mingus and Archie

Shepp) seeing it as a ‘survival code’ within hostile white culture, a code which, for Baraka, also offers the potential for attack. Subsequent chapters examine Baraka’s July 1960 visit to Cuba and his dissatisfaction with New York bohemianism, his novel *The System of Dante’s Hell* (1965) as producer of counter-images to liberal stasis, and a final chapter on Baraka and Frantz Fanon titled ‘Towards a Militant Poetics’ which according to Hampson ‘lays the ground work for a militant poetics at the same time as it displays an ambivalence [for Bonney] towards the political efficacy of poetry’. The long ending of Hampson’s essay is an investigation into Bonney’s struggle to formulate this militant poetics of collectivist action over individualist outrage in *Letters Against the Firmament* in the aftermath of the 2011 London riots.

**Lisa Jeschke and Danny Hayward’s ‘A Conversation about Death’** is presented in the form as a dialogue, rather than a conventional essay. It addresses death in Bonney’s last works and in relation to the decade of austerity and after from 2010 to 2019. Jeschke and Hayward write:

In 2019 the poet Sean Bonney published his book *Our Death*. In November 2019 our friend Sean Bonney died. The relationship between those two sentences is too complex for us to explain here or indeed to ourselves, and we won’t try to explain it. Instead we will talk here about a more general relationship, between two contradictory left-wing approaches to death, and also about the reality of that contradiction within Sean’s writing.

‘Sean’, they continue, ‘knew from the beginning that austerity as instituted by the Tory(-led) governments from 2010 onwards was not only a minor inconvenience, but a policy that kills’. Against this—and against the murderous history of capitalism in general, its centuries—Jeschke and Hayward seek to articulate a ‘left-wing response to death’, without falling into a rigidified or moralistic ideological position. ‘This is an essay’, they write, ‘that counts the ways its dead continue to exist, in community with the living’. Their piece traces the lived experience, the affective dimensions of death, as, they argue, does Bonney’s work. They seek to steer a position between notions of decay, despair and entropy, on the one hand, and a banal resistance to death on the other that fails to take into account the deathly structures of a contemporary world system characterised by direct killing and by ‘social murder’ alike. And, daringly, they conclude of the title to Bonney’s final book, *Our Death*, that it might suggest ‘the most expansive communist idea: that everything can be expropriated. Even that’.

**Rob Kiely’s ‘A preliminary reading of Sean Bonney’s “What Teargas is For”** addresses Bonney’s work in relation to mysticism and esotericism, focusing on the idea

of ‘understanding’ and ‘knowledge’. As Kiely suggests, these categories in Bonney’s work are at once loci for reactionary forms which occlude a true knowledge of existent socio-economic conditions—forms of mystification which can tip over into Fascism—and explorations of the actually-existing policing of knowledge and understanding under current regimes of power, a connection made specifically through Bonney’s writing on teargas in relation to the medieval ‘Cloud of Unknowing’. Kiely draws on Fred Moten’s recent writing on Kant’s metaphorical policing of the ‘lawless freedom’ of the imagination, as well as reflecting on the relation of torture to knowledge-extraction and knowledge-creation, and the contestation of linguistic meaning under conditions of extreme pressure. In doing so, he suggests some valuable ways into Bonney’s poetic thought—and the use of that thought more generally—while deliberately working with the aporia of what he calls Bonney’s ‘note-taking and note-playing practice’, which ‘move[s] across a wide range of material, from films and albums to literary criticism and entire poetic oeuvres’, in order to ‘describe some of the leaps Bonney’s work makes’, ‘bring[ing] [...] into relief [...] the sometimes immense gulfs across which Bonney’s thinking discharges its most illuminating and thrilling sparks’.

We’re very happy to be reprinting part of **Esther Leslie’s ‘Bouleversed Baudelairizing: On Poetics and Terror’**, originally published as a pamphlet by Veer Books in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Whilst not an essay *in toto* about Sean Bonney, it includes significant sections on two of his books, *Baudelaire in English* and *The Commons*. With its damaged language ‘slanting and clashing’ on the page, Bonney’s dissected renditions of Baudelaire’s ‘spleeny thoughts’ follow Walter Benjamin’s notion of translation as echo rather than accurate rendition of the original text, instead ‘emerging in its “afterlife”, its renewal through its existence in another language, another epoch’. Bonney’s ‘splenetic anti-verse’ also has the capacity to evoke the shudder that Adorno saw as a primal component of experience. After a foray into the work of Anna Mendelssohn/Grace Lake, Leslie concludes with a consideration of Bonney’s *The Commons*, a text that dialogues with Mendelssohn in its use of fragments of Angry Brigade Communiqués and which, as Leslie states, eschews our present zombie realm of corrupted language and bourgeois relations of ownership in favour of a politics of collectivity, ‘a desire for sharing in (and defending the existence of) public goods, of things held in common and belonging to no-one’.

