

Research Communiqués:
RCA School of Arts and Humanities

Representation

SoAH's Research Communiqués will provide a way to disseminate important yet irregular updates from our research community in published form. Each Communiqué will be produced by a single researcher or research group, giving scope to present a concentrated dose of ideas and practices in book form. The publications are intended to create insights into the work we undertake at the School and will provide an environment for artists, material practitioners and curators as well as writers, theorists, and critics to showcase what we do. Our Communiqués give our work the potential to move outside of the RCA's immediate circles, travelling wherever we do and passing between hands. They are intended as a means to filter ideas outwards and also draw in those outside the School to participate in our work.

Printed in black and white, the books will employ clear and simple design principles, taking inspiration from the culture of strategic communications. But since nothing in art can ever remain uninflected, the design will play subtly with bureaucratic and typographic conventions. The physicality of the book series will be extended through freely available, full colour PDF's inviting people to circulate, incorporate and permutate their content.

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Opening the Semiotic Web

Josephine Berry

Selves, human or nonhuman, simple or complex, are outcomes of semiosis as well as the starting points for new sign interpretation whose outcome will be a future self. They are waypoints in a semiotic process.

Eduardo Kohn(1)

As an anthropologist working beyond the human, Eduardo Kohn is committed to ‘provincializing language’, understanding the symbolic structure of human language to be embedded within a dense and plural semiotic world. While it is true that humans are uniquely in possession of symbolic language, for Kohn language and indeed thought arise from a world animated by multiple modes of representing. ‘Signs,’ he says, ‘are not exclusively human affairs.’(2) In this radical expansion of semiosis and the communicative capacity of all planetary life, it is not the human that thinks the world but rather the world’s semiotic webs that give rise to human thought.(3) Representation extends far beyond language, then, and is constructive of a multitude of selves who are but ‘waypoints’ to future selves, events and meanings.

Thinking about how selves arise out of representational systems, rather than preceding and determining them, has been central to the work we undertook in the Representation research group at the Royal College of Art, School of Arts and Humanities. The PhD seminar was a process of group learning undertaken during pandemic times, in which our very ability to connect and communicate via video

conferencing software was underpinned by a representational meshwork of software, machine codes, internet protocols, and electron movement in circuits and networks. The habituation to this format, in which a speaker is required to talk and make sense while simultaneously – if sighted – consuming themselves as a spectacle, gave us a real-time experience of just how pliant we are in respect to the representational systems that construct us. We adjusted fast, which isn't to say we liked it.

The artificiality of the situation dramatised our embeddedness in representation, its inescapability. Still, one can always close the application, slam the laptop shut, go for a walk. This is quite another matter when an entire global economic order depends on the conversion of you and your epidermis into a sign for something – of primitivity, non-existence, absolute exploitability. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has discussed the 'plasticity' that characterises representations of black people and how this malleability corresponds to their cancellation and reduction to a 'no thing'.(4) This entails an 'exorbitance of form', she says, which compiles and substitutes qualities of humanness, animality, and the machine depending on what is required or desired by our antiblack world.(5) For those who are marginalised and vilified on the basis of their sex/uality, race, culture, or class, the body is conspicuously marked in representation becoming a 'resource for metaphor' in Hortense Spillers' words.(6) Conversely, wherever the body passes as neutral and unremarkable, there power lies and there the work of historicisation and visibilisation need to be ceaselessly undertaken.

'Representation is always a doing, a making, a worlding that makes us' says Jackson, while Kohn says of signs that they 'all do things' in the end.(7) To struggle at the level of representation, to return

the gaze of representational regimes oppositionally by forcing them into visibility, is not some parlour game played in cultural studies departments. The work of reading, and therefore seeing, representational regimes involves the heavy spade work of materialist history. Black, queer, and feminist scholars have often led the way here. Spillers' powerful 1980s essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' spares us nothing in articulating the violence of torture, capture, and transplantation required to separate African peoples from their symbolic structures of personhood. Sylvia Wynter's essay, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom' gives a 500-year transhistorical account of the 'transumption' of an older model of Christian subjecthood onto the new political subject of the capitalist nation state which continued to operate the same old principle of division between the Saved and the Damned, only now transposed to European societies and their colonised Others – les damnés de la terre. Through the weaving together of European and New World histories, Wynter reconstructs how the symbolic codes of a society are formed and then internalised and translated into the real effects of life and death. To describe this material-semiotic continuity between social codes and embodied, biological outcomes she applies the term 'sociogeny', derived from Frantz Fanon's work, who had himself devised it as a necessary third term to the developmental schema of phylogeny and ontogeny. As with Kohn's 'open whole' of semiosis, Wynter understands representation as inseparably sutured to living bodies, forming a second 'set of instructions'(8) that interact with and impact on our primary biological coding.

Perhaps it is this biopolitical reading of modernity's representational regime and its stratifying effects that captured our attention most in the research group.

It led us from a study of the 1789 declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to an understanding of the ongoing and ubiquitous principle of division that underpins all such universal ideals. For this, one of our two invited contributors to this book, David Lloyd, provided an invaluable guide through his essential work *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*. Here Lloyd performs a subtle and joint reading of the representational structures that produce the nation state as the alleged pinnacle of civilisation, and Kant's philosophical conception of aesthetic judgement which allows for an experience of 'our' universally shared faculties.(9) While on the one hand these modern universalist schemas reduce citizens to those who are representable by state representatives as such, on the other they rely upon the exclusion from representation of subalternised Others. The necessary indifference that characterises Kant's aesthetic experience can ultimately only be achieved by a subject of Reason who is able to withstand affection and resist what he calls the 'charm of sense'(10). This sets up the 'regulative' – because universal and unmarked – function of European culture against which all other cultures are particularised and ethnicised, hence the centrality of aesthetics to the racial regime of differential rights and differential sovereignty. The result is that European people's rights have more might and European sovereignty is more unimpeachable in a colonial world and its antiblack aftermath.

Lloyd's historical and philosophical rereading of the function of aesthetics within colonial history and its role in establishing a global biopolitical regime meets a crucial response in the science fiction writing and pleasure activism of our other invited contributor, Ama Josephine B. Johnstone. She has commented that in order to shake up the deadening effect of white cis-

gendered scientific descriptions of climate catastrophe, she uses sensual strategies to engage the emotions of her audiences. 'I write really hot climate change fiction', she jokes.(11) She is interested in the fecund, the orgiastic, the tentacular, and the queer as vectors of transformation within and between all kinds of selves. In her speculative fiction, despised and marginalised selves become waypoints to an unknown future in which the representational syntax of racial capitalism that is driving ecocide is itself provincialised into a historical moment. In her story 'Moonies', written for this book, a mutating black and queer undercommons exists outside the immunised bubble of white power, and is somehow exiting humanness and certainly humanity in its exclusively European sense.

Pleasure is important not only because it dignifies and reclaims the 'charm of sense', but also because it engages the reciprocity between vulnerability and feeling. Johnstone often points out that violence enacted on queer black bodies is analogous and materially connected to the violence enacted upon the Earth. The living reciprocity of feeling which gives rise to pleasure and pain involves the social and material receptivity of 'feeling others feel', thus also the potential of sensing and responding to our planetary crisis. It allows us to open the semiotic web. Pleasure provides us with a political orientation too, because, as Alfred Schmidt asked while defending Marxist materialism against German idealism, 'what is the value of men's immense and not only theoretical efforts to transcend capitalism, if one of the objects aimed at is not pleasure, and the attainment of the satisfaction of the senses?'(12)

Mutation, pleasure, tactility, erotic stimuli, para-ability, secrecy, queer phenomenology, and nonconscious affect are some of the tactics, concepts, and concerns of the artists and researchers whose work fills the pages

of this book. These are arguably all tools by which they attempt to move beyond Laura Mulvey's insistence, in her ground-breaking 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', that the pleasure implicit in the scopic regime of patriarchy must be rejected.(13) Such a negation of pleasure has certainly been a necessary step but is not sustainable for long. Disidentifying with hegemonic representational regimes also entails unpicking, exaggerating, transgressing, dragging, or finding new and emancipatory forms since we can never get beyond representation.

David Johnson and Chang Gao introduce braille and Mandarin characters to pluralise the tacit universalism of the English language and assumed accessibility of the written word in their self-interview. In describing her practice, Gao writes of using 'erotic sensitivity to feeling, caring, fragility, sharing between differences' in order to create 'energy and movement' with which she imagines hacking the repressiveness of (Chinese) public space. David Johnson, whose research understands his own blindness not as an obstacle to art making but as its very means, nevertheless removes his own body from the process of producing sculptures. This absence or lack becomes a conceptual positive, a sounding space of thought. Poking holes in the false hope of approximating the capitalist physical ideal and the search for pleasure beyond its norms inspires a game of corporeal and mnemonic wandering in Rob Birch and Mariana Aboim's project. Nicholas Middleton and Orla Fahey travel through a hole found in the street to think what lies beneath the asphalt and the representational layers of maps. This gives a physical and perspectival dimension to David Lloyd's title 'Under Representation' suggesting a different facet to the problematic of what representation obscures, given that the built structures of cities are always also

semantic mediations. Giulia Astesani and I undertook some poetic sabotage of gentrified Shoreditch, weaponising our memories and feelings against the aseptic amnesia of neoliberal and financialised city development.

For all this, recoding oppressive representations is by no means something that can be achieved at the level of aesthetics alone. Lest this brief introduction sound overly optimistic about the reconfigurability of a global economic regime supported by racial, patriarchal and heterosexual representational regimes, Mariana Aboim's comment in an email will serve as a caution and an ending. 'It is imperative', she writes, 'to acknowledge that some bodies are constantly and consistently the object and signifiers of inferiority, of terror, not deemed human, whilst their pain is deprived of having a history, from existing, they are both made to represent other/less than humans and erased from existing.' The work of historical salvage, of giving voice to the voiceless, of discovering obscured pain and unknown pleasures, and of challenging the over representation of 'Man' must therefore entail nothing short of, in Fanon's decolonising vision, a 'programme of complete disorder'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Only then do we stand a chance of converting asphyxiating representational regimes into receding 'waystations' on the path to future multitudinous selves.

1. Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 34.
2. *Ibid.* p. 42.
3. Semiosis is the creation and interpretation of signs.
4. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, New York: New York University Press, 2020.
5. Talk given by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson for 'Diaspora, Humanism and the Global Project of Black Freedom', York University, Toronto, 5 February 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSbDB_-xDWg
6. Hortense Spillers, 'Papa's Baby, Mama's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection. Summer 1987, pp. 64–81.
7. Talk given by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 2020, *op. cit.*; Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
8. See Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations' in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. by Katherine McKittrick, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 9–89.
9. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith. Oxford University Press, 1952, 2007.
10. This term appears throughout Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, *ibid.*
11. Ama Josephine Budge, 'Some of Us Did Not Die', ONCA's Lost Species Day, 2018, https://m.facebook.com/ONCAarts/videos/357995758120124/?locale2=ps_AF
12. Alfred Schmidt (1962), *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, London: Verso, 2014, p. 40.
13. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6–18.
14. Frantz Fanon (1961), *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 27.

The Road to Mutation

Mariana Aboim & Rob Birch



I Hoped that one day I would be seen.
I would be heard.
I also Hoped that one day I would be thin,
Hoped that I wouldn't have to change my skid marked
underwear every day,
Hoped that one day I would recognise that reflection
that looked back at me.
Hoped that one day I would not have to be me.
Hope is a loser's charter with my name on it.

Fuck hope.

