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Transforming Violence through Artistic Practice in Cold War  
America, 1945-1975

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to argue that following the Second World War and the dropping of the atomic bomb, certain American artists understood that it was necessary to induce a profound change in how we present manifestations and languages of violence. Following the lead of Sacvan Bercovitch's writings on the 'simultaneity of violence and culture formation' at the heart of the United States,<sup>1</sup> the thesis' primary research objective is to investigate how John Cage, Amiri Baraka, William S. Burroughs and Denise Levertov developed a deep engagement with violence through aesthetics in order to offer a potential transformation in established relationships with violence in the postwar period. In understanding, as Susan Sontag proposed, that 'the American faith in violence' is essential to its symbolic identity,<sup>2</sup> the thesis argues that these artists seek to undermine the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, the American symbolic identity, those which come to bear on that violence.

Whilst many critical works have discussed the intersection between violence and culture, much of the critical material focusing on that intersection in the Cold War period continues to lag behind the creative practices and innovations arrived at by these American artists. The thesis argues that these artists worked to transform violence through their practice by accepting instability and precarity as a condition of postwar politics, society and morality. Using the theoretical work of Jacques Derrida, Susan Sontag, Frantz Fanon, Sacvan Bercovitch and Jacques Lacan among others, the thesis aims to fundamentally reconsider violence in the postwar moment. Taking the defining aesthetic innovations of the artists in question as its points of departure—Cage's silence, Baraka's break, Burroughs' scansion, and Levertov's threshold—the thesis demonstrates that what such a reconsideration calls for is a renewed understanding of violence in the postwar moment. At the level of their defining innovations, what these artists thus enable us to formulate is a relation to violence that rejects its presentation in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

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<sup>1</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969; repr. London: Vintage, 1994), p. 196.

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This thesis adheres to the *MHRA style guide : a handbook for authors, editors, and writers of theses*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2015) in its citation and bibliographic documentation.

What I discovered in America was the simultaneity of violence and culture formation. America, as its meanings gradually unfolded to me, was interchangeably a cultural treasure of barbarism, a barbaric dream documented by a procession of “great minds and talents,” and an interpretive process through which the worlds out there had been triumphantly repressed—first, by myths of their inhabitants (“savage,” “primitive”) attended by facts of genocide, and then by symbols of the land (“virgin,” “wilderness”) attended by the creation of the United States of America.

— Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*

## Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the ways in which four artists attempt to reconfigure relationships with violence in the early American Cold War through their aesthetic practices. They do so through various injunctions which aim to reveal, antagonise and undermine a certain mytho-ideological interpretation of violence in order to disrupt its spread or at least disclose its machinations. The categorisations—of good versus evil, right versus wrong etc.—which hitherto shaped and sustained the symbolic identity of America came under unprecedented scrutiny in the wake of the extreme violence of the early twentieth century, a period which came to be defined by two World Wars, the Holocaust and the invention and detonation of the atom bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

The interpretation of violence which American leaders in the postwar moment attempt to sustain will find itself summarised in the term America as Other, a Lacanian reworking of the America symbolic identity found in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch. To summarise, I propose that the writers that are the subject of this thesis were able to render an alternative narrative regarding our relationship with violence by eschewing certain fixed notions of violence in the postwar moment. In short, they were, in Lacanian terms, able to undermine the idea of America as a complete Other, as a series of fully coherent positions which pre-determine the discourses available to individuals regarding violence. These writers understand that any naïve attempts to generate a fixed grand narrative of violence or to totally eradicate it serve to merely prolong it or to tighten its grip. Accordingly, the writers presented here aim to transform our relationship with violence by transforming our relationship with the symbolic force which shapes and limits the ways in which violence can be understood in the postwar moment. This symbolic force will be named America as Other. I posit that this symbolic identity shapes the violence of the state in early Cold War America despite its creation long before this moment, in some of the earliest formations of the idea of “America” as a nation.

This alternative understanding of violence is a critical move in the postmodern moment. As interpretations of violence become shaken by the facts of the early twentieth century, the classic model of violence as based on “means” and “ends” fails to render this devastation. The new rendering of violence, which the events of the early twentieth century force us to face up to, also offers us the opportunity to reflect on the abhorrences of centuries past, many of which were fundamental to America’s formation. Momentarily, I will provide a historical explanation for this reframing of past and present violences, one largely grounded in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch and his claim that America has defined—and will continue to define—its laws, hypotheses and discourses—which will later be used to define the concept of America as an Other—by its relationship with violence. The development of this symbolic identity stretches back to before the Calvinist Christianity of Puritan New England and finds itself extended and manipulated through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This historical framing is critical for Bercovitch and in turn for this thesis because it helps to explain a unique relationship with national identity, culture formation and violence. Additionally, this framing helps to explain the complexity and stubbornness of such narratives. For instance, John Winthrop’s 1630 speech “A Model of Christian Charity” (‘we shall be as a City upon a hill’)<sup>1</sup> offers an early form of American covenant, one defined by exceptionalism, a formal move repeated by countless Presidents, politicians and activists of all persuasions since. These range from the Declaration of Independence in 1776, through John L. O’Sullivan’s christening of the term “manifest destiny” in 1845, through John F. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan and Obama. These narratives politically inscribe a normative understanding of what it means to be American.

This is merely one example of an intricate cultural narrative compounded over many centuries. So by the time of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in 1835 and the dawn of the label “exceptional” in relation to the United States, a complex set of these social, cultural, political and religious narratives, laws and hypotheses had become

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Winthrop, *Life and Letters of John Winthrop* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), p. 19.

established and intertwined. These developed alongside decades of violence against the various enemies which threatened the States' then-unnamed manifest destiny—from European powers to Native North Americans, from the desire of the slaves of the Transatlantic Trade for freedom, to nature itself, the latter embodied in the Puritanical “Errand into the Wilderness”. To translate Bercovitch into a Lacanian idiom, America as Other—gathered from its various sources and experiences in Puritan eschatology, European enlightenment and its cannibalistic growth through slaveries and oppressions—comes to bear on understandings of violence through the violent acts and processes which developed America as a nation. This offers those “others” (“Americans”) a certain relationship with a culture and with violence. This renders clear the thesis' first thoughts on violence: that it is impossible to significantly reduce or eliminate because it is always tied up with questions of symbolic identity whether interpersonal, local, or national. Such a way of viewing violence, whilst not new, is brought sharply into focus in postwar America.

### Violence

Having summarised certain initial cultural and historical premises, I will now define what the thesis takes “violence” to be. As Robert Appelbaum suggests in his 2013 article “Notes Toward an Aesthetics of Violence”, considering violence in relation to aesthetics requires that we ‘submit [our] thinking to a kind of violence’ and that in considering aesthetics, we must ‘put aside the presumptions of a thesis, a vision of what violence [is] objectively’.<sup>2</sup> One reading of these statements from Appelbaum is clear: dictionary definitions—whether from the Oxford English Dictionary or Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (1976)—legal accounts—such as Robert Cover’s “Violence and the Word” (1986)—or investigations from the social sciences—such as Norbert Elias’ *The Civilizing Process, Vol. I. The History of Manners* (1939), Larry Ray’s *Violence and Society* (2011) or Elizabeth Stanko’s edited collection *The*

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Appelbaum, ‘Notes Towards and Aesthetics of Violence’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 85:2 (2013), 119-132 (p. 119).

*Meanings of Violence* (2002)—can only take us so far in our attempts to render violence with greater clarity. This is not to say that these sociologically or politically guided studies are not helpful, for they are. Such studies, however, constitute only one part of the investigation, one which also requires a deep engagement with aesthetic explorations.

One place to start, in such an engagement, is with the history of the term itself, its etymology. The word “violence” appears to originate, through its relationship with “violation”, from the Proto-Indo European root \*weie- meaning to ‘go after, strive after, pursue vigorously, desire’.<sup>3</sup> Violence also finds early form in the Proto-Italic \*wīs meaning ‘strength, force, power, energy’ which is subsequently carried into Latin as ‘vis’.<sup>4</sup> This becomes ‘violentus’—‘vehement, forcible’—eventually moving to the noun ‘violentia’—‘vehemence, impetuosity’.<sup>5</sup> It is around this time that ‘violence’ takes its own shape, carrying the meanings now most commonly associated with it (such as “physical instrumental force”). In this etymological account, violence has always had connection to desire, to power and even the ‘vis’ of ‘vis-à-vis’. Diachronically, violence signifies connection and remains an important force in interpersonal relations between people rather than a restless anomaly to be expunged.

We could contextualise such a definition with one of the nineteenth or twentieth century’s many texts from some of its leading theorists which take violence as either the main focus or as a critical component in a potential reframing of interpersonal relations: Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On The Genealogy of Morality* (1887); Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1908); Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Founding Manifesto of Futurism* (1909); Sigmund Freud’s *Reflections on War and Death* (1915), “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and, in fact, much of his work after the First World War; Walter Benjamin’s

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<sup>3</sup> ‘violation (n.)’, *Online Etymology Dictionary* <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/violation>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

<sup>4</sup> ‘Violence’, in *Ainsworth’s Latin Dictionary*, ed. by John Carey, LL. D., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Spottiswoods, 1823), Google eBook.

<sup>5</sup> ‘violence (n.)’, *Online Etymology Dictionary* <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/violation>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

“Critique of Violence” (1921); Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935); Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958) or *On Violence* (1970); Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961); Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The Will to Knowledge* (1978); and Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) to name but a few.

Whilst these texts tackle violence as a central concern to varying degrees, violence has most frequently been discussed in relation to other discourses. For instance, Marxian criticism of all stripes regularly finds itself in contact with violence. Friedrich Engels provides some of these early contextualisations, producing writings in a mode that influenced many of the theorists discussed here such as Hannah Arendt as well as other writers who discuss struggles against ideological violences, such as Jacques Derrida. Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* (1878) puts forth the notion that ‘militarism also bears within itself the seed of its own destruction’.<sup>6</sup> This places militarism in intimate relation with capitalism, rendering both as systems of violence which remain inherently unstable. Indeed, the presence of Derrida and Lacan as primary theoretical references in this thesis is due as much to this dialectical approach which exposes instability as it is to their focus on the instability of language and its relation to violence. Extending from Hegel and then from Marx, Derrida and Lacan seek to analyse and expose this instability, the eventual acceptance and mobilisation of which will be crucial for this thesis’ exploration of violence.

It is also in *Anti-Dühring* that Engels distinguishes violence from force—a critical distinction which opens Arendt’s own account in “On Violence”. Engels describes violence as ‘no mere act of the will,’ but as requiring ‘the existence of very real preliminary conditions before it can come into operation, namely, *instruments*, the more perfect of which gets the better of the less perfect’.<sup>7</sup> Aside from the sword or the rifle, one of these

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Engels, ‘Anti-Dühring’, in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. by Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 40-61 (p.50).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

technologies or tools of violence could surely be modern bureaucracy. Such bureaucracy aims, among other things, to prevent physical violence outside of the law. As Arendt would argue later in 1972's "On Violence":

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is a form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. The crucial feature in the student rebellions around the world is that they are directed everywhere against the ruling bureaucracy.<sup>8</sup>

This collapsing of private and public life—a primary concern for Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958)—which the bureaucratic systems that codify modern life invokes, those which were intended to diminish violence through legal means, merely serve to convert that violence into further systems of dominance and oppression in the name, for instance, of the nation, of “good manners” or—to use Freud’s term—“civilisation”. The cultural rendering of the laws and hypotheses which this bureaucracy seeks to disseminate may arrive, in John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1858), as the ‘tyranny of the majority’.<sup>9</sup> In less concrete terms, Lacan would call this the Other; the symbolic identity which comes to bear on the laws, languages and hypotheses which we inherit.

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<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1970), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), p. 13.

## America as Other

It is crucial at this juncture to sharply delineate the central concept of America as Other, and in so doing to indicate how that concept can be seen to inform and relate to the work of key modern thinkers on the question of violence. This notion of America as a series of symbolic hypotheses—ones shaped by past violences and subsequently shaping new ones—could not be made without the theoretical foundations established in the work of Jacques Lacan. Concerning Lacan’s three elementary orders in which the psyche function—Real, Symbolic and Imaginary—these laws and hypotheses constitute the Symbolic order.<sup>10</sup> It is the interactions between the Symbolic and the Imaginary—the Imaginary being the order of sensory experience and ego construction—which enable us to generate meaning and, accordingly, shape our understanding of the world and ourselves in relation to others. Finally, the Real in Lacan’s topography, which shall be discussed in more detail momentarily, is the enigmatic leftover, that which stands for what is neither Symbolic nor Imaginary.

The subject for Lacan is *subject to* the Symbolic order, the Symbolic being that which comes to bear on their understanding of the world before the subject even becomes a participant in language. ‘The subject’, as Lacan argues in Seminar XX, ‘is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which signifier he is the effect of or not.’<sup>11</sup> For Lacan, the big Other (capitalised in the French as *l’Autre*) is the Symbolic order, the ‘locus of the treasure trove of signifiers’.<sup>12</sup> The big Other—hereafter referred to capitalised as Other—is not language itself, but rather the space in which language is constituted. As Lionel Bailly puts it most succinctly, the Other is the set of ‘symbolic constructs’, the ‘hypotheses into which the Subject is born.’<sup>13</sup> As Bailly further remarks, ‘[t]he Other is omnipresent: all our lives we play with, struggle against, and learn to use its manifestations.’

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<sup>10</sup> Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2009; repr. 2017), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX, Encore: On feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge (1972-73)*, trans. by Bruce Fink, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, Héroïse Fink and Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 682.

<sup>13</sup> Bailly, p. 219.

The Other, crucially, has a ‘structuring effect...upon the development of the Subject’.<sup>14</sup> America, as a symbolic construct, accordingly takes on a role in shaping the ‘hypotheses into which the Subject is born’.

The Other, and accordingly America as Other, is not a subject and has no intentionality or agency. It is the set of laws and hypotheses which language passes through in order that it may cohere into a set of positions in relation to one another. The Other is therefore the manifestation of any individual’s relationship with the Symbolic order. In turn, this shapes the ways in which individuals are able to create meaning in the world. Yet the Other is not a fixed entity; each individual has a different relationship with their “Other” due to the many uncountable contextual differences in a given subject’s upbringing as compared to other subjects. Where the mother represents the first Other for the child and passes on laws, hypotheses and symbolic constructions, the Other eventually becomes the Symbolic order at large once the child come to realise that the mother, like themselves, lacks. The Other is therefore a series of hypotheses and laws gathered from a number of sources including, but not limited to, the hypotheses and laws of one’s nation, of what it means to “be an American”. Whilst the differences between individuals and their specific circumstances ensure that there is no unified, complete Other which all subjects share in, there is a shared relationship with certain general positions—such as culturally acceptable interpretations of violence—which all individuals that live within the influence of a shared cultural setting such as “America” have experience of.

It is critical here to differentiate between America as a nation state and America as Other.<sup>15</sup> Where America as a nation state is a political entity, one which has agency through legal powers, America as Other is the series of laws and hypotheses which, whilst having no agency of their own, come to bear significantly on the agency and behaviour of America as a nation state and the individuals and groups which feel its influence. When, for instance,

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<sup>14</sup> Bailly, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> For further clarity, the use of the term America or The United States of America and derivatives in this thesis will signify the nation state. America as Other will always be written in full as written here.

President Harry S. Truman declares that the atom bomb was necessary in order to ‘defend itself against any possible aggressor’, his response is in part impacted and shaped by the relationship of America as a nation state to violence in both past and present history—a violence which is positioned in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.<sup>16</sup> The range of positions available to President Truman are therefore limited by that history, coming to bear not only his own answer, but the responses of all those that live within the influence of America as Other. Whether for or against the bomb, the limited range of positions available to Truman with regards to this particular violence are already inscribed as pro or anti-American, as patriotic or as traitorous, as progressive or as regressive etc. The so-called progress afforded to America by its relationship with violence—which will be outlined in more detail momentarily—is thanks to its inscription in mythology which enshrines that specific violence as necessary and justifiable for the good of the nation. Whilst there are distinct differences between the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, these individuals are still limited by the symbolic constructions which maintain that office of President of the United States of America.

The concept of America as Other, one that this thesis will return to throughout, can thus be delineated as the role that America—as a Symbolic construction, as a series of historically constituted laws and relationships to various ideas and concepts, including violence—plays in the lives of American citizens as a force which comes to bear on their understanding and categorising of the world. The concept also describes the ways in which this series of laws and hypotheses come to bear on the ways in which American narratives on violence are constructed and maintained in the postwar moment. America as Other is, to clarify, not therefore an active agent that manipulates others—although this series of hypotheses and laws can be manipulated or utilised by those in power, those who represent America as a nation state through the use of propaganda for instance. Such actions serve to bolster a historically determined relationship with violence, one which has justified the nation’s

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<sup>16</sup> Tamra Orr, *The Hydrogen Bomb: Unleashing the Nuclear Age and Arms Race* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2004), p. 27.

continued existence and “successful” progress. America as Other is a symbolic construction which American citizens—and many outside its borders—have a relationship with, one which shapes their own understanding of the world. Therefore, the historically constituted relationship with violence which aided in the construction of the United States of America, to some degree, shapes and defines the relationships which individuals living under the influence of America as Other have with violence in the postwar moment.

The use of the Lacanian concept of “Other” in this thesis helps to mark two critical points relating to violence in postwar America. Firstly, the term “Other” describes a set of laws and hypotheses which clearly bear on the agency and behaviour of individuals without ascribing agency to the Other itself. America as Other is a symbolic force which both verifies as correct and promulgates a historically determined relationship with violence, that which developed the United States. America as Other, as the Other always is for Lacan, is ‘beyond one’s conscious control; [speech and language] come from another place, outside consciousness, and hence ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’’.<sup>17</sup> This is to say that a given individual will enter into a relationship with the Other, with speech and language, and that America as Other will therefore come to bear upon that individual’s relationship with violence.

Secondly is the importance of inherent incompleteness. The Other *lacks* as we do because it is the Symbolic order and, therefore, cannot describe the indescribable Real—that enigmatic leftover. As Dylan Evans proposed, ‘[t]he mythical complete Other (written A in Lacanian algebra) does not exist’ therefore because ‘there is always a signifier missing from the treasury of signifiers constituted by the Other.’<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the term America as Other additionally assists in marking the attempts of the official American state, of nationalists and of other individuals or groups to utilise those hypotheses and laws—of “what it means” to be America—in order to situate “America as a nation”—or the ideal of America as a nation—as

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<sup>17</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, p. 133.

the all-explaining, omnipotent, radical Other. Along with the ‘complete Other’ described by Evans, Lacan describes this radical Other the God function or God hypothesis. The term America as Other necessarily points towards the lack inherent in any Other. This frames any subsequent attempts to situate America as the ‘complete Other’, as the total coherence, by parties with vested interests as impossible.

Having delineated the concept of America as Other, we can return to this concept in order to discuss and how it relates to the modern bureaucracy discussed in relation to Engels and Arendt at the close of the last subsection. As stated, whilst America as Other is not this modern bureaucracy for it possesses no agency, its hypotheses and laws do come to bear on violence and the shaping of modern bureaucracy in America. There are many threads issuing from this previously discussed dual-rendering of bureaucracy, firstly as a state legitimisation and legalisation of violence—as an alternative figuring of the instrumentalisation of force as proposed by Engels—and secondly as the validation of a cultural superego which crushes individual morality in favour of a proposed collective morality. Both of these threads are critical to explore in order to gather a greater sense of the relationship between violence and America as Other in postwar America.

In considering the first—the state ownership and legalisation of violence—we can reflect on Arendt and the violence of the state as discussed above. Indeed, are the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century not bureaucratic ones? The Holocaust would have been impossible without the violence instrumentalised in the bureaucratic language of Nazism. And is the atom bomb not merely an extension of a certain logic brought to its apocalyptic extreme, justified by its adherence to the interests of the American state? In the case of the latter, as noted above in the example with President Truman, we can see that the atom bomb is an acceptable violence, one which is legitimised by such principles of “self-defence”, of “necessary measures”, and of “winning the war, being victorious”. Here, we can turn to Walter Benjamin’s demarcation of law-making, law-preserving, mythic and divine violences. Arguing against the silent injunction of the Other that violence is justifiable if it is

in accordance with the laws it represents—a point extended by Derrida into distinctions between justice and law in “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority” (1992)—Benjamin contends that ‘violence in the hands of individuals’ is seen ‘as a danger undermining the legal system’,<sup>19</sup> that ‘violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law.’<sup>20</sup> The law-making and law-preserving violences which respectively justify natural ends (Benjamin gives the example of militarism of the state in war) and legal ends (Benjamin offers the example of conscription) work to indicate that violence is both the means by which the law is instituted and rewritten, and the means by which the state preserves its stewardship of violence. Bureaucracy becomes the method by which the state organises and controls violence for its own ends, removing this agency from citizens as best as possible, fearful that those citizens may use violence ‘outside the law’. As stated earlier, the legal system of the state is shaped in part by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Those that use violence outside of the limited range of possibilities offered in America as Other threaten the potential, yet impossible, completeness of the Other. They risk finding a position in relation to violence which is not predetermined by that Other, revealing that America as Other does not represent *the* coherence on violence.

The mere idea that there may be other ways in which we could position ourselves in relation to violence, ideas that reject the positions on violence offered in America as Other, weakens any claim to the universality of those laws and hypotheses. The solution for an American political administration which requires these laws and hypotheses for reasons of war, for instance, is to insist upon those codifications of violence as *the* complete and only codification. As previously discussed however, no Other is able to take on the position of this mythical complete Other, the God function. As Lacan defines it, this position is taken up by God or any supernatural force which is able to define the undefinable Real.<sup>21</sup> When states

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (London: The Belknap Press, 1996; repr. 2002), p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, ‘Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love’, *Crisis & Critique*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2015), 56-71 (pp. 58-9).

or other institutional bodies attempt to take up this mantle—such as when President Truman claims the atom bomb as “necessary”—it attempts to step into the God function, a move which will always fail. America, as a nation state and institutional body, attempts to achieve mastery of discourses of violence by becoming that permanent state of exception, by speaking through the positions offered by its symbolic identity—America as Other—and justifying one, unified position on violence as necessary for the preservation and progress of the state and its people. America would reach the ‘new Eden’ as posited by the Puritans, thus becoming justification and justifier, ruler and ruled, to erase all differences and contradictions indefinitely.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that America simply has a “God delusion”, but rather that rationality and reason—two terms which are often used to justify actions as self-evidently positive or progressive—can no longer be said, with any confidence, to hold the “final answer” to the questions which violence poses in the postwar moment. Yet the impossibility of this total communion, of a total “truth of violence”, has led not to the Promised Land. Instead, it has led to increased violence and to the potential for apocalyptic ruin.

It is through Freud that we can discuss the second thread; that of America as Other as an embodiment of the cultural superego. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud presents us with a series of conflicts established in previous works (the pleasure and reality principles, Eros and Thanatos etc) bringing them to bear on the question of what it means to live in a society and how the civilising process causes the twentieth century individual such turmoil. Freud contends that ‘the human individual takes part in the course of development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path in life.’ Just as the individual’s superego develops, so ‘the community, too, evolves a super-ego under whose influence cultural development proceeds.’<sup>23</sup> If this superego demands violence, cultural development

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<sup>22</sup> Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere (Oxford: Hogarth, 1930; repr. 1957), p. 136.

would advance under its influence accordingly. In this regard, Freud could not be more emphatic:

In the latter [the individual], when tension arises, the aggressions of the super-ego voicing its noisy reproaches are all that is perceived, while its injunctions themselves often remain unconscious in the background. If we bring them to the knowledge of consciousness *we find that they coincide with the demands of the prevailing cultural super-ego.* (my emphasis)<sup>24</sup>

If Freud is correct, what we call ethics is ‘an endeavour to achieve, by means of a command of the superego, something which has so far not been achieved by means of any other cultural activities.’ Indeed, this formation is strengthened by that society so as to ‘dislodge the greatest obstacle to civilization, the constitutional tendency in men to aggressions against one another’.<sup>25</sup> If, and it is an “if”, the legal systems which come to dominate twentieth century Western life have succeeded in reducing clearly identifiable, physical violence between individuals—what Žižek calls “subjective violence”—even a cursory study of the twentieth century seems to indicate that these systems have merely suppressed this violence through the force of law.<sup>26</sup> Whilst a reduction in subjective violence may be desirable, the mechanisms of law which are used to suppress this violence also deploy violence to punish those that dare to use it outside of the law—Žižek calls this “objective violence”.<sup>27</sup> As Larry Ray argues, ‘[v]iolence has been enclosed and removed so far as possible from public spaces rather than eradicated’. For Ray, it becomes challenging to make the claim that ‘there has been a decline in violence in the modern period’, arguing instead that ‘[t]he twentieth century can be seen as an age of exceptional violence – with millions of deaths in two world

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 137-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008; repr. 2009), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

wars, genocides, the Soviet Gulag and the development of weapons of mass destruction.’<sup>28</sup> In short, whilst that bureaucratic process may have intended to simultaneously streamline legalised violence and reduce subjective violence, it has in fact exacerbated the social and political alienation outlined by Arendt which, alongside the atrocities of the twentieth century, has dislocated individuals from an understanding of subjective and objective, visible and concealed violences, in America. Instead of being able to rely on a more nuanced, localised understanding of violence, this dislocation deepens the importance of America as Other in providing a series of seemingly coherent but limited positions in a confusing and confused world.