A shorter piece by **Will Rowe**, Bonney’s friend and former PhD supervisor, offers a commentary on Bonney’s *Letters Against the Firmament*, but in the knowledge that they ‘exceed what can be said about the work they do’. In his readings, Rowe is constantly forced to recognise that various limits, contradictions and impossibilities are a condition

of their ontological, verbal, cognitive, historical and political life. How can *poetry* be made under such pressures? Recognising the ‘speed and extreme spatial compaction’ of Bonney’s poems, Rowe’s commentary is a similarly compressed undertaking which acknowledges that, as in the *Letters*, difficulty cannot be dissolved, only concentrated.

Kashif Sharma-Patel’s essay ‘**Bonney’s Militant Poetics: Political Aesthetics, Black Poetics and Modernism**’, addresses Bonney’s relation to the Black Radical Tradition, considering his potential status as a ‘bridge-like figure between the Marxist strains of the British Poetry Revival, and Black modernist poetics’. Whereas both the poetics of the British Poetry Revival itself, and much of its subsequent critical reception, have tended to elide the presence—or, more often, absence—of considerations of race, Bonney draws equally on the heritage of the Revival and a consideration of the Black Radical Tradition, understood principally through the work of Amiri Baraka, but also of the anti-colonial poetics of Black Caribbean poets such as Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. As Sharma-Patel notes, Bonney himself, however, did not intend his work as a contribution to Black Studies: rather, he draws on the Black Radical Tradition as part of an assemblage, or—to borrow a phrase from Peter Linebaugh, Markus Rediker and Laura Harris—a ‘motley crew’, used to theorize the relation between aesthetics and politics, which includes traditions of English radical and dissenting poetry, from Blake and Abiezer Coppe to the British Poetry Revival, the European avant-garde—particular Symbolist and Surrealist poetry—to which Bonney gives the name ‘militant poetics’. Within this assemblage, Sharma-Patel suggests, there is an important gap concerning a specifically Black British presence, such as the writers of the Caribbean Artists Movement and its descendants. This gap is ‘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’. Reading Bonney’s work alongside Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten, Sharma-Patel nonetheless suggests that Bonney’s conception of ‘militant poetics’ ‘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 militant avant-gardist position’.

The sense of a practical poetry, a poetry that exists in the real world, in real space—bearing in mind that definitions of what Bonney called, variously, ‘official poetry’, the ‘official world’, ‘official reality’, and ‘police reality’, are often far from those in normative language use—comes through once more in Vicky Sparrow’s ‘**Sean Bonney’s Social Space**’, which recalls Bonney’s personal and poetic presence in London between 2010 and 2013, ‘the time of the coalition government and its austerities, the anti-cuts

protests, the London riots, the student movement against tuition fees; potentialities seemed opened up, lots of people were mobilised by and for these struggles, and a sense of possibility amassed, fizzing through London's unrestful arteries'. Alongside close readings of poems from *Baudelaire in English*, it traverses the Tavistock in Bloomsbury, the Greenwich Foot Tunnel, 'a short-lived squat in central London, off Leicester Square', and Kristin Ross's writing on poetry and social space. Sparrow's piece locates Bonney's work in particular spaces but also suggests what the work contains beyond the closure or loss of those spaces: the now-closed Tavistock Hotel Bar, the short-lived squat, the defeat of the student movement, and the longer histories into which these temporary and specific conjunctures play out.