Hope stopped me stealing what I needed. It stopped me seeing the pointlessness of all this and in doing so freed me to see the point of everything. It told me my freedom is everything, and that I should die for democracy. Yet, when I'm not looking it steals it from behind my back and when I realise what is going on it tells me I should shut up and be grateful.

Hope offered me an education (which was gleefully accepted) that turned out to be a prison.

Hope is the lie, the grandest of lies. The lie that, if repeated often enough, becomes a truth that never sees the light of day. Hope now believes in its own lies. It believes its lie is its truth.

And when it fails to sustain its deception (which it does more often than you might realise) it offers up nostalgia as a suitable palliative. It is smart enough to recognise it has only a limited capacity to fool me, and when it realises this truth, it offers rose tinted spectacles of a past that never really existed. But nostalgia is no substitute for education, and if I am anything I am educated. At least educated enough to see the true point of hope.

Yet hope has a function in my world. If I can get rid of hope, then I might be truly free. If I can get rid of hope I will return to the body where I really live and where I really exist. If I can get rid of hope I will have time to mutate, space to mutate. Hope is my signifier when I realise its worthlessness and can look elsewhere for what I need. It has abandoned me. So why should I hang out a hand in the 'hope' it will be there.

This realisation is my catalyst, my detonator, my doorway into a world of mutation. A world where I know two things, I will have no idea what I may become but I will know that whatever the result I will be whatever I am meant to be, and I will be a criminal.



I want to live in a world where there are no women and no men, only criminals.

Where desire is a sociality, something to share and experience. It is not a duality, a binary concept introduced to mark the frontline of the war against war. It is the failure of hope that mutates us and to mutate is to become criminal. The Universitas will proclaim as much as it hates anything that is professional, common. And in doing so it will point us (finally) in the direction we should all be heading in. We adopt their 'fuck you' approach, take it as a badge of honour, appropriate it, make it ours and apply it when we see fit

to do so. They will say this is a just war, but it is a war based on the fact we are different, and we will reply in kind to their war because there is nothing wrong with us, we are not broken. We must commit to it. It will be our war against their war on us. We must keep it in the social and resist the attempts to create new narratives that the mutated are anti-social for we are not. We cannot be as our new, wonderful, mutated forms can only exist within the social. The Universitas forces our disruption as it has itself ceded all power to the asocial. Their war is a war against society itself. They are the ones that are broken, they are the ones that have allowed this racialised, colonial world to come into being. We are not broken, we are strong, and we are capable. We have a voice, and it is one that points towards a new way of being, seeing, and doing. One that does not rely on hope to find substance. One that is mutated beyond the forms and structures that limit our imaginations. This is a war where the mutated fight for the survival of the social. In this war we are the criminals, and we are challenging the hegemony of the negligent and the Universitas.

So if we are to be treated as criminals, let's act like criminals. To steal an education back from the university and share that with our fellow criminals. Take back what is ours and put it to good use. We are not here to fix what is broken, but to tear down what is broken.

'I know the multiple "I's" I embody are not sufficiently heard, let alone the "I's" deprived for that which is considered embodiment. No wonder "we" are so angry.'

The goal of any insurrection is to become irreversible. It becomes irreversible when you've defeated both authority and the need for authority, property and the taste for appropriation, and the desire for hegemony

The Invisible Committee (2007), *The Coming Insurrection*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, p. 131.

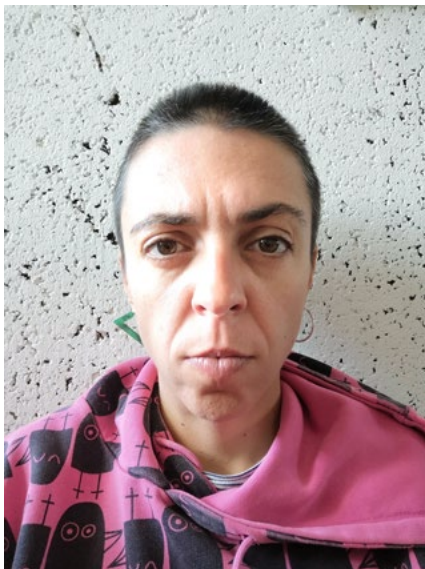


Response to Rob 2, 2021

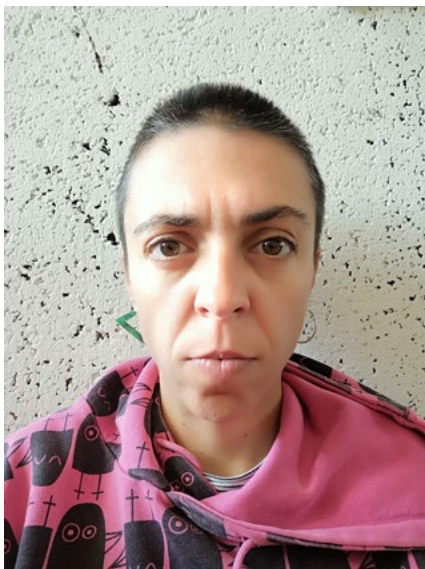
The dismantling of the structures that oppress us are not enough. Elimination has never been enough to make things irreversible. What matters is how it is done, its permanence, its ability to ensure that the ability to return is destroyed forever. The mutant, the criminal ensures that what was once dismantled stays dismantled. Its rise ensures that this takes place with as little emotion as possible, with as little pity as possible and with as much meticulous, precise and accurate disdain as we can possibly muster. We are not losing something we might have an investment in. Our mutated selves cannot allocate such an indulgence because we are no longer the common that had feelings for the old ways, its authorities and discourses.

MAN AS MASTERPIECE





Knowledge with beauty filter zero



Knowledge with beauty filter ten

There is a sort of stowaway in our cabin – a really dull type. I can't remember a single thing about her... In fact, it might not even be a her. It's difficult to say.

Alan Moore and Ian Gibson, *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, 2000AD, prog 406, 1985.

I know, knowledge: another process, finally no different, in its overall form, from the one called stupidity. Information is not taken into the human organism so much as it is created from the strong association of external and internal perceptions. These associations are called knowledge, insight, belief, understanding, belligerence, pig-headedness, stupidity. (Only social use determines which associations are knowledge and which are not.)

Samuel Delany, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, New York: Bantam Books, 1985, p.32.



This is largely because so much of the people's attention is directed toward the ground, not the sky. They notice what's there: stars and the sun and the occasional comet or falling star. They do not notice what's missing. But then, how can they? Who misses what they have never, ever even imagined? That would not be human nature. How fortunate, then, that there are more people in this world than just humankind.

N. K. Jemisin, 'The Fifth Season', *Broken Earth* Trilogy, Book 1, London: Orbit, 2016, p.51.

Then you said, 'He's not a man. It was horrible!'
(Ah, dear, if you'd only seen him riding the horses he trains!)
But you cried.

James wants to be adored by a real man (thought I) and that will be hard on him in this world where the men and women all vanished years ago. It was very like tonight you know; I mean a nearly full moon setting outside your window and some amateur stargazer out with a telescope, trying to catch Venus in a hand-made twenty-inch mirror.

I said something like 'Well, you see, there aren't any men and women, James, not any more. No one thinks that way any more.'

I said, 'James, it's all different now.'

And then, after a moment, I said:

'It's been two thousand years.'

Joanna Russ, 'Bodies', in *Extra (Ordinary) People*,
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984, pp. 105–106.

By 'form' [...] I am referring to a strange but nonetheless worldly process of pattern production and propagation, a process [Terrance] Deacon (2006, 2012) characterises as 'morphodynamic' – one whose peculiar generative logic necessarily comes to permeate living beings (human and nonhuman) as they harness it.

Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p.20.

'practice' re-writes, re-responds in ways that are beyond what is considered 'empirical':

'form' as a 'worldly process of pattern production and propagation (...) – one whose peculiar generative[ness] logic necessarily comes to permeate living beings (human and nonhuman)'.

Eduardo Kohn, *ibid.*, strikethroughs added.

If the ways in which 'form' travels, spreads, diffuses in its efferently multiple and afferently unpredictable ways, as processes propelled and absorbed nonconsciously, and if one would think about sexual orientation, for example, as a pattern, as form, as abstract as it may be, diffusing through bodies, and if you think about 'coming out' as heterosexual not being a thing, at least I don't know anyone who went to their parents or friends saying 'hey, I have something to tell

you... I'm heterosexual...' This is a nonconscious
affference of form, a shapeless affective flow, both material
and immaterial: it is immaterial in its invisible spreading,
unmeasurable assimilation, and unpredictable affect[ings],
and yet it is material in its very concrete impacts.



Response to Rob 1, 2021
*Artwork in the background by Santiago Pinyol
Photography by Lili Huston-Herterich

We were supposed to write about mutation, a transformative,
potentially adaptive process working concurrently
with alterations external to that which is 'mutating'.

I could not think beyond those mutations that strategically
evolve to maintain specific supremacies in place,
whilst hearing the common 'you are always so negative'.

The suggestion was to approach mutation as method, something that we had used as mode of collaborative production, an action and reaction through each other's artwork whilst producing a collaborative piece for Prova 6: 'Representation's Coup'. Here, we took mutation as the wandering around in each other's words and images, thinking through the 'what ifs' captured in the seams and breaches of quotes and collages, trying not to find whole new propositions, but rather to expose the fallacies of hope, the ridicule belief of gendered binary, and the contradiction of our own positions as criminals, and criminalised subjects conducting 'post-graduate' research.

This has the potential to find a space for myself, it implies a disruption, a stolen sense of self taken back from the original criminals and hidden in plain sight. Neither man nor woman but something new and unknown and unbroken. Mutated by catalysts from outside agencies but changed from within.



It's been a long time since the last [in ongoing] revolutions and the faggots and their friends are still not free, 1992–2021

Landscapes through the Diasporic Eye

Nerissa Allegra 何泳欣

This project considers the mass proliferation of diaspora in face of globalization's dynamic forces. The diasporic condition offers a third culture perspective, which begs the question of how landscape representations, which are manifestations of national and cultural identity, can be reimagined from this perspective. This undertaking asks specifically how landscape paintings can be re-envisioned from the Chinese-Canadian diasporic lens. It examines extant representations of a Chinese and a Canadian landscape of significance, namely, Huang Shan National Park and Rocky Mountain National Park. These representations have been appropriated and their associated pictorial paradigms considered to generate, through mediation using digital morphing software and the translation of the digital to the analogue, a new hybrid landscape painting that reflects a diasporic Chinese-Canadian subjectivity. Through this exploration, concepts central to the diasporic condition, pictorial ideals associated with each cultural tradition of landscape painting, the significance of nature to both cultural and national identities, and the meaning of nature imbued in the manner of representation are unearthed.









Moonies

Ama Josephine B. Johnstone

Do you know how quickly a species can adapt to entirely different environmental conditions? Two generations. So, whilst my great-grandmother may have looked a little like humans as you think of them, she'd likely have taken one look between my mother's bleeding thighs, before running down to the river to drown me. But two generations are ancient history out here, where our elders are under 40, and a legacy is making it through the night. For the half that survive initiation anyway.

I'm fourteen moons out of that ritual, still young by our standards, but ripe and ready for my first Hrougha. In so many ways, I've been preparing for this all my life. My skin darkens every day gradienting from its naturally rich brown sheen to something closer to true black, the most sacred of our hues. My non-essential bodily functions slow down; my speed, agility and external senses heightening, my large eyes bright blue orbs, forever dilated to caress and parse the shadows. A heat builds in my lower abdomen as everything within me concentrates on preparing this body for life. My smooth hairless scalp gleams a little in the starlight, the harder skin there, as the harder bone that tips my wiry fingers and thumb, enriched with vitamins and oils all primed, to attract, to entice, to fecundate.