This has two implications. Firstly, that the First World War, which shapes Freud’s writing in *Civilization and its Discontents*, serves to demonstrate the failure of the current manifestation of an ethical model which America as Other embodies—one guided by an empirical, rational humanism—to contend with the violences of the early twentieth century. The “civilising process”, of which contemporary bureaucracy is a result and guarantor, produces violence in the early twentieth century in the form of wars, genocides, oppressions and exponential advances in weapons technology. Freud identifies a failure of this ethics in the injunction of the cultural superego to Love Thy Neighbour—known all too well to a nation whose dreams, hypotheses and laws are deeply influenced by Puritan Christianity. Freud connects the ‘constitutional tendency in men to aggressions’ immediately to this injunction, stating that it is ‘for that very reason the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself...is especially interesting to us.’<sup>29</sup> ‘The command’, Freud argues, ‘is impossible to fulfil; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value and not remedy the evil.’<sup>30</sup> The set positions that are offered in the Other, by having to operate in such broad brushstrokes, nullify any of the transformative power which may be found in love or forgiveness by commanding them as ethically imperative. Love takes on a vicious, mandated

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<sup>28</sup> Larry Ray, *Violence and Society* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011), p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>30</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 140.

tone. Lacan then later adds a further complication. Playing on Freudian ambivalence, he argues that ‘this obscene superego’ demands that we must love our neighbour in spite of the fact that ‘you are at the level of the word, the one whom you hate.’<sup>31</sup> This becomes all the more prescient when considering the self-loathing generated by the Calvinist conception of original sin which forms the basis of Puritan eschatology and the many violences—frontier and otherwise—which guarantee America’s manifest destiny, its dreams and thus its identity.

This leads us into a second implication of this reading of the cultural superego and the impact this has on our reading of America as Other. Freud also demonstrates the superego’s cruelty alongside its ability to prevent us from forming new moralities. The dislocation between individuals and the new, almost unfathomable violences of the early twentieth century renders old ethical modes which were designed to tackle the means and ends of subjective violence unfit for purpose. As Adam Phillips argues, Freud’s superego is a coward, ‘the moralist that prevents us from evolving a personal, more complex and subtle morality.’<sup>32</sup> To jump ahead slightly, this, I contend, is one way of considering the manoeuvres and practices of the artists of this thesis: to, in some way, challenge the prescriptiveness of the relationship between America as Other and violence by developing a ‘personal, more complex and subtle morality’ with violence. Firstly, however, this requires a new series of positions in relation to violence, a move undertaken by all authors studied here in various guises, a move which only ever appears to be possible fleetingly. If we could be freed from the predetermined positions in relation to violence that America as Other offers us, we could, as proposed by Phillips, create new moralities, those defined not by the injunctions of consumer capitalism (the “enjoy” of *jouissance*), the moral uprightness and self-loathing instated in the Puritan conception of original sin or in Love Thy Neighbour, or

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar V: The Formations of the Unconscious (1957 – 1958)*, trans. by Cormac Gallagher, Unpublished translation from unedited French typescripts <<http://www.lacanireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-05-the-formations-of-the-unconscious.pdf>> [accessed 5 November 2019], p. 381.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures* (London, Penguin Books, 2016), p. 103.

the pressure of perfect adherence to the law of violence required by American exceptionalism ('we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.')<sup>33</sup>

### A History of Violence

The turn of the twentieth century brings into focus an understanding of violence as contingent upon a particular relationship with culture and with symbolic identity. Yet in order to speak of America in the postwar moment, we must look closely at the conditions in which America arose and how they were extended and transformed until 1945, conditions which shaped the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

As indicated by one of the epigraphs to this thesis, the writing of Sacvan Bercovitch acts as a starting point for such work. To requote one essential part of his summation, '[w]hat I discovered in America was the simultaneity of violence and culture formation.'<sup>34</sup> The "self" of *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and the American symbolic identity of *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993) come to bear on questions of violence, sketching an intimate link between those mythologies which created and now sustain America (the Dream, manifest destiny, American exceptionalism) and the individuals required to sustain them. The symbolic identity which arises is, for Bercovitch, 'interchangeably a cultural treasure of barbarism...and an interpretive process through which the worlds out there had been triumphantly repressed'.<sup>35</sup> This triumphant repression for Freud is the inversion of a failure which induces 'the creation of sagas, by means of which a nation which later becomes great and proud seeks to conceal the insignificance and misadventure of its origins.'<sup>36</sup> This positions violence as functionally vital in the creation of the triumphant myths which sustain a nation.

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<sup>33</sup> Winthrop, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, p. 9

<sup>35</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, p. 9

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis [The 'Wolfman']', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), pp. 196-309 (p. 208).

By this account, violence is foundational to the United States even before its conception; the Dream that formed the United States was once Europe's, a dream reactivated by the violence of early colonisation. As Jack P. Greene argues in *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (1993), '[t]he image of America inspired English colonial organizers with the dream of creating through conscious instrumental human planning and action a New Jerusalem or a New Eden.'<sup>37</sup> This transition of the Dream from Europe to America is, for Richard Slotkin, a foundational moment where myth and cultural formation serve to deepen symbolic identity—America as Other—through the absorption of acts of violence into that identity:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.<sup>38</sup>

This myth of regeneration through violence is, at least in part for Bercovitch, impacted heavily by New England Puritanism:

And the concept [Cotton] Mather advanced of the American who stands for the New World, in despite of, or beyond, the forces of secular time, justified the claims of a long procession of solitary keepers of the dream. The greatest of them are also the leading figures in our cultural tradition, from the Great Awakening through the American Renaissance, [Jonathan] Edwards through [Ralph Waldo] Emerson. Each

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<sup>37</sup> Greene, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), p. 5.

of them, in his own way, responded to the problems of his times by recourse to what I have described...the celebration of the representative self as America, and of the American self as the embodiment of a prophetic universal design.<sup>39</sup>

The Puritans cultivated a long tradition of blurring individual and national ethics and goals. This complex relationship between the self and the nation, embodied in the ‘American self’, the ‘men...created equal’<sup>40</sup> of the Declaration of Independence, offers a vessel for the American Dream and the myths which serve as America’s foundation to propagate, deepen and extend their reach over time. Critically, the Puritan dream is founded on the violence of its eschatology, of the frontier and the rejection of an impure past.

America continued to develop and enrich these mythologies of violence throughout the centuries with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the growing Western frontier and the continued subjugation of Native North Americans. If we fast forward to the early twentieth century, the link between violence, culture formation and nation remains central. As Mark Greif outlines in *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (2015), the ‘sacred rights of man’ which the Declaration of Independence codified as the representative self of “America”—the “man” imbued with the ideals of the American symbolic identity—‘could not be taken for granted in Europe, as “man” was being alienated and eradicated, altered and undone.’<sup>41</sup> The vehicle which embodied the ‘unalienable Rights’ of ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’, the same vehicle which embodied “rationality” and “reason”, was no longer an infallible category.<sup>42</sup> The ‘representative self as America, and of the American self as the embodiment of a prophetic universal design’ instead became a

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<sup>39</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the America Self* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 136.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Declaration of Independence: A Transcription’, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* <<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

<sup>41</sup> Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2015; repr. 2016), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Declaration of Independence: A Transcription’, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*.

marker of the failure of old ethics, old humanisms and old standards of violence which could not cope with the new devastations of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout this history, there are those that have attempted to uncover and extend this relationship between America, culture and violence. As Bercovitch highlights, what Walt Whitman and Ralph Emerson found after they ‘plumbed the emotional, imaginative, and conceptual ground of their rhetoric’ was a rhetoric which ‘enlisted the spirit of revolution in the cause of social continuity; which recast self-interest, as individualism, into a concept of self-fulfillment that allowed for mutuality and community; which invested the dream of progress with moral as well as material imperatives’.<sup>44</sup> In spite of this potential for a new morality:

The rhetoric here is inseparable from the country’s astonishing economic, political, and technological achievement in the nineteenth century. It is inseparable, too, from the intensity of racism, greed, frontier and urban violence, and sectional conflict building toward what was to be the century’s most devastating war. But we need not overlook the one in order to condemn the other...Those possibilities did not depend on nostalgia alone, or on some heroic lonely struggle of the creative imagination against society. Not one of the classic American texts supports this view; it cannot be substantiated by the life and thought of any one of the country’s major writers. On the contrary: all of them testify that the historical achievements and the violence are together integral to the cultural dynamics which produced the American Renaissance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Greif, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, p. 369.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

If we accept that ‘the historical achievements and the violence are together integral to the cultural dynamics which produced the American Renaissance’, the question becomes how to expel this specific relationship with violence, one embodied by the range of positions on violence offered in America as Other, and devise positions which are more subtle and suitable. In the wake of discovering that the violence of the atom bomb could now spell the end of human life this task becomes all the more critical. It is only through practicing aesthetics as a form of cultural investigation that artists and critics can come to explore their own relationship with the nation and with violence in order that it may be transformed.

### American art in the Second World War

Having discussed the historically specific conditions which shaped America as Other over the preceding centuries and the ways in which this Symbolic Other came to bear on readings of violence, we can now turn to the time period of this thesis. To understand the function of violence in postwar America, it is necessary to understand its more immediate pre-history. In order to do so, I will frame, first, American literary history and, secondly, American political history from 1940 to 1945.

With increasing violence in Europe, Franklin D. Roosevelt chose to run for a third term on a platform of isolationism and non-intervention (“I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again; your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.”).<sup>46</sup> These policies then fell by the wayside after the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. Even before the United States’ military entry into the Second World War, American artists were grappling with the questions which increasing domestic and worldwide violence forced them to confront.

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Documents Related to FDR and Churchill’, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* <<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-churchill>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

1940 saw both Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* alongside Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The latter's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, represents the inevitability of individual acts of violence in an America defined by violence against non-whites, a move echoed by the nationwide and numerous race riots of 1943. James Baldwin would later discuss Wright's text in depth in 1955's *Notes of a Native Son*, stating that 'no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull.'<sup>47</sup> The study of violence through literature continued among the attack on Pearl Harbour and the drafting of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 with many celebrated texts published between 1940 and 1943 investigating violence in some form. Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942) provides further examination of racial violence whilst T.S. Eliot—perhaps by this point “too English” for consideration here as an American writer—and his poem “Little Gidding” in *Four Quartets* (1943) offered harrowing accounts of the Blitz. 1941 also saw “Art of This Century”, a collection of abstract and Surrealist art, opened in New York by Peggy Guggenheim, a gallery which could be seen as a continuation of the Dadaist response to violence; that the reason and rationality of man had led to war, giving “nonsense” increased cachet.

It is 1943 that signals a major turning point, one curiously marked by one the century's most persistent novels: Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. This text is worth consideration both due to its legacy—Alan Greenspan, former Chair of the Federal Reserve, and current President Donald Trump are two of its many notable admirers<sup>48</sup>—its archetypal rendering of a particular move which this thesis seeks to undermine and its warning as a particular manifestation of legitimised violence repackaged as “common sense”.

Howard Roark, the novel's protagonist, represents a particularly narcissistic response to the violent consequences of the failure of international community. For Rand, he represents the ideal man as a self-sufficient, independent, uncompromising individualist. Whilst defenders of both the text and Rand will point to her emphasis on personal responsibility, the text

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<sup>47</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955; repr. 1984), p. 42.

<sup>48</sup> 'Ayn Rand from the left: academics gather to examine Trump's favourite author', *University of Reading*, <<https://research.reading.ac.uk/research-blog/ayn-rand-from-the-left-academics-gather-to-examine-trumps-favourite-author/>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

renders plainly the violence of such individualism from Roark's destruction of the Cortlandt housing project to his rape of Dominique. The latter violence is rendered by Rand as 'rape by engraved invitation',<sup>49</sup> that Dominique 'all but invited'<sup>50</sup> it—yet crucially did not—and that Roark's character had to be written such that 'were it necessary, he could rape her and feel justified.'<sup>51</sup> The sheen which Rand gives Roark helps make a much wider point critical to this thesis. Rand's text, first conceived in the growing tumult of 1936, represents the easiest answer to such devastating violence. This is a near-perfect rendering of a move found similarly in the formation of Italian Futurism; the failure of one system of thought legitimises its opposite. Seeing the growing failure of international community, Rand's text proposes we reject it wholesale. To Rand, the visionary, rational thinker that can sidestep the communities which appear to exacerbate war is someone to be praised, not lambasted. Whilst visionaries may on occasion prove vital, Roark appears closer to Oswald Mosley's "man of action" than the inclusive "I" of Martin Luther King Jr. Rand's "I" heralds the self as inalienable and impossible to object to, an "I" which can embody reason and rationality. *The Fountainhead* is a response to violence which cuts all ties of responsibility to others, failing to realise that all basic functions of sociality require interaction and co-operation. Durkheim isolates this issue as the "cult of the individual":

Thus very far from there being the antagonism between the individual and society which is often claimed, moral individualism, the cult of the individual, is in fact the product of society itself. It is society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> Ayn Rand, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, ed. by Michael S. Berliner (New York: Dutton, 1995), p. 631.

<sup>51</sup> Ayn Rand, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, ed. by David Harriman (New York: Dutton, 1997), p. 96.

<sup>52</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, trans. by D. F. Pocock (London: Cohen & West Ltd, 1953; repr. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 59.

Even Rand's arch-individualism is determined by the society which enables it. And any society based upon a set of core principles and beliefs (as good, righteous, etc) must necessarily include their opposites. As we shall find in the third chapter, where both Rand and Burroughs ask similar questions—what is to be done with community, with innocence, with moral codes?—Burroughs knowingly extends the logic of the discourses of violence offered in America as Other to their limits in order to question it where Rand blindly recites it. The artists of this thesis accept the premise of a fracture in American life at this time as Rand does, but refuse to give in to the readings of violence offered in America as Other.

Through 1943 to the end of the war in August 1945, violence continued to shape both the content and, increasingly, the form of American literature. Karl Shapiro's *V-Letter and Other Poems* and William Carlos Williams' *The Wedge* (both 1944) were written in and for the trenches respectively. Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944) frames Joseph's inner crisis as being hung between a life without meaning and the meaningful violence of the draft. John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* (1944) retains the ideal of the American Hero, presenting Victor Joppolo as a saviour of culture and community in the fictional town of Adano in Sicily. Hersey would later go on to write *Hiroshima* (1946), a text which helped frame the magnitude and severity of the atom bomb. It also brought New Journalism into focus, a perhaps totally necessary move which Derrida would echo many years later in "Seven Missiles, Seven Missives". The integration of fiction writing techniques into non-fiction reporting signals the limits of objectivity, the limit of reporting on such horrendous violence with an eye for fact alone. This act of looking slightly obliquely or tangentially rather than attempting to arrest the movement of an impossibly slippery subject is found in many of the strongest writings on violence in this period.

In terms of historical events, Roosevelt and Winston Churchill drafted the Atlantic Charter in 1941 to set postwar goals. This move signalled a desire to end the war, but also projected success into the future, a projection which at the time was by no means certain. In military circles, the focus remained on ending the war rather than considering the wider implications

of its violence—a move not altogether unsurprising. 1942 saw the passing of Executive Order 9066 which paved the way for the incarceration of Japanese Americans, Italian Americans and German Americans in internment camps. Coupled with the unconditional surrender proposed at the Casablanca Conference in 1943, we can see a focus on purity, of the black/white categorisations which cleanly yet violently divides citizens into desirable and undesirable, human and non-human. This also prefigures an argument to be found in this thesis' chapters on Burroughs and Levertov in particular, that of infection from within. This question of purity extends to the race riots of the same year in New York, Detroit and Beaumont, Texas, demonstrating increasing tensions and division. It took a non-American, Gunnar Myrdal, to publish *An American Dilemma* which would point to the cyclical nature of racial violence in America and the importance of the “American Creed”—those shared values of liberty, individualism etc—in holding the nation together. Revolutionary for its time in its emphasis that ‘the Negro problem is predominantly a white man’s problem’,<sup>53</sup> it proved important—along with a huge number of other sources, including Mamie Phipps Clark’s study as referenced in chapter two—in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 which ended segregation in public schools.

To trace these pre-histories is to understand the American discourse of violence at the moment just prior to the dropping of the atom bomb. What one finds, in particular perhaps in the case of Ayn Rand, is that this discourse was well developed. Still, though, with the dropping of the bomb, the horizon changed.

After the war, rather than seeking a new relationship with violence, postwar America doubles down.<sup>54</sup> The end of the rope was reached with the atom bomb and marks what Burroughs would later term a violation of the Earth.<sup>55</sup> Harry Truman played down the bomb, calling it ‘no “great decision”’ but ‘merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of

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<sup>53</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma Volume I: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944; repr. London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. lxxxiv.

<sup>54</sup> This is not, of course, to argue that these modalities cannot be of use or should be discarded, but that we must rethink our relationship with them.

<sup>55</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Last Words: The Final Journals of William S. Burroughs*, ed. by James Grauerholz (New York: Grove Press, 2000), p. 207.

righteousness', once again aligning America's symbolic identity with Puritanical perfection.<sup>56</sup> An overly simplistic reading of the world returned, one in which the classic oppositions of good/evil, black/white, East/West came to dominate.

As with many occasions in its past, the dropping of the bomb necessitates a re-dreaming of the American Dream. Alongside Pease's definition of American exceptionalism as a 'national ego ideal that is regulated by state fantasy',<sup>57</sup> we can see how the reconfiguring of the dream reconfigures the symbolic identity. As with all re-dreamings, the Dream's signifiers change profoundly dependent on context. This particular re-dreaming was contextualised by the Cold War. Pease identifies that '[a]fter World War II, the U.S. government propagated the belief that America was the fulfilment of the world's aspiration for the "Nation of Nations" by constructing the threat to the attainment of the ideal in the image of the Soviet Empire.'<sup>58</sup> In addition:

When it operated outside U.S. borders, the cold war configured the globe within a superordinate binarism that supervised a range of vertical rankings (North/South, First World/Third World, male/female, white/black, Euro-American/other) within and without the territorial U.S. borders. Because it always misrepresented internal divisiveness as if it were an external dualism, however, the cold war framework was inherently unstable. It constituted a coherent national identity out of diverse constituencies whose differences could only be partially and unevenly repressed through their projection onto a wholly exterior oppositional power.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, *Quest for Identity: America since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Melley, 'Zero Dark Democracy', in *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security and Terrorism*, ed. by John N. Duvall and Robert P. Merzec (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), pp. 17-39 (p. 19).

<sup>58</sup> Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Donald E. Pease, 'Hiroshima, the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, and the Gulf War', in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 557-580 (p. 557).

The attempt to place America in the position of the “Nation of Nations” prevents us from creating new, more complex and subtle moralities, ones which do not rely on the ‘range of vertical rankings’ offered here. This move outlined by Pease subsequently justifies “any necessary measures” required to protect America including the expulsion and exclusion of all narratives and peoples which do not serve the public good. These justifications arrive in the form of the internment camps of Executive Order 9066, the Jim Crow laws, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Red Scare or, to give a contemporary example, the concentration camps of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement as a result of President Donald Trump’s family separation immigration policy. This removal of “un-American” elements re-enforces the laws and hypotheses of America as Other—its categorisations—and thus propagates violence. If the artists of this thesis are to oppose this move, it is a question of understanding the various unfixed, precarious positions which it may be possible to take up in respect to these relations.

### Literature Review

Whilst many theses have been written on violence and literature, very few take violence as their primary focus, instead electing to treat other concerns that are related to, or exacerbated by, violence. This thesis’ original contribution to knowledge is that it offers a deep engagement with violence through specific aesthetic practices, demonstrating how these practices work to transform relationships with violence. In its attempts to uncover certain aesthetic relationships with violence in early Cold War America, this study covers a lot of ground, working to integrate these strands as it progresses. This thesis represents a specific engagement with violence, aesthetic practice, poststructural thought and the Cold War. Whilst this introduction has covered many of the key texts of the twentieth-century on violence and literature, I will here outline the critical work which studies violence and aesthetics through literature as its key focus. In the case of the relationship between violence

and America, the most pertinent studies—those of Bercovitch, Pease, Slotkin, Arendt and Greene—have already been discussed.

As Stephen Belletto and Daniel Grausam argue in their edited volume *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* (2012), ‘the full cultural impact of the Cold War remains unprocessed, and that some of the paradigms for understanding the culture of the Cold War were contributing to, rather than alleviating, such confusion.’<sup>60</sup> None of the essays in Belletto and Grausam’s volume, however, tackle violence as their specific concern. They critique Lary May’s *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (1989) for offering a ‘tacit sense that literature might be of the Cold War only if it engages in overtly political concerns.’<sup>61</sup> Indeed, this is a move which this thesis seeks to disrupt, offering readings of artists whose aesthetics would not seemingly engender an immediate political link to the Cold War.

Adam Piette’s *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (2009) covers the same period as this thesis. It differs chiefly in the key writers chosen—Vladimir Nabokov, Graham Greene, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and, in similarity with this thesis, William Burroughs—and in its primary focus. Whilst violence is a concern for Piette, it is the ‘Cold War fantasies’ that place writers at the ‘hazy borders between aesthetic project and political allegory’ that take centre stage.<sup>62</sup> This concern with ‘hazy borders’ is a point which this thesis shares in its exploration of violence. However, not only does this thesis present a different selection of artists—and where we do share Burroughs, our texts and focus on those texts differ—I retain violence as the primary focus. One further remark from Piette does however build a sense of our works contributing to a shared, underexplored concern: ‘History has been leading the way [in studying the Cold War], in other words, with literary studies sometimes bafflingly indifferent to the importance of the Cold War in shaping cultures in the postwar.’<sup>63</sup> As shall

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<sup>60</sup> *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, ed. by Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

be discussed in the chapters on Burroughs and Levertov especially, there is a sense that these literatures, in their ability to explore the ‘beyond’ of language, are able to access areas of symbolic identity which standard historical accounts cannot reach.

Another study which sits in close proximity with this thesis is Ben Hickman’s *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics* (2015). Offering considerations of three of the four artists considered here—John Cage, Amiri Baraka (primarily after 1974) and Denise Levertov—Hickman’s study is principally concerned with the relationship between poetics of crisis and political action as situated in six specific crises in twentieth century America: ‘the Great Depression, the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the Vietnam war, the racial conflicts of the 1970s and the advent of the neoliberal regime of capital in the same decade.’<sup>64</sup> Critically for this study, Hickman’s work is one of few which seriously considers Levertov’s war poetry—not without fair criticism—revealing it as ‘a shaken confidence in the ability of poems to carry an inherent political force.’<sup>65</sup> Yet as with Piette’s study, violence is in the background of Hickman’s thesis with crisis being its primary concern. Hickman’s work will be turned to during this thesis during discussions on political efficacy and the role of poetics and aesthetics in political and social conflict.

Any study of violence and precarity is, of course, indebted to some degree to Judith Butler’s texts *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009). The former was ‘written after September 11, 2001, and in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events.’<sup>66</sup> Butler contends that ‘[i]f we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war.’ In particular, her challenge that when ‘national sovereignty is challenged, that does not mean it must be shored up at all costs’ resonates

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<sup>64</sup> Ben Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. xi.

deeply with the concerns of this thesis.<sup>67</sup> Butler’s work on “precarity” takes a socio-political tenor—‘that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’—<sup>68</sup> a move which this thesis, on occasion, utilises. Denise Levertov is responding to a similarly rendered precarity and call upon “precariousness”—which, for Butler, is descriptive of our fundamental interdependence as individuals and, thus, our individual vulnerability—as a position which may induce political change. Butler’s primary focus here, and in *Frames of War*, is also on more recent American history. Additionally, Butler’s writings do not seek to thoroughly investigate violence through aesthetics. Butler’s work will be turned to throughout this thesis as an undeniably crucial work on the relationship between violence and precarity.

Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) seeks to map ‘violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.’<sup>69</sup> In a thesis which seeks to discover and explore more nuanced relations, this shaking of what may and may not be considered violence will be crucial in mapping formerly ignored violences—such as those committed against groups which sit outside normative conceptions of “the American”—which are contended with in this period.

Robert Appelbaum’s text *The Aesthetics of Violence* (2017) and his paper “Notes Toward an Aesthetics of Violence” (2013) attempt to provide an aesthetics of violence by studying a wide range of media from Graham Greene through Quentin Tarantino. Appelbaum is mindful to focus on violence without subjecting it to too forceful a reading, coming to any conclusions about the term dialectically. Yet there are moments here which I will contest, such as his statement that ‘[t]his is the remove, first of all, of *fiction*: the violence is not

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. xii.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 25.

<sup>69</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

really happening. We are *safe*, and so is all the rest of the human race.<sup>70</sup> As stated throughout this introduction, the discourses which legalise violence in this particular period in America frame subsequent uses of violence. The work of these artists in their works is, very often, to simply resist violence, as it is influenced by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, from overwhelming their writing. That these texts so often grapple with the same languages which led to the atom bomb and the Holocaust put statements such as Appelbaum's into question. In a contemporary moment where languages of violence appear to be increasingly mobilised, it feels critical that we are able to distinguish the more subtle violences which do not always manifest themselves obviously. Appelbaum targets the 'somewhat recondite thoughts'<sup>71</sup> of Butler and Lorenzo Magnani—and by some extension Derrida—that 'simply the *use* of language can be inherently violent'.<sup>72</sup> Whilst this could certainly lead us to practices that we should be cautious of—simply labelling things as “violent” or “nonviolent”—his clarifying statement appears, in fact, confusing: 'it is not immediately clear what [those recondite thoughts] can contribute to an aesthetics of violence. For it would seem to be a necessary premise for such an aesthetics that artworks can distinguish between violence and non-violence.'<sup>73</sup> There is a reticence here to accept that aesthetic practices which work with violence—such as those presented in this thesis—are often exploring these liminalities, studying when something tips from nonviolence into violence. Not only does this thesis aim to make clear what these thoughts can 'contribute' more generally, it aims to demonstrate that they have a crucial role to play in transforming relationships with violence.