Poetry from the United States was important to Bonney's work, not least in his engagement with Amiri Baraka, but also in his friendships with and reception by American poets, in venues and occasions such as Richard Owens' *Damn the Caesars* and Punch Press (Owens' 2012 video interview with Bonney is required viewing), the revolution and/or poetry conference in Oakland, and the publication of his final book, *Our Death*, by Commune Editions.<sup>6</sup> **Lindsay Turner's 'The Poetics of Despair: Listening to Sean Bonney in Charlottesville, Virginia'**, reflects on encountering Bonney's work in the North American town that would, a few years later, become indelibly associated with the rise of the American Far Right, its torchlit rallies. For Turner, Bonney's work is part of a 'poetic canon of despair' from Edmund Spenser to John Donne to Adrienne Rich. Yet, while 'we tend to think of despair as a flat and dead-end state', Turner writes, Bonney's instead offers a 'sharp, glittering, opulent, substantial despair': a despair that, rather than signalling a dead-end, might instead be 'useful'.

The critical articles in this special issue end with a piece that draws together some of Bonney's earlier work with his final book, suggesting both the continuities and discontinuities within his practice and within the changing political landscape against which that practice developed. **Steve Willey's 'This Face of Glee...This Terrifying Sound: Sean Bonney Through The Soundhole, Where Bonney IS'** excavates words and phrases from Bonney's poem 'Through the Soundhole', which he read out at Bob Cobbing's funeral in 2002. Thinking forward to the later poems of *Our Death*, Willey uses these words and phrases to evaluate Bonney's complex and evolving relation to sound poetry as an affective practice. The word 'seize', for example, is itself seized upon by Willey as one with paradoxically mobile potential for revolutionary actions in different historical eras and cultural practices (including poetry), as well as allowing Willey to meditate on the figure of the sun in Bonney and Etel Adnan's poems as a terrifying and terminal apocalyptic force. Rather than seeing Bonney as having abandoned sound poetry altogether in his later writings, Willey construes *Our Death* as a way of 'reading political

content back into Western traditions of sound poetry which are...too easily diminished as obsolete relics of a defeated and mistaken avant-garde'. Moving back and forth between different historical timescales, the essay ends with a powerful examination of how the malign presence of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher 'buckles and stresses the wild line' connecting Cobbing to Bonney.

### Critical Writing by Sean Bonney

In this issue, we also want to emphasize Bonney's importance as a critical thinker on poetry and politics, and we include a selection of his critical writing, designed to give a sense of his concerns. Bonney's work consistently collapsed the boundaries between criticism, scholarship, manifesto and poem. Though he completed a PhD on Amiri Baraka at Birkbeck College, University of London, and conducted postdoctoral research on Diane Di Prima at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin, as well as co-organising the Poetry and Revolution conference at Birkbeck in 2012, Bonney was uneasy with the framings of much academic writing. Given this, his criticism appears, not in conventional academic journals, but in more miscellaneous venues, principally in small magazines and online at his blog, *Abandoned Buildings*.<sup>7</sup>

The first of the essays republished here, '**Minds do exist to agitate and provoke / this is the reason I do not conform**', concerns the poet Anna Mendelssohn, and was originally published in the *Poetry Project Newsletter* in 2011. Our decision to reprint this particular piece consciously follows on from the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*'s previous issue on Mendelssohn, edited by Eleanor Careless and Vicky Sparrow, in which it is quoted several times, as well as from Esther Leslie's essay on Bonney and Mendelssohn, an excerpt of which is also printed in the present issue. Bonney rejects, as Mendelssohn did, any simplistic connection between Mendelssohn as revolutionary icon and the political work that poetry might do. Instead, what's politically valuable in Mendelssohn's work is precisely its resistance to closed and enclosed meaning, a meaning that Mendelssohn associates with the sentencing of critics, judges, and cops. In taking Mendelssohn's work seriously beyond the circumstances of her own biography—while acknowledging that her poetry can't be understood without a sense of her life and its often tragic events—Bonney's essay provides exciting grounds for thought about the political work that experimental poetry might do.

The multiple sections of the '**Notes on Militant Poetics**' were posted at *Abandoned Buildings* between 2012–2013, and are arguably Bonney's most important statement of poetics. Written while he was completing his PhD, they draw from a diverse range of sources including Frantz Fanon, George Jackson, Walter Benjamin, and the

Situationists, and perhaps more than any other of his texts, they marked a dialectical meeting point between critical prose and the prose poetry he would increasingly write in his final books.

**‘Comets & Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination in Exile’**, first published by *Mute* magazine in 2014, turns to Louis-Auguste Blanqui and the project of a non-mystical cosmology. Bonney’s deep engagement with Benjamin, for whom Blanqui was an important thinker, and various revolutionary traditions, once more takes dialectical thought seriously, attempting to enact this in its style as well as its content. The essay provides a way to think about defeat, imprisonment, and revolutionary temporality: a series of questions rather than fixed, finite answers, that, like Blanqui’s own writing, is poised between nightmarish repetition and an opening into new possibilities, new temporalities, ways of breaking out of the cycle.