But what am I doing rambling on, as though we're not skidding towards Moonrise like rats in an oil shoot ready to be turned into a protein-rich mash. I'm joking of course, we don't really eat rodents. That's just more propaganda. But you knew that already, or you wouldn't be here fraternizing with the enemy, trying to see

up our skirts. I've got a long way to go the other side of the city and it's a bright one. It's not that it doesn't burn, the light. It's that we're used to it; which doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, it means we haven't any other choice. Like a chicken egg hatching in the belly of a snake.

I'm still not sure this is a good idea, letting one of you in. It galls that we'll experience this for the first time together. That there are things I don't yet know about our people, that we'll discover in tandem. The elders might think it's time to try for a truce but I'm not at all convinced. What's to stop you from using tonight to finish us off? The child I could conceive may never even see the sky if this all goes to hell.



Chang Gao, *Erotic Proximity*, 2021

It's cold and the old, moss-covered tiles are cracked and clattering beneath my feet as I scale rooftop after rooftop, headed toward the old overpass. Somewhere below I think of children waking with a start, shadowy thoughts clouding their dreams of monsters that go bump in the night and wayward creatures beyond their ken. My talons dig in deeper, turning their dilapidation

to my advantage, shifting my weight into a spring as I loop-the-loop a lamppost that groans momentarily under the weight, just to revel in my own youth and strength. The Moon stabs in for the millisecond we're face-to-face and her bite is like the beating of a lover or a parent, familiar and anticipatory.

Then I'm down and I'm running, the rumble of triple-layered, blacked-out hover-boxes transporting the wealthy and their lackeys out the backside of a day long since ended, and I hiss in disgust and rage at their trespassing into our territory. Their headlights flash a pure, unfiltered, and sickly grey. We no longer see in colour. We see so much more. We are taught from youth to run through the city. Even clothed by our beloved darkness, above ground we're safest in flight. But it's more than that: adrenaline pumping, muscles engorged and humming to attention, we feel most alive in motion, flickering like Moonshadows through a world at once ours and not. We whisper in the afterglow of futures postponed, yet what has risen out of the interlude defies your wildest dreams. Or fears. Is there any difference for you?

Used needles litter the gutters, marking another inoculation day. I suppose that's another difference between us. We see what the night is doing to our skin, our hair, our eyes, our desires even. You've no idea what the drugs are doing to you. How can you even tell what it is you believe, and what Spikers tell you is true? When was the last time your people stepped outside unveiled, bare to the judgements of the sky, just to see what would happen? And clearly the drugs are not working anyway, you are evidence enough of that.

The Hrougha happens every six Moons in one of our nine Mother houses. We can gestate faster than you in only six-seven months, so this works out safest for those who experience successful joinings. Of course,

I have a host of lovers both in and out of my nest, but it takes at least a tenth of us to make babies. That was one of the first things we discovered: the power of fucking in numbers.

It's strange to be punished for who your ancestors were and yet be born into a world that doesn't believe in you. That doesn't believe we can even exist. You thought we would die when you cast us into the Moonless night. Or at best die out within a generation. What could a group of sinful 'women' do alone, unwed, unguarded and uninoculated in a world that had long since decided our species were a plague to be culled at all costs, if not entirely wiped out? Fornicate themselves to death, if they didn't burn first. You never believed we might not only survive, but thrive. Never believed being thrown out of Eden might be the closest thing to freedom we could have hoped for.

I'm nearly there now. Just a final riverbed to cross. I take the aerial route, leaping out into nothingness. My sharp eyes gauging distances held secret to your gaze, leathery fingers grasping at the corrugated iron rungs of the bridge, swinging like a spider-monkey, six hundred feet above the ground. Some rungs are rusted through, and some are barely there at all. I remember most of these and avoid them by rote. Most of them. But that's all part of the fun, feeding the desperate need to prove my aliveness, to prove my existence outside of captivity. Just as you live confined by such hatred and discomfort to prove you are holy, are righteous – to prove you are not us – so we live close to the edge of being, walking the sharpest blades of the night, to prove that we are not you.

This side of the river is desolate, your scarcity leaving room for other life forms to creep up and explode in unexpected places and configurations. I move less cautiously. I'm close. I can feel the others, and it's like

an ache in my guts and between my thighs. It's already beginning. Are you sure you're ready for this? Last shot to back out, no second chances. That's how we live out here. No second chances.

Then I'm here, and so are you. Two rivers meeting.

Your faux-black hooded cloak stands out against the true dark like a foal in the Moonlight, pale and defenceless. The shock of your presence ripples through my already tightly wound nervous system. I've prepared myself for this, I thought I had anyway. But maybe there is no preparation to be had. Every inch of you etched with memories of genocide, hatred and fear. The things you did just to stop us from being who we are, what we are, for believing all that we believe, from loving who we love. And even now we all cradle chasms within us, those you have taken, tortured, experimented on then discarded, cut open and brutalised. Bodies left where you knew we'd find them. Unsubtle warnings, coated in your impotence. As though we needed a reminder of your power or your cruelty.



Chang Gao, Intimate Fantasy, 2021

Anger surges, taking heart from the fire already boiling in my belly, and I could just reach out to undo you guts from flesh with a single hooked hunting claw. The fury is fresh and alive in me. Deliciously soothing the pain. But tonight is not for that. No, no, tonight is for pleasure, and even you – forced here out of desperation I know, whatever your pretty words might say – even you, cannot stop that. Without words I drop down before you, revelling in the extra foot of height the dark has granted, as our curves stretched and evened out under the ossifying Moongaze. You jump in surprise and more, and it pleases me, feeding the arousal that quickly gobbles down my rage. Without a word I walk on and sense you falling in behind me.

The breath rises up in you three, three or four times, throat catching and heart rate quickening with a deafening rhythm to my hyper-sensitive ears, as you consider speaking. I'm glad you think better of it. I take you to the entrance, no more than a crack in tumbled down walls from before. Long abandoned now. I slip through easily, and don't bother to wait whilst you and the stone navigate the contours of your ungainly body, bloated in unfortunate places, by the side effects of your holy drug. You bring with you the power of sovereignty, you said, a promise to end the persecution. But I don't believe you can represent more than a small number of your leaders, when so much of what you are is built on disavowing that any life other than yours is sentient or worthy of breath.

And this feels like too high a price to pay for empty words. This is the only thing we have that you want. Or at least that you say you want. Perhaps reproducing through a ritual of pleasurable ecstasies may feel too high a price to pay for you as well.

Your breath quickens again, and I suspect even you can hear it now: the moaning and ululations,

the undoing rhythms of our sacred drums. We pass out of the crevassed corridor and into a wide courtyard, basked in Moonlight. At last I lower my hood, gasping in unison with you as the rays greet my flesh with an icy burning lick of light. Your shock fills the air: fresh blood in the water. I want to look up and howl just to see if it would push you over the edge. But I won't interrupt the drummers now, not when my own need is so great. The spiderwebbed canvass cradling the otherwise open space allows just enough light through to feel all but bright as day to us, and you must stay hooded as you lurk in the shadows, hugging the walls, aware perhaps at last of what it is we are sharing, of how completely you are not supposed to be here. I wonder if you can feel anything other than shame? Of if the drums stir your loins as well. Even you do not thrive in captivity.

I bare my undulating body: blackness lithe and liquid; and leave you far behind. Duty done, I am embraced by a croon of limbs hungry to sate my hungers. Why are you so afraid of this? It's only fucking, isn't it? Only loving isn't it? Only kinship isn't it? Only a billion molecules of Moonstruck stardust, still aching to belong.

How do Affect and Phenomenology Reshape Representation and Art?

A Conversation Between David Johnson and Chang Gao on Ignorance and Oppression in Disability and Chinese Society

Affect theory and phenomenology have reshaped our way of thinking and revolutionised idealist and universalist conceptions of subjective knowledge. Inspired by these ideas, David Johnson and Chang Gao engage in a conversation concerning ignorance and oppression across cultures and physical differences, interrogating the politics and the normativity of contemporary regimes of representation.

The unacceptable suppression of individual self-expression in contemporary China and the harmful and widespread ignorance of the lived experience of disability in contemporary Western society are the two starting points for our conversation. By viewing these contemporary themes through the prisms of phenomenology and affect theory, and with the assistance of touched braille and Chinese iconography, we hope to leave an imprint in the minds of readers.

David Johnson: We are going to talk about a joint response to notions of representation and the research group that we've both been part of with reference to phenomenology and affect theory as we understand those two things. And I guess, Chang, you're going to talk about your interest in Chinese society while I'm going to talk about disability, which are our respective research interests.

Chang Gao: You've said that in contemporary Western society there's an over-simplified understanding of disability and that in the academy we are learning from the able-bodied perspective. I just want to hear more about how you feel about such issues and the people who generate those kinds of universal concepts of knowledge.



Fig. 1: David Johnson, 3D print of Conference Pear, 2021

DJ: Well, yeah, I've got a lot to say and it's a huge subject. But of course that's what my research focus is really on. Although I focus on one tiny aspect of disability, namely blindness. Because I am blind myself I'm researching from the inside and I'm looking at the world in that way.

In general I think society, certainly in the West, massively over simplifies disability. Disability, whether it's blindness, or any other sort of disability, is a hugely

complex phenomenon. And I think, generally speaking, we simplify it, I suppose, so that the able-bodied world can deal with it all in some way. But the problem with over-simplifying it is that you may lose some of the very important, even essential elements of what disability really is. I must admit I am guilty of it myself. It wasn't really until I started researching or thinking about disability in a very detailed way that I realised myself how complex disability is.

I mean just to take blindness, there are a huge number of different sorts of blindness or different ways in which we lose our sight. So you know you can't generalize about blindness because of the very many facets of blindness that exist. Each eye disease has its own characteristics which are special to it, so losing your sight it's not just one thing. It's a whole range of different types and ways in which blindness occurs. That's the sort of starting point that I come from, and I think that 'Blind Aesthetics', which is my particular research interest, has complexity and heterogeneity at its very core.

In my research I propose that a blind aesthetic exists; in other words, a way of understanding the world which blindness gives privileged access to and that's what my art tries to demonstrate. But I think, more importantly for what we're talking about in the Representation seminar is the general ableist bias that exists in society. What is so infuriating about the ableism that is prevalent in contemporary society is that it is based on a false premise; namely that the differently formed body is always and necessarily unable to fully function in the world. The widely accepted Social Model of Disability denies this and claims that people with different bodies, more often than not, are prevented from fully functioning not by their bodies but rather by the unnecessarily limiting constructs that are put

in their way by society. To put it more succinctly, yes people are disabled but it doesn't have to be that way. There are ways in which the world should and could be changed for the benefit of not only disabled and blind people, but for the benefit of everybody. To quote the tired but powerful old trope: If we are able to put a human on the Moon we can surely effect a few quite simple changes on Earth to enable the contingently disabled. But my main point is that there's a lot of unnecessary ableist bias in society.

CG: Can you expand on that a bit, is there a specific example that you can give?

DJ: One of the most persistent examples of ableist bias I am encountering in my studies is the unnecessary inaccessibility of literature. I have in place a complex edifice of sighted support workers (who, by the way, are individually marvellous!) and associated funding that attempts to ensure that the literature I need and want is accessible to me when I need it. Each and every book and journal I require has to be translated into an electronic format that's compatible with my particular digital system. As I say this is complex and expensive and it doesn't have to be that way; if publishers, lawyers, assistive technology experts and disability advocates were to work together towards a common end the problem would be significantly lessened.

In the classroom there's huge amounts of visual content and there's very little audio description! It does happen from time to time, and when it does happen it's really great. An audio description doesn't have to be very involved to impart huge amounts of information. A little goes a long way, and there's truth in reversing the old saying: For 'a picture speaks a thousand words' read: 'a few words speak a thousand pictures'.