Whilst no other texts to my knowledge cover the engagement of aesthetic practice with violence in postwar America utilising the frameworks, philosophies, authors and premises of this thesis, there are further texts which sit within this general field of study. These include Josh Cohen's *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of*

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<sup>70</sup> Appelbaum, 'Notes Towards and Aesthetics of Violence', p. 121.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Appelbaum, *The Aesthetics of Violence: Art, Fiction, Drama and Film* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), p. 34.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

*Seeing* (1998); Fabienne Collignon's *Rocket States: Atomic Weaponry and the Cultural Imagination* (2014); Robert Genter's *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (2010); Daniel Grausam's *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (2011); Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993); Marina MacKay's *Modernism, War, and Violence* (2017); David Seed's *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (1999); Paul Sheehan's *Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence* (2013); and Lidia Yuknavitch's *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writings of War in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2013). In spite of these examples and as previously stated, a sustained, phenomenologically driven study of a deep aesthetic engagement with that violence in this period of American history is yet to be written. Violence, in many theses, becomes a background concern. One contribution of this thesis is to clearly foreground violence in the postwar American period, to make that violence itself the subject of study as clearly as possible.

In addition to the many works discussed here, there are many further avenues which are not explicitly explored in this thesis. One of these is the specific violences endured by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village of June 28<sup>th</sup> 1969 carry great historical power, shaping hugely influential publications such as *Fag Rag* and giving name to Europe's leading charity for LGBTQIA+ rights. Although this thesis features two openly queer authors and offers diversity in its selection of primary writers, the lack of consideration of specific violences against the LGBTQIA+ community in aesthetics during this period would certainly require attention in a broader study.

In the case of John Cage, his focus on Zen Buddhist practice shaped the realisation of his sexuality in a way that often rendered it incommensurate with focused politicisation. Where reading Kathy Acker and violence, for example, without taking into account her status as a woman is impossible, a similar assertion regarding Cage and sexuality is more debateable. There is very little which is explicit in Cage's aesthetics about his sexuality and, where there is, it is often framed within the context of a more general "deinstitutionalisation", a project

which he frames in much greater detail. Whilst Burroughs' work features a greater exploration of his sexuality in relation to violence, he most frequently considers this relationship through wider societal concerns. Furthermore, the accusations of misogyny and misanthropy which are frequently levelled at Burroughs often place him at odds with many writers on LGBTQIA+ issues.<sup>74</sup>

As for contemporary writings on this issue, Nat Raha's 2018 doctoral thesis *Queer Capital: Marxism in Queer Theory and Post-1950 Poetics* covers violence in the work of John Weiners and in the wider context of LGBTQIA+ movements, tracing the intersection between Marxism, Queer Studies and violence in the given period. Studies which consider the importance of space (Hanhardt, 2013), the languages of violence in oppression of certain identities (Reddy, 2011) and the criminalisation of members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Mogul, Ritchie & Whitlock, 2012) in this period could further contribute to defining and shaping future consideration of this vital topic.

Another unexplored discourse of violence here is that related to Native North Americans, those who were the collateral in the European Dream becoming the American Dream. This violence extends into the twentieth century, a violence marked by Sherry L. Smith's *Hippies, Indians and the Fight for Red Power* (2012). Smith marks the symbolic importance of Native North Americans as vital allies for many in the struggle for rights in the face of state opposition. The occupation of Alcatraz, an apparatus of state violence, in 1969 was critical as one of many fronts on which the symbolic identity of America was challenged in this postwar period.

As with violence endured by LGBTQIA+ communities, the violence against Native North Americans was not an area it was possible to discuss in this thesis. With contemporary issues surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline (construction of which was completed in

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<sup>74</sup> Jamie Russell's work *Queer Burroughs* (2001) offers extensive queer readings of Burroughs' texts, often making connections between sexuality and violence as a form of enhancement or statement of masculinity.

April 2017 after a presidential memorandum signed by Donald Trump)<sup>75</sup> and the Trans Mountain Pipeline (a project recently given the greenlight by Justin Trudeau despite pressure from indigenous groups), these are ongoing issues which firmly entangle the politics of Native North Americans with questions of violence, exclusion and identity as discussed in this thesis. There are a number of recent studies which relate to violence against Native North American women (Goeman, 2013; Trask, 1993), space and place (Byrd, 2011) and sovereignty and subjectivity (Coulthard, 2014), demonstrating the continued necessity of such research. The production of a work concerned with the triangulation of aesthetics, violence and Native North American & Indigenous lives would therefore require a sustained study rather than one chapter here.

### Chapter Titles

The titles for the thesis' chapters offer four terms through which the work of the given artist may be oriented. All of these terms differ significantly, yet they are alike in that they represent a counter relation to violence as limited by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. The similarities and differences between these counter relations—silence, break, scansion, and threshold—will be clearly elucidated at the close of each chapter. However, I will also offer a short introductory explanation of each term below.

In the case of the first chapter presented here, “Silence in the work of John Cage”, silence represents a new unfixable position in relation to postwar violence through its irruption into, and through, the existing fixed discourse on violence which is offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Extending the work of Emerson and Zen Buddhism, Cage promotes a heuristic reading of violence. Considering “style” in an Emersonian mode—as a style which is unfixed and perpetually transcendent of itself—Cage’s work, in seeking to

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<sup>75</sup> Jarrett Renshaw, “East Coast refiner shuns Bakken delivery as Dakota Access Pipeline starts”, *Reuters* <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-dakota-pipeline-pes-idUSKBN17L0BJ>> [accessed 8 November 2019]

undermine the self, comes to undermine the limited understanding of violence which dominates at this time. His use of silence—often misunderstood as simply a renouncement or an attempt at an apolitical gesture—has a radical potential to undermine this fixed discourse of violence offered by America as Other in the postwar moment.

In chapter two, “The Break in the work of Amiri Baraka”, the break is that which provides access to an inerasable space which claims black experience as a series of narratives, histories and mythologies which can only be communicated by those that have collectively and culturally experienced them. I discuss the work of Amiri Baraka, focusing specifically on his weaponisation of the voice. Baraka finds an artistic mode which points towards some unsymbolisable leftover, some element which allows black voices and stories to be heard. This break in the voice also enables the voicing of stories of those excluded by creating a space which lacks the fixed position required in order to be simply absorbed into existing laws and hypotheses of violence.

In the third chapter, “The Scansion in the work of William S. Burroughs”, the scansion is that which marks the points at which the laws and hypotheses of violence presented in America as Other fail to present coherence. Burroughs’ scansion—a series of markings that appear without the author’s control over the surface of the text—highlights where the apocalyptic ends that the limited laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other lead us. *Naked Lunch*, a limit case as with much of Burroughs’ work, presents a confusing world in order to present a worrying conclusion: that the decadent violence presented in the text follows the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, rendered most horrifically in a cultural death drive which embodies our seemingly inerasable desire to annihilate ourselves.

In the fourth chapter, “The Threshold in the work of Denise Levertov”, the threshold represents a space which maps the ways in which our interactions with one another have become impacted by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other in a time of active war. The chapter discusses Denise Levertov’s much maligned war poetry as essential for

understanding the pressure which the Vietnam War placed on poetic action and the urgency required in seeking a more nuanced engagement with violence outside of the laws and hypotheses which are available to us through the fixed positions offered in America as Other. Levertov's work on the threshold—as discussed both directly and through her extended metaphor on the breath—offers one of the most compelling narratives on violence and vulnerability in postwar American writing. Discussing her poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the chapter seeks to define Levertov's threshold as essential to understanding postwar violence in America.

These discussions will map the heuristic, political and cultural examinations which artists have developed in their artistic practice in order to challenge the prescriptiveness of the discourses embodied in the term America as Other in this critical postwar moment. This series of deep engagements consistently oppose and undermine the rigidity and uniformity of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. What the practitioners discussed in this thesis insist, and enable us to see, is that our relationship to violence may be transformable.

## Chapter 1: Silence in the work of John Cage

I am going toward violence rather than tenderness, hell rather than heaven,  
ugly rather than beautiful, impure rather than pure—because by doing these  
things they become transformed, and we become transformed.<sup>1</sup>

— John Cage

### Introduction

This opening chapter will locate John Cage as an essential figure in the study of violence in early Cold War American aesthetics. The chapter will posit that Cage's turn to Buddhism marks a reworking of certain ideals of American Transcendentalism and a specifically Emersonian conception of style. I propose that Cage implicitly accepts Emerson's maxim that an artist's style must be a "going beyond" style, one which is perpetually surprising and generative. By understanding that style is irrevocably connected to questions of the self, Cage's extension of Emerson, through his work with East Asian philosophies and Henry David Thoreau, generates an aesthetics which attempts to eschew a fixed style by undermining the self. As questions of the self are tied up with questions of nation, the individual's development being in part shaped by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, Cage's work both directly and implicitly asks questions of a nation consumed by violence. The first section will focus primarily on gathering and making connections between Cage, Emerson, Zen and violence. The second section will focus on how Cage utilises these connections to offer a potentially radical transformation of our relationship with violence.

The key co-ordinates for this discussion are style, the self, and a series of engagements with various Zen terms. I will be drawing extensively on Cage's own writings, performances, and interviews on all of these topics, but will also use a number of other key thinkers to extend,

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 144

challenge and flesh out these ideas. In discussing style, I will be drawing on Ralph Waldo Emerson (on imitation and America), Susan Sontag (on style and its relation to American violence), and Antonin Artaud (on the intersection between violence and style in “cruel theatre”). In discussing nation, I will again turn to Emerson and Slotkin alongside interventions from Henry David Thoreau, and Donald Pease, the latter extending the thoughts of Sacvan Bercovitch. In discussing the self, I will draw on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well as Cage’s own Zen practice.

In considering these co-ordinates, the chapter will contend that whilst Cage’s art is not capable of permanently transforming our relationship with violence, its ephemeral, radical potential is enough to open a gap in the Symbolic order which may allow us to step outside the violence of America as Other and into a new relationship with violence. As I propose, this can be best conducted utilising a heuristic understanding of key Buddhist terms such as 悟り (*satori*) and 公案 (*kōan*). The chapter will uncover these terms gradually, using Cage’s works to do so.

## I – Emerson, Zen, and Violence

### Style and Violence in Emerson and Cage

Having worked in the introduction to offer an orientation to this thesis’ framing of violence, we must now turn to the term “style”, as discussed in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in order to contextualise Cage’s own response to violence in the postwar moment. A central question in the work of Emerson was how to arrive at the ‘new yet unapproachable America’ which he describes in 1844’s “Experience”—one beyond the discourses, hypotheses and laws of the Europe which established it—through aesthetic practice when that practice is limited by the horizon which it writes from.<sup>2</sup> How do we establish a radically different

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Experience’, in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), pp. 342-64 (pp. 356-7).

America when we are required to take up a position outside of laws and hypotheses which seem inescapable, those which come to bear on our lives so greatly?

Emerson never arrives at an answer to this issue because of his positioning as a central figure of American cultural nationalism and individualism; the question that he asks exceeds his ability to answer it from within the frame of a certain historical moment.<sup>3</sup> Emerson, of course, identifies this and proposes a radically different position, one which, I argue, is not able to be taken up seriously until this postwar moment—most brilliantly, I propose, in the work of Cage. The realisations which follow the world ending potential of the bomb and the magnitude of the violences of the early twentieth century shake our faith in even the most basic principles (politics, community etc.) and it is this questioning of those things previously considered immutable which renders Emerson's 'new yet unapproachable America' possible. As Adam Phillips identifies in his essay "Emerson and the Impossibilities of Style", this position has everything to do with denying the certainty which American symbolic identity offers by coming to a style 'that was not a tyranny'. The 'new yet unapproachable America' is unapproachable because it goes beyond language, beyond the laws and hypotheses which are considered possible by America as Other. Emerson and Phillips render this kind of aesthetic positioning in the term "style". An Emersonian rendering of "style" as something which alters this relationship with the Other, which may allow us to temporarily experience positions outside of its horizon, which refuses to support its violence without openly declaring so and thus becoming complicit, leans on a fundamental precarity. To escape a fixed style is to provide a different kind of purchase on the laws and hypotheses of violence offered in America as Other.

For Cage, style and violence are firmly intertwined. This linkage is apparent in his earliest surviving essay, "Other People Think". Written aged 15 during the US involvement in

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is clarified further in chapter one regarding Cage's "intentionless" silence of 4'33". Simply put, in creating something without intention or with some other kind of radical potential outside of an extant horizon of meaning, it is impossible for that same artist to then imbue it with intention.

Panama's rent riots, Cage's early writing links violence and "America" to silence as a kind of quasi "stylelessness":

One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near future would be to have her industries halted, her businesses discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in her world of affairs created, and finally to have everything stopped that runs, until everyone should hear the last wheel go around and the last echo fade away...then, in that moment of complete intermission, of undisturbed calm, would be the hour most conducive to the birth of a Pan-American Conscience. Then we should be capable of answering the question, "What ought we to do?" For we should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn that other people think.<sup>4</sup>

Cage establishes a link between the 'complete intermission' of silence and the birth of 'a Pan-American Conscience.' This indicates that the 'complete intermission' may be a renouncement of America as it currently stands *through* a renouncement of style (in the form of silence). For Susan Sontag, silence embodies 'Modern art's chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience' which 'can be regarded as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a major standard of "seriousness" in contemporary aesthetics.'<sup>5</sup> Silence can be rendered here as a style of frustration, but this is not simply frustration for the sake of it. This aesthetic positioning is often seen as indicative of a kind of madness, where the 'censorship and physical destruction of artworks' justifies and 'demonstrates that sanity itself may be the price of trespassing the

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<sup>4</sup> Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 7.

accepted frontiers of consciousness.’<sup>6</sup> Mentioning Artaud explicitly in this discussion, Sontag offers a link between style and violence. Style can alter our position with respect to the Other, meaning that we can take up a different position in our relationship with postwar violence. She sets the stakes more explicitly in “What’s Happening in America (1966)”:

Foreigners extol the American “energy,” attributing to it both our unparalleled economic prosperity and the splendid vivacity of our arts and entertainments. But surely this is energy bad at its source and for which we pay too high a price, a hypernatural and humanly disproportionate dynamism that flays everyone’s nerves raw. Basically it is the energy of violence, of free-floating resentment and anxiety unleashed by chronic cultural dislocations which must be, for the most part, ferociously sublimated...But the naked violence keeps breaking through, throwing everything into question.<sup>7</sup>

Style here is concretely linked to violence. The energy which drives the art practices of the time is ‘bad at its source’, fuelled by ‘naked violence’, that violence shaped by the hypotheses and laws of America as Other. Silence is then a stylistic limit case, one which attempts to offer pause in order that we may burrow deeper into these laws and hypotheses. Whilst pause offers a practical cessation of violence, the young Cage understands that this must lead somewhere. A transformation must occur *through* that cessation of style in order to prove transformative. Whilst he will later discover that a cessation of style is impossible, at this young age, he rightly avoids the mistake often made; that of simply flipping from “us” to “them”, “good” to “bad”, thus upholding the categorisations which prevent the development of a more nuanced understanding.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 195-6.

So can silence offer anything more than inactivity at a time when we must be active in our response to ongoing violences? And what might this new, silent America look like? Whilst this first question will be untangled slowly throughout the chapter, we can turn to a sense of Cage's link to both Artaud and Ralph Waldo Emerson to give us purchase on the second. The connection to Artaud, Cage's contemporary, will be addressed in section two. For now, it is enough to say here that Artaud's 'diffuse poetry'<sup>8</sup> of the theatre gives further support to Cage's desire to free his work from 'likes and dislikes',<sup>9</sup> to use silence against the absolute Logos of the theatre—and, in Cage's case, to free his work from the confines of America as Other which come to bear.

It is the second connection—that of Cage and Emerson—which provides us with a richer sense of the link Cage established between violence and style. As discussed, due to Emerson's status as the archetype of a certain American cultural nationalism, his insight that we must transcend our style if we are to create a new America—one which is not merely an extension of a European vision—exceeds his cultural frame and his fixed position within that frame. Yet Emerson is aware of this. A seed of this new America exists not only in the writings mentioned thus far, but also in the 'horizon' of "Experience" (1844): 'There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism...Of what use is genius, if the organ is too convex or too concave and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?'<sup>10</sup> There is a sense that a writer must accept that they must write from within and towards the 'actual horizon' even to manifest that 'new yet unapproachable America' which appears, by description, to exceed this very frame. It is Cage's turn towards East Asia along with his own sense of the horizon—framed as it is by a different historical moment—that allows such possibility to dawn. In a sense then, Emerson is too much a man of his time, embedded too deep in extant American culture to complete the work himself. This work is passed on to others after him.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978; repr. Abingdon, Routledge Classics: 2001), p. 301.

<sup>9</sup> 'Chance Conversations: An Interview with Merce Cunningham and John Cage', *Walker Art Center* <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/chance-conversations-an-interview-with-merce>> [accessed 27/10/2019]

<sup>10</sup> Emerson, 'Experience', p. 345.

Emerson's work on his insight into the 'new yet unapproachable' is manifest in 1841's "Self-Reliance", where he declares that 'imitation is suicide' and that '[t]he power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.'<sup>11</sup> For Emerson, finding one's style merely leads to repetition and stagnation. As Adam Phillips indicates, Emerson's masterstroke is to suggest that we must find a style that is always a transcending of style:

Emerson's project was to find a style that was not a tyranny. And in doing this he was acknowledging, at its most minimal, that style, at least as we have so far conceived it, tends towards the tyrannical. Unless, that is – like the shellfish – it comes to no conclusions, and can endlessly renew itself. Vision is revisionary. Bad style outdates, good style surprises. It is impossible to be continually surprised, but wanting to be continually surprised is full of possibility.<sup>12</sup>

Such a radical gesture—or, to share Emerson's rightful caution, the *possibility* of such a radical gesture—towards a style which can surprise us aims to avoid the "suicide" of imitation. This is a style, again in Phillips' words, which 'is not a standing still nor a looking back, that neither aspires to, nor needs to ironize, the monumental, the immutable or the established...A style that quotes, or alludes, or refers, but with a view only to revision not to legitimation. An approach to the torrent.'<sup>13</sup> "Going with the flow" so to speak, this dogged optimism, is a hallmark of this new American philosophy. The question for Emerson, again as Phillips puts it, is '[h]ow can we write in, and for, a New World?'.<sup>14</sup> This links questions of style to those of nation. As Emerson outlines in "Experience", 'I feel a new heart beating with the love of a new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Writing* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 94-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West'.<sup>15</sup> The creation of a style which might surpass style, which might not assert, is necessary in order to create 'this new yet unapproachable America', an America which may be something other than a response to, rejection of, or extension of Europe. Emerson points out that America—much like the writer obsessed with their own style—has no chance of escaping the suicide of imitation unless it is able to create one which 'comes to no conclusions'. Rather than responding to Europe, America must somehow reject the very engagement.

This is the beginning of a profound project. As Richard Slotkin argues, the mythogenesis of "America" is rooted in a European dream: 'The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience'.<sup>16</sup> Extending Emerson's logic, the project of rejecting an essentialist view of style—here rendered by Slotkin as a project of regeneration—is a project which rejects the American identity which sustains violence as critical to its progress in the twentieth century. Furthermore, Emerson rejects "regeneration" in favour of the radically new *as unapproachable*—what Derrida would go on to term "l'avenir", the unpredictable future.<sup>17</sup> By the time Cage reaches his projects of indeterminacy, Emerson has long-since carved out this sense of the relationship between nationhood, style and the self. Cage's questioning of style and the self *has to*, and seeks to, engage with questions of violence through a dismantling of style as a fixed position. Quite how this can be done is another question. As Susan Sontag polemically outlines:

The unquenchable American moralism and the American faith in violence are not just twin symptoms of some character neurosis taking the form of a protracted

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<sup>15</sup> Emerson, 'Experience', pp. 356-7.

<sup>16</sup> Slotkin, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Derrida*, dir. by Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering Kofman (Zeitgeist Films, 2002).

adolescence, which presages an eventual maturity. They constitute a *full-grown, firmly installed national psychosis*, founded, as are all psychoses on the efficacious denial of reality. (my emphasis)<sup>18</sup>

Pease, Sontag, Slotkin, and Bercovitch all paint a compelling picture as to the depth of violence within the national psyche. The connections made by Sontag and Cage between violence and style may generate, as Sontag argues, aesthetic processes which place pressure on the ‘sanity itself’ of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Alongside Emerson, this question of America in relation to violence and nonviolence was taken up by fellow Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau’s work was a significant influence on Cage, in particular at the intersection between America and the role of art practice in describing and disrupting it as a symbolic force. In this regard, Cage’s foreword to *M: Writings ’67-’72* marks Thoreau as significantly ahead of his time:

I had been struck by the twentieth-century way Thoreau listened. He listened, it seemed to me, just as composers using technology nowadays listen. He paid attention to each sound, whether it was ‘musical’ or not, just as they do<sup>19</sup>

As Cage makes clear, Thoreau’s influence on his practice related, most simply, to the question of paying attention. Yet it is also regarding wider political concerns, as well as those of violence and nonviolence, that Thoreau proves important to Cage. When asked by Thomas McEvelley ‘[w]hy is this nineteenth-century anarchist relevant now?’, Cage replies ‘[b]ecause the fact of separate governments endangers continued life on this planet. Our

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<sup>18</sup> Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> John Cage, *M: Writings ’67-’72* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. ix.

proper concerns are not political but global.’<sup>20</sup> Cage outlines their shared intellectual heritage when reflecting on his earlier pieces in an interview of 1975:

Take, for instance, something [of Thoreau’s] that I came across this last year. “If, when I am in the woods, the woods are not in me, what right have I to be in the woods?” It’s what I have been saying in my books all along.<sup>21</sup>

The interrelation of all life here becomes an explicit political concern. As Christopher Shultis notes, ‘[a]uthors that later became especially influential to Cage, Ralph Waldo Emerson and particularly Henry David Thoreau, saw themselves as writing a way out of European influence’.<sup>22</sup> Cage saw his work as serving ‘*the hoped-for deinstitutionalized future, or the future of deinstitutionalized society*’,<sup>23</sup> a future which, as he observed, would certainly involve Thoreau. From “Preface to “Lecture on the Weather””, Cage notes that:

His *Essay on Civil Disobedience* inspired Gandhi in his work of changing India, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in his use of nonviolence as a means of revolution. No greater American has lived than Thoreau. Emerson called him a speaker and actor of the truth. Other great men have vision. Thoreau had none. Each day his eyes and ears were open and empty to see and hear the world he lived in. Music, he said, is continuous; only listening is intermittent.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Conversing with Cage*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Shultis, ‘Cage and Europe’, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. by David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 20-40 (p. 20).

<sup>23</sup> Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings ’73-’78* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 3.

This passage demonstrates how Cage identifies Thoreau's openness, his "no vision", as pivotal to his own transformation of violence.

To clarify how Cage brings such a 'deinstitutionalised' or 'new yet unapproachable' America, into view, we must first consider his enduring influence and his beginnings. To begin with the sense of self which Cage would later seek to dismantle, Cage identified himself as 'completely American'. Tracing his history back to another 'John Cage who helped Washington in the surveying of Virginia', John Jr found himself inheriting another of the great American narratives: religious fervour. His grandfather was a Methodist Episcopal minister of 'extraordinary puritanical righteousness'.<sup>25</sup> Cage's identification with his Americanness—through frontier formation and religious zeal—is influenced by a connecting of his own identity and that of his family's to national identity. Accordingly, Cage's earliest exposure to music was also familial. Cage's early lessons with his Aunt Phoebe began with firm beliefs and rejections. As Cage himself recalls, '[s]he said of the work of Bach and Beethoven that it couldn't possibly interest me, she herself being devoted to the music of the nineteenth century.'<sup>26</sup> Later lessons with Fannie Charles Dillon, who had a particular interest in 'the musical potential of birdsong',<sup>27</sup> became an early indicator that music need not arise only from instruments. His semi-eponymous piece for tape *Bird Cage* from 1972 would seemingly reference this collapsing of self—personal history into proper name—and style. Having channelled his family history, his first compositions appeared to follow his father's scientific background, derived as they were from 'mathematical calculations' yet lacking 'sensual appeal' or 'expressive power'.<sup>28</sup> There is a sense here of music as mapping and as needing to correspond to an external system of order. This is a young artist trying to find his voice through the Other—the myths and dreams of America—and through other people. This search, as Emerson recognises, occurs initially through imitation.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> David W. Bernstein, 'Music I: to the late 1940s', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. by David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 61-84 (p. 63).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

Cage's formative years, then, were shaped by a sense of his relationship to his familial past, his religion, his nation and the Western canon of classical music—which he initially made sense of using “non-musical”, rational systems and “non-musical” sounds. All of these are inexorably tied to his relationship with his nation; his ‘complete’ Americanness, his Puritanical grandfather, his study of nineteenth century music and rejection of Baroque and Classical era works, the essay “Other People Think” to name a few. To turn to Slotkin once more, ‘[t]hrough myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected.’<sup>29</sup> Cage's identification is thus also predicated on an implicit understanding that we inherit our personal identities from others, from a past which we never personally experienced.