As we’ve noted, this issue contains a piece on Bonney’s PhD thesis by Robert Hampson, who served as internal examiner for the thesis, and whose essay provides valuable insight into this still-unpublished work. At the time of his death, Bonney was revising the thesis into a book, a project that was never completed, in part because Bonney was still searching for a form that would combine scholarly rigour with the energies that fizzed through his poetry and poetic prose. However, material adjacent to the PhD appeared in various sources, including the blog *Round Midnight: Notes on Baraka* (2019). The final piece we present here, **‘Time Negatives of Variable Universe: On Amiri Baraka and Sun Ra’**, was first given as a talk for the journal *Cesura Acceso* (as of spring 2022, the original recording can be accessed via the journal’s *Soundcloud* page).<sup>8</sup> The piece further develops the concerns with the Black Radical Tradition set out in the PhD and the ‘Notes on Militant Poetics’, as Frantz Fanon’s writing on the use of the radio in the Algerian anti-colonial struggle of the 1950s and ’60s is set alongside the music and poetry of Ra, Henry Dumas, Joseph Jarman, and Amiri Baraka, as a means of thinking through music, sound and poetry and the way these might be ‘activated’ within revolutionary situations. As Bonney concludes, it tries to work out ‘how to make the excruciating din work as a strategy, as a means of infecting the ‘lies’ that we live under, and make them visible, to translate this dialectical nebulae made up of static and screams into clear speech’.

Finally, we also include a **bibliography of Sean Bonney’s** work, covering major publications and taking note of significant uncollected work, along with selected secondary criticism. It was compiled by David Grundy using material provided by Ian Heames, Justin Katko and Harry Gilonis, in January 2022. As well as providing a resource for material that is sometimes hard to access, appearing in transient or fugitive publications as part of Bonney’s commitment to the tradition of the small

press, the underground publication, and the refusal of a false notion of mainstream inclusivity, the bibliography aims once more to illustrate the sheer range of Bonney's work, from books, pamphlets and broadsides to critical writing, readings, films, visual art, interviews, and existing critical discussion of his work. It's to be hoped that a broader edition of Bonney's poetic and critical work will appear in the future.

### **'No simple explanations'**

When we first began to assemble the present issue in the spring and summer of 2020, at the invitation of the journal's lead editor Scott Thurston, we agreed that it was essential that we endeavour to represent the range of Sean's work as far as possible. We reproduce the list of 'potential topics' from our original call for papers as follows:

- Anarchism
- Bonney as teacher; Bonney as scholar
- The Black Radical Tradition: Amiri Baraka, Afro-Futurism, Afro-Pessimism, Négritude, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant
- The British Poetry Revival: Bob Cobbing, Bill Griffiths, Anna Mendelssohn, Barry MacSweeney, Maggie O'Sullivan
- European Modernisms: especially Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Rimbaud, Dadaism, Russian Futurism, the Paris Commune, Surrealism, Brecht, Anita Berber, Georg Trakl, Peter Weiss, Jean Genet; questions of bohemianism
- Film: Fassbinder, Pasolini, B-movies and trash cinema
- Internationalism and anti-imperialism; contemporary border discourse; racialisation; national identity
- Marx and Marxism
- Millenarian traditions, mysticism, radical religious movements: Abiezer Coppe, the Ranters, the work of Diane di Prima, Gerrit Lansing, histories of heresy
- Music: 'Free Jazz' (especially John Coltrane), Bob Dylan, folk practice, punk, post-punk & anarcho-punk (The Fall, Crass, etc), Britpop as enemy
- The New American Poetry: Charles Olson, Diane di Prima, John Wieners, Stephen Jonas, Allen Ginsberg & The Beats, Lenore Kandel, David Rattray.
- Performance, Sound Poetry (i.e. Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh and Zaum), poetry off the page
- The Politics of Protest: Anti-War Movement, Occupy, ACAB, Antifa, Riot and Revolution.