Fig. 2: David Johnson, Cutting of Pears, 2021

CG: Art making, art displaying and media displaying in general is still very visually biased.

DJ: Yeah, it is but it doesn't have to be. I mean when you go to a gallery or an art show it's clearly not just the visual experiences you encounter. It's a multi-sensory experience, all the senses are involved all of the time. Whenever you are looking at something you're also listening and tasting and feeling, all your other senses are still working so it's never just a visual art; it's also a sonic art, it's an olfactory art and it's a tactile art or a haptic art. So art is always multi-sensory in spite of the artist's intentions. It doesn't have to be just visual or even biased towards the visual; but it happens that it often is.

CG: Of course in performance art or the performing

arts, sensory engagement is often differently arranged or biased. The cognitive process always starts with the sensory.



Fig. 3: David Johnson, Finishing Large Pears, 2021

DJ: I agree, but the visual is also available to blind and visually impaired people too. That's very important to me, I'm a very visual person, even though I'm blind, I think visually. Now, whether that's because I used to see or whether it's because all humans are visually hard-wired whether they can see or not, I'm not certain, but I have a very strong sense of the visual and I know for a fact that other blind and partially sighted people think very visually too. So just because you are blind doesn't mean you don't have an understanding of the visual world.

The world of the inner visual – the imagination –

is available to everyone, sighted or otherwise. Everyone that is, apart from those with the rare and mysterious syndrome known as Aphantasia, which is the inability to inwardly picture the world. So the constancy of the visual, or more accurately, the inner visual, and the inherent interconnectivity of all the embodied sensory faculties is foundational to my current understanding of blindness and aesthetics. It is also, I think, foundational to phenomenology and affect theory, the guiding concepts for our current conversation.

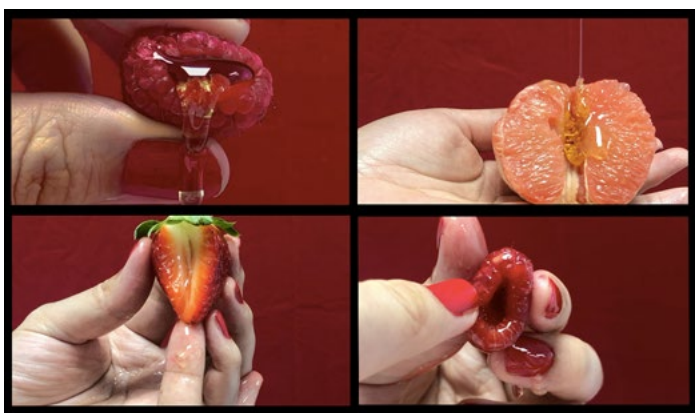


Fig. 4: Chang Gao, *Erotic Proximity* (Film Still, 9 Minute), 2021

I think it's appropriate here to share one of my latest pieces. Its working title is *A Pair of Pear-Shaped Pears*; it's a hugely collaborative conception involving technical assistants and high spec digital tools throughout the process of making. In so doing the piece simultaneously facilitates disabled artistic expression while raising questions around authorial and artistic authority. The process of production of this piece had three distinct stages. Stage 1: a life-sized 3D print of an actual Conference pear [Fig. 1]. Stage two: upscaling the digital scan of the pear by many degrees of

magnitude and cutting two identical pears out of blocks of expanded polystyrene [Fig. 2]. Stage three: Rebuilding, covering and painting the pears ready for presentation [Fig. 3].

These pear-shaped iterations have remained utterly faithful to the original Conference pear copying every contour and detail of the found pear. What has altered radically at each stage is the materiality and the scale of the pears. At stage one it was life sized in 3D printed plastic, at stage two it was magnified and expanded in polystyrene, and at stage three the same magnification was coated in plaster, PVA and household paint.

For my research purposes the making of this piece was interesting and informative because of the lack of my physical intervention in its production. At least four technicians were involved and we used two digital printing and cutting processes. My personal physical presence only happened at stage three with the final piecing together and surface coating and painting. The high level of third-party intervention or collaboration by technicians and machines in making this piece raises questions about the degree to which the piece represents my work.

CG: Yes, exactly David, as you mentioned, although you are a blind artist you are still a visual person. This is directly related to the cognition level which comprises a representation or image as the third level of cognition. As cognitive psychologist Cai Shushan summarises, there are six levels of human cognition: sensation, perception, representation, conception, reasoning, and logics. The visualisation of imagination as the third level exists in most people, except for people who have Aphantasia syndrome as you mentioned.

DJ: This leads me to the fascinating and related subject

area of ASMR. I know Chang that ASMR is an important aspect of your research and practice. Would you, at this point, expand on what this new approach to the sensory is and how it informs your research?



Fig. 5: Chang Gao, Speaking for The speechless (Robotic Installation), 2021

CG: ASMR or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, has become a recent phenomenon where people use a hyper-sensitive microphone to collect the subtle sound made by different triggers. Actions like turning book pages, combing hair, rubbing skin, tapping a finger, liquid dripping, etc. It's meant to create a sense of intimacy and caring through amplifying the subtle sound we normally ignore in daily life.

DJ: You have to hold your breath sometimes to listen to it; because it's so quiet and because it's at the extreme end of your sensory perception. If it was in the middle of your sensory range, it wouldn't have the same impact. That's why it attracts your attention, because it's so quiet and so delicate, fragile, and subtle.

CG: Yes exactly, I am currently working on a series of films called Erotic Proximity [Fig. 4]. It describes a flow of actions such as touching the edge of a kiwi, honey flowing and dripping on a strawberry, slowly squeezing honey out of raspberries, rubbing yogurt in the middle of a strawberry, rubbing a banana against a peeled grapefruit, etc. So I am just experimenting with these hyper sensual and erotic short films together with the sound effects using a hyper-sensitive microphone to collect the sound such as water dripping, honey pouring, finger rubbing, or even the sound of biting and chewing and swallowing.



Fig. 6: Chang Gao, Gender Not Defined (Still Sculpture), 2010

DJ: It sounds very sensational and even delicious. It might be interesting to do a video about a musician playing a cello or a saxophone. The way the sax player moves the keys, the way they breathe into the instrument, the wetness to their tongue on the reed. The vibration and the shining. A column of air moving from her lungs to her mouth and then into the instrument; it's one continuous column of air making the body and the instrument into one thing. All this stuff is an important part of the sensory and emotional experience of music performance. To hear all these layers of activity, for me, is integral to what makes

music exciting. May I ask, why have you chosen this approach and how does it inform your research?

CG: Yes, all these sensational and sensory experiences are integral to Affect Theory and Phenomenology. For me, the reason I am interested in this method is because it strongly relates to the methodology I am using. I've been working with so-called 'supernormal stimuli', which is also a category of pleasurable sensations, like the taste of chocolate, the sight of something sexually inviting, or ASMR sounds, which I generate with my artworks.

The reason I choose to use ASMR and 'supernormal stimuli' is because my research addresses the political and cultural issues in China, where people's critical thinking and different voices are suppressed. In China higher levels of cognition, such as conception, reasoning and logic are castrated through education, media, and political environments. I use the methods of ASMR and 'supernormal stimuli' for provoking people's awareness through bodily affect and lower levels of cognition (like sensation, perception, and image). Most of my artworks are also super sensuous and hyper erotic because in my research hypothesis, under this hegemonic and repressive society, erotic (or, relatedly, 'supernormal') stimuli which, according to Herbert Marcuse, are the key feature of aesthetics, are able to escape the repression and domination of reasoning via play and display during artmaking and its experience.

When audiences encounter these artworks in public spaces, the bodily effect evoked by the artworks create a fold of energy from feelings such as sensuousness, desire, anxiety, anger, horror and offensiveness (from 'supernormal stimuli'), affection, love, tenderness, caring, softness, fantasy, imagination, playfulness and pleasure, etc. My hope is that the energy of such

sensuous feelings also drives the movement to make a change, even to reshape the existing system, where oppression is derived from hegemony, universalism, reason, and the legacy of colonialism. Therefore, my research practice aims to inspire new thinking, new positions, new voices and a new sense of identity, and to encourage people to speak for themselves.



Fig. 7: Chang Gao, Beauty Inside (Wood Carving Sculpture), 2014

DJ: Interesting, and I think all powerful artworks will stimulate you and will stop you in your tracks and make you look on this and feel something that you haven't felt before, or maybe heighten your feelings about something.

CG: Exactly, I am making an interactive robotic project called Speaking for the Speechless. It is an ongoing project where sculpture encourages agency; so people can speak out against oppression. By filtering personal information from the audience, the robotic mouth will generate the voice and visemes (the visual counterpart of phonemes) on behalf of the viewers following texts sent from the audience.

So, this is another level of caring, using ‘supernormal stimuli’ and a linguistic approach to generate care, for the people who are unable to express themselves.[Fig. 5]

Talking about the repressive environment where I grew up, I can also tell you about my artworks as a way to explain the experience as a woman artist. The work *Gender: Not Defined* [Fig. 6] talks about the concept of gender inequality as well as the influence of the fourth level of cognition: conception deprives people of their lives due to the idea that boys are superior to girls. The series *Beauty Inside* [Fig. 7] reflects on the paradox between women’s position of being observed with the concept of the ‘gentleman’ in Chinese traditional culture. Both works reflect the patriarchal and repressive environment where woman artists are not valued. After I made this series of artworks, professors who taught me criticised the work as either problematic or as ‘girls’ work’ due to its political subject matter and feminist position, which made them uncomfortable. So that’s why I have chosen to come to the RCA and I am using my artworks as a weapon to further question the authority, existing power structure, and attempt to make a change.

DJ: Okay, great! I think we have arrived at quite an interesting point and have discussed something valuable.

CG: Indeed, thank you very much for speaking to me, it was a pleasure working with you. I hope we can collaborate together someday in the future.

The subaltern is the lost object
of representation. David Lloyd

底层是失去的再现对象

Imperial violence is not secondary
to art but constitutive of it. Ariella Azoulay

帝国暴力并不次于艺术，而是艺术的组成部分

Our vision isn't impeded only by eyes,
but by our own consciousness.

遮蔽我们视线的不仅是眼睛，而是我们的意识。

Speaking for the speechless,
let the subaltern speak for themselves.

为无法发出声音的人发声，让底层人群为自己说话。

Gender is not defined by sex, but by concepts,
a customised mindset, which may kill.

性别不是由性别定义的，而是由概念、
定制的心态来定义的，这可能会致命。

Benjamin in Palestine: From the Racial Regimes of Aesthetics and Rights to Poetic Justice(1)

David Lloyd

The intimate link that my title implies between the regime of aesthetics and that of rights may not seem immediately self-evident. Nor, perhaps, will the assertion that both are ‘racial’ regimes. That from its founding texts, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1823–29), down through figures as various as Matthew Arnold, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, the aesthetic is a regime that regulates the distribution of different humans on racialised lines. This is the argument that I make in *Under Representation: On the Racial Regime of Aesthetics*.(2) As a discourse that lays out the conditions of possibility of entering into representation, aesthetics also determines the conditions of becoming (fully) human. In doing so, the capacity for a free subjective aesthetic judgment that is also universal in form grounds both the possibility of the autonomous subject and that of political community in the idea of a common or public sense. It furnishes, in other words, the terms by which subjects are represented as enjoying freedom and yet coming into accord with one another, thus grounding the condition for any possible liberal political community, as instantiated in the republican constitution Kant always envisaged as the horizon of collective human progress. We may say, then, that the regime of aesthetics is intimately bound

up with that of rights, in so far as it supplies the terms in which both the formal identity of the human – Man – and the representative relation of the Citizen to the State – which Schiller referred to as the ‘archetype’ of the human – is to be conceived. ‘Aesthetic education’, the pedagogical extension of Kant’s assumptions, is the prerequisite for the formation of the particular individual into a citizen of and for the state where they may realise their universality.