#### Zen through Suzuki through Emerson through America

As David Patterson notes, Cage's ‘engagement in Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature)’ seems, to him, instrumental’. 1950 marked Cage's first explicit reference to his primary source of Zen study, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, in a letter to Pierre Boulez.<sup>30</sup> Cage admits that, rather than becoming a dogmatic Buddhist, he channelled Buddhist thought into his questioning of style. Regardless, Suzuki's teachings attempted to pour cold water on the idea of a “purely functional Zen”. This is in part what made it so appealing. As Cage notes:

If you are not involved with music but are involved just with Zen Buddhism and you want to free yourself from your likes and dislikes, you sit cross legged and go

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<sup>29</sup> Slotkin, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> David W. Patterson, ‘Cage and Asia: history and sources’, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. by David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 41-59 (p. 53).

through various breathing exercises... Well, I wasn't going to do that, but I wanted to adopt a discipline that would work in the field of music that would be just as strict as sitting cross legged.<sup>31</sup>

By outlining the philosophical and historical conditions of Zen in America—as well as Cage's already-discussed personal history—we can understand what attracted Cage to Zen and how it became so popular in a particular American art scene. Much of this has to do with Suzuki and his understanding of Zen and American Transcendentalism. Suzuki worked with Sōen Shaku, the first Zen Buddhist master to teach in the United States, and philosopher Paul Carus in the late nineteenth century to 'take Zen out to the world as representative of the essence of Japanese culture.'<sup>32</sup> After academic work in Europe and further Zen study in Japan, Suzuki, who was not trained as a Zen priest, returned to America to undertake a series of professorships during the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>33</sup> The "Buddhist Modernism" that he practiced engaged with 'the dominant and intellectual forces of modernity'.<sup>34</sup> As David L. McMahan argues:

He is critical of the aspects of modernity that often distressed the Romantics and Transcendentalists: commercialism, greed for luxuries, rampant industrialism, and the dominance of instrumental reason. He also conceived of spiritual freedom as a spontaneous, emancipatory consciousness that transcends rational intellect and social convention.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 'Chance Conversations: An Interview with Merce Cunningham and John Cage', *Walker Art Center* <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/chance-conversations-an-interview-with-merce>> [accessed 27/10/2019]

<sup>32</sup> 'Zen', *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, 4 December 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Patterson, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (n.p.: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> McMahan, pp. 122-3.

Key for Suzuki was Emerson. Suzuki described reading Emerson ‘as akin to “making acquaintance with myself,” to “digging down into the recesses of my own thought.”’<sup>36</sup> This description, with unmistakably Zen flavour, points to Suzuki’s identification of the similarities between the experience of reading Emerson and the experience of meditation.

Suzuki’s early essay “Zen Theory of Emerson” (1896) serves to deepen this nascent connection between Zen and America. As per Palmer Rampell, ‘Suzuki identifies themes in Emerson’s writing that would ground his own philosophy and—as he modelled his reformation of the Zen tradition on Emerson’s divergence from Unitarianism—that would continue to inspire his version of Zen as it reached its maturity.’<sup>37</sup> The essay even ‘presents four insights about Zen derived from the American transcendentalist: spiritual truth is ineffable; spiritual truth is intuitive; purification must be achieved through meditation; and forgetfulness of self precedes the final revelation of spiritual truth.’<sup>38</sup> Rampell connects Suzuki’s work to some of Emerson’s most heralded essays such as “Divinity School Address” (1838), “The Over-Soul” (1841) and “Self-Reliance” (1841). By the time of Cage’s first interaction with Suzuki at Columbia University in the early 1950s,<sup>39</sup> Suzuki had developed a unique brand of Zen framed by contemporary American concerns, developed through extensive engagement with Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These writers had themselves read Hindu and Buddhist texts thereby creating a loop of sorts between East Asian and American Transcendental thought.

With this context in mind, we can say that Suzuki’s Zen stood in opposition to certain aspects of modernity just as Emerson’s Transcendentalism opposed Puritan Calvinism and Unitarianism—amongst many other ideological formations. It filled a gap for those frustrated with modernity, those that question its limits. We cannot simply turn to Emerson

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<sup>36</sup> Palmer Rampell, ‘Laws That Refuse To Be Stated: The Post-Sectarian Spiritualities of Emerson, Thoreau, and D. T. Suzuki’, *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXIV, No.4 (December 2011), 621-654 (p. 621).

<sup>37</sup> Rampell, p. 623.

<sup>38</sup> Rampell, p. 630.

<sup>39</sup> As David Patterson states, the patchy historical record from Columbia either regarding Suzuki’s role or the exact years of Cage’s study—‘although accounts from fellow auditors verify his presence at least in the spring and fall of 1952’—make placing his study problematic. (Patterson, p. 53)

here and apply his nineteenth century work to contemporary issues. The nature of Emerson's own insight—the need for and prospect of a radically new America—combined with his status as a fundamental figure of a certain American cultural nationalism places a hard limit on his ability to exceed his cultural framing. As such, we need a contemporary project which re-evaluates, refigures and extends Emerson's ideas as relevant to postwar America.

Having suggested the gap which Zen came to fill, we can now turn to some technical terminology to describe its potential potency. As has already been discussed, these terms must somehow reject America as Other as the only potential source of laws and hypotheses *without* becoming re-absorbed by them. Any communicable explanation of how to reconfigure the Other would need to be couched in some form of discourse, a discourse which, as described in the introduction, is shaped by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Bruce Fink quotes Lacan from Seminar XV in this regard: there is 'no transference of the transference', no way to discuss the Other without the use of the language which it acts as locus for.<sup>40</sup>

悟り (*satori*/'comprehension, understanding')<sup>41</sup> is one proposition of an aesthetic positioning which can only surprise us, akin to Phillips' rendering of Emerson as proposing a style that is 'not a tyranny'. Yet if we are to find ourselves in a position which surprises us, it cannot be a position which we can intuitively go to, determined as this is by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. It must be a position which we find ourselves in altogether unaware of how we got there. In turn, 公案 (*kōan*/'public order')<sup>42</sup> may be a practice which, unreliably yet surprisingly, induces this elusive position. In turn, this may provide a brief glimpse of the elusive 'new yet unapproachable America', free from present discourses of violence.

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Spahn and Wolfgang Hadamitzky, *The Kanji Dictionary* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1996), p. 1192.

<sup>42</sup> Spahn and Hadamitzky, p. 394.

Whilst Theravadan lineages of Buddhism tend to offer a process which seeks to eradicate defilements in order to facilitate enlightenment, the Zen notion of enlightenment relies not on working towards a goal methodically. 悟り (*satori*) describes ‘an intuitive apprehension of the nature of reality that transcends conceptual thought and cannot be expressed through ‘words and letters’.’<sup>43</sup> It is a fleeting moment of profound realisation, likened to catching a glimpse of the unsymbolisable Real. An important note here is that *satori* is not based on “intuition”. As Bruce Fink argues, what we call “intuition” ‘is nothing but a sense one has or a guess one makes that is based on unarticulated, unexamined notions that one has assimilated in the course of one’s lifetime’.<sup>44</sup> Psychoanalysis and Zen both emphasise the importance of an-other (in the form of an analyst or teacher) who makes a profound cut in the logic of our received discourse to incite change. With *satori*, we can only hope to touch such ineffable “truth” through interaction with others. It is not, however, a final state of total enlightenment. This eschewing of “completeness”, along with the transformative quality of *satori*, speaks wonderfully to Emerson’s transcending of style.

One way in which a moment of *satori* may be inspired is through the practice of 公案 (*kōan*). *Kōan* may appear to many readers as similar to a riddle. However, unlike a riddle, *kōan* is a practice which aims to break down the barriers of purely intellectual understanding rather than test them. A student of Zen may well understand concepts intellectually, but as long as these are not embodied in everyday actions, the student’s understanding will be incomplete. An example from the *kōan* collection *Gateless Gate*:

Master Shuzan held up a *shippei* [a bamboo staff] before his disciples and said,  
“You monks, if you call this a *shippei*, you are adhering to the fact. If you do not

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<sup>43</sup> Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 255-6.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Freud: Techniques for Everyday Practice* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), p.xviii.

call this a *shippei*, you are opposing the fact. Tell me, you monks, what will you call it?”<sup>45</sup>

As Kōun Yamada points out:

...everything has two aspects, one phenomenal and the other essential. If you look at the *shippei* only from the phenomenal side and call it a *shippei*, you are adhering to the phenomenal viewpoint and ignoring the essential aspect. If you look at the *shippei* merely from the essential point of view—that is, from the aspect of complete emptiness—and do not call it a *shippei*, you are opposing the fact of the phenomenal side.<sup>46</sup>

The intentional contradiction of the *kōan* which defies intellectual understanding is seen as conducive to revealing the ultimate truth. Ben Grant argues that although:

...we are expected to give an answer to the koan, there is no way to get logical purchase on it... However, because it is presented to us as a question which must be answered, we cannot simply respond to it with an open-ended process of interpretation. [Zen Master] Mumon suggests that, to find the answer, we will instead have to ‘completely cut off the way of thinking’.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kōun Yamada, *Gateless Gate* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), p. 204.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 111.

*Kōan* practice is designed to ‘bring our thought processes to this crisis’.<sup>48</sup> Only through this crisis, posits Zen, can *satori* occur. To clarify the focus upon procedure over the “finished” work of art, *kōan* could similarly embody an investigative art practice. Cage and Buddhism reject the simple “knowing” of answers and the issues that such a rigid pursuit of certainty creates. Instead, one must embody these practices and their contradictions. One must, in Emersonian terms, find a style beyond the stylistic features of the *kōan* in order for it to be transformative. So, whilst both *satori* and *kōan* are terms used to designate certain individuations, they are both premised on interaction with others and can only be realised if we accept that no *one* is an island.

Zen took for Cage ‘the place of psychoanalysis’, providing a radical cut in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.<sup>49</sup> If the beginning of the Cold War is, as proposed in the introduction, a moment of crisis as well as an inaugurator of a specific violence, Cage rejects the terms of crisis and violence proposed by America as Other and chooses his own through Zen. He consistently references ‘Daniel in the lion’s den’ to explain this new positioning. The selection of this particular tale has two implications. Firstly, Cage dismantles the notion that the nuclear arms race provides security: ‘we know from Thoreau, from Martin Luther King, from Gandhi, and everything, that defenselessness is the best protection against attack.’<sup>50</sup> As naïve as this may sound, importantly for this study, Cage’s sense of position here echoes the central thesis of “Other People Think”: if we are to move towards vulnerability away from a strong sense of position, what we are really giving up is a sense of intuition. Whilst many may call this rejection of mutually assured destruction irrational, Cage revels in this, stating that ‘[irrationality] is important to us in our lives’ and is ‘akin to the use of the *kōan* in Zen Buddhism. That is to say, we are so accustomed and so safe...that in Buddhism it was long known that we needed to leap out of that, and the discipline by which they made that leap take place was by asking a question that could not be answered

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Patterson, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 31.

rationally.’<sup>51</sup> Where the violence rendered in mutually assured destruction is seemingly rational, violence could be altered so as to provide a sudden transformation of this way of thinking. To reach further into questions of violence, music is, for Cage as for Antonin Artaud, created ‘in order to produce a revolution in the mind and that now...it could further revolution in society.’<sup>52</sup> A transformation of our relationship with violence in the mind of the individual can induce a transformation of our relationship with violence more widely.

Secondly, Cage’s reading of the book of Daniel suggests that vulnerability may prove to be our saviour. The nuclear deterrent is a last resort to avoid the void—the Real of the apocalypse—which has opened up as a result of its conception. Considering Cage’s move away from the punishing God of the Old Testament, this selection feels odd: ‘My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me’ (Daniel 6.22). Not only does this echo his childhood experiences of religion, but Cage interprets the story as a principle; Daniel is saved because he accepts interaction with the void, the Real, in facing certain death. In Cage’s own reflections on his hypothetical drafting into the Second World War, he states that ‘I believe in the principle of Daniel in the lion’s den, so I would not want to keep myself out of it, if I were obliged to go into it.’<sup>53</sup> This is about being willing to be surprised. Necessarily, this involves the erasure of a fixed notion of style. In the two examples given above, we can see that Cage relates this willingness to be surprised, to be irrational, to a potential transformation of our relationship with violence. This, necessarily involves a dismantling of the notion of “finding our style”. By doing so, we can transform our relationship with style in order to transform our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the hypotheses of violence embodied in the term America as Other. As suggested earlier by Cage in his readings of Thoreau, it is not about having *a vision* for violence, but rather finding a way to have no vision.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 286.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 282.

<sup>53</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 11.

As mentioned above, *kōan* is designed precisely to facilitate “crisis”. Rather than promising triumph, *kōan* practice offers a crisis which *may* lead to a violent breaking from one’s intuitions. The violence inherent in this liberation is crucial for understanding Cage’s work. Cage’s personal issues throughout the 1940s and 1950s are placated in part through his study of Zen. This conflict arose from the same kinds of contradictions as proposed by 公案 (*kōan*). As biographer Kay Larson notes, Cage had a ‘fear of being himself—yet a powerful need to be himself, too.’<sup>54</sup> Zen teaches Cage that the creation of such firm distinctions is the issue: ‘Don’t bother to grasp it. You already have it. You already *are* it.’<sup>55</sup> From 1951 to 1952, Cage comes to understand that freedom is not about explaining the world, but rather coming to terms with what it means to engage artistically with *our relationship* with the world (and violence) through a transcending of the illusion of the self—a self necessarily informed by its relationship with the Other. What Cage has learned from Zen is that the limits he places on himself, the forces that come to bear on him—the Other—is powerful and compelling yet, ultimately, it is an illusion. There is no “work” to be done per se other than to embody that realisation.

Where that realisation comes to rest is in a vulnerability to the Real, such vulnerability exposing the inherent weakness in any so-called “complete Other”. It reveals that it is, in fact, incomplete, that it is only a partial coherence. Yet we must always take up *some* position in relation to the Other. One avenue to explore is working with vulnerability which denies the fixed positionality of religious or political conviction. Critically, this is what Zen means for Cage; it is an encounter with the void, with the lions in the den. We must encounter it *without* naming it. As such, if we wish to transform our relationship with violence, we have to transform our relationship with the self and refuse to name the void, to accept the Real. By doing this, we may be able to engineer a new relationship with America as Other and thus with violence.

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<sup>54</sup> Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 198.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

## II – Silence, Cruelty and Disrupting Violence

### Early procedures

This section will seek to trace Cage’s artistic development from his earliest performed pieces through “non-musical” sounds, chance operations, aleatoric procedures and finally to *4’33”*. These practices evolve, becoming increasingly related to violence in postwar America.

Amongst Cage’s influences in his early adult years were the Futurist Luigi Russolo—who was also an inspiration for mid-century noise music—the Serialist composer Arnold Schoenberg and Dadaist Marcel Duchamp. To take the latter, in an attack on contemporary art, Duchamp exclaimed that ‘Painting is washed up. Who will ever do anything better than that propeller? Tell me, can you do that?’<sup>56</sup> For the Futurists, this ‘beauty of speed’ which the propeller offers, its ‘energy’,<sup>57</sup> is quickly absorbed into rhetoric which deifies violence and war as ‘the only hygiene of the world’.<sup>58</sup> Using this to demarcate between the Futurists and Dadaists, the Futurists see the propeller for its function (war, violence, speed etc.) rather than its aesthetic utility. Nevertheless, the signifiers which we load onto the propeller can tell us much about the ways in which the laws and hypotheses of America as Other come to bear on our understanding. Duchamp’s work shines a light on our reflexive transformation of objects into symbols. It is critical for Cage that we move beyond seeing objects as something to load signifiers onto and instead move towards them as “just” objects (or just “sounds”). This is to move towards the Real. By moving the focus towards our personal experience of “sounds as sounds”, Cage brings an intimacy which Duchamp’s incisive yet often cold and cynical work lacks.

In the case of music specifically, Cage recalled rejecting Schoenberg’s Serialism in the mid-1930’s. Whilst revolutionary, Schoenberg’s work still adhered to the 12-tone scale and was played on culturally-dominant instrumentation. The violence inherent in noise, disrupting

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<sup>56</sup> Janis Mink, *Duchamp* (Köln: Taschen, 2016), p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding Manifesto of Futurism (Feb. 1909)’, in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 3-6 (p. 4).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

the boundaries of what is considered music and defiling its tools, extends from Duchamp and Zen for Cage. Speaking in 1975 on leaving Schoenberg's lessons in 1935, Cage comments that:

*I had not yet studied Zen Buddhism, curiously enough. When I did, which was about ten or fifteen years later, I would have had even more reason for not studying harmony [with Schoenberg]. But at that time, it was as though I was wrong, and what I was interested in was noise. The reason I couldn't be interested in harmony was that harmony didn't have anything to say about noise. Nothing.*<sup>59</sup>

Cage's embracing of noise indicates a move towards the composer as 'only the framing device...everything else becomes the material'.<sup>60</sup> This certainly moves us in the direction of a "going beyond" style and hearing "sounds as sounds". As "The Future of Music: Credo" (1937) outlines however, the move towards electronic instruments is done 'to provide complete control' to the composer. 'We', Cage states, 'want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.'<sup>61</sup> Having chosen to follow Edgard Varèse, having 'fought for noises' as he 'liked being on the side of the underdog',<sup>62</sup> Cage still finds himself needing to control them. Early pieces which usher in this new appreciation for sounds include the macrostructured *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939) or early prepared piano works such as *Bacchanale* (1938/1940) or *Totem Ancestor* (1942). There is violence particularly in the latter here: the drilling in of screws damages the piano-as-product by affecting the tone, timbre or pitch of the strings in a variety of ways. This act also disregards the traditional usage of the instrument, this violence being done to the piano's cultural cachet as well as its physical body. This violence, on *Bacchanale* for

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<sup>59</sup> Larson, p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group), p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

example (appendix 1), is precise. Whilst Cage offers the player the opportunity to ‘[d]etermine position and size of mutes by experiment’, he is prescriptive as to the materials used (‘screw with nuts & weather stripping’, ‘small bolt’) and the strings to be affected.<sup>63</sup> Cage’s criticism of Serialism in 1959’s *Lecture on Nothing* feels applicable with hindsight:

The twelve-tone row is a method; a method is a control of each single note. There is too much there there . There is not enough of nothing in it .<sup>64</sup>

This is not to say that all control is bad. We can go back to thoughts offered earlier on the “dead end” of intuition and the natural capacity of the human mind, as per Zen, to become stuck in its own ruts. A modicum of etic control may back us into corners hitherto unexplored.<sup>65</sup> Arguably, control is tightened further in the late 1940s. Yet I wish to claim that this is, counterintuitively, “progress” towards Cage’s goal of work free from likes and dislikes. Comparing the preparations on *Bacchanale* to those on *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48) (appendix 2) reveals a greater precision in the selection of materials and measurements. Yet the aural quality tells a different story. Where *Bacchanale* may sound akin to something from Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* played on a piano worse for wear, many pieces in *Sonatas and Interludes* make it nearly impossible for the listener to determine fundamental pitches by ear. Here, greater control of the instrument equals a move towards

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<sup>63</sup> John Cage, *Prepared Piano Music: Volume 1, 1940-47* (New York: Henmar Press Inc., 1960; repr. 1999), p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p. 124.

<sup>65</sup> This seems to mark Cage’s distrust of Surrealism. The Surrealists, for Cage, ‘wish...to make us less guilty’ rather than ‘open our eyes’, echoing some of his concerns about psychoanalysis. (Richard Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 174). Oulipo, one of the French counters to Surrealism, distrusted their work for relying precisely on this glorifying of the biased “intuition” of the unconscious. For Oulipoean artists, the addition of *more* rules through methods similar to Cage (mathematics, arbitrary exclusions, extended techniques) would lead to a “text beneath the text”. The Oulipo however strongly disagreed with what they saw as Cage’s tendency towards nonsense over the potential for a “new sense” found in their method. For more detail, see Motte’s *Oulipo: A Primer for Potential Literature* (1998).

the untranslatable “voice”—overtones for example—and away from the translatable “words” of Western classical music—here intended pitches. The piece produces sounds, attempting to escape the clutches of having to choose between harmony and noise.

Yet the violence here is still *too* precise, too focused and Cage’s aims for violence are much grander (‘...they become transformed, and we become transformed.’). Ultimately, Cage exerts the control a pianist may assert over an interpretation of Rachmaninov—interpretation within a certain range—but with non-musical sounds (“noise”). Where Cage’s influences from Duchamp, Varèse and Russolo all point him towards noise (broadly meaning “sounds as sounds”), his creative work has only tackled acts of violence against art music’s cherished pianoforte. There is a limit to the impact this can have. Yet, eschewing the dichotomy of harmony/dissonance and choosing sounds which might sit outside of this (i.e. those that are considered “non-musical” or at least not easy to categorise) is certainly a positive step for Cage. As Marcel Cobussen argues, arbitrary privileging of harmony/dissonance as a paradigm ‘makes it extremely difficult to develop an uninhibited and unprejudiced ear for sounds that one does not (yet) count among music. Instead, one often tries to avoid, banish, or ignore these sounds precisely because they do not belong to the musical domain.’<sup>66</sup> A return to “The Future of Music: Credo”, from 1937, puts these assertions into action. It channels the energy of the Futurists or Dadaists, with Cage proclaiming:

The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Marcel Cobussen, ‘Cage and Noise’, *Deconstruction in Music* <[http://www.deconstruction-in-music.com/proefschrift/300\\_john\\_cage/317\\_cage\\_and\\_noise/cage\\_and\\_noise.htm](http://www.deconstruction-in-music.com/proefschrift/300_john_cage/317_cage_and_noise/cage_and_noise.htm)> [accessed 27 October 2019]

<sup>67</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p. 3.

An attentiveness to sound is the focus. His sentences are short with extraneous conjunctions removed. It can be read at pace to match the speed of the truck. Alternatively, it can be pored over and meditated upon. Either way, Cage attempts to secure a sense of vitality through a restricted use of language. That this passage lends itself to a close reading is indicative of the focus given to its subjects. Cage also lambasts what he considers the abuse of the newly developed Theremin with players acting as ‘censors, giving the public those sounds they think the public will like. We are shielded from new sound experiences.’<sup>68</sup> The Theremin should do as percussion music does: it ‘explores the academically forbidden’, the “non-musical”.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the composer is still the one to “give” those new sound experiences. The next step, then, is to move away from this authority, predetermining as it does a certain trajectory towards a fixed sense of style.

### Chance

Cage’s works of the 1940s as discussed above are indicative of a desire for iconoclasm expressed creatively. His violence towards traditional instrumentation and forms not only mirrored a violent society, but also an inner violence. Violence can be utilised as a tool for stripping back, one which Cage delights in with his prepared piano works and orchestrations of controlled noise. Indeed, just as he feels the Buddha did centuries before, Cage wishes to strip back sounds to reveal the “pure silence” underneath. Yet just as the Buddha found asceticism to not be the way to attain enlightenment, Cage will similarly find that a “pure silence” is illusory.

Cage’s instrumental (in both senses) violence can only take us so far. Whilst not endorsing a psychobiographical account wholeheartedly, this instrumental violence does line up for Cage. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Cage’s life in its many guises had begun to fall apart. His marriage with Xenia Kashevaroff had ended and his rhythmic revolution

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

(exemplified in his percussion based works) had not been taken up anywhere near as enthusiastically in New York as with Bonnie Bird at the Cornish School in the late 1930s. Furthermore, he fought an internal war. As biographer Kay Larson notes, Cage has a ‘fear of being himself—yet a powerful need to be himself too.’<sup>70</sup> Cage ‘had always felt that sounds should be themselves’ and ‘relentlessly demanded that everything be itself, authentic to its true nature’.<sup>71</sup> Cage subsequently began to work with chance as a potential solution to both personal issues and his artistic progress. In a 1979 interview with Bill Womack, Cage stated that:

Of course, my proper concern first of all has been with changing my own mind. I wanted to change it because I was, in the forties, in certain ways very confused both in my personal life and in my understanding of what the function of art in society should be. It was through the study of Buddhism that I became, it seems to me, less confused...I decided that my proper discipline was one to which I was already committed, namely the making of music. And that I would do it with a means that was as strict as sitting cross-legged, namely, the use of chance operations, and the shifting of my responsibility from the making of choices to that of asking questions.<sup>72</sup>

Early forays into aleatoric composition, progressing towards the solo piano piece *Music of Changes* (1951), all rely on chance as an origin or centre upon which a universe of possibility can be explored. The first and one of the most famous of these chance pieces, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (March No. 2)* (1951), introduces the radio as an instrument, one whose content is beyond the control of the composer. The piece is guided by a bare

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<sup>70</sup> Larson, p. 198.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>72</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 45.

bones score with extensive explanation. As Cage notes in “Composition: To Describe the Process of Composition Used in *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*”, the charts for both pieces ‘are made of an equal number of elements (sixty-four) which refer to Superpositions (one chart) (how many events are happening at once during a given structural space); Tempi (one chart); Durations (*n*, the number of superpositions, in these works, eight charts); Sounds (eight charts); Dynamics (eight charts).’<sup>73</sup> The intention of a macrostructure such as this was ‘to make a musical composition the continuity of which is free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and “traditions” of art.’<sup>74</sup> Chance operates not as the opening to limitless possibility here, but rather as a breaking away from ‘individual taste’ or, to use the terms Cage used to describe Thoreau, from ‘vision’. Such a “goal” can be found in many of the other methods utilised by Cage at this time. The post-4’33” series *Music for Piano* (1952), for instance, moved away from durational structures, instead electing to shape the performance around the imperfections in the manuscript paper. As Cage notes in “Composition as Process”, with [s]tructure no longer being present, that piece took place in any length of time whatsoever, according to the exigencies of an occasion. The duration of single sounds was therefore also left indeterminate.’<sup>75</sup> In other pieces, such as *Williams Mix* (1953), Cage offered performers a series of tapes with sounds fitting into six categories:

[C]ity sounds (A), country sounds (B), electronic sounds (C), “music” and especially manually produced sounds (D), wind-produced sounds and vocal music (E), and “small” sounds requiring amplification (F). These sounds were further classified according to whether three of their characteristics – frequency, timbre (overtone structure), and amplitude – were “controlled”(c) or “variable” (v). Thus, as Cage explained, “Dvvv” could be jazz or Beethoven with variable frequency,

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<sup>73</sup> Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, p. 58.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

timbre, and amplitude (Nattiez 1993, p. 131). Controls could be imposed upon any of these characteristics through filters or reverberation. Such decisions, in addition to the selection of the sounds themselves, were entirely left up to Cage's sound engineers.<sup>76</sup>

In "Composition as Process", Cage highlights that chance in this piece makes 'evident that music itself is an ideal situation, not a real one', a generator of conditions where 'the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience.'<sup>77</sup> The number of variables at play produces both a richness of texture as well as an uncountable number of different possible interactions, a number only increased by the freedom offered to performers to interpret this laminal construction as they pleased. *Williams Mix*, as with *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and *Music of Changes*, utilised the I Ching and coin tosses to frame the chance operations.