- Publishing: small press poetry, the samizdat tradition, DIY aesthetics, Yt Communication, *Abandoned Buildings* (Bonney's blog)
- Questions of form: prose poetry, the sonnet, visual poetry, the diagram, collage, asemic writing, letters, notes on militant poetics
- Romanticism: Blake, Shelley and others
- Situationism and its influence
- Translation: Baudelaire, Gogou and others
- Urban space and critical geographies; radical cities (London, Paris, Berlin, Athens); pastoral and anti-pastoral (*The Commons*); gentrification; insurrectionary action (especially 2011 UK riots)
- Visual Art: Jay de Feo, Nikki de St Phalle, Valie Export, Stephen Rodefer.

As readers will note, some of these topics are covered in this issue. Many others are not. No one issue can contain this work, and it's our hope that this issue is not an endpoint but a beginning, suggesting directions for Sean's work, and for the constellations of influence, kinship, comradeship, solidarity, and connection to which it gives rise.

We wanted to conclude this introduction with a brief reflection on what it means to collect essays on Sean's work in this way. Acknowledging our personal friendship with Sean—and that of many of the contributors in the issue—is a way of indicating that his was and is a work that emerges from and, indeed, *creates* a community. Sean's work created readers, inspired poets, and gave rise to poetries. His passing has left a gap in community, but around this gap new communities can arise.

Almost all of the contributors to this issue are poets, but Bonney was far from a 'poet's poet'. His work consistently challenged the borders and boundaries of what poetry might mean, whether in his late prose poems, or in his critical work, that overspilled the boundaries of manifesto, academic essay, or poetic text to produce a rigorous thinking through and with form—not just literary form, but the forms of life—the social forms, the structures of feeling—that are both with and without name, within which we are constrained and through which poetry attempts to trace an alternative course.

Shortly following Bonney's death, the poet-scholar Fred Moten paid a short tribute from the stage at the Arika Festival in Glasgow. And in correspondence during the early months of the Covid pandemic, Moten spoke of 'my sense of [Sean's] presence, which even poetry couldn't hold'.<sup>9</sup> Sean's work was capacious, but it was also rigorous. Sean quoted Walter Benjamin's work on surrealism to talk about the 'secret cargo' that might be contained within oppositional poetics, and those images—containment and that which bursts beyond it, the prison and the breaking of its walls, the container ship

and the routes of smuggling, migration, exile and fugitivity—cluster around his work.<sup>10</sup> They are bonds we are still trapped within, some of us more comfortably than others. It matters what side of the fence we're on and which side of the fence we'll end up. Sean's poetry doesn't provide a simplistic analysis of any of this, but it knows that sometimes, as Brecht wrote of communism: 'It's quite straightforward, you'll understand it. It's not hard. [...] It's just the simple thing / That's hard, so hard to do'.<sup>11</sup>

Alternatively, here are some words from a poem by Jayne Cortez, a poet Bonney held in high regard and whose work is too often ignored today. The poem is called 'No Simple Explanations':

This piece is passing up the motif of sorrow  
  let it pass  
let the words split and erupt and dry  
  Into snake pulsations [...]

Conform to evolution of your own syllables  
to revolution of your own stanzas  
because  
suddenly it will be too soon  
suddenly it will be too late  
suddenly it will be too sudden  
and there'll be no tuning forks left  
in palm of a poet on a cold morning<sup>12</sup>

Refusing 'simple explanations', Cortez's crescendo of surrealism—volcanoes, tombs, snakes, flacons, mosquitos, ankhs, crossroads, whirlwinds—draws out a genuinely social realism.<sup>13</sup> Writing in memory of another poet who died too young, Black Arts Movement architect Larry Neal, Cortez constructs the poem around a dialectical opposition between 'simple explanations'—those reports from official reality, from the news, from liberal opinion pieces loudly proclaiming their own inability to understand the workings of the world—and the host of surrealist images she unleashes—alternative explanations that reach beyond the given. Between these two modes of explanation, a new direction emerges. That sense of temporal urgency likewise infuses Bonney's work. In her piece for this issue, Lindsay Turner writes of how Bonney's work 'makes despair into a useful thing'. And reading Bonney alongside Cortez helps us to think of a poetry that moves through grief, despair, and sorrow into new forms, new ways to think through the temporal urgency of this and any moment. Writing in the early 1980s, Cortez's poem emerged at a time of peril: of a resurgent KKK, of movie star

presidents and Mutually Assured Destruction and weapons systems given the name of Hollywood blockbusters. Forty years on, the situation is similarly perilous: resurgent fascism everywhere, the repeal of Roe vs. Wade, and a new arms race in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, not to mention austerity and Covid and climate change and the endless logic of the border. Bonney's work enables us to think through all this and to reach what, as Fred Moten put it in 2020, 'even poetry couldn't hold'.