Kant’s and, after him, Schiller’s insistence that the realm of the aesthetic grounds the very possibility of both human freedom and of the accord that guarantees the universality of the form of the Western human subject, continues to shape a prevalent conjunction between aesthetic work and the ideal of human freedom and individuality. It cannot do so, however, without establishing differentiating thresholds between the free or autonomous subject and those subordinate categories of humans, its racialised others who have yet to arrive at the capacity for a purely formal and undetermined mode of representation. The latter are, in effect, still subordinated to nature and to necessity and, as such, are not free but essentially creatures of heteronomy, or external determination. They have yet to reach that point where they can be considered either as fully human or as autonomous subjects capable of being represented in and by the state. This is a categorical, not a merely contingent division of human beings, which Kant articulates both in the Critique of Judgement (aesthetics) and in the earlier Critique of Practical Reason of 1788 (ethics). Only the autonomous subject of reason enjoys either universality or those rights – essentially respect for their autonomy or freedom from coercion – that citizenship in the state confers. This division of the human is the deeply implicit lesson that our aesthetic pedagogies – the

humanities – reproduce with varying degrees of self-consciousness.

What I want to address here, not least because of the urgent circumstances of the present and the relation of the humanities to them, is the question as to how an essay that has everything to do with the establishment of boundaries and the constitution of law and rights, Walter Benjamin's 1921 'Critique of Violence', allows us to rethink the rights-claims that so often frame popular struggles for justice, for representation, or for decolonisation, and which generally underpin the principles of nonviolence by which redress is to be won.(3) I will also suggest how Benjamin's understanding in that essay of the practical ways in which claims to rights broach the limits of the law might in turn lead us also to question the Kantian categorical terms in which the 'right to rights' is generally framed.(4) And I want to think with you as to how the claim of rights leads beyond rights to the possibility of what I will call 'poetic justice'.

I should also acknowledge by way of introduction that my reflections here were in large part shaped in the context of the conference 'Benjamin in Palestine' in Ramallah, December 2015, a conference that will, I hope, become a model for many such collaborative intellectual ventures in the future.(5) Living under a permanent state of emergency such as Walter Benjamin recognised to be the condition – and the condition for knowledge – of the oppressed, our Palestinian colleagues need urgently not only our solidarity with their call to boycott Israeli institutions, but also our active collaboration to break the intellectual blockades that occupation and siege impose upon them and their institutions. The urgency of thinking the question of nonviolence and committing to its practice has been made all the more acute by recent events that have been

ongoing since 1948, at times – as in Israel’s incursions into Gaza – massive and spectacular, at times individuated and below the horizon of international outrage. Over and over again, unarmed Palestinian protest, from the Gazan enclosure fence to the spring of Nabi Saleh, has been met with Israel’s lethal force, making it incumbent upon us to try to understand why nonviolence should elicit, under certain circumstances, the state’s violent response and its suspension of every norm of law and rights. Why is it that after repeated calls, made in ignorance of the long history of Palestinian nonviolence, for Palestinians to commit to nonviolent protest, Israel so deliberately and methodically meets nonviolence with fatal violence? And what is it, in the simple claim to the exercise of internationally acknowledged rights – the right to assemble, the right to protest, the right to go home – that leads not only to the denial of those rights but to the denial of the right to life itself, to the relegation of the Palestinian to a permanent status outside the law? Such questions force us to engage yet again with the traditions of critique of violence and of nonviolence in a work of theorisation that is inseparable from the practice of nonviolence and its ends.

Any reading of Benjamin’s *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* [‘Critique of Violence’], must start with acknowledgement of the threefold meaning of the German term *Gewalt*: it means, as in the standard translation, violence, a word already complex enough in its range of connotations and applications. But it can also mean (and Benjamin uses it thus throughout the essay) force or coercion, and it can mean authority or power, as in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s *Individuum und Staatsgewalt* [‘The Individual and State Authority’], or as in *die ausübende Gewalt* [the executive power]. Furthermore, these distinct meanings, despite the different

phenomena they embrace, form a continuum: as we shall see further, there is no very firm distinction between the authority of the state and its power, or between those and its use, or monopoly of violence.

For Benjamin, the critique of violence is grounded not in the legitimacy that just ends might confer on the means used to attain them, as in natural law theory, but in positivist legal theory's perplexing distinction between 'sanctioned' and 'unsanctioned', or legitimate and illegitimate violence.[237-8] According to Benjamin, furthermore, 'positive law demands of all violence a proof of its historical origin, which under certain conditions is declared legal, sanctioned.'[238] Violence, to name the tautology implicit here, is legitimate if the established legal system accords it legitimacy. In replacing the 'natural ends' of individuals, which could 'be usefully pursued by violence' with 'legal ends that can be realized only by legal power', the law also considers that 'violence in the hands of individuals [is] a danger undermining the legal system.'[238] Violence is thus defined not by the ends it pursues, however just, but by the fact that it is a force not sanctioned by the existing law. But that law or system of law is not defined by ends either, but by its historical origin: it is the law because at a certain point, and by violence, it was established as such. 'Unsanctioned violence', however morally or politically justified it may seem, troubles the law not so much by questioning its ends as by questioning its foundations in, and subsequent monopoly of, violence.

The convergence, noted by Giorgio Agamben, between Benjamin and his contemporary, legal theorist Carl Schmitt, is clear here: both refuse the conventional liberal assumption that the state comes to 'cure' violence and that its use of force is legitimated by its containing of the 'natural' violence of uncivil humanity.(6) For both,

law and its legitimacy alike are grounded in the groundless violence of foundation itself, in what Benjamin describes as the ‘lawmaking character of all such violence’.[240] But Benjamin’s observation also gives rise to the ‘surprising possibility’ that:

The law’s interest in preserving the monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is explained not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving law itself; that violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law.[239]

Here, Benjamin invokes the great criminal and the ‘secret admiration’ he inspires in the public, ‘arousing even in defeat the sympathy of the masses against the law’.[239] The idea of a violence that maintains an ‘existence outside the law’ suggests at the least the partiality of the law and its failure therefore to gain unequivocal assent from the masses. But it also implicitly raises a further possibility, which is that ‘mere existence outside the law’ might inversely be coded as in itself violence, irrespective of the means that it proposes to achieve its ends and irrespective of the justice of those ends.

Benjamin almost acknowledges this peculiar effect of the law in the paragraphs that follow, remarking that ‘even conduct involving the exercise of a right can nevertheless, under certain circumstances, be described as violence’.[240] The instance he has in mind here is the general strike. The right to strike in the ordinary sense, Benjamin asserts, is one that the state grants or is indifferent to. It conceded it ‘once this was no longer avoidable’, i.e., due to the coercive power of the workers’ movements, and because the strike can be understood

strictly as nonviolent: ‘the omission of an action, or service, where it amounts simply to a “severing of relations”, can be an entirely nonviolent, pure means.’[239] As such, the strike is, moreover, to be considered a means ‘to escape from a violence exercised by the employer’. But a strike used as a means to gain other ends can introduce ‘the moment of violence [...] in the form of extortion [Erpreßung]’ when:

it takes place in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under certain circumstances that either have nothing to do with this action or only superficially modify it. Understood in this way, the right to strike constitutes in the view of labor, which is opposed to that of the state, the right to use force in attaining certain ends.[239]

The importance of the continuum of meanings in the word *Gewalt* is here at its most manifest, as the coercive ‘force’ – or extortion – applied by the strike or boycott slips over into ‘violence’ without any change in the legal concession of the right to strike.

The contradiction embedded here comes into full clarity in the case of the revolutionary general strike. Here, labour ‘appeals to the right to strike’, but the state calls it an abuse and declares a state of emergency: it recognises in the revolutionary general strike an exceptional challenge to its own foundations and therefore suspends the law that these legitimate. Accordingly also, ‘the law meets the strikers, as perpetrators of violence, with violence’.[240] Note that Benjamin does not state here that the state’s violence reacts to a prior violence of the strikers: in this respect, the German text seems less ambiguous: wenn es den Streikenden als Gewaltttätigen [...]

mit Gewalt entgegentritt.[48] Confronted with a not necessarily violent, a perhaps even passive, refusal to labour that threatens to bring down the whole legal order, the state 'produces' the strikers as agents of violence. Violence is not a quality that inheres principally in actions but expresses a relation of interiority or exteriority to the law as constituted.(7)

Benjamin's example can be further clarified by the invocation of another instance, familiar to me from a quite different context. Established in 1922, Northern Ireland was for over fifty years explicitly 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people', therefore determined to deny a range of rights to its large Catholic minority, from voting rights to equal access to public goods like housing. Yet as a province of the United Kingdom, the state was also obliged to honour British customary rights, such as those of assembly, despite the frequent abuse of a Special (or Emergency) Powers Act that had been continuously in force since the state's foundation. When the nonviolent Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association [NICRA] was formed in 1967 and began to engage in large public marches, it was met with exceptional police and paramilitary loyalist violence. A nonviolent movement was apprehended as a threat to the very constitution of the Northern Irish state precisely because it had exercised an acknowledged right in order to demand other rights whose concession would have effectively spelt the end of 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people'. Accordingly, it was treated as if it were violent, even though it had not engaged in acts of violence 'properly speaking'. Their constitutional claims to rights were, from the state's and from its Unionist or Loyalist population's perspective, deconstitutive.(8)

As Benjamin maintains, the peculiar 'flip' by which a non-violent action or organisation gets rendered as and met with violence by the state cannot be explained

within any framework which regards the law as an institution that guarantees rights as the means to claiming and securing just ends. On the contrary, the peculiar distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence suggests, in the light of Benjamin's logic, that the relation of agent and action can be reversed: there are agents whose legitimate claim to rights, irrespective of the means used to promote it, cannot be permitted precisely because to do so would undermine the sanctioned violence in which a given state and its legal system is founded. The right to rights is, accordingly, not categorical but depends on its conformity to existing law and its grounds and therefore also on whether or not the subject who claims those rights is regarded as a fully human subject. Though Benjamin only briefly alludes to 'the categorical imperative, with its doubtless incontestable minimum program', he does so precisely to suggest its inadequacy for the critique of violence. [241] Indeed, it is more than inadequate: Benjamin's argument here suggests a fundamental critique of any invocation of the 'categorical' definition of the human as a ground for the right to rights.