With *Music of Changes*, as pianist John Tilbury—one of the foremost interpreters of Cage and Morton Feldman—states, 'readings of the charts always encompassed, for example, all twelve notes of the chromatic scale so that the effect of the chance operations (the tossing of coins) was balanced to a certain extent by the composer's initial choice of materials.'<sup>78</sup> The goal remained the supposed "purity" of indeterminacy where Cage wished to venture 'outside the circle of a known universe': to be 'dealing with things that I literally don't know anything about'.<sup>79</sup> Whilst the chance pieces described here offer a range of methods for interrupting traditional methods of composition whilst simultaneously allowing interpretative freedom to performers, there are limits, as argued by Tilbury, if one's goal is to venture 'outside the circle of a known universe'. The limits of these chance methods are

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<sup>76</sup> David W. Bernstein, "Cage and high modernism", in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. by David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 186-213 (p. 209).

<sup>77</sup> Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>78</sup> Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (n.p.: ubuclassics, 2004), p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 62.

echoed retroactively by Cage; ‘one knows more or less the elements of the universe with which ones is dealing.’<sup>80</sup> There is still something to be attached to, regardless of whether that is the rules and materials offered, or even the limited uncertainty of chance itself. Re-affirming chance as a centre—and allow it to be shaped by the laws and hypotheses of the Other—subsequently dissolves any potential to be radically surprised outside of a fixed style.

By *Music of Changes*, the first of Cage’s pieces to be determined entirely by chance operations, his reading of *The Huang Po Doctrine of Universal Mind* had become ‘*extremely meaningful*’.<sup>81</sup> It sat alongside the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), which he learned of through Suzuki, as fundamental to Cagean procedure. The latter became central to the composition of *Music of Changes*, ‘divorcing sounds from the burden of psychological intentions’.<sup>82</sup> Pianist Herbert Henck regards *Music of Changes* as radical, defining Cage as “‘the real pioneer’ of American music’.<sup>83</sup> David Tudor spoke of a “cancellation” of consciousness in performing the piece.<sup>84</sup> Cage, in composing both this and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, became increasingly hostile towards value judgements calling them ‘*destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness*’.<sup>85</sup> *Music of Changes* acted as one way out of fixity. This is a refiguring of our relationship with violence away from “destructive to our proper business” and towards “destructive *as* our proper business”. Yet both *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* are ‘precisely structured’<sup>86</sup> and ‘packed with complicated rules for a myriad of musical decisions.’<sup>87</sup>

Because there is some degree of pre-determination at play, a radically new style or relationship with violence cannot arrive and *remain* from these methods for it will simply become reabsorbed. Indeed, this reabsorption is at the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer’s

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Larson, p. 198.

<sup>82</sup> Nyman, p. 60.

<sup>83</sup> Larson, p. 203.

<sup>84</sup> Nyman, p. 62.

<sup>85</sup> Larson, p. 208.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

claim of capitalism that '[e]very detail is so firmly stamped with sameness [by the entertainment industry] that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth, or does not meet with approval at first sight.'<sup>88</sup> We can, however, use them to learn about the ways in which the laws and hypotheses of America as Other come to bear on our understanding. In decoding these, we can begin to shape what an alternative relationship with violence may look like, one which accepts the void, the unsymbolisable Real.

Cage's work towards 4'33" must therefore utilise the chance elements which have proved so productive to his own psychical transformation whilst not allowing chance to become a new, pre-determined centre. Here, the artist remains a producer of 'controlled circumstances' with chance becoming a new end, bearing more of a load than it can take. To break out of this—away from the riddle and towards a *kōan*, away from violence as defined by the Other and towards a new, more subtle relationship with violence—requires a fundamentally different way of engaging with sound.

Cage's conundrum is thus: can one create a piece which transcends a fixed notion of style? Here, we can return to Cage's Zen practice and to his readings of Artaud. In order to free his work from "likes and dislikes", Cage must oppose the conversation of liking or disliking in choice-making—the violence of metaphysics as Jacques Derrida may term it—even whilst knowing that this is (logically and practically) impossible; it is not possible to be amoral or non-preferential for if we decide to have no preference on the outcome, we merely pivot to another pre-determined position (i.e. "I do not have a preference of outcome" pivots us towards a privileging of "surprise" or "prideful indifference", one which can be reabsorbed into the existing structures offered in America as Other). David Loy, writing to Derrida in "The Deconstruction of Buddhism", argues that finding a way out of this conundrum cannot simply be folded back into 'metaphysical reappropriation'. We cannot simply aim for

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<sup>88</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972; repr. London: Verso, 1997), p. 128.

something “styleless” for this would, like chance, merely reinvoke the style we are attempting to escape (There is ‘no transference of the transference’):

Thanks to the sensitivities that Derrida’s texts have helped to develop, it is possible to understand the Buddhist tradition as a history of this struggle between deconstructive delimitation and metaphysical reappropriation, between a message that undermines all security by undermining the sense-of-self that seeks security, and a countervailing tendency to dogmatize and institutionalize that challenge.<sup>89</sup>

For Derrida, ‘the price of freedom’ from ontotheology—from a fixed style in Cage’s case—is ‘eternal vigilance’.<sup>90</sup> For Loy at least, the “breakthrough” which Derrida seeks can be found in meditation. For Cage and Suzuki, we may say that this can be found in *satori* as a fleeting engagement the innate emptiness of all things. Relevant to this fleeting engagement is Loy’s reference to *śūnyatā* (emptiness, to be swollen).<sup>91</sup> In Madhyamika Buddhist practice, a school hugely influential on Zen, *śūnyatā* is described as the deconstructing of ‘the self-existence/self-presence of things’.<sup>92</sup> As Loy comments, Nāgārjuna understood that the practice of *śūnyatā* would become ‘reappropriated into a metaphysics, so Nāgārjuna was careful to warn that *śūnyatā* was a heuristic, not a cognitive, notion’.<sup>93</sup> This is simply elucidated in the *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*: ‘If there were something not *śūnya* there would be something *śūnya*, but there is nothing *śūnya*, so how can anything be *śūnya*?’<sup>94</sup> *Śūnyatā* is thus not a tangible method that can simply be deployed nor does it have an immediate, privileged relationship to that which it describes.

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<sup>89</sup> David R. Loy, ‘The Deconstruction of Buddhism’, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: Suny Press, 1992), pp. 227-253 (p. 227).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

This links to what has been said thus far about the postwar relationship with violence. This relationship, at least for Cage, is predicated upon the clinging to a historically determined sense of national identity, one defined by the violence which proved so important in the development of the United States. The nuclear horizon acts as a kind of *satori* moment, a cataclysmic “loosening” of the moors of an identity which may be totally erased in the apocalypse. As a consequence, the precarious nature of that identity and the violences of the past which have sustained it are rendered manifest. This dream of sorts, which threatens to bubble up and consume the American Dream and American identity, must be worked through and re-accessed in order to offer a new relationship with violence. It is only through this process of heuristic, rather than cognitive or logical, analysis that America can finally gesture towards a new dream, a ‘new yet unapproachable America’ away from the European dream of centuries past as well as the violences—those which continued extension of the old America—that will necessarily continue. Yet an “America” which is not couched in a specific identity—and thus not a specific style—does not seem conducive to a specific individuation, nor to a concrete “nation”. Similar practical concerns arise for both Derrida and Nāgārjuna: how do we move from the empirical to the phenomenological without simply rendering the latter as a rational system and thus nullifying its effect? Regarding *śūnyatā*, we can see that this is the wrong question to be asking for the question itself simply takes us straight to the empirical. To seemingly affirm Derrida’s oft-misunderstood and mistranslated aphorism ‘there is no outside-text’, Cage rightly points out that ‘there isn’t such a thing as a thing that doesn’t make sense’.<sup>95</sup> Everything is within reference. A move towards Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” opens up a way of approaching dreams—and thus the American Dream—as gestures rather than as representative of the all-consuming logos of interpretation, fixing our style before we have had the chance to perform it.

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<sup>95</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 146.

### Cruel Discourse and 4'33"

This second section has detailed the move towards 4'33" as a gradual stripping away of extraneous elements. We have a chronology, a dialectical process which may lead us closer to some end of History in art practice. Read in this sense, 4'33" marks failure, a monolith dedicated to our impotence to escape reference; having stripped "everything" away, we are still no closer to the final referent. I wish to trouble this oversimplification. Rather than seeing history as essentially chronological, and by utilising Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" and the aphoristic qualities of the *kōan*, we can see 4'33" as potentially conducive to a fleeting glimpse of going beyond style to transform our relationship with violence—as in "l'avenir"—as opposed to just another development in a series of naïve utopian moves towards some pre-determined end—as in "le futur".

Cage's remark quoted above that 'there isn't such a thing as a thing that doesn't make sense' comes straight from Artaud ('and we may as well cite Artaud again').<sup>96</sup> There are many similarities between the two artists—alienation by formal art movements, moves towards Eastern philosophies and practices—but key is Artaud's work towards a writing divorced from the "logos" of the theatre. Cage began to write music at this time which would demonstrate that '[e]very something is an echo of nothing',<sup>97</sup> music devoid of any of the structural characteristics of classical "music" (such as harmony, timbre etc.). Both artists are attempting what Derrida calls 'the production of a space that no speech could condense or comprehend (since speech primarily presupposes this spacing)'.<sup>98</sup> It is an attempt to create a space which is 'no longer organized from the vantage of an other absent site, an illocality, an alibi or invisible utopia.'<sup>99</sup> They yearn for a theatre in which speech and writing 'will once more become *gestures*.'<sup>100</sup> That Cage also read Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*—a direct influence on Cage's *Theatre Piece #1* (1952)—around the time of the first

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 146.

<sup>97</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p. 131.

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 299.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 300.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 302.

performance of 4'33" figures Artaud, along with Robert Rauschenberg, as inspiring Cage towards 4'33".

Whilst the idea of a "silent piece" had been noted by Cage as early as "Other People Think" and prominently in the mid-1940s (*The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942), *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947) and *A Flower* (1950)), it should be noted that Cage's engagement with Artaud preceded 4'33" (1952). These early forays into silence would come to shape particular elements of 4'33". In *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*, for instance, the performer taps out rhythms on a closed piano lid, the opening and closing of which became critical to mark the closing of one movement and beginning of the next in 4'33".<sup>101</sup> *Music for Marcel Duchamp* features two bars of silence in its last section.<sup>102</sup> *A Flower* includes both long passages of silence and the use of the piano lid as a percussive device.<sup>103</sup> The interruption of so many culturally accepted gestures in classical music—including the most unassuming act of opening the piano lid or of actively making sound as a performer at all times—brings us towards the 'no vision' of 4'33".

This is a critical juncture; by turning away from "endings" such as those offered by the logos of the theatre or by the end of History, we are offered a new path. We cannot fully escape the laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other, but we can reveal or manifest them in some way. This, critically, brings us back to the remarks in the introduction on the American Dream; Artaud's work provides us with a radical rethinking of dreaming, one absent of, one predetermined by, those laws and hypotheses. Just as *śūnyatā* is rendered heuristically, so Artaud proposes a radical move away from the interpretation-led dreaming of psychoanalysis and towards a "cruel" dream. This speaks to Lacan's own meta-analysis:

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<sup>101</sup> Jan Steele / John Cage, "The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs", *Voices And Instruments*, LP, Obscure, obscure no. 5, 1976.

<sup>102</sup> John Cage / Morton Feldman, "Music for Marcel Duchamp", *Music For Keyboard 1935-1948 / The Early Years*, CD, New World Records, 80664-2, 2007.

<sup>103</sup> John Cage, Anna Clementi, Steffen Schleiermacher, "A Flower", *Voice And Piano*, CD, Musikproduktion Dabringhaus und Grimm, MDG 613 1076-2, 2001.

If dreams are still more suitable to [analysis], it is because the elaboration produced by your [Freud's] games is at work in their development: "Only the dream's elaboration interests us," Freud says, and again, "A dream is a rebus." What would he have had to add so that we would stop expecting dreams to deliver up the words of the soul? Have the sentences of a rebus ever had the slightest meaning, and does its interest—that is, the interest we take in its deciphering—not derive from the fact that the signification manifest in its images falls away, having no other scope than that of conveying the signifier that is disguised in it?<sup>104</sup>

As Bruce Fink adds, '*as far as psychoanalytic practice is concerned, a dream is the oral text or speech (which can be potentially transcribed more or less accurately) produced about the dream by the analysand.*'<sup>105</sup> Critically, it is not therefore the dream as experienced, but the dream as recounted. The cruel dream by contrast allows us to "re-feel" the dream *outside* of the laws and hypotheses which determine it.<sup>106</sup> Derrida remarks in "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" that 'the theater of cruelty is indeed a theater of dreams, but of *cruel* dreams, that is to say, absolutely necessary and determined dreams, dreams calculated and given direction, as opposed to what Artaud believed to be the empirical disorder of spontaneous dreams.'<sup>107</sup> For Artaud, '[i]t is the *law* of dreams that must be produced or reproduced'.<sup>108</sup> Derrida subsequently highlights this as a move whereby Artaud 'rejects the psychoanalyst as interpreter' or verifier of the dream.<sup>109</sup> The work of the piece that would come to be known as *4'33*" seeks the same goal as the one being sought by Artaud. Derrida describes this as such:

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<sup>104</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 393-4.

<sup>105</sup> Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Freud: Techniques for Everyday Practice*, p. 73.

<sup>106</sup> I understand that this logic is in some sense programmed from the same experiences as conscious thought. There is a danger here that we make the same mistake as the Surrealists and elevate the unconscious. However, not only is dreaming often troubling, confusing and even disturbing to the dreamer, Artaud is not proposing interpreting the dream's logic. Instead, he attempts to offer ways to experience it without dulling its impact with interpretation.

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 305.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

The theater of cruelty expulses God from the stage. It does not put a new atheist discourse on stage, or give atheism a platform, or give over theatrical space to a philosophizing logic that would once more, to our greater lassitude proclaim the death of God. The theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits or rather *produces* a nontheological space.<sup>110</sup>

The cruel dream is an expulsion not a murder, for to murder is a wish to affirm (“I must show how strongly I detest your existence by interacting with that existence at its most fundamental level”). It is not to be seen as an expulsion that we may associate with the Holocaust. Cage’s expulsion is an expulsion *of* the Führer, not by the Führer, the voice of violence which claims to symbolise the Real, to close the gap between the voice and the Word, *zoe* and *bios*. Mladen Dolar explains this in *A Voice and Nothing More* as such:

In the person of the Führer, *zoe* and *bios* coincide. He represents the unity of *Volk* and its aspirations, its biopolitical ambition and endeavor...The collapse of that distinction [between *zoe* and *bios*] necessarily brings forth the emergence of the “bare life” on the other side: the life which anybody can kill with impunity, yet the life which cannot be sacrificed, that is, subjected to an economy of sacrifice, gift, atonement, expiation, in some gesture of exchange with the (divine) Other. Such is the life of Jews, the paramount *homines sacri* of our day.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 296.

<sup>111</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 117.

In attempting to bridge the gap between bare life and the political, the Führer attempts to step into the God function, becoming the justifier for all writable violence. In the case of America, this move leads to the atom bomb. It is this murderous violence which must be expelled from the stage. It may then be possible to transform violence from murder to generative expulsion, from the affirmation of a self to the radical rejection of such an engagement. The only way to dream cruelly is to do so outside of the laws and hypotheses of the Other's dream, outside of the Symbolic order. We must reject the primary logos of speech in favour of a heuristic dream, one which is 'more *affirmative* than an activity of displacement.'<sup>112</sup> A theatre without speech, a voice without speech. In short, silence as an irruptive experience rather than as another symbolic gesture to be absorbed into the possibilities already mapped in America as Other.

The cruel dream offers a way of thinking about experience without language, a world temporarily uninterpreted. The wordless glossopoeia of 4'33" 'takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet a discourse, when repetition is *almost* impossible'.<sup>113</sup> In Zen terms, we may call this *hsüan*, a 'metaphorical darkness...the sheer inconceivability which confronts the mind when it tries to remember the time before birth, or to penetrate its own depths.'<sup>114</sup> In other words, 4'33" offers a moment of *satori*, where intellectual, logical, psychological and empirical systems fail to represent the Real. The dialectical nature of 4'33" is such that it can quickly bring us to a moment of crisis. The "content" of the ambient sounds of the room arrive and, being "unspectacular", force us to focus on the form of the piece. The form then refers us back to the content, so devoid is the form of anything we could classically determine to be "artistic work". We can then realise that the piece is not about the specific content as would occur in many interpretations of music. Rather, the piece focuses on the experiencing of that content, buffeting us back and forth between content and

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<sup>112</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 306.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>114</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 18.

form, neither of which offer us a final referent for our experience. Silence is not then, as a chronological history of art may indicate, simply the absence of sound. It is the surprising absence of a specific empirical content which *should*, by all accounts, be present as the verifier or interpreter of an experience. Instead, the piece offers us a unique moment of fleeting irruption from discourse, from America as Other, a moment where our relationship with violence is transformed as we briefly witness a “cruel violence”, conscious and intentional yet outside of discourse. Many will react with discomfort towards a piece of art which so radically questions their conceptions of music, the assumed notion of the self and the failure of empiricism to account for either. By studying these “sticking points”, we can see where *4'33"* interferes with the laws and hypotheses embodied in America as Other and thus the ways it comes to bear on coherences of violence.

The genesis of *4'33"*—as I have described throughout this chapter and most explicitly in descriptions of Cage’s pieces of the late 1940s and early 1950s—was one inspired by many sources. In addition to the works discussed thus far, Cage was influenced by Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, created in 1951. *White Paintings*, which consists of a series of rectangular canvases covered in matte white paint, made such an impression on Cage that he noted the weight of their influence in the preface to his essay “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work”: ‘*To Whom It May Concern: The white paintings came first; my silence piece came later.*’<sup>115</sup> Cage goes on to describe the work as follows:

This is not a composition. It is a place where things are, as on a table or on a town seen from the air: any one of them could be removed and another come into its place through circumstances analogous to birth and death, travel, housecleaning or cluttering. He is not saying; he is painting. (What is Rauschenberg saying?) The message is conveyed by dirt which, mixed with adhesive, sticks to itself and to the

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<sup>115</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, p. 98.

canvas upon which he places it. Crumbling and responding to changes in weather, the dirt unceasingly does my thinking. He regrets we do not see the paint while it's dripping.<sup>116</sup>

In a formal gesture which attempts to speak to the generosity, the unassuming nature, of Rauschenberg's work, Cage offers the reader the opportunity to construct the essay as they please: *'It may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order...Any of the sections may be printed directly over any of the others, and the spaces between paragraphs may be varied in any manner.'*<sup>117</sup> The critical essay opens up to the ways in which ink, letters or words may sit across one another, just as the *White Paintings* acted as 'airports for the lights, shadows, and particles.'<sup>118</sup> Their meanings become of secondary importance, their visual impact instead drawing our gaze. As Calvin Tomkins notes, "[t]he white paintings arose from the same attitude that later led Cage to write his silent piece. The possibility of not doing anything...They made no visual demands."<sup>119</sup>

Cage also sought silence from the physical sciences. On a visit to an anechoic chamber—a space designed to completely absorb sound waves or other waves of the electromagnetic field— at Harvard University in the early 1950s, Cage discovered the impossibility of his pursuit, outlined here in "Experimental Music":

In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot...I entered [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, pp. 99-100.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>119</sup> Larson, 233

one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.<sup>120</sup>

When this realisation is applied to the concert hall, the potential for Cage's "deinstitutionalisation" becomes clear. As Douglas Kahn notes in *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, "[i]t should be noted that each performance was held in a concert setting where any muttering or clearing of one's throat, let alone heckling, was a breach of decorum. Thus, there was already in place in these settings, as in other settings for Western art music, a culturally specific mandate to be silent'.<sup>121</sup> Kahn identifies that which Artaud found in his theatre of cruelty, that Cage's piece, 'by tacitly instructing the performer to remain quiet in *all* respects, muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken...and legitimated bad behaviour that in any other number of settings (including many musical ones) would have been perfectly acceptable.'<sup>122</sup> By making "the unacceptable" the piece's content, the work draws attention to the impossibility of the perfect coherent system, the inevitability of its interruption. The 'privileged site', the logos of the theatre, becomes inherently untenable.

As James Pritchett notes, then, *4'33"* is 'a mental, spiritual, and compositional exercise' whose 'literal silence reflects the silence of the will necessary to open up a realm of infinite possibilities.'<sup>123</sup> The pieces leading up to *4'33"*, those based on chance—*Music of Changes*, the *Imaginary Landscape* series, *Music for Piano*, *Williams Mix* etc—and those working directly with silence—*The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*, *Music for Marcel Duchamp* and *A Flower*—established Cage's work as disruptive through inaction, through the "no vision", through nonviolence as a response to the limited, destructive determinations

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<sup>120</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 165.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>123</sup> James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 60.

of violence offered in America as Other. In the first performance of *4'33''*, David Tudor, Cage's long-time collaborator, walked onto the stage and began, indicating the start of each movement by closing the piano lid, ending each movement by opening it. When the piece was first presented at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York<sup>124</sup> to 'an audience that supported contemporary art', it was greeted with outrage. As Cage remembers:

People began whispering to one another, and some people began to walk out. They didn't laugh—they were just irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry.<sup>125</sup>

Cage himself delayed performing *4'33''* for several years before first presenting it in 1952, stating that he 'knew that it would be taken as a joke and a renunciation of work, whereas I also knew that if it was done it would be the highest form of work. Or this form of work: an art without work.'<sup>126</sup> It is a piece for Cage which is 'free of my intentions',<sup>127</sup> a piece which is 'a very physical work, not conceptual. I thought of it as a quick way of hearing what there was to hear.'<sup>128</sup> In addition to being physical and as renouncing work-as-intended-action, we can say that *4'33''* adds more to the reframing of objects by blurring selves with sounds. If sounds are allowed to be without interpretation or intention, it follows that the listeners in a certain phenomenological mode can be without self, style or interpretation also. The positions which people take up cannot be rooted by interpretations and thus their idea of self as "intending" cannot be rooted. As Eric De Visscher highlights:

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<sup>124</sup> Larson, p. 274.

<sup>125</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.

<sup>126</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 69.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p. 231.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 218.

If one replaces the term *crowd of people* by *crowd of sounds*, one can find a satisfying analogy with Cage's description of "sudden illumination" in face of daily experience. As was Cage's passage in the anechoic chamber at Harvard, the shock is a physical experience that takes place before speech or thought can interfere...<sup>129</sup>

Rather than "replacing" people with sounds as De Visscher suggests, the distinctions between them appear to fade away. This *satori* moment, as previously highlighted, comes about because we are guided by the "content" of the sounds of the room. This generates the form of the piece before the content defies our ability to interpret or interfere with it. So for Cage, who sought to blur the distinction between audience and performer or student and teacher, *4'33"* acts as *kōan*, the silent transmission of knowledge de-centred from Cage himself because it is beyond Cage's ability to transmit it. This is a style divorced from the self, one which continuously and stubbornly transcends style.

Cage clearly has an intention for the piece, yet it is the elements of the piece which are far beyond his intention which are so violent. This moment of violence is found in transforming the limited positions on violence as determined by America as Other into the violence of liberation *from* the limited range of positions offered by America as Other—as short-lived as this moment may be before interpretation kicks back in (perhaps in the form of walking out, applauding or laughing). Cage here presents music as not active nor passive, musical nor non-musical. It is a rejection of the terms upon which the comforting notions of music, the self, style, history, violence etc. are all established. Accordingly, it is a rejection of the "America as Europe" which Emerson critiques and whose imperialist past generates violence through the centuries. Whilst many at the time and since have experienced the floorlessness of *4'33"*, the negative reaction of many is, as Cage himself points out,

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<sup>129</sup> Eric De Visscher, "There's no such thing as silence...": John Cage's Poetics of Silence', in *Writings about John Cage*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 117-133 (p. 132).