And so we dedicate this issue to Sean Bonney's memory and to the futures we might make together. Because otherwise, 'suddenly it will be too late'.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Götter der Pest / Gods of the Plague* (dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1970). Bonney's *Gods of the Plague* blog is archived online <<https://godsoftheplague.tumblr.com/>>. Accessed July 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> Sean Bonney, 'Letter Against Hunger / A Foodstamp for the Palace'. *Abandoned Buildings*, July 2013. Online <[https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2013/07/letter-against-hunger-foodstamp-for\\_3165.html](https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2013/07/letter-against-hunger-foodstamp-for_3165.html)> Accessed March 2022. Reprinted in *Letters against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p.95.
- <sup>3</sup> Bonney, 'Letter Against the Firmament (two)'. *Abandoned Buildings*, January 2014. Online <<https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2014/01/letter-against-firmament-two.html>> Reprinted in *Letters against the Firmament*, p.113–14.
- <sup>4</sup> For Dante, see Bonney, 'Cancer: Poems after Katerina Gogou', in *Our Death* (Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2019), p.30. For Blanqui, see the essay 'Comets and Barricades', reprinted in this issue; for Huggins and Meinhoff, 'Lamentations', in *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), pp.19–20; and for George Jackson, see 'Notes on Militant Poetics', reprinted in this issue.
- <sup>5</sup> At of summer 2022, the full pamphlet can be ordered at the Veer Books website. Online <<https://www.veerbooks.com/Esther-Leslie-Bouleversed-Baudelairizing>> Accessed July 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Richard Owens interviews Sean Bonney'. *Damn the Caesars*, YouTube Channel, June 2012 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHkj96VI08c>> For *revolution and/or poetry*, see <<https://revolutionandorpoetry.wordpress.com>> Links accessed March 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> We have left the essays almost entirely as originally published, making silent corrections only in cases of obvious errors of spelling and grammar. With the exception of the essay 'Comets & Barricades', none of the essays contain footnotes.
- <sup>8</sup> See <<https://soundcloud.com/cesura-acceso/sean-bonney-time-negatives-of-variable-universe-on-sun-ra-and-amiri-baraka>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Personal correspondence with David Grundy, Tuesday, July 28, 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> The reference, which is also picked up in several of the essays in this issue, is to Walter Benjamin's discussion of Surrealism: 'For art's sake was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name. This is the moment to embark on a work that would illuminate as has no other the crisis of the arts that we are witnessing: a history of esoteric poetry'. (Benjamin, *One Way Street*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), p. 231). For Bonney's discussion, see Bonney, 'Further Notes on Militant Poetics', reprinted in this issue; 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2012) pp.106, 196, 200, 204, 210' and Sean Bonney and Paal Bjelke Andersen, 'You'd be a pig not to answer: a conversation', pp. 10, 12: <http://www.auditor.no/festival/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/02-Sean.Bonney.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'In Praise of Communism', trans. by Steve Gooch, from *The Mother* (London: Methuen 1978), p.28.

<sup>12</sup> Jayne Cortez, 'No Simple Explanations (to the memory of Larry Neal)', *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 72–73. Cortez's recording of the poem, alongside Ornette Coleman (alto saxophone), Charles Moffett, Jr. (tenor saxophone), Bern Nix (guitar), Al MacDowell (bass), and Denardo Coleman (acoustic and electric percussion), can be heard on the LP, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, *Maintain Control* (Bola Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Our argument here is that Cortez—along with other Afro-Surrealist writers such as Henry Dumas—steers a course between socialist realism and what Mark Fisher more recently termed 'capitalist realism'. In the first instance, the function of realism is to limit the imagination of what socialism or and could be; the second seeks to abolish any kind of imagination of socialism at all. (See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).) Also crucial here in relation to Surrealism and its precursors is Aimé Césaire's argument, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, that the work of Lautréamont in particular serves as a fundamentally *realist* account of the epoch of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism and imperialism. Bonney's PhD thesis draws Césaire's *Discourse* alongside Walter Benjamin's discussion of surrealism in the context of an extended discussion of Amiri Baraka's attitude toward surrealism (Bonney, 'Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the Work of Amiri Baraka', 141–145).

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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