Let us return to Kant's telling formulation of the categorical imperative that prohibits any use of any human person as if they were not ends in themselves, not subjects:

A human being is indeed unholy enough but the humanity in his person must be holy to him. In the whole of creation everything one wants and over which one has any power can also be used merely as means; a human being alone, and with him every rational creature, is an end in itself: by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom he is the subject of the moral law, which is holy. Just because

of this every will, even every person's own will directed to himself, is restricted to the condition of agreement with the autonomy of the rational being, that is to say, such a being is not to be subject to any purpose that is not possible in accordance with a law which could arise from the will of the affected [leidenden] subject himself; hence this subject is to be used never merely as a means, but as at the same time an end.(9)

Kant's maxim, which assumes that any infringement on the autonomy that not only belongs to but actually defines the human subject is an infringement on the autonomy of humanity in general, furnishes the grounds for a categorical condemnation, not only of the coercive use of violence to suppress the exercise of rights or expression, but also of any such infringement of human autonomy, as, for example, slavery or torture. It expresses most clearly the philosophical foundation for an ethical, legal, and ultimately political condemnation and sanctioning of the use violence and of its agents that is based not on subjective feeling but on the very category of the human subject as such. And yet, at the same time, Kant's predication of the right to rights, the subject's right to be treated as 'an end in itself,' entails a necessary division of the human between this fully or categorically human, ethical subject and its counterpart that he denominates the 'pathological subject', that is, the subject subjected to need and desire, fear and gratification. As Marx equally recognised of Hegel's doctrine of right, this division is the only way 'that the state constitutes itself as universality': it opposes what Marx designates 'the species-life of man in opposition to his material life.'(10) Accordingly, this divided human subject occupies at once the condition of abstract, ethical

subjectivity in the state, and that of the pathological subject in civil society:

He lives in the political community, where he regards himself as a communal being, and in civil society, where he is active as a private individual, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers.(11)

The latter is the subject which, subject already to the implicitly coercive force of nature or necessity, is likewise apt to be subjected to the suspension of law, that 'state of necessity' or Notstaat in which normative law is suspended and the state's coercive violence is the norm. This is, as Benjamin elsewhere pronounces, the norm for the oppressed. Framed as it is within the logic of development or the 'civilising process' in which certain humans remain bound to their tutelage, the categorical imperative and its predication on the autonomy of the fully human subject relegates a whole segment of potential human subjects to the status of 'pathological subjects'. The autonomous 'subjects of freedom' have not merely emancipated themselves from the condition of heteronomy; they require the existence of 'pathological subjects' against whom their freedom is imagined and defined. For the latter, as Frantz Fanon so eloquently spelt out in the chapter 'Concerning Violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence, or the regime of perpetual corporal punishment that is slavery and colonialism, is absolutely the norm. It is only 'by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom' that the person is 'the subject of the moral law'.(12) For all other categories of human beings, existence as a 'means' is not merely routine, it is justified by their not-yet-human status. The categorical imperative, on its very own terms, cannot dispel the sanctioning of the state's violence

nor, finally, underpin the universality of the claim to rights. Rather, it offers a covert justification of it that is entirely complicit in the logic of domination and of colonialism and in the denomination of certain categories of human as outside the protections of the law. For such humans to demand rights appears as a fundamental challenge to the racial regime of the law that not only sanctions but is also grounded in their subordination.

Both the logic of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', which implies the limits of any categorical appeal to the universality of rights, and the example of the NICRA are richly instructive in the context of the Palestinian non-violent struggle for justice and rights conducted under the rubric of Boycott, Divestment and Sanction [BDS] – a movement often accused by its opponents of seeking 'the destruction of Israel' or, more pointedly in their language, the abolition of the Jewish state. From the outset, the claims of BDS have been framed in the language and traditions of human rights and international law. BDS seeks redress for specific abuses of fundamental rights and an end to a system of domination that conforms to the definition of apartheid outlined in the Rome Statute of the International Court.⁽¹³⁾ Insofar as it addresses global civil society as the necessary advocate of such redress, the tactics it calls for, boycott and divestment, represent no more than what Benjamin terms a 'severing of relations' with the Israeli state and its institutions. Sanctions, which can only be imposed by states, would be more actively punitive. All, however, may be regarded as nonviolent interventions, aimed at holding Israel accountable for its dispossession of and discrimination against the Palestinian people. BDS calls not only for ending the siege and blockade of Gaza and the Occupation of the West Bank, but also for an end

to the constitutively discriminatory regime by which Israel, at the expense of its indigenous Palestinian minority, maintains itself as ‘a Jewish State for a Jewish people’.

But BDS is, like Benjamin’s ordinary strike, indubitably an exercise of coercive force and to that extent occupies a place on the continuum of Gewalt. The ‘Critique of Violence’ is here of inestimable theoretical value if we wish to think through the logic of BDS dialectically and grasp how its practice leads to the elaboration of Benjamin’s theoretical insights. Its opponents rightly recognise the degree to which the practice of boycott involves the exercise of force, even if it operates through the invocation of rights that are generally conceded to the citizens of democratic states. The degree to which proponents of BDS, though exercising a widely recognised right to boycott, are increasingly being outlawed or conflated with terrorists, not only by the current right-wing Zionist regime in Israel, but also by western democracies like France, Germany, and Canada and by some state legislatures in the United States, from New York to Texas, confirms that ‘even conduct involving the exercise of a right can nevertheless, under certain circumstances, be described as violence’,[240] and therefore be relegated outside the law. It is clear that Israel regards BDS as in effect an act of war and responds accordingly, threatening its proponents in Israel and Palestine with ‘targeted civil elimination’ and attacking those in the United States and elsewhere, who are beyond the reach of its violence, with what it has revealingly dubbed ‘lawfare’.(14) BDS is the expression of the constitutive contradiction that shapes Israel and has generated its current crisis in the face of growing international awareness: as liberal Zionists have increasingly had to acknowledge, a state cannot

at once be devoted to ethnic exclusivity and a democracy. This is why those liberal Zionists have recently sought to confine boycott to the Occupied West Bank and the illegal settlements: those abuses, they believe, can be delinked from the larger system of discrimination that Israel maintains, leaving the Israeli state untouched.

But BDS does not merely shed light on the ‘law-preserving’ violence of the military occupation or only on the violence of dispossession and institutional apartheid on the West Bank. Insofar as its principle strategically approaches a status akin to what Benjamin denominates the ‘general strike’ rather than a merely tactical ‘ordinary strike’, it highlights the continuity between the ‘lawmaking’ violence – conquest and ethnic cleansing – in which Israel as a polity was forged and the daily, structural, law-preserving violence it requires to remain in existence. In this respect, it necessarily pushes beyond the humanitarian discourses of human rights and international law within which it was framed and into another terrain altogether. It raises the question as to whether it represents an instance of ‘pure, unalloyed violence’ – what Benjamin calls ‘divine violence’ – or another moment of ‘lawmaking’ violence that he dubs ‘mythic.’

For Benjamin, both mythic and divine violence appear to represent the ‘nonmediate function of violence’, [248] that is, violence not as an instrument or means to attain given ends, which is the only way in which legal theory can conceive of violence. Mythic violence ‘in its archetypal form’ initially appears as ‘a mere manifestation of the gods’. But that manifestation reveals itself as both establishing a boundary – a ‘frontier between men and gods’ – and a law. Ultimately, ‘this immediate violence in mythic manifestations proves closely related, even identical, to lawmaking violence’. [248] This lawmaking function

of violence not only inaugurates a new law – as in conquest or coup – but also ‘specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power [Macht]. Lawmaking is power-making, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence.’[248]

If, as its opponents often claim, the ends of the BDS movement were the destruction of the Israeli state and the foundation of a single non-sectarian one in its place, we might regard its nonviolent means as ‘an exercise of a right’ that manifests as mythic violence, foundational and frontier establishing even as it is power-making as well as lawmaking. This would, of course, be in itself a legitimate end, transforming a discriminatory racial state into one grounded in widely accepted norms of equality and democracy. But it would still seek to inaugurate a new legal regime, a new state, and the moral force of nonviolence would be an instrument devoted to ends indistinguishable from those attained by violence. Rights, as legal entitlements guaranteed only by states or by interstate systems, would represent not only the tactics of the movement but the bounds within which it was confined, the thinking of the state. Necessarily, it would replace one category of human currently in dominance with another that, however inclusive, would install a new regime of state and law.

It is precisely such thinking that Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ aims to exceed. His invocation of divine violence is in pursuit of ‘a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to mythic violence’[249] and it confronts the principle of power that informs the mythic with that of justice. It is the function of this ‘pure immediate violence’ not to establish a new order but to abolish the historically foundational function of mythic violence, whose destruction he regards as

‘obligatory’. It aims at ‘the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law, on the suspension of law with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power’[251–2]. Read in this way, what the Palestinian invocation of rights within the current regime of international law and humanitarian norms ultimately destroys is not the state of Israel as such, but the principle of state power altogether. Its practice sets in train a movement towards justice whose theoretical logic does not culminate in the establishment of a new state – though of course it might get suspended there – but seeks realisation in a complete transformation of social relations. It asks not for the destruction of Israel but for its transformation in a condition of justice that Benjamin’s friend and colleague, Theodor Adorno once defined with deceptive simplicity as ‘the togetherness of the diverse’.(15) To think Benjamin in Palestine, to think Palestine with Benjamin, is not to arrive at this, or at

any utopian goal, but it is perhaps to orient ourselves towards a destination by way of a counter-violence that exceeds both itself and the categorical invocation of rights that the movement requires as its starting point. That destination, a destination that would be the horizon of any genuine decolonisation, is what I am drawn to call ‘poetic justice’.(16)

A short poem of Mahmoud Darwish seems to me beautifully to condense an apprehension of how ‘poetic justice’ might be realised, as a sensuous undoing of sense in which ‘the togetherness of the diverse’ can be anticipated. Let me end simply by citing a part of that poem, ‘I Belong There’:

I belong there. I have many memories. I was born
as everyone is born.

I have a mother, a house with many windows, brothers,
friends, and a prison cell with a chilly window! I have
a wave snatched by seagulls, a panorama of my own.

I have a saturated meadow. In the deep horizon
of my word, I have a moon, a bird's sustenance,
and an immortal olive tree.

[...]

To break the rules, I have learned all the words needed
for a trial by blood.

I have learned and dismantled all the words in order
to draw from them a single word: Home.(17)

1. Initially delivered as a paper at the Modern Language Association in January 2017, this essay is an abbreviated version of a longer article, 'From the Critique of Violence to the Critique of Rights', *Critical Times*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, April 2020, pp.109–130.
2. David Lloyd, *Under Representation: On the Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.
3. 'Critique of Violence', in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. by Marcus Bullock et. al., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.236–253. Page numbers given in brackets throughout the text.
4. The notion of 'a right to have rights' was identified by Hannah Arendt in 'The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man,' chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1973, p.296.
5. My account of this conference and its significance can be found here: <http://savageminds.org/2016/02/10/walter-benjamin-in-palestine/> (accessed 16 November 2021).
6. See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp.52–64.
7. In this respect, where the regular strike is reformatory in its aims, the state's ascription of violence to the general strike is performative. The general strike, however, is as Werner Hamacher has termed it, 'afformative': its ends are neither reformist nor lawmaking, but law dissolving. See Werner Hamacher, 'Afformative, Strike', *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol.13, no. 4, December 1991, pp.1133–1158.
8. For a discussion of Northern Ireland as a quite typical settler colony and its response to deconstitutive challenges to Protestant supremacy, see David Lloyd 'Protestantism and Settler Identity: the Ambiguous Case of Northern Ireland', in *When Politics are Sacralized: International Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. by Nadim Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp.309–336.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor, intro. by Andrews Reath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.74.
10. Karl Marx, (1844) 'On the Jewish Question', marxists.org.

11. Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *Early Writings*, intro. by Lucio Colletti, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, New York: Vintage Books, 1975, p. 220.
12. Frantz Fanon, 'Concerning Violence', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, New York: Grove Press, 1981, pp. 37–43.
13. These guiding principles and further information about the BDS movement can be found at: <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds> (viewed November 16, 2021). These statements and the most extensive exposition of the logic of BDS can be found in Omar Barghouti, *BDS: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions. The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011.
14. On the threat of 'targeted civil elimination' made against Palestinian BDS proponent Omar Barghouti, see Glenn Greenwald, 'Interview with BDS Co-Founder Omar Barghouti: Banned by Israel from Traveling, Threatened with Worse' in *The Intercept*, 13 May 2016: <https://theintercept.com/2016/05/13/interview-with-bds-advocate-omar-barghouti-banned-by-israel-from-traveling-threatened-with-worse/> (accessed 16 November 2021). On the 'Lawfare Project', see Ali Abunimah, 'Israel lawfare group plans "massive punishments" for activists' in *The Electronic Intifada*, 25 June 2016: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-lawfare-group-plans-massive-punishments-activists> (viewed 16 November 2021). The recent designation by Israeli defence minister Benny Gantz of nonviolent Palestinian human rights groups like Al Haq and Addameer as 'terrorist organisations' confirms this pattern of delegitimation: see Ali Abunimah and Maureen Clare Murphy, 'Israel declares war on Palestinian rights groups' in *The Electronic Intifada*, 22 October 2021: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/israel-declares-war-palestinian-rights-groups/34166> (accessed 16 November 2021).
15. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 150.
16. For further reflections on 'poetic justice' as opposed to the law, see David Lloyd, 'Nomos and Lyric: On Poetry and Justice', *Law, Culture and Humanities*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 128–144.
17. Mahmoud Darwish, (1986) 'I Belong There', from *Fewer Roses in Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché, with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 7.



COMMON
SENSE IS
OVERRATED

Moving Forwards While Looking Backward

Giulia Astesani & Josephine Berry

COMMON
SENSE IS
OVERRATED

COMMON
SENSE IS
OVERRATED

BEAT

Thoughts

1 message

Giulia Astesani <g.astesani@network.rca.ac.uk>
To: Josephine Berry <josephine.berry@rca.ac.uk>

Dear Josie,

Since this process started through an exchange of emails, I thought to go full circle and finish with a further message and write you a few thoughts on our contribution to the book. Maybe we could use them for the intro?

I like how introductions are always written at the end when everything else is done. I find comfort in thinking that often we don't fully know where ideas are going to go at the beginning of a process and that it forces us to build things backwards.

When we began this collaboration, I was reading S. Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*, and I sent you this quote:

‘Risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new features possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.’

I chose it because I have been concerned with possibilities for escaping the linearity of progress and to queer, using your words, ‘the rigidity of contemporary existence’.

I have been asking myself if it's possible to enact the detouring and re-orienting Ahmed calls for in the neoliberal state and city. Where is the space for dissent and otherness in the current paradigms of the urban environment, and how can we shift from policies aimed at ‘protecting’ (controlling) women, racialised and queer bodies in public spaces to practices of liberation?

My response lies within a bodily deviation. Turning your back on something is an act of refusal as well as a possibility for new perspectives. But what if it wasn't a static gesture? What if we continued to move forward while looking backwards? What spaces, feelings, ideas can we clutch from the past to help us imagine different futures from those imposed on us? Looking back then can be a generative force, not a conservative one, if used as a tool to resist the violent amnesia that neoliberalism enacts.

I hope this all makes sense to you...but then again, common sense is overrated!

Speak soon,

Gx

Litter

THE DRECS
OF THOSE
DAYS
DRAIN



I KNOW THAT
DOOR
VERY WELL.
NOW LONG
CLOSED.

I KNOW THAT
DOOR
VERY WELL.
NOW LONG
CLOSED.

Moving Forwards While Looking Backward

Giulia Astesani

To make things queer, is certainly
to disturb the order of things.

S. Ahmed

For a few months, I have watched a man walking
backwards through Victoria Park.

He has white hair and a short, scraggly beard. He carries
a big backpack on his shoulders and always holds a long
wooden branch which he uses as a walking stick.

He has a gentle expression and looks quite serene,
even if slightly apprehensive, while he attempts to hold
his ground and avoid bumping into the rest of us who
are walking forward.


Is he going somewhere, returning, or both?

Each time I observed this scene, I'd suddenly get an odd,
disorienting feeling. As I stood there, tilting my head
slightly to look at the man who walks backwards, what
got me is that everyone else, including me, wasn't.

A momentary crack.

A hole in the structure.

And while his walking fashion seems a little
impractical, I'd find a strange sense of relief in looking
at him. Someone might say that what he's doing doesn't
make sense. I'd argue that common sense is overrated.



CORNERS ARE
THE MOST
SENSITIVE
PARTS

PAIN
REFLECTS
IN MIRROR
GLASS

Moving forward while looking backwards.

After all, directions are just a matter of perspective.

I have recently learned about the Aymara people, an indigenous culture living in the Andean highlands. They understand and envision the past as something that lies ahead, whilst the future awaits and unfolds behind them. This means their eyes are gazing at history, and when referring to it, their hands are gesturing forward; the further in the past, the bigger the leaps that the arm takes from the body.

Facing your past. Literally.

Maybe that's the purpose of the man that walks backwards. Who could blame him?

Move on.

What's done is done.

A brighter future and an often-disposable past.

But I want to turn my back on progress' inevitability

I'm walking through a street that used to be very different, and I get perfused by a sense of unfamiliarity, mainly because now it all looks the same.

Adding value by subtracting content.

One detail, though, catches my attention. Some posters are glued around the frame of a small neglected red door.

On one side are a couple of pink posters from the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion, printed on them the drawing of a skeleton sitting on a log and below it the sentence, ACT NOW BEFORE BECAUSE

IT'S TOO LATE. Glued next to them, four posters advertising Billie Eilish's new album Happier Than Ever.

There is a certain sadistic irony in that juxtaposition.

I know that door very well, now long closed. I walked through it many nights, slightly dazed; crossing a threshold.

Two different worlds existing within each other.

I recall peeking inside, the music leaking out together with the pungent smell of alcohol spilt on floors. Inside, my first girlfriend, before she became such, is standing in a corner.

I think you might call it a turning point.

She drinks beer with a straw, holding it like a cigarette between her fingers, bending it towards her lips which are performing a half-smile. She is looking at me, looking at her, while her friend talks in her ear as the cheesy pop music is pumping too loud to understand each other from a distance.

A momentary crack.

A hole in the structure.

An ex-lover once sent me a text that read 'I was thinking about all your corners whilst walking back towards home'. She then told me that corners are the most sensitive parts of our bodies. I thought that corners often feel safe, made to momentarily hold you in, shield you.

Two different worlds existing within each other.

And while walking through the street that looks all the same, I keep thinking about the corners of bodies I've known, and about corners of cities, and bodies in corners of cities, like where we used to stand at night, and drink, and chat and smoke and touch, before walking through the small red door.

'We never fully know why we do things', a friend wrote in an email I received a few days ago. She was talking about love, but I think that's true for most things, or at least I'd like to think so.

In capitalism's amnesic landscape, where little or no space is left to detour, get lost and err, not knowing is a nudge to possibilities and otherness. An opening to – like the little red door when we could still go through it.

I pause, and for a moment, I think again about the man who walks backwards and the Aymara people and their shifted perspectives and past infused sights. I turn around and start

Moving forward while looking backwards.

Ghost Tour

1 message

Josephine Berry <josephine.berry@rca.ac.uk>

To: Giulia Astesani <g.astesani@network.rca.ac.uk>

Dear Giulia,

Our decision to create a fly poster campaign around Shoreditch got me reminiscing while I was away on holiday. I wrote this poem sitting in the sloped garden of an old miner's cottage in Cornwall. The distance sharpened my memories. Maybe we can use some of this in our action. Let me know what you think!

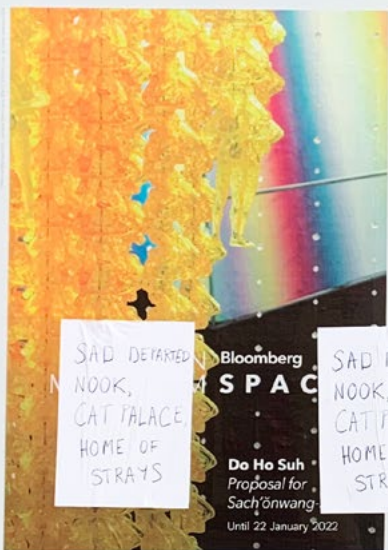
Josie x

SHE DRINKS
BEER WITH
A STRAW

SHE DRINKS BEER
WITH A STRAW

FACING
YOUR
PAST.
LITERALLY

CREMER ST.



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CAT TALACE
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Ghost Tour

Josephine Berry

Sad departed nook
Cat Palace, home of strays
Laid under towered crankings
Of a less instinctual place
Tails curl out of view

We spoke there late
In summer's light, on the corner
By the Joiners, Charlie Wrights
On the curb by Adam D***'s

But the beaten Conqueror has laid down his sword
In the Churchyard where the trees watch
The dregs of those days drain
Through the sieve of memory, untying
Mathematical parcellings

Mushroomy hollow
You smell damply of promise
Let us sit awhile on newsprint, and forgo the benches
Pain reflects in mirror glass
And pavements boil with
Bilious greed
The fundament rots with
Trades and NOX
Sheen and quanta

Face smiles burn
In pina-colada permafrost
Slushing sweet hangover
Into sticky backed cancer
Where I plunge my roots
Like toes in a summer lawn

Finding form in place
Against brick veneer
And the constant memory loss
Of real estate inception

There you had sat, and she had sat, and
Pile drivers turn up
Ghosts in the strata
No care to sort the remains,
The tales will have to tell themselves
It was all that speaking for that brought us
To this point anyway,
From every point it seems

After mail

1 message

Josephine Berry <josephine.berry@rca.ac.uk>

To: Giulia Astesani <g.astesani@network.rca.ac.uk>

Dear Giulia,

Nice to chat yesterday. Funny how the selection of images kind of makes itself. What the printed page demands is quite different from what a truer account of our fly posting experience would involve. Excluding the pictures that revealed our most daring paste ups – like the development on the site of the old Bingo club on Hackney Rd or the WeWork on the site of cat palace – kept happening because those images were harder to read and less impactful.

So our project has lots of loss built in; the torn or fallen down posters, the way we'll never know if they were consciously seen by people, and finally the pictures we can't include.

These absences, gaps or losses are sedimented into our memories, joining all the others. I like that somehow, maybe it appeals to my own frequent wish to disappear and become environment. There is a tone to this that feels right to me. Just as it felt right and empowering to undertake a campaign of personal expression in public space, an anti amnesia campaign in the face of capital's erasures.

I keep thinking of James Lovelock writing about planetary life deserts in his Gaia book, and how these can spread wildly. I think financialisation creates desert cities. Maybe these feral offerings of ours are powerless to prevent that, but it was wonderful to see them amongst the other semantic weeds, the typewriter piece and smiley faces and hammers and sickles. Diversification of expression in every realm, public, private, natural, artistic and political

seems worth practicing. And these memories give me some resources to carry on. So thank you for collaborating with me. It was such a pleasure to work with you.

Speak soon!

X Josie

Sent from my iphone

U-N-T-I-T-L-E-D
R-E-P-O-R-T



World Trade Center station, NYC



World Trade Center, NYC



Separation barriers, Cupar Way, West Belfast



Old Alton Bridge Trail, Denton, Texas



Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans



Grenfell Tower, North West London



Power, Mobility,
Space, Vulnerability

Orla Fahey & Nicholas Middleton

Figure 1



'Roads in London are resurfaced, on average, every 42 years...'
<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/node/1081>

Returning to my workplace after the summer, a sinkhole had opened in the middle of the road outside the main entrance to the building. As an access road, rarely busy, marked with cones and small enough to drive around, the hole remained unfilled for many days. Unnervingly, an oblique glance into the depths towards the sides of the hole revealed a large void under the tarmac, its extent unseeable in the darkness. Although the city is permeated with innumerable underground tunnels, sewers, pipes, boreholes, basements and bunkers, beneath its streets – and we know this to be true – this lack of solidity rarely feels so immediately present. Around the same time, a suspected gas leak was investigated in the street where I live. An engineer tapped a number of holes behind the granite kerbstones and marked the pavement with chalk to indicate all the utilities just below; frequently done with different coloured spray paint prior to excavating the road, this activity demonstrates the fact that this infrastructure is largely unmapped.(1)

Lines



In order to protect the public from accidents, danger signs and lines are installed to designate 'safe' spaces so that pedestrians and other road users have a safe passage to their destination. On the public roads in the UK predominantly straight white lines are painted onto the infrastructure advising vehicle drivers to stop, yield, slow. Lines can regulate time as well as space. Single yellow lines allow vehicles to park at certain times or at no time on double yellow lines. Further restrictions on time and the use of space are imposed in London by Transport for London (TfL) using red lines. Within these lines the space and time is 'owned' and its use is regulated by the traffic authority; transgression of these rules may result in financial penalties.