‘[b]ecause they see that I am denying things to which they are devoted.’<sup>130</sup> And what are we more devoted to than the Other, having such great bearing on our sense of self as it does? Rather than their disdain being absorbed back into “America as Europe”, their negative reactions are fleetingly fed into 4’33” instead. We do not feed an existing range of laws and hypotheses, but fuel the ephemeral, non-empirical discourse, the cruel American dream, offered by Cage’s piece:

You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement [in the premiere]. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.<sup>131</sup>

The payload of 4’33”—much like the atom bomb with America—is a momentarily radical opening where the idea of a fixed style of the composer gives way. The idea that a fixed style could exist was framed by Cage earlier in his initial worries about the piece; that people would see it as a joke. Of course, the radical potential of 4’33” is that it is a joke, but a joke that we must take seriously but only as/when/if we feel it. James Joyce, accordingly for Cage, ‘was so involved with comedy, because tragedy is not so free from [desire and loathing]’.<sup>132</sup> And getting the joke—that we are, in part, influenced by an Other which we sustain even when its laws and hypotheses limits our range of actions in ways we do not find preferable—is our proper business. When asked if, where previously people took the piece as ‘*too foolish*’, they now take it ‘*too seriously*’, Cage replies ‘No. I don’t think it can be taken too seriously.’<sup>133</sup> It cannot be taken too seriously because this reading of the piece is one which comes to bear heavily on questions of nation and violence in the mid-twentieth

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<sup>130</sup> Kostelanetz ed., *Conversing with Cage*, p. 71.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

century. As Operation Ivy tested hydrogen bombs in the Marshall Islands in the very same year of Cage's first presentation of the piece, upholding the United States as, in President Truman's words, able to 'defend itself against any possible aggressor', the gravity of said lesson appeared more devastating and more necessary than ever.<sup>134</sup>

To deepen this link between 4'33" and violence, we can turn to a reading of 4'33" as *kōan* and how this engenders such a strong relationship to violence. On the one hand, we cannot answer 4'33", but by the same token, we also cannot *not* answer it. It is an invitation to face silence—unequivocally—as an interaction with the void, but one we must open ourselves towards. We cannot go to silence directly for it will then become what we expect. We must not face it down, but make ourselves vulnerable to its "Realness", to risk interaction with it in light of the uncertainty surrounding how/whether it affects us. Silence, like *kōan*, pushes us to a point of crisis where no positive affirmation of an answer is enough. We must move beyond the very idea of a coherence, beyond the idea of a final referent. Giving up on God is to renounce God as the *only* justification for the logical impossibility of the Real, as a form of coherence. For Lacan, this is what designates "believing in the symptom":

Believing in it only strictly means as follows: it can only mean, semantically, believing in beings in so far as they can say something. There is no doubt that whoever comes to present us with a symptom believes in it... If he asks our help, our aid, it is because he believes the symptom is capable of saying something, that it must only be deciphered.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Tamra Orr, *The Hydrogen Bomb: Unleashing the Nuclear Age and Arms Race* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>135</sup> Jacques Lacan, *XXII: RSI (1974-75)* trans. by Cormac Gallagher, Unpublished <<http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/RSI-Complete-With-Diagrams.pdf>> [accessed 27 October 2019], p. 63-4.

Believing in the symptom thus presupposes the God function (“There is a final interpretation of my symptom which will free me from lack.”) To stop believing in the symptom—for example, to stop believing that silence *means* something—is to give up the idea that a final interpretation is possible. One must renounce the complete Other, and that Other’s idea that a final interpretation of violence or “America” is possible. In this sense, a standard interpretation of style as something we should aim to discover is symptomatic. The ‘new yet unapproachable America’ allows us temporarily to access a position (or style) which is always to come. It is to move to silence as an empty invitation and nothing more.

The traditional explication of 4’33” is that it is passive, an attempt at a kind of boundless, utopian acceptance. Cage regarded this as the most fundamental misunderstanding of the piece:

[Q:] *Well, the traditional understanding is that it opens you up to the sounds that exist around you and...*

[Cage:]... *and to the acceptance of anything...*

[Q:]... *yes...*

[Cage:]... *even when you have something as the basis. And that’s how it’s misunderstood...*

[Q:] *What’s a better understanding of it?*

[Cage:] *It opens you up to any possibility only when nothing is taken as the basis.*

*But most people don’t understand that as far as I can tell.*<sup>136</sup>

In the face of the Real of silence, we may see an alternative outside of the Other’s limited range of positions in relation to violence. Cage appears to indicate this to be one definition of “nothing”; historically framed, it is the radical absence of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Here, we may be able to see 4’33” as embodying the radical potential to

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<sup>136</sup> Larson, p. 275.

create the more subtle, complex relationships with violence that are required in this postwar moment. By extension, we can see Cage's point above as the potential for a thorough re-reading of "nothing": that we can only consider "nothing" once we are able to experience silence not as silence (for there is no pure silence) or as merely the opposite of sound. Silence becomes a potentially radical and fruitful diversion from searching for a specific way out of this destructive, pre-determined relationship with America as Other. Where America as Other comes to bear on a limited number of ways in which violence may be interpreted, Cage offers us the opportunity to accept our precarity through the radical potential of silence.

### III - Summary

The purpose of this closing section is to approach a key question which the chapter has sought to provide shape for: what has the work of the artist discussed here revealed about violence in the postwar moment in the United States of America?

Accordingly, this chapter has demonstrated that John Cage is a key figure in the discussion of the intersection between postwar aesthetics and violence. The chapter has offered the term “silence” as a term from Cage’s own lexicon in order to orient this claim. “Silence”, and the inherent impossibility of fixing in place either the experience or definition of the term, acts as an incommensurable counter to the fixed positions of violence of the postwar moment, interpretations defined by the past violences of the United States as inscribed in language (America as Other). Through *4’33”*, Cage is able to reveal the inherent untenability of these interpretations of violence. In embodying ‘a style that was not a tyranny’, or a vision that is not a vision as per Thoreau, we are offered a potentially radical break from these fixed, codified hypotheses and laws of violence as well as from the self which is grounded in the certainty that these interpretations provide.

As the thesis moves on to a consideration of Amiri Baraka, it is important to register that there appears to be no evidence to suggest that *4’33”* or any of Cage’s aesthetic developments were a direct influence on Baraka. This does not mean, however, that the two do not share certain modes of practice. Baraka understands that one cannot simply, as Audre Lorde wrote, utilise the tools or discourses of Master as they are not built to dismantle the Master’s house, a “white mythology”. There must be a move to facilitate the development of practices outside of the prevailing *logos* and to bring these into play in order to transform any relationship with violence. After expelling the Other’s discourse from the stage, Baraka goes one step further than Cage; in stepping into the space to tell stories of violence, he creates a radical, weaponised voice which erupts from within the horizon of America as Other. This bears resemblance to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s work in *The*

*Undercommons*, as the development of a ‘self-defense of the surround in the face of the repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion’.<sup>137</sup> The next chapter will demonstrate how specific qualities of the voice may provide an extension to the limits of Cage’s project, a way of maintaining the expulsion which pieces such as *4’33”* offer, and the need to take direct possession of one’s experience of violence in order to do so. Extending Moten, Harney, Lacan, Fanon and Cedric J. Robinson, I will posit that the break which is so central to Baraka’s poetics is that which allows him to avoid simply becoming reabsorbed by the white mythology, that which enables him to ‘surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it.’<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 17.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

## Chapter 2: The Break in the work of Amiri Baraka

We'll worship Jesus

When Jesus do

Somethin

...

we worship revolution<sup>1</sup>

— Amiri Baraka, “When We’ll Worship Jesus”

### Introduction

This chapter will examine the poetry of Amiri Baraka, focusing on his development of that which Fred Moten terms the break. It will seek to demonstrate that Baraka turns towards the voice as able to offer a new sense of aesthetic position, one which acts to undermine the coherence and supposed solidity of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other—a symbolic identity built, in part, on the violence of slavery. The development of this voice will be traced through Baraka’s essays, poetry and plays of the 1960s. This confrontation also challenges and transforms the potential of the sustained racist violence of the period and of America’s past. The break of Baraka’s voice—which offers access to a surplus which refuses symbolisation or reduction into the limited series of positions offered in America as Other—opens up a new space where self-presence is denied, but in which violence can be transformed through the radical retelling of past and present stories of violence.

I will contend that Baraka’s conception of the voice towards the break is changed dramatically by his visit to Cuba in 1960 and his subsequent phenomenological account of Fidel Castro’s voice. The chapter will consider the works of this period as offering a series of newly figured mythologies which others can utilise and enter into, a move facilitated by

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<sup>1</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. by William J. Harris (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 251-254.

certain qualities of Baraka's proper name. Finally, I will discuss the use of the term "Negro" in both Baraka and Cedric J. Robinson to articulate how Baraka's poetic voice, as exemplified through his public readings of "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS", offers a potential transformation of an individual's relationship with total violences such as slavery. This arrives in a transformation of the atom bomb from a symbol of apocalypse to one which both reveals the bomb's Real violence as well as the inability of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other to ever fully account for, and thus potentially erase, black bodies, psyches and cultures.

The key co-ordinates for this chapter will be the break, the voice, the anti-slave and opacity. Regarding violence, and alongside the co-ordinates already established in the introduction and extended in chapter one, the work of Frantz Fanon will provide an account of the psychological and cultural impact of racist violence as related to the nation state and its symbolic identity. The break will primarily be articulated through the work of Fred Moten. Moten's writings will also assist in describing questions of community. In discussing the voice, I will again turn to Moten alongside the work of Ben Hickman, Peter Middleton, Nina Sun Eidsheim and Lesley Wheeler. The primary point of reference for the voice, however, will come from Mladen Dolar's readings of Jacques Lacan and Lacan himself. Opening the chapter, the anti-slave will be framed through Ralph Waldo Emerson and extended by Frederick Douglass and Fanon. Opacity will be explored primarily through the work of Édouard Glissant with inflection from Jacques Derrida and Cedric J. Robinson. All these co-ordinates will be explored through Baraka's poetry, plays and essays and supported by interview materials.

In considering these co-ordinates, I will posit that Baraka not only offers a profound extension of the voice—a point made by many thinkers referenced in this chapter—but that such an extension also has specific consequences for languages and representations of violence. By positing that certain elements of past and present violences can only be uncovered and explored through the break, Baraka presents a new horizon *within* the laws

and hypotheses of America as Other, underlining both the incompleteness of those laws and hypotheses and exposing and embodying the Real of violence which it cannot account for and which can be turned against it.

## I – The Anti-Slave and a New Horizon

### The Anti-Slave

America’s deepest and most substantially instituted relationships with violence are those related to settlement and forced exile—most prominently the displacement of Native North American and Indigenous peoples and the Transatlantic slave trade. Here, the questions of expulsion raised in the previous chapter are given a different, geopolitical focus. The question for Amiri Baraka becomes how to stake out an active position for those voices shunned by America without being positioned in such a way that those voices to become reabsorbed.

After the ousting of Native North Americans upon the discovery of the “New World” by European settlers, those settlers then shipped millions of Africans to America as slaves to service burgeoning settlements and established European empires. This was the European Dream. Upon the resolution of the American War of Independence and the passing of that Dream to America, black slaves were considered of lesser worth financially, civically and interpersonally. The Declaration of Independence made clear that America was a free nation, but only for some. For Cedric J. Robinson, these colonialisms have been interwoven with capitalism and racism since their inception. This ‘development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society’ which ‘pursued essentially racial directions’ is what he calls “racial capitalism”:

The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term "racial capitalism" to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.<sup>2</sup>

This system, 'dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide',<sup>3</sup> is ingrained in America's very foundations and generative of the twentieth century model of consumer capitalism and, thus, the long economic boom between 1945-1973. Whilst constitutionally and economically ingrained racism had been a pertinent topic for many writers concerned with black rights, for a young Amiri Baraka—then known as LeRoi Jones—issues of race, though of great importance, were not initially fundamental to his art:

I'm fully conscious all the time that I am an American Negro, because it's part of my life. But I know also that if I want to say, 'I see a bus full of people,' I don't have to say, 'I am a Negro seeing a bus full of people.' I would deal with it when it has to do directly with the poem and not as a kind of broad generalization that doesn't have much to do with a lot of young writers today who are Negroes.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst this quote of 1960 may reject race as vital to his work, the following decade proved pivotal for Baraka. From a Beat poetry greatly influenced by 'the white avant-garde: Charles Olson, O'Hara, and Ginsberg',<sup>5</sup> Baraka's poetry transitioned into one that 'found that being

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<sup>2</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983; repr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. xix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

a Negro wasn't some abstract and generalized stance but was integral to his art.'<sup>6</sup> His work began to 'convey a sense of ethnic self away from the world of white culture'.<sup>7</sup> One reviewer pertinently noted that "No American poet since Pound has come closer to making poetry and politics reciprocal forms of action."<sup>8</sup> A foreshadowing of his more directly politically driven work from the mid-1960s onwards, the communion of poetry and the politics of revolution is integrated by a concern with representing violence.

Yet long before Amiri Baraka, before Sontag's affirmation of the American 'energy bad at its source'<sup>9</sup> or Cedric J. Robinson's "racial capitalism", a series of thinkers, activists and revolutionaries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had embodied what Ralph Waldo Emerson had termed the anti-slave. Far from a synonym for "abolitionist", the anti-slave was a position outside of, yet troubling to, America as Other. As embodiments of this radical future, these individuals are described by Emerson as potential transformers of the relationship between excluded citizens and the America of the day. At the time of Emerson's writing, and during many periods since, this relationship appeared and appears staunchly entrenched:

So now, the arrival in the world of men such as Toussaint [Louverture], and the Haytian heroes, or of the leaders of their race in Barbadoes and Jamaica, outweighs in good omen all the English and American humanity. The anti-slavery of the whole world, is dust in the balance before this,—is a poor squeamishness and nervousness: the might and the right are here: here is the anti-slave: here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. xix.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, pp. 195-6.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Emancipation in the British West Indies', in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), pp. 831-60 (p. 855).

Emerson identifies Toussaint Louverture and Frederick Douglass as embodiments of the anti-slave. ‘If the law produced the legal fiction of the slave,’ writes Donald Pease, ‘Toussaint incarnated the anti-slave as the condition for its transformation.’<sup>11</sup> As Pease later continues:

Toussaint and ex-slaves and colonial subalterns could not simply take up preexisting positions within a disciplinary society whose social norms were structured on their generalized exclusion...The freedom practices of the anti-slave differed from the liberal practices of freedom structured on subaltern absence insofar as they emerged through *the creation of forms of life that could not be integrated within the political horizon of Western humanism.*<sup>12</sup> (my emphasis)

The anti-slave, then, takes the legalised destruction of the slave’s humanity and transforms this violence into a new horizon for black people, one neither currently inscribed nor inscribable in the range of positions offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. The question of how to create a form which could expel the Other from the stage—as found in Artaud and Cage—and stake a claim for the resulting void as a position capable of a prolonged transformation of racialised violence—a problem which is not tackled by, nor in the crosshairs of, Cage and *4’33’’*—becomes the new challenge. I contend that Baraka generates the possibility of this transformation through a particular relationship with the voice. The American ‘faith in violence’<sup>13</sup> was a foundational component of the nation’s conception and vision of the world. As highlighted by Pease above, Baraka becomes involved in the ‘creation of forms of life that could not be integrated within the political

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<sup>11</sup> Donald E. Pease, ‘The Anti-Slave from Emerson to Obama’, in *A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture*, ed. by David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Sontag, p. 196.

horizon of Western humanism.’ Aural in quality, America as Other, as series of symbolic laws and hypotheses, cannot reintegrate that which cannot be rendered discursively. One modality of the voice, which shall be discussed momentarily, eludes this symbolic framing of the Other. It is through this evasion that this same modality comes to undermine the solidity of the hypotheses of violence offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

Indeed, the use of oration as a method to oppose American oppression is central to Frederick Douglass’ praxis. He speaks warmly of his reading of “The Columbian Orator” in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). The text vindicated his response to the abuse he had received from his Master Hugh: ‘if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.’<sup>14</sup> What Douglass derived from these interactions was that learning and oration were ways to subvert, challenge and even circumvent the dominant white discourse: ‘to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man.’<sup>15</sup> Baraka’s growing understanding of his race as pivotal to his understanding of America and of the world was married with his embodiment of a certain liminal position—an extension of the anti-slave—which might institute a transformation of racialised violence. This is a position which he arrives at, I contend, similarly to Douglass; the voice becomes a vehicle capable of communicating qualities of black experience beyond words which are incommensurable with the fixed positions offered to black people in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. In the voice, a position opens up—the break—which claims black experience as a series of narratives, histories and mythologies which can only be communicated by those that have experienced them. Having been excluded as fellow human beings, these voices transform

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. by William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

this violence, turning it back on the coloniser. Within that same horizon, these voices create the break in which these stories of violence can be told.

Whilst Baraka seeks to propose new mythologies, to claim that he is simply a continuation or extension of Louverture or Douglass would be naïve and reductive. As this thesis proposes, the artists presented here understand the need for a change in languages and representations of violence in light of the framing of the Second World War and the atom bomb. In the case of Baraka, there is an additional history at play in the racialised violence which works back to the slave trade and its new manifestations in postwar society. As such, before we can discuss the voice in more detail and its relationship with violence in Baraka's work, some further specifics of the sociological status of 1960s America—the time of Baraka's growing affiliation with a certain black cultural nationalism—must be established. These will be specifically related to self-identity, a self-identity aggravated by what W. E. B. Du Bois would term “double consciousness”.

Reading Cage's work as a series of aesthetic positionings which illuminate the illusion of selfhood, as the previous chapter did, is all well and good. However, when such procedures are brought to issues of racist violence, they can be quickly absorbed into the violence they seek to dismantle. Simply put, many would question whether the positions offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other in the postwar moment—and, of course, previously and since—even recognised black people as possessors of a self—or certainly a self which it considers important—to begin with. Baraka identifies this himself in “Numbers, Letters” (1969):

I cant say who I am  
unless you agree I'm real  
...  
Unless you agree I'm real

that I can feel  
whatever beats hardest  
at our black souls

I am real, and I can't say who  
I am. Ask me if I know, I'll say  
yes, I might say no. Still ask.<sup>16</sup>

The call to dismantle the self can feel contradictory to any political mission to transform racial violence considering that such violent destruction has been conducted on the selves of black people. In short, there is no self to be destroyed because it has been subject to violence which forecloses its ability to interact with others. In “Numbers, Letters”, however, Baraka exposes a disjunction between being unable to positively *situate oneself* in relation to the laws and hypotheses of America as Other (‘I cant say who I am/unless you agree I’m real’) and the nevertheless potent understanding that he is ‘real’ (‘I am real, and can’t say who/I am. Ask me if I know, I’ll say/yes, I might say no.’). In short, Baraka exposes the fact that what he calls his “realness” is not ultimately situatable within the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Whilst they undoubtedly come to bear on Baraka, this poem exposes the areas within the horizon of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other which do not account for his experience (‘Ask me if I know, I’ll say/yes, I might say no.’) The exposure of this disjunction will prove crucial momentarily when discussing the voice.

Studies of the time demonstrate the ways in which the laws and hypotheses of America as Other come to bear on black people. Mamie Phipps Clark’s 1947 study “Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children”, for instance, demonstrated a preference among segregated pre-school children—particularly in the North—for white rather than black dolls. As Clark states, ‘there is a tendency for the majority of these children, in spite of

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<sup>16</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 214-15.

their own skin color, to prefer the white doll and negate the brown doll'<sup>17</sup> with 57% of the children Clark categorised as “Dark” deeming that the ‘colored doll’ ‘looks bad’.<sup>18</sup> These instances of scopic discrimination were married with deliberate racial gaslighting on a national scale. In a long history of violences against enfranchisement of non-whites, the literacy tests of 1950s and 1960s Louisiana and other Southern states—which offered non-whites the opportunity to “earn” their vote—were intentionally worded so as to offer an examiner a plethora of excuses to fail applications. Failing criteria could come down to how the candidate chose to interpret the question. The white registrar would judge whether these confusingly worded and at times unanswerable questions had been given acceptable answers.<sup>19</sup> These two examples of deeply embedded structural state violence against non-whites target the self, foreclosing its potential to be realised or recognised within the hypotheses of America as Other. Fanon indicates in his psychoanalytically couched text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that this is one element of the tripartite structure of colonial violence. Beginning with the body, black people are reduced to their skin colour—what Fanon calls the ‘racial epidermal schema’.<sup>20</sup> The body becomes an object, broken into parts and fixed, explained and justified by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. This psychic violence—the result of the first violence—induces what Fanon calls ‘nausea’,<sup>21</sup> the disgust induced in the black person upon realising “who they are” in the laws and hypotheses of the Other; “if America as Other determines that I am not human, this must be the case”. This formulation bears similarity to Du Bois’ double consciousness as the ‘measuring [of] one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’<sup>22</sup> This is then carried into cultural violences which seek the destruction of forms and practices which might embody and engender a sense of self through community. Phipps

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, ‘Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children’, in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. by Theodore M. Newcomb and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Holt, 1947), pp. 169-178 (p. 177).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Onion, ‘Take the Impossible “Literacy” Test Louisiana Gave Black Voters in the 1960s’, *Slate* <<https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/06/voting-rights-and-the-supreme-court-the-impossible-literacy-test-louisiana-used-to-give-black-voters.html>> [accessed 27 October 2019]

<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 11.

Clark's study above exhibits this; the black doll is rejected because the white doll is deemed by many of the children to uphold certain cultural standards of beauty. All the work carried out by state violence in these practices can be summed up as the forced erasure of selfhood in seeing "who one is" relation to the laws and hypotheses of the Other.

Yet as discussed in the first chapter, Cage's work is to propose a radical eschewing of the self as a conceptual category and the stark yet transformative vulnerability which this can induce. Because that sense of self is couched in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other in this instance, this would merely lead to that which Fanon describes as "identification"; seeking to be seen as acceptable to white America. As Homi K. Bhabha writes, '[t]he demand of identification—that is, to be *for* an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness.' Identification is thus 'always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.'<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is not prudent to aim *for* a sense of self determined by America as Other, but to claim space for one's self away from that series of hypotheses and laws. For Baraka, there is a similar urgency to expel the logos of the Other from the stage in order to foster identities outside of this limited horizon. If this describes the challenge, a refiguring of the anti-slave for 1960s America describes the position required to take on this challenge. Yet this is an uncertain and precarious position as it also requires the disavowal of established communities of what "blackness" in America may entail, guided as these are, in some sense, by America as Other. An intuitive turn away from "white" and towards "black" not only upholds the artificial binary between the two. It additionally offers an artificial comfort, what Robinson would term the 'cage' of Western culture<sup>24</sup> and Baraka would describe as self-defeating: '...you see that Black people have been trying to get out of this for a long time and they've been doing the same things.'<sup>25</sup> The position required in order to avoid 'identification' and provoke a substantial change is one that is unpredictable and

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<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994; repr. Routledge Classics, 2004), p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Robinson, p. 268.

<sup>25</sup> 'Interview with Amiri Baraka', *Washington University Digital Gateway Texts* <<http://digital.wustl.edu/e/ii/iiweb/bar5427.0106.009amiribaraka.html>> [accessed 27 October 2019]

inherently precarious. As we shall momentarily discover, Baraka's poetics suggests that the voice may provide the medium to embody this position and to transform violence.

### The break and the voice

Having discussed Baraka's initial scepticism and eventual move towards the view that race was integral to his writing, the chapter set up the anti-slave, the break and voice as a points of departure 'for the creation of forms of life that could not be integrated within the political horizon of Western humanism.' The introduction of Fanon and examples of the systematic structural violence against non-whites aimed to deepen the specificity of this particular socio-political horizon as related to racialised violence in the postwar period. In order to move towards a position which cannot be integrated within this horizon, we can turn to Baraka's growing radicalisation. Viewed through the lens of his revelatory experience of travelling to Cuba, we can see how Baraka's earliest movements towards an art immediately concerned with race and violence are connected to the voice and the generative spaces that this voice can access.

As a country that was in alliance with the Soviet Union, the depiction of Cuba within the United States was unsurprisingly negative. Whilst Joseph McCarthy had resigned as Chair of the Senate Government Operations Committee in 1955, McCarthyism had sunk its claws into American discourse. In turn, Baraka visited Cuba with fellow black revolutionary writers to 'know what's *really* going on' (in the words of those that invited him).<sup>26</sup> Not only did the trip change an initially sceptical Baraka's opinion of revolution, but also of his own view of himself as an American. As he states in "Cuba Libre" (1960):

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<sup>26</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 126.

Being an American poet, I suppose, I thought my function was simply to talk about everything as if I knew...it had never entered my mind that I might really like to find out for once what was actually happening someplace else in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Realising that he should see the world and pass judgement on experience rather than on received wisdom is pivotal. His personal experience in the essay is intrinsically linked to his “being black” as much as it is to “being American”. In spite of this gradual move in the 1960s towards seeing the connection between his race and his art as vital, he remained forcefully opposed to ‘embarrassingly inept social comment-type poems, usually about one or sometimes a group of Negroes being mistreated or suffering in general’,<sup>28</sup> as he did throughout his career. For Baraka, there is a need for decisiveness, for truly effective action (‘we want “poems that kill.”’).<sup>29</sup> This desire, combined with the victorious revolutionary spirit still extant in Cuba, proved instrumental in developing a voice capable of carrying out this revolutionary work.

In the course of his visit, Baraka was directly affected by the tension which had been generated through increased American interference in Cuba as part of the wider Cold War politic. He had travelled from a nation which excluded him as a representative of his race to a nation where he was excluded as a representative of America, an America seeking to become the ‘Nation of Nations’:

“Everyone in the world,” she said, with her finger, “has to be communist or anti-communist. And if they're anti-communist, no matter what kind of foul person they are, you people accept them as your allies. Do you really think that hopeless little

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 219.

island in the middle of the sea is China? That is irrational. You people are irrational!”<sup>30</sup>

Criticism of Baraka as representative of “America” in this context seems highly effective. In one of the most emotive passages in the essay, Baraka defends himself as in ‘complete agreement’ with the group, albeit remaining ‘not even interested in politics’.<sup>31</sup> By the end of the essay, he appears to write off America and its penchant for disavowing revolution in light of reason. He declares that whilst it is ‘much too late’ for Americans to change their relationship with America as Other, ‘the Cubans, and the other *new* peoples (in Asia, Africa, South America) don’t need us, and we had better stay out of their way.’<sup>32</sup> Whilst Baraka here retraces the lines drawn by those he met in Cuba (“cowardly bourgeois individualist.”), he also gathers a sense of the necessity of change. He also comes to further understand the importance of art’s link to personal experience of a society which has continuously ostracised black people (‘In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul?’).<sup>33</sup> Whilst Baraka remains pessimistic at the close of the essay, there are occasions where an infectious Cuban optimism moves him. Notably, his meeting with Castro stirs him not only as a political activist but as a poet and an orator. He describes the two-hour speech as given by ‘an amazing speaker, knowing probably instinctively all the laws of dynamics and elocution...as if he were reading a poem’.<sup>34</sup> This has clear links to Douglass who saw oration as of critical importance to bypassing the any hypotheses in language which may predetermine the reception of his response. Indeed, Baraka’s pessimism could be read as a sense that the narrative around black people in America is omnipotent and immovable, conditions which Castro’s voice loosens up. Furthermore, the answers given in their short, private conversation holds further evidence of Baraka’s respect. As a poet:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 146-7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

I shrugged my shoulders and asked him what did he intend to do with this revolution... “That’s a poet’s question,” he said, “and the only poet’s answer I can give you is that I will do what I think is right, what I think the people want. That’s the best I can hope for, don’t you think?”<sup>35</sup>

...and as a radical:

“I’ve said a hundred times that I’m not a communist...I said also a hundred times that I consider myself a humanist. A radical humanist. The only way that anything can ever be accomplished in a country like Cuba is radically. The old has been here so long that the new must make radical changes in order to function at all.”<sup>36</sup>

The focus, for the moment, is on the voice. Baraka is drawn to particular qualities of Castro’s voice which began ‘with the syllables drawn out and precisely enunciated, then tightening...and going into an almost musical rearrangement’.<sup>37</sup> Important as the aural qualities of Castro’s presentation are, his instruction to Baraka is clear: “I hope you take it home with you”.<sup>38</sup> The speech appears pivotal for an erstwhile unconvinced Baraka who—whilst remaining pessimistic regarding the potential for transformation within the United States—does take the idea of radical action home. Whilst Douglass may have cemented the importance of oration in this new black radical tradition, the experience of *hearing* the voice of Castro is crucial for Baraka. One particular closing line—‘[t]he idea of “a revolution” had been foreign to me’—intrigues not merely for that mid-sentence ‘had’ which gestures

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

towards the possibility of uncertainty and change. '[F]oreign' signifies an idea which exists *inside* a set of principles *as an outsider*, as an enclave. As the opposite of white, blackness acts as what Baldwin would later call the 'fixed star', the point around which whiteness can define itself as opposite to.<sup>39</sup> Finding radical revolutionary action consequently allows Baraka to tap into his own radical relationship with blackness which had hitherto remained obscure to his conscious practice. Cuba, as an anti-American state, brokers the reconnection to the potential radicality of black experience for Baraka. The potential for a new horizon rests in black experience whose 'foreign' revolutionary spirit is uncovered vicariously through the voice in Baraka's journey to 'foreign' Cuba.

The importance of the voice as a tool for challenging violences couched in discourse takes on increasing significance throughout the 1960s, into the 1970s and beyond. As indicated by the passage above, Baraka's experiencing of the Castro's voice, and the way in which it is deeply affecting of him, is predicated on a series of complex problematics. Baraka's work brings to the fore different modes of voice: the voice of the poem as text, the voicing of the poem in performance (as a vocal projection of one's ego to others), and that quality of the voice which remains inarticulate but which unquestionably carries force—that which the voice gestures towards but which meaning through words remains unable to match. These modes can be mapped onto Lacan's Symbolic (at the level of the words on the page), the Imaginary (as a form of ego projection), and the Real (as that quality of the voice which evades description). Mladen Dolar and Édouard Glissant will prove key in mapping this question of inarticulacy—Glissant will term this "opacity"—in Baraka's work whilst Lesley Wheeler, Nina Sun Eidsheim, and Peter Middleton will assist in a similar mode regarding the voicing of the poem. To offer a starting articulation here however, when this chapter utilises the term "voice", it is speaking of a force which encapsulates all the above modes. When speaking of the voice of the poem as text, the sense of the poem as voiced in performance and the voice's inarticulable qualities are also partially called forth. Similarly,

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<sup>39</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2017), p. 17.

when speaking of the voicing of the poem, its words as written are also brought into play by virtue of their recitation. This does not mean that we cannot speak of these modes of voice individually, but it is critical to note that all are interrelated and at play in each other. Accordingly, the voice brings together these different modes of voice, disrupting any idea of a “pure Symbolic voice” and, therefore, any notion of full symbolic coherence, the idea that the words on the page contain the whole story. Accordingly, the voice for Lacan, and as taken by this chapter, is best described by Darian Leader as ‘the signifying chain minus the effect of meaning.’<sup>40</sup> Because the voice has Real, Symbolic and Imaginary registers, the inarticulate Real of the voice always encroaches on attempts to reduce the voice as a whole to the Symbolic or Imaginary alone. The “Real” of the voice presents us with the signifiers of the poem outside of the symbolic ordering of America as Other. The ‘enigmatic leftover’ of the Real, that component which is both unsymbolisable and irremovable, therefore offers access to positions outside of America as Other. Yet these positions can be shared in via a historically constituted relationship with violence, one beyond words, one experienced only by black people in America. As such, the voice as a whole connects us to those experiences via different channels than the possible positions offered in America as Other.

As noted, the voice in Baraka is one which itself sits in the “break”, in this “Realness”. So whilst the voice in Baraka’s poetry is Baraka himself, this is predicated on an understanding of the subject as in continuous relationship with one’s heritage. Accordingly, when Baraka writes and subsequently performs his poetry or plays, he does so from a site of unfixed provenance, one in which he speaks for himself yet channels the violences against black people of centuries past and present, violences which both vindicate and are vindicated by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. As shall be elucidated further in the second section through Baraka’s reading of “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” and other poetry and plays including *Slave Ship*, it is the problematic of “inarticulacy” which prevents the voice from being fully absorbed by the laws and hypotheses held in the term America as Other.

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<sup>40</sup> Darian Leader and Judy Groves, *Introducing Lacan* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2000), p. 125.

This complex interplay of the three vocal modes is critical in generating the unfixable forcefulness of what we are entitled to call Baraka's poetic voice.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of the undeniable importance of his trip to Cuba in 1960, William J. Harris marks 1963 as the beginning of Baraka's "transitional period" from Beat poet to Black Nationalist icon. Staying with forms where great emphasis is placed on the non-discursive, Baraka wrote *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* in 1963 under his birth name, LeRoi Jones. It is here that Baraka depicts the close connection between cultural formation and violence. The text considers music as a voicing of shared cultural identity including shared experiences of violence. The chapter "The Negro as Non-American" is a rigorous and damning polemic against the inhumanity cultivated by white slave owners. Baraka focuses on the calculation required to maintain transnational slavery. He references Melville Herskovits' *A Myth of the Negro Past* which identifies slavery in Africa before the Transatlantic slave trade began.<sup>42</sup> He argues that whilst this slavery reduced slaves to the role of an 'economic cipher', an individual remained an 'essential part and member of whatever community he is enslaved in'.<sup>43</sup> Whilst 'these slaves were still human beings...the African who was unfortunate enough to find himself on some fast clipper ship to the New World was not even accorded membership in the human race.'<sup>44</sup> Baraka drives this point home most forcefully when he argues that the slaves of the Transatlantic Trade were:

...brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, and is, in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one's own version of man's life on earth—that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> As such, when this chapter speaks of a particular mode of voice (i.e. the Symbolic or Real voice) as opposed to the voice as a whole, it will make this clear.

<sup>42</sup> LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963; repr. London: Harper Perennial, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

This 'particular enslavement' brings us back to the psychical violence described by Fanon. Slavery is a total violence, one which strips individuals of their selfhood. The violence of the Transatlantic slave trade is caused by a total severing of the individual from 'one's own version of man's life on earth'. The impact of this violence upon the individual's sense of self results in their reduction to a mere cipher producing predictable, profitable actions. This stripping of selfhood is predicated on the foreclosing of one's ability to form a community in which one may recognise oneself as anything other than a slave.

What is lacking is not a tangible, physical home, but the very idea of "home" itself. Dislocated from an originary home of Africa geographically and shipped to an America which represents 'the complete antithesis to one's own version of man's life on earth', the African slave is caught between locations with nowhere to root. As time progresses and many generations of slaves are born in America, there comes the additional dislocation of time. The very idea of a self and of a home is foreclosed by the limitations placed on black people through the hypotheses and laws of America as Other. It is no surprise therefore that a sense of this eternal delay from reaching any sense of "home", the trauma of which is inscribed into black experience, returns for Baraka in many of his writings. This is a question, as Glissant suggests and as will be discussed later in this chapter, of bringing the violent expulsion of the Transatlantic slave trade to bear on the contemporary experience of that legacy and, indeed, on contemporary violences.

Music then becomes a form which can, in some sense, carry a communal cultural history when community formation has been foreclosed. The ability to build community on the basis of recognising oneself and others as anything other than slaves is cached in the voicing and performing of music or poetry. Indeed, the voicing of these words and images reactivates and transforms those past violences by exposing their non-discursive qualities. Baraka's essay in *Home* entitled "The Myth of a "Negro Literature"" points to a sense of conviction in the potential of cultural practices to affect change. Baraka argues that '[o]nly in music, and most notably in blues, jazz, and spirituals, i.e., 'Negro Music', has there been a

significantly profound contribution by American Negroes.’<sup>46</sup> Even then, as he argues once more in *Blues People*, these original practices have been diluted to prove acceptable to a white audience:

The very nature of slavery in America dictated the way in which African culture could be adapted. Thus, a Dahomey river god ceremony had no chance of survival in this country at all unless it was incorporated into an analogous rite that was present in the new culture—which is what happened. The Christians of the New World called it baptism.<sup>47</sup>

As stated earlier, this covers the tripartite structure of violence offered by Fanon (bodily, psychological, cultural) where a cultural practice is “made white” in order to make it acceptable for performance within the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, as sufficiently representative of “Americanness”. Baraka continues, articulating other instances of slaves developing their own practices in systems which wished to deny them. For example, ‘where the use of the African drum was strictly forbidden, other percussive devices had to be found, like the empty oil drums that led to the development of the West Indian steel bands.’<sup>48</sup> Baraka’s conclusion is bittersweet:

The Negro’s way in this part of the Western world was adaptation and reinterpretation...But the survival of the *system* of African music is much more significant than the existence of a few isolated and finally superfluous features. The

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<sup>46</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Home* (New York: Morrow, 1966; repr. New York: AkashiClassics, 2009), p. 124.

<sup>47</sup> Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

notable fact is that the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value is of African derivation.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst an expression of collective black experience, this art also expresses an individual's intransitive experience of being black in addition to their own stories and histories of violence. Accordingly, the focus upon freeing the mind so as to cultivate sensitivity to both these paths became increasingly important for Baraka. Robert Elliot Fox described Baraka's fiction as 'the harried flight of an intensely self-conscious Afro-American artist/intellectual from the neo-slavery of blinding, neutralising whiteness, where the arena of struggle is basically within the mind.'<sup>50</sup> A passage in *Tales* (1967) documents Baraka's deep respect for poetics which are engaged with the mind, but in a most direct fashion:

The straight ahead people, who think when that's what's called for, who don't when they don't have to. Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit, to always be weighing and analyzing, and reflecting.<sup>51</sup>

In 1966—and the early years of his Black Nationalist work—Baraka attacks 'American expression *sans* blackness', heralding a 'Black music' which he describes as, in its greatest iterations, one which 'breaks out'.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, 'the vibration of a feeling, of a particular place, a conjunction of world spirit' is in this great black art. He describes this music as 'the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 27-8.

<sup>50</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. xxii.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

consciousness, the expression of where we are.’<sup>53</sup> Yet it is Baraka’s explication of ‘[w]here man will go’ that has radical promise:<sup>54</sup>

Sun-Ra speaks of evolution of the cosmic consciousness; that is future, or as old as *purusa*. Where man will go. “Oh you mean space ships?” Which is like the Zen monk answering the student’s question about whether or not dogs have souls... i.e., “Well, yes... and no.”<sup>55</sup>

When Pharaoh Sanders says “ommmmmmmmm” or James Brown screams, *that* is more radical for Baraka ‘than most jazz musicians’.<sup>56</sup> What is more radical than a protest led by ‘sit-ins’ is a protest where ‘[w]e get to Feel-ins, Know-ins, Be-ins.’<sup>57</sup> The nature of one’s own experience of blackness and communicating collective black experience is crucially approached for Baraka, at least initially, through this focus upon the voice of the music. This begins by freeing the mind from the unsustainable distinction between individual and collective, proposing instead their inherent immanence within one another. He praises the ‘new music’ as “radical” within the context of mainstream America. Just as the new music begins by being free. That is, freed of the popular song.<sup>58</sup> Freed of the popular song, the popular discourse, this black music can create new mythologies and strategies for dismantling the popular discourse through reactivation of past and present violences in the break. The musicians which are ‘using their music as eloquent vehicles for a consciousness of self in America’—he cites Charles Mingus, Max Roach and Archie Shepp in particular—give ‘their various responses from wherever they (are) find themselves.’<sup>59</sup> Exemplary musicians, for Baraka, are able to offer politicised readings through their ability to reflect

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 208-9.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

their experience of being black, and their position in the wider culture. He closes by encouraging unity in Black music across its many fragments. Such a music will ‘include all resources, all the rhythms, all the yells and cries, all that information about the world, the Black ommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, opening and entering.’<sup>60</sup> This ‘opening and entering’ retains critical purchase upon Baraka’s Black Nationalist poetry, his later Third-World Marxist works, and the transition between them. There is something in music and in the voice as a vehicle for thought beyond communicative and aesthetic forms. The voice possesses a particular quality for preventing discourse from being “just words”, instead rendering it closer to ‘Feel-ins, Know-ins, Be-ins.’ The voices of Sanders or Brown, their inarticulable qualities, adds something that mere words cannot.

‘We want a black poem. And a/Black World.’<sup>61</sup>

Having discussed Baraka’s early relationship with the voice through both an ongoing historical oral tradition—embodied by Douglass and Louverture—and through the experience of the revolutionary voice of Castro, this chapter has discussed how this related to the manipulation and development of various forms of music. These forms sought to tease out the relationship with both historical and present day violences through the use of the voice as a force which operates partially outside of the fixed positions—yet within the horizon—of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. At base, this voice must speak from a position of experience incommensurable with the horizon of the white logos in order to prevent its reabsorption. Here, Baraka offers a reinterpretation of what it means to invoke and ‘propose his own symbols’.<sup>62</sup> Sun Ra articulates the importance of seizing myth creation and its relationship to Fanon’s descriptions of violence in a passage from his 1974 film *Space is the Place*:

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

<sup>62</sup> Baraka, *Home*, p. 131.

How do you know I'm real? I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as the myth because that's what black people are: myths.<sup>63</sup>

On a first reading, Sun Ra's articulation of black people as a myth offers a series of positions outside of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Sun Ra's new myth creation often began with existing artefacts of cultural importance to America such as the Bible, which had itself been used to justify slavery. He 'rewrote and transformed their letters and syntax into new equations of meaning'.<sup>64</sup> Sun Ra's work here is to offer hidden meanings which would otherwise remain suppressed by reworking existing materials into new forms. This is a move which proposes the creation of myths which are foreign to, yet part of, the Other, myths which may transform the extant violences of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other and violently burst forth to offer a new horizon.

Yet, as Baraka identifies, there is a tendency towards what he calls 'mediocrity'. The term is discussed in his essay "The Myth of a "Negro Literature"" where it takes on a similar tenor to Fanon's use of the term 'identification'. Baraka states that 'the Negro middle class' has 'always gone out of its way to cultivate *any* mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, *i.e.*, Negroes.'<sup>65</sup> This is echoed in his poem "SOS", one which begins and ends by '[c]alling all black people' as if that call to arms is not being sufficiently taken up: 'Black people, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people'.<sup>66</sup> As Fanon proposed, in attempting to prove their "whiteness", the black middle classes are

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<sup>63</sup> *Space is the Place*, dir. by John Coney (North American Star Systems, 1974).

<sup>64</sup> David W. Stowe, *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 223.

<sup>65</sup> Baraka, *Home*, pp. 124-5.

<sup>66</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 218.

unable to find a new position in relation to the hypotheses of America as Other which may transform racialised violence. Baraka proposes that the problem is that the writer that remains influenced by ‘mediocrity’ has ‘never moved into the position where he could propose his own symbols, erect his own personal myths, as any great literature must.’<sup>67</sup> Baraka’s proposal is a breakaway, that ‘[i]f there is ever a Negro literature, it must disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a profounder America.’<sup>68</sup> In order to close this section, I will use this discussion of ‘mediocrity’ as a means of discussing certain early poems of Baraka’s Black Nationalist period. These, I contend, embody the mythologies and narratives which may prove capable of disrupting the violence of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. This will be followed by a consideration of Fred Moten’s discussion of the break. This will offer a formal clarification of the position alluded to so far in this chapter, one that will allow Baraka’s poetic voice to offer a transformative relationship with violence.

Baraka’s early Black Nationalist poetry focuses on allowing past and present violences to come forward in the form of new stories and mythologies. Published in *Black Magic*, which William J. Harris cites as Baraka’s ‘first black nationalist-inspired collection of poetry’,<sup>69</sup> “leroy” is representative of a violence in the form of an offering. This image is perpetuated by the cover to the first edition ‘which depicts a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed voodoo doll riddled with huge hat pins.’<sup>70</sup> The poem depicts Baraka’s mother as the protagonist in the transfer of knowledge as received from ‘black angels’<sup>71</sup> and passed onto ‘me and all the other black people of our time’.<sup>72</sup> Baraka hopes to pass this onto others in turn and does so in a form of self-sacrifice:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>69</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 210.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 223.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 224.

When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to  
black people. May they pick me apart and take the  
useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave  
the bitter bullshit rotten white parts  
alone.<sup>73</sup>

The cannibalistic overtones in the picking apart of the body become a signifier for the transfer of new, radical mythologies. Baraka takes control of the bodily violence described by Fanon, transforming it into a forced, violent disengagement ‘from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it’. The compartmentalisation of his being into the ‘sweet meat’ and the ‘bitter bullshit rotten white parts’ echoes a passage from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* which details the force of the laws and hypotheses of the Other as they come to bear on black people:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema.<sup>74</sup>

...

I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects...I took myself far off from my own presence.<sup>75</sup>

Baraka takes control of the process of compartmentalisation and reverses it, stripping out the white parts which dilute, infect and prevent black mythologies from developing. As Fanon

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, '[t]he colonial world is a compartmentalized world'.<sup>76</sup> Here, Baraka maps the violence of the compartmentalisation of black bodies onto the compartmentalisation of America, transforming this violence which forecloses selfhood into a cannibalistic offering, a compartmentalisation which nourishes radical action.<sup>77</sup> Such a move by both Fanon and Baraka could be critiqued as an attempt to collapse difference through the instatement of a single 'blackness' which stands in opposition to whiteness. This would shun the importance of individual experiences of violence, but also exacerbate the black/white binary which sustains racial violence. However, an alternative reading of this move—one proposed by Homi K. Bhabha in reading Fanon's "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*—is 'more strategic, activist, and aspirational' than one which exacerbates difference: 'the coming into being of the Third World is also a *project of futurity* conditional upon being freed from the "univocal choice" presented by the cold war.'<sup>78</sup> The transformation of this univocal choice is then transformed into a "breaking through" of a different mythology, united behind a set of collected experiences, organised and defined by those which enact them through their performance. In "leroy", Baraka sacrifices his individual being for the furthering of a cause beyond himself. The poem therefore offers an oscillation between violences, between the forced expulsion of whiteness and the sacred

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<sup>76</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> There are a great number of extant scholarly works which consider this connection between Baraka, Fanon and violence. Kimberly W. Benston's *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (1976) focuses on Baraka's 'movement from the avant-garde of the white, Euro-American tradition to the vanguard of black revolutionary art' (Benston, p.4), highlighting the importance of 'Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon in insisting that "the purpose of our writing is to create a nation."' (Kimberley W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (Chelsea: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 58). Komozi Woodard's *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (1999) quotes regularly from *The Wretched of the Earth*, framing Fanon as 'another way to revolutionary self-transformation' (Komozi Woodard, *A Nation with a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 50). William J. Harris' *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (1985) connects Baraka's desire for revenge against the white world after the death of Malcolm X in "A Poem for Black Hearts" to Fanon's assertion that 'violence is a cleansing force' (William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 28). Sean Bonney, in his 2013 blog post "Further Notes on Militant Poetics", connects Fanon's "'zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.'" to Baraka's "'the place music goes when we don't hear it no more . . . the silence at the top of our screams.'" (Sean Bonney, 'Further Notes on Militant Poetics' <<https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2013/09/further-notes-on-militant-poetics.html>> [accessed 10 November 2019]). Other texts, such as Jerry Gafio Watts' *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (2001), consider this connection whilst remaining too clouded by their own political sentiments, to the point of questioning 'whether Baraka had actually read Fanon' (Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (London: New York University Press, 2001) p. 255) to provide material of any great revelation on this topic.

<sup>78</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. xvii.

violence of cannibalism. Similar to finding himself in between symbolic identities in Cuba (American/black), Baraka finds a similar liminality with representations of violence. This opens up a position between the stereotypical mythologies described by Fanon ('tom-toms, cannibalism') which could be seen as a reaffirmation of those stereotypes and the radical potential of those mythologies, if skilfully reformed. The unified mythology offered by Baraka is thus a pointed one which cuts straight through the categorisations imposed by Cold War politics—performing a whiteness defined by the hypotheses of America as Other or performing a blackness also defined by the hypotheses of America as Other. It is therefore a question of how to keep the potentially radical violence of these mythologies open whilst preventing them from becoming reappropriated into the range of possible positions already on offer by America as Other. It is a question of how to utilise aestheticisations of violence as a *new* symbol of strength rather than one of pastiche.

In order to expel the hypotheses of America as Other *and* to keep this space open for the working through of stories of racial violence, the voice must occupy the liminalities discussed above—America/Africa, whiteness as defined by the Other/blackness as defined by the Other, psychical violence of the hypotheses of America as Other coming to bear on the individual/bodily violence of cannibalistic imagery. It must occupy these liminalities in order to refuse the absorption of those actions. To articulate this space, one from which the voice may be able to speak for individual *and* collective black experience and be able to transform the above violences, we can return to the 'opening and entering' earlier articulated in Baraka's "The Changing Same". As articulated by Adam Fitzgerald whilst interviewing Fred Moten:

There's this ecstatic moment where you're reframing the movers and shakers of our modernity and then suddenly a kind of vernacular music enters the text. All of the (mostly) French theory I've read sounds so much more insular in tone, in

comparison. This is part of what I find so exciting about Baraka's work, especially in the 60s where you can see him as absorbing Creeley and Olson and O'Hara at the same time he's introducing, inflecting, infecting poetry with a sublimely black vernacular.<sup>79</sup>

Black studies for Moten persists in an enquiry into 'what it is to own one's dispossession', what it is to own the space which embodies both the dispossession of Africa and the dislocation of America. As shall be argued in the second section, the voice is paramount to embodying this ownership. Moten argues that this concern 'makes it more possible to embrace the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape.'<sup>80</sup> For Moten, 'the gift of constant escape', the 'dispossession' appears to rest in the position taken up by the poetic voice. The aesthetic position where the "work" of Baraka's poetry is carried out is 'in the break, in the scene, in the music'.<sup>81</sup> The Real of the voice is what offers access to this, communicating not from the absorbable Symbolic or Imaginary. This is a position which can 'propose [its] own symbols', relying neither on a caricature of blackness nor the prevailing whiteness, but instead on violences which have been recorded in musical and poetic cultural practices. It is an aesthetic positioning of the anti-slave for 1960s America. Baraka is 'situated...at the opening'<sup>82</sup> and it is this specific quality of openings that enables such intense, active reflection and transformation. As Baraka himself argues in "State/ment" (1965), 'The Black Artist's role is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering'.<sup>83</sup> Any deep understanding of the 'nature of the society' requires resting in its breaks and its contradictions, a position offered by access to the Real of the voice. Furthermore, and vital for a deeply political art

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<sup>79</sup> Adam Fitzgerald, "An Interview with Fred Moten, Pt. II", *Literary Hub* <<https://lithub.com/an-interview-with-fred-moten-pt-ii/>> [accessed 28 October 2019]

<sup>80</sup> Fred Moten, 'Black Op', *PMLA*, Vol. 123, No. 5 (Oct., 2008), 1743-1747 (p. 1745).