Figure 2



'In the deserts of the West some mangled Ruins of the Map lasted on, inhabited by Animals and Beggars [...]'(2)

The history of the map is inextricably linked to power, control, and authority, from the Highland clearances of the eighteenth century, the straight lines of colonial borders, hiding in plain sight in the very name Ordnance Survey. Maps, as representations, structure how we see the world, from the distortions of the Mercator projection inflating the global North, to the car-centred navigations of the modern city. Maps are necessary abstractions. Borges' 'On Exactitude in Science' makes the absurdity of a true one-to-one representation evident. By including everything, the map, in its point-for-point accuracy, transforms this perfect cartography into a burden of sheer uselessness. Once abandoned, some surviving remnants of this pinnacle of cartography are returned to use, sheltering 'animals and beggars'.

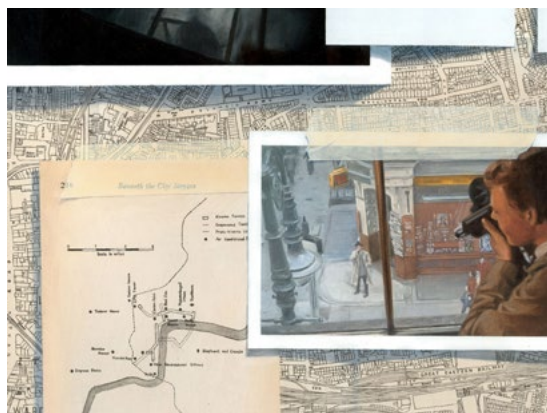
Signs



Road signs are another representation of authority and restricted access. They warn of danger and advise caution for vehicle drivers using the public space. Traffic light systems contain the flow of traffic and manage safety for all road users. On the surface these appear to determine the safest passage for a user through the (public) space and time. A ‘vulnerable road user’ is one who is most vulnerable to injury from a collision. A pedestrian is deemed the most vulnerable in the hierarchy of road users. Within this hierarchy other tiers exist based on age, ability and gender. This projection of vulnerability onto users from safety experts demands that systems are in place that provide protection for these groups or to ‘rationalise the subjugation of minorities’ that Judith Butler refers to in *Vulnerability in Resistance*.⁽³⁾ TfL’s main purpose is to expedite the journey time for goods and services through the design of traffic management systems that accommodate this goal. Traffic lights exemplify this goal by regulating vehicle traffic – pedestrians wanting

to cross a road will have to request permission to access this space by pressing the button on a traffic crossing and waiting until the traffic comes to a halt and when they are given permission to cross. Typically, a timed countdown indicates how long the pedestrian has to cross this space safely before the flow of traffic commences. The time given to cross the road is not based on what pedestrians may require, especially if they have reduced mobility, but based on what the traffic system designer deems an appropriate time to halt vehicle traffic.

Figure 3



The schematic outline of the river

The sinkhole outside my place of work may or may not have been related to a new spur of the London Underground recently being built in the area. The Underground map is a paragon of representational utility, much emulated around the world: topographical geography is sacrificed for topological consistency. The important features derived from Harry Beck's design are the relative position of each station and how each line connects with every other. One notable side effect of this diagram posing as a map is that travellers unfamiliar with the city frequently make unnecessary short journeys and complicated interchanges between lines when an above ground route would be far quicker. Indeed, a pocket atlas was at one point produced with each page spread centred around stations in the city centre, catering for exactly this phenomenon. The tube map's only concession to surface geography is the presence of the River Thames. When the schematic outline of the river was briefly removed from the map a decade ago, it was quickly reinstated. Inhabitants

of the city always desire to know on which side of this great divide they find themselves after emerging from the depths into daylight. The conventions of the Underground map are explicit. Implicit assumptions and biases in many maps may be harder to divine. The representational language of the atlas frequently proclaims a universalism, consisting of apparently neutral lines, colours, symbols, positions, relations, projections, orientations, all producing the implied ideal user, its audience. Of course, by its nature, inclusion tends to produce exclusion. Who gets to make the map and who is it for?(4)

Infrastructure



Kenny Cupers describes how Infrastructure is inherited from the past and how it has been used as a neoliberal tool of power that both facilitates the mobility of things and people but at the expense of restricting mobility and connectedness in African countries.(5) He compares how the use of advanced technologies has enabled the smooth transport of extracted materials to flow from Africa to the global North with the use of sophisticated technology to patrol borders with the use of drones to restrict and contain the flow of people within this continent. He highlights how the transport infrastructure excludes, contains, and subjugates as much as it includes, moves or liberates.

Doreen Massey's book *For Space* discusses how space is seen as feminised, referring to Foucault's view where space is treated as 'the dead, the fixed [...]' whereas time '[...] was richness, fecundity, life'.(6) The imposition of a set of 'universally' understood sets of signs and lines in this dead, static space for the dynamic life that passes through this space can be exclusionary

and challenging for those who do not have knowledge or understanding of these signs and lines. Excluded from this knowledge are those who have not taken a driving test, who may not be able to read or importantly understand the symbols and will have to take their chances in this space. Massey describes these 'rules' a part of a neoliberal design that decides who gets access to that space.

Figure 4



A fictional landmark: the Haggerston Dry Ski Slope

Like the design of the Underground map, the London A to Z began as an individual enterprise, Phyllis Pearsal's quest to tie a name to every street on the ground and thereby to index them(7). As a product of and for the modern urban population, the physical map had inbuilt obsolescence, out of date as soon as it was printed and bound, always a snapshot despite its appearance of authoritative stability. However, the fact that I was able to usefully keep the same street atlas for many years is testament to the general lack of dynamism of old European cities, their defining plans and shapes persisting, unlike their contemporary rivals in the global East. My long-standing and well-thumbed copy of the London A to Z was an edition which featured the Haggerston dry ski slope. Having learned on the Beckton Alps, and being local at the time, aware of the whimsy of its fictional Haggerston twin, a more imaginative variation on the geographer's 'trap street', this was a lesson in the tacit value of on-the-ground knowledge against the reliance of the

authority of the map. Technological change has already largely made the printed map an anachronism, its snapshot supplanted by a real time immersive experience through the GPS-enabled device in one's pocket.(8)

Shared Space



‘Shared space’ is a Dutch concept used in the UK. Its original idea was to design an equitable space between drivers, pedestrians and cyclists with an absence of signs and lines with the sole purpose of slowing vehicle traffic down as it is unclear to the driver who has priority in the space, compelling them to reduce their speed in order to check whether other road users are using the space. The ‘shared space’ sign is usually seen on the pavement, to signify that the space is shared between pedestrians and cyclists. The sign appears to show a democratic state of affairs where pedestrians and cyclists share the space equally and with care for each other. As anyone who has used this type of space will know, particularly during busy rush hours; there is confusion between these groups as to who has priority; with the pedestrian often backing down in this contested space to keep themselves safe from fast moving cyclists. The ‘shared space’ concept has been used to take cyclists off main roads and onto pavements, where once only pedestrians ‘owned’ the space. During

observations at a case study, it was noted that the 'shared space' sign was ignored and the painted lines not observed by users. Why was this? One reason was that the sign was much higher than eye level for a cyclist or pedestrian to read, or that a tiny bollard sign was too small. The purpose of these objects in the infrastructure is to ensure that the 'owner' of the space, usually a local authority, is covered by public liability insurance in allowing a cyclist (otherwise not legally protected on the pavement) to use the space by displaying the sign. In other words, the signs and lines are not there for the purpose of keeping vulnerable road users safe but to limit insurance claims. In reality, safety in the space relies on the behaviour of the pedestrians and cyclists to exercise caution; not on whether the signs and lines are visible, adhered to or even understood by the users.

Figure 5



'The stationary idling of a vehicle engine is an offence, liable to a fine'. Section 42, Road Traffic Act 1988

While off work, recovering from a respiratory illness late last year, I had been advised to keep a window open for fresh air. I was acutely aware of the sounds from the street outside, marking the day, mindful that it was the passing of time which was the essential act of recovery. The noises from outside were readable as a pattern structured by a school at the end of the road: the sounds of children before school, at morning and afternoon breaks, at lunchtime and home time. At home time, enough cars arrived to park with their engines idling that I had to close the window as a precaution against the fumes. A map of the ephemeral effects of air pollution is modelled from real time data by the London Air Quality Network from monitoring stations across the city. The borough in which I live – one of the more deprived in the city – does not have a single monitor which feeds into the London Air Quality Network.(9)

Resistance



Perhaps the Shared Space area serves as a prototype space that is more representative of real life in the public sphere where chaos, uncertainty and conflict are embodied – a state of affairs which Massey argues is truly ‘public’. Despite its ‘empire’-ical design, I propose that this contested space, which insists that a resolution of conflict between ‘vulnerable’ users is worked out in that space and within that time, shows an area of resistance against the rules of the space where the practice of resistance that Butler refers to in *Vulnerability and Resistance* is truly related. These spaces embody Massey’s argument for the joy of ‘thrown togetherness’ which truly represents life, in all aspects of its space and time.

Figure 6



A remnant of police tape, no longer marking a boundary, 19 September 2021

From the sinkhole outside to the other end of my route to and from work, an estate between myself and the Underground station that transports me there was cordoned off by police tape during that first week back at work. There had been a shooting. After the first day, the cordon was widened to take in most of the estate, a number of small roads and open green areas. Although the colloquial terminology of ‘postcode gangs’ may not be appropriate to this particular incident, the idea of lines on the map which demarcate belonging and territory, safety or otherwise, for the individual, unseen by the more privileged sections of the population, is pervasive to what appears to be senseless violence when observed at a remove. Layers of local knowledge form maps in the head, a representation with many missing gaps.(10)

1. See Peter Laurie (1970), *Beneath the City Streets*, St Albans: Granada, 1979.
2. Jorge Luis Borges (1946), 'On Exactitude in Science' in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, London: Penguin, 1999.
3. Judith Butler, 'Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance', in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 19.
4. Mark Ovenden, *Metro Maps of the World*, Middlesex: Capital Transport Publishing, 2003, pp.20–23.
5. Kenny Cupers, *Coloniality of Infrastructure*, September 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/coloniality-infrastructure/412386/editorial/>
6. Doreen Massey (1980), *For Space*, London: Sage, 2005, p. 70.
7. For a nuanced examination of the myth of Pearsall's singular creation, see Richard Hornsey, 'The Cultural Uses of the A-Z London Street Atlas', *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, April 2016, pp.265–280.
8. Matt Haynes, 'The New Romantic Luge', *Smoke: A London Peculiar*, issue 12, 2014.
9. London Air Quality Network: <http://www.londonair.org.uk>.
10. Jonny Pickering, Keith Kintrea and Jon Bannister, 'Invisible Walls and Visible Youth: Territoriality Among Young People in British Cities', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2012, pp.945–960.

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