<sup>81</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, p. 85.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 169.

such as Baraka's, sitting in the break allows an illumination of the ground of battle and a making clear of current relationships with violence. Furthermore, it presents an unpredictable space which is the only space capable of piercing and creating new space within the horizon of America as Other. Baraka appears acutely aware of the importance of this moment of pause upon the opening. Again from Moten:

What he sees as a transitional phase of his development—ground simply to have been covered or passed through—is a very definite seizure and advent, a musical caesura that demands precisely that immersive lingering that, according to Ralph Ellison, is a necessary preface to action.<sup>84</sup>

Action is crucial to our project here. It is after this 'immersive lingering' that violence's target can be considered. The break—a space of 'immersive lingering'—offers this. Critically, it is a position which Moten describes as 'a cutting and abundant refusal of closure.'<sup>85</sup> It is a liminality which, once occupied and launched from, cannot be reabsorbed. This is both because it does not want and is not commensurate with the horizon of America as Other—as Symbolic—which it challenges. Baraka's "cruelty", to reference Artaud, offers mythologies and transformations *outside* those codified in America as Other through a particular quality of the poetic voice. As Stefano Harney and Moten later describe in *The Undercommons*, it is a position which, when attacked, is never fixed:

We surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we're undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we're unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we're gone (because we're already

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<sup>84</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, p. 85.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

here, moving.) We ask and we tell and we cast the spell that we're under, which tells us what to do and how we shall be moved, here, where we dance the war of apposition.<sup>86</sup>

This is a radical reimagining of the basic tenets of Emerson's anti-slave, the individual that is capable of offering a new horizon. In retaining the openness of this space, Baraka can both tell stories of violence and enact his own. Accordingly, this 'immersive lingering' in the break *becomes* a reflection of the violence Baraka wishes to enact. The second section will articulate how, in utilising his relationship with the break, Baraka is able to provide a sustained critique. His weaponisation of the voice, through the break which offers potent access to its Real-ness, transforms violent content into something altogether more powerful.

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<sup>86</sup> Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 19.

## II – Opacity and the Voice

### Real Voices

As Ben Hickman argues in *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics*, one branch of the postwar avant-garde—that which focused on the ‘subsumption of art into life’—had specific limits:

[A]n emphasis was placed on accepting the world as it existed rather than constructing symbolic orders to constrain it. This strategy was political in different ways: in Susan Sontag’s anti-hermeneutical ‘Against Interpretation’ it aimed to release the sensuality and energy inhering in aesthetic form; in John Cage’s insistence on a shift from ‘making to accepting’ the priority was heightened attention to the everyday world. By the time of the Vietnam War, however, in their diffuseness and emphasis on acceptance, such projects were inadequate as a response to repressions of increasingly concrete and identifiable political enemies.<sup>87</sup>

Whilst a mode of deep aesthetic investigation is critical, Baraka couples this with direct, political engagement. This marries with Hickman’s assertion that Baraka was ‘fundamentally a poet of conviction’.<sup>88</sup> This second section aims to identify how Baraka is able to work with and specify these heuristic praxes in order to engender a new, effective relationship with the violence engendered through the laws and hypothesis of America as Other. This will be conducted through an exploration of Baraka’s weaponisation of the poetic voice and articulated using Mladen Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More* alongside the works of Édouard Glissant and Fred Moten. In the first section, I outlined how Baraka considers race as related to the creation of new myths beyond the limited, only partially

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<sup>87</sup> Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics*, p. 113.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

coherent horizon of America as Other. To gather an idea of how the ‘opening and entering’ into the voice may provide passage to a new horizon, we can first turn to Lesley Wheeler and Peter Middleton before further considering the work of Jacques Lacan as read through Mladen Dolar.

Part of Baraka’s project is to foreground the importance of his poetic voice as one of many interwoven strategies for proposing new, unfixed positions in relation to violence. As Lesley Wheeler argues in *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (2008), the voicing of poetry is a ‘first principle for poets of various affiliations, including much ethnic-American writing’. ‘However,’ she continues, ‘voice is also a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry.’<sup>89</sup> For Wheeler, the voice is a meeting point: ‘[v]oice in the political sense, as the right or ability to speak or write, also intersects with literary studies’.<sup>90</sup> The voice is a different kind of activation of the poem’s energy. For Peter Middleton in *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (2005), this projection which he terms “distant reading” is ‘an interpretation that acknowledges that it is only one moment of the text’s future, and only one of the many ‘interpretants’’.<sup>91</sup> This brings us to Baraka’s new mythologies. The voice activates these past and present stories of violence whilst simultaneously denying that America as Other is a symbolic system which offers a complete symbolic interpretation of them. The voice also offers a series of new futures for the text which are grounded in the experience of giving voice to those poems and reactivating the histories of violence which they tell.<sup>92</sup> Yet what is the *specific* quality of the voice in Baraka which facilitates this kind of transmission and transformation of stories of violence? Baraka points us towards the importance of voices in “The Burton Greene Affair”

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<sup>89</sup> Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. 8-9.

<sup>92</sup> This is not to say that the voice is a privileged force, a potential misstep which Derrida undermines in *Voice and Phenomena* (1967). Instead, the voice takes on, as Wheeler states, a specific role in the transmission of certain poetic affiliations, and for concretely undermining the authorial power granted to words on the page, and is thus well suited to the task of channelling energies and stories which have been systematically undermined when presented *only* on the page.

from *Black Music* (1968): ‘Burton Greene, at one point, began to bang aimlessly at the keyboard. He was writhing, too, pushed by forces he could not use or properly assimilate.’<sup>93</sup> Greene’s whiteness prevents him from being carried by the same ‘mad body-dissolving music’ of those black musicians that he plays with (Pharaoh Sanders and Marion Brown).<sup>94</sup> Racialised voices thus partially point towards a Real difference, that which cannot simply be accounted for by the words or notes projected or the ways in which those words or notes are projected.

To further investigate this compelling interpretation of the racialised voice, a force which, dependent on the context, grants privileged access to certain modalities of experience, we can turn to Jacques Lacan as read through Mladen Dolar. In Lacan, the voice is one embodiment of *l’objet a* (the object cause of desire). Lacan dubs the voice a partial object, one which has ‘no specular image, in other words, no alterity’.<sup>95</sup>

For isn’t it plain to see that the characteristic of being partial, rightly emphasized in objects, is applicable not because these objects are part of a total object, which the body is assumed to be, but because they only partially represent the function which produces them?<sup>96</sup>

As discussed, with the voice, there is always something missing, some surplus, something radically outside of our ability to comprehend it. This quality of the voice is always opaque and works silently without clear representation. The voice is therefore, for Dolar, ‘an interior obstacle to (self-)presence’ rather than any potential grounding of it.<sup>97</sup> The voice as an object of aesthetic beauty is open to fetishisation—symbolised as ‘beautiful’, ‘ugly’ etc—and the

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<sup>93</sup> LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1968; repr. Akashic Books, 2010), p. 137.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>95</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 693.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Dolar, p. 42.

voice which is interpreted as a mere carrier of words is open to absorption by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. In both these instances, the impact of the voice can be limited. Both of these qualities of the voice can be used to prop up a sense of self-presence, a sense of ownership of one's voice. Yet these same qualities are what makes it possible for Burton Greene to attempt to interpret, translate or imitate these voices, the same qualities which America as Other provides interpretation to, an interpretation which can be used to write those voices off in racially charged violence. As discussed already however, there is something of the voice which is not accounted for here. The object voice, as Dolar terms this enigmatic leftover, is the mode of voice which 'embodies the very impossibility of attaining auto-affection; it introduces a scission, a rupture in the middle of the full presence, and refers it to a void—but a void which is not simply a lack, an empty space; it is a void in which the voice comes to resonate.'<sup>98</sup> The void is that in which the voice engenders access to the Real of those stories of past and present violence. This object voice is:

...the part which can never be simply present, but it is not simply absent either: the object voice is the pivotal point precisely at the interaction between presence and absence. It discloses the presence and gives ground to its imaginary recognition—recognizing oneself as the addressee of the voice of the Other—but at the same time it is what inherently lacks and disrupts any notion of a full presence...the lack epitomized by the surplus of the voice.<sup>99</sup>

Critically for our purposes, the object voice allows for recognition by the Other whilst disrupting 'any notion of a full presence'. Like the anti-slave, the object voice is positioned such that it cannot be fixed in place; as proposed by Harney and Moten, '[e]very time it tries

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<sup>98</sup> Dolar, p. 42.

<sup>99</sup> Dolar, p. 55.

to take root, we're gone.'<sup>100</sup> This voice comes to be that which sits in the break, becoming the voice of unfixable position, of 'constant escape', of 'dispossession'. That the voice denies self-presence prevents what Dolar terms the rise of 'the Führer', a force which attempts to step into the God function and become a present embodiment of the object voice, of those histories of violence. Writing on Adolf Eichmann, Dolar demonstrates how distinctly different the expulsions of Baraka and the totalitarian are:

It is the voice [of the Führer] that makes the law—*Führerworte haben Gesetzkraft*, as Eichmann will say in Jerusalem; his words supported by the mere voice make the law, the voice immediately turns them into law, that is, the voice suspends the law...

In the person of the Führer, *zoe* and *bios* coincide. He represents the unity of *Volk* and its aspirations, its biopolitical ambition and endeavour—and Foucault's term "biopolitics" aims precisely at the annihilation of the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*—that is, in our particular perspective, at the same time between voice and *logos*. The biopolitical swallows the sacred, the voice swallows the letter, the division collapses.<sup>101</sup>

This is a critical but fundamental distinction. Where the Führer seeks to straddle *zoe* and *bios*—i.e. to symbolise and thus collapse the unexplainable Real—the renouncement of a fixed self accepts interaction with that void, using the 'void in which the voice comes to resonate' to demonstrate that void as a site of potential action.

"BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS" from 1964's *The Dead Lecturer* makes the voice central to the instatement of the new mythologies which will conjure the poem's eponymous force. Similarly to *Black Magic* (1969), there are connotations to voodoo ('(may a lost god

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<sup>100</sup> Harney & Moten, p. 19.

<sup>101</sup> Dolar, p. 116-17.

damballah, rest or save us’),<sup>102</sup> to explicit violence by those conjurations (‘Come up, black dada//nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape/their fathers. Cut the mothers’ throats’),<sup>103</sup> and to non-discursive vocalisations (‘Black scream/and chant, scream,/and dull, un/earthly/hollering.’).<sup>104</sup>

Before discussing the voice’s centrality to these three modalities, it is critical to pause. Baraka’s provocation to rape is motivated by revenge, one later described in “A Poem for Black Hearts” (‘For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest/until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals/that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if/we fail’).<sup>105</sup> There is confluence at this moment in “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” between the language of revolution, the occult, and the direct call to sexual violence. The extremeness of this particular call is reflective of the radical nature of Baraka’s attempted refiguring of violence through aesthetics in this period. As William J. Harris notes:

He does not want to shock the bourgeoisie, he wants to destroy it. For instance, when Allen Ginsberg approvingly describes a character in “Howl” (1956) throwing “potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism” as a true act of Dada, he is condoning a mild form of havoc in bourgeois society; but when Baraka uses dada in such poems as “Black Dada Nihilismus,” he is trying to marshal the irrational forces of dada...to bring an end to white civilization.<sup>106</sup>

Harris later describes the violence of this image—although he primarily focuses on Baraka’s call to ‘choke my friends’—as brought on by ‘ambivalence’, as the need to ‘escape the white

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<sup>102</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 73.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>106</sup> William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 32.

world view and poetics' whilst still being 'drawn to this white bohemian world and the great ideas of the Western humanist tradition.'<sup>107</sup> Baraka is, by this reading, attempting to shake not just 'the Negro middle class' out of its stupor with the use of stark images of violence, but also himself. Within the hypermasculine image of rape is not just a desire to 'destroy' the bourgeoisie, but a desire to humiliate and punish, a punishment which is first directed towards the 'white girls' as revenge for the innocent people destroyed by the violences of the white world. The directness here is jarring, yet it is designed, as Baraka argues in "American Sexual Reference: Black Male", to highlight the fact that 'the average ofay thinks of the black man as potentially raping every white lady in sight. Which is true, in the sense that the black man should want to rob the white man of everything he has'<sup>108</sup> Whilst illuminating the racist stereotypes which are passed down through the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, the force of the image of sexual violence against 'white girls'—who are contextualised as mere objects of 'the white man' in the above quote—is quickly absorbed by the violence of misogyny. Even here, this misogynistic violence can be taken further, pointing to Langston Hughes' "Silhouette" from "Three Songs About Lynching" where falsified claims to rape by the 'Southern gentle lady' resulted in the lynching of innocent black men.<sup>109</sup> In this call to rape, Baraka points towards yet another history of legalised violence against black people.

It clearly remains difficult to justify such imagery, particularly in light of Baraka's reflections in "American Sexual Reference: Black Male". Yet this is an important provocation. It acts, as shall be discussed momentarily, as a lure, one which exposes the ways in which the hypotheses of America as Other racially symbolise Baraka's provocation to sexual violence as indicative of a certain stereotype of black men. It is the force of the image, as Harris highlights, which appears to be of paramount importance to Baraka in this provocation, one which comes through with clarity.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>108</sup> Baraka, *Home*, p. 255.

<sup>109</sup> Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 171.

This provocation to rape along with the many other violences described in this and other poems are activated by the voice. In “Return of the Native” for instance, the voice plays a critical role in describing and also activating the ‘beauty’ of a place such as ‘Harlem’, a beauty noted as ‘[s]o violent and transforming’. The voice connects the ‘place/meant of/black people’ with Harlem, the violence which the residents have collectively experienced being transformed by the voice into a way in which to situate oneself outside of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other: ‘Can you sing/yourself, your life, your place/on the warm planet earth.’<sup>110</sup> As Mladen Dolar states, and as Baraka demonstrates here, ‘the written word has no power if it is not preceded by, and based in, the living voice.’<sup>111</sup> When the voice is brought to bear on specific political concerns—as well as heuristic ones—it can come to act much like the performative in Austin; the voice is less the articulation of doing than the doing itself. Indeed, in some cases in “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS”, the voice is clearly performative (‘Come up, black dada//nihilismus.’). It is critical these words are voiced for ‘[the law] cannot be passed, at least in principle, without passing through vocality.’<sup>112</sup> This is embodied in the aforementioned ‘Black scream’. As an ‘un/earthly/hollering’, the scream represents a vocalisation outside of the Other’s horizon. This does not last however:

Black scream  
 and chant, scream,  
 and dull, un  
 earthly  
 hollering. Dada, bilious  
 what ugliness, learned  
 in the dome, colored holy

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<sup>110</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 217.

<sup>111</sup> Dolar, p. 109.

<sup>112</sup> Dolar, p. 110.

shit (I call them sinned)<sup>113</sup>

Quickly, the voice is absorbed into a familiar ‘bilious/ugliness’. This ugliness is ‘learned in the dome’, in the sphere of white influence. This dome has a ‘power,/a moral code, so cruel’.<sup>114</sup> For Moten, “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” is a representation of ‘tragic political despair’<sup>115</sup> guided by ‘the absence, the irrecoverability of an originary and constitutive event; the impossibility of a return to an African, the impossibility of an arrival at an American, home.’<sup>116</sup> The despair of the poem is guided by the voice’s rapid reabsorption as a fetishised, symbolised stereotype. Again from Moten:

Perhaps all we know is that in the absence of what stands against, in the absence that is the dead and false, a poem is generated. It represents these absences, projecting into the future of their structures and effects from which, it would appear, only a god can save us. But a poem is generated, like a transcendental clue for that in which faith has been lost.<sup>117</sup>

This ‘god’ here could be the figure of the anti-slave, a radical individual proposing a radical future, yet one which faces the Real rather than attempting to justify it away through an attempt at full symbolic coherence. In order for this to come about, Baraka’s voice be positioned at the intersection between presence and absence—in the break—and to generate a voice which brings the ways in which the voice cannot be absorbed into the existing positions offered in America as Other to the fore.

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<sup>113</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 72.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>115</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, p. 94.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Baraka's performance of the poem with the New York Art Quartet on the latter's self-titled album of 1965 offers an articulation of how such a voicing may be generated.<sup>118</sup> Baraka's voicing of the poem in this instance is undertaken with deliberate calm. Lines which call for violence ('Rape the white girls', 'choke my friends')<sup>119</sup> can be delivered with such measured conviction because they are a call to the poem's eponymous force, the force which will inevitably deliver the violence called for. This is reflected in the timbre of the music and recitation, both of which carry a calm yet assured momentum. The voice brings "the word" of those stories of violence—their symbolic qualities—into the 'living voice'. Because that which is in the ear is not in the word—and thus not in the symbolic order—the laws and hypotheses of America as Other are unable to encapsulate that history of violence which Baraka calls upon and recites due to the disjunction between word and delivery. Outside of the positions offered in America as Other, Baraka's persistent, deliberate sermon activates that past relationship with violence found in Aunt Hester's scream, that quality which cannot be reduced to the word and thus not fully codified by the fixed positions offered within the term America as Other.

Baraka, then, moves away from the poem as a carrier of written words. Moten articulates the poem's relation to the page as like music to the score ('not the poem but a visual-spatial representation of the poem that would approximate or indicate its sound and meaning').<sup>120</sup> Whilst not necessarily speaking on the same kind of poetry, Hazel Smith's essay "Improvisation in Contemporary Experimental Poetry" expresses a similar relationship between the text and a subsequent voicing of that text when discussing Richard Kostelanetz's definition of 'text-sound' as 'language whose principal means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics'.<sup>121</sup> For Smith, '[t]his shifts the locus of meaning and

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<sup>118</sup> New York Art Quartet, "Sweet – Black Dada Nihilismus", New York Art Quartet, LP, ESP-Disk, 1004, 1965.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>121</sup> *Text-Sound Texts*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1980), p. 14.

coherence from signified to signifier.’<sup>122</sup> This rearticulates an issue which Baraka has already amply covered in *Blues People*: the malleability of music. A “Westernised” presentation retains its original “sonic qualities” in order to vicariously share some original cultural practice and the violences which it bore witness to. This can become a reaching towards ‘the impossibility of...home’ not as a set location, of either America or Africa, but as a series of ‘Feel-ins, Know-ins, Be-ins’, a reaching towards stories of violence. Progress is made towards generating a voice capable of such transformation in one of the most regularly quoted poems from this period, “Black Art”. Here, Baraka integrates the voice with open declarations of violence, proposing a new path for the individual as active:

...We want “poems that kill.’  
 Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
 guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
 and take their weapons leaving them dead  
 with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland...  
 ...politicians Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrr  
 rrrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh  
 . . . rrrrrrrrrrr . . . Setting fire and death to  
 whities ass.<sup>123</sup>

As this passage progresses, the violence creeps from the abstract uncertainty of “‘poems that kill’ to the concrete, targeted ‘Setting fire and death to/whities ass.’ There is an open rage here that drives the ‘tragic despair’ of “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” or the wearied pessimism which closes “Cuba Libre” into something altogether more transformative. The

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<sup>122</sup> Hazel Smith, ‘Improvisation in Contemporary Experimental Poetry’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies: Volume 2*, ed. by Benjamin Piekut and George E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 360-380 (p. 365).

<sup>123</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 219.

onomatopoeic ‘rrrrrrrrrrrr/rrrrrrrrrrrr’ and ‘tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh’ feel unfulfilled and unqualified if not articulated with the spoken voice. The polemical opening words, ‘Poems are bullshit unless they are/teeth or trees or lemons piled/on a step’, puts into question the cultural artefact of the poem itself—similarly to Cage’s violence against the piano—unless it can be embodied as violent action (‘Poems that wrestle cops into alleys’). The violence here serves as the *trompe-l’oeil*, that which Lacan designates as the “lure of the gaze”. The screams of black voices can then be codified through a number of stereotypical, racialised symbolisations. Those same screams then reveal the unsymbolisable Real experience of America’s history of racialised violence. As Ann Wordsworth notes, this lure ‘satisfies and attracts, not because it gives an illusory equivalence to its object, but because the moment we realise its deception, we glimpse it as the something else it seemed.’<sup>124</sup> As Hickman contends when discussing “AM/TRAK” (1979), ‘[t]he scream here is a ‘precise saying’ because it at once undermines the present order as an irreducibly singular sound form and rails against it in emotional content. In form, then, the scream is disruptive, breaking the order of the referential system, but it nonetheless, in content, holds powerful political emotions.’<sup>125</sup> It is these ‘powerful political emotions’ which generate the ‘disruptive’ voice, the retracing of violences past and present which generate the scream. And as Moten suggests, the poem itself is generated by ‘absence’, in the space of that in which faith has been lost. This break—in which the poem is generated by ‘absence’ and ‘tragic political despair’—offers space for the mourning and recitation of historic and present-day violences and their subsequent transformation through the voice into works which may both ‘undermine’ and challenge the limited positionalities offered within America as Other. This quality of the voice to transform vocalisation into, as Hickman terms them, a ‘precise saying’ is sharply defined by Nina Sun Eidsheim: ‘If...we believe in racialized bodies (if what is “culturally intelligible” to us is racial difference), then when a body is “sounded”

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<sup>124</sup> Ann Wordsworth, ‘Browning’s Anxious Gaze’, *The Oxford Literary Review*, Volume 3, Issue 1 (1978), pp. 27-29 (p. 27).

<sup>125</sup> Hickman, p. 133.

through the voice that racial difference is audible, amplified and broadcasted.’<sup>126</sup> As she continues, ‘laryngologists have confirmed that there are no physiological vocal differences that would create a distinct Latin-American vocal timbre. Therefore, what seems to confirm an audience’s image...of singers who are “connected to their bodies” is the *performance* of the socio-cultural notions of Latin-American classical vocal timbre.’<sup>127</sup> This racialised voice, then, is an amplifier of that racial difference. Baraka understands the intensity of the relationship between the political and the cultural and once more the screams emanate from a voice inclusive of the inarticulable qualities of that experienced violence as opposed to a singularly aesthetic or symbolic one. Whilst the scream can be symbolised in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other in a general, racialised sense—as “typical” of a certain stereotype of black people—the scream here acts as Moten identifies in Douglass’ recalling of Aunt Hester’s scream: it is a call to a history, a call to an experience of violence which can never be fixed into place by existing hypotheses and positionalities.

### Music as Anti-Reductive

As Lacan reminds us, meaning can only be created through the combination of initial sensory input (Imaginary) and its subsequent clarification by the Symbolic order—the latter being generated through our relationship with the Other. The move away from communication as a solely Symbolic activity is thus a move away from the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. This is enabled by the voice in the break as a method of delivery which, necessarily, involves a surplus, an unquantifiable element which cannot be reduced by the limited positions offered in America as Other. This results in the potential creation of more subtle and complex moralities, those outlined by Adam Phillips in the introduction. Yet it is also capable of its own distinct method of communication through a set of codes, mythologies and auralities—as shared hearing—which are unsymbolisable

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<sup>126</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance* (La Jolla, Calif.: University of California, San Diego, 2008), p. 207.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p. 208.

representations of past and present violences. This puts Baraka ‘in the break’, ,mixing reality and mythology, the written future and l’avenir, Symbolic meaning and Real non-meaning. He is able to criticise and challenge present reality whilst retaining some purchase on a new, radical future.

To extend this further, the targeted political enemy cannot locate this break which music and the object voice offer. This was observed by Baraka in microcosm in the playing of Burton Greene. In its attempts to locate the scream—as a projection which can be tamed by symbolisation—the laws and hypotheses of America as Other do not account for Baraka’s voice, positioned as he is outside of any symbolisable part of the horizon. It is the surplus of the object voice in the Real, then, which becomes the point of reference for understanding and comprehending the voice. This is embodied in the ‘sacred words’ of “Ka ‘Ba”, words actualised and activated through the voice:

We have been captured,  
brothers. And we labor  
to make our getaway, into  
the ancient image, into a new  
  
correspondence with ourselves  
and our black family. We need magic  
now we need the spells, to raise up  
return, destroy, and create. What will be  
the sacred words?<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 222.

Baraka makes it clear that he does not know the ‘sacred words’ in terms of their semantic content, but they once again occupy the place of l’avenir, a radical future. In the work of Édouard Glissant, these ‘sacred words’ embody “opacity”. The ‘contemporary poles’ of ‘politics and lyricism’ are, for Glissant, ‘violence and opacity’.<sup>129</sup> We can see here how ‘politics and lyricism’ relate to Baraka’s understanding of the intimate connection between political and cultural insurgency and violence. Opacity works ‘[a]gainst this reductive transparency’ of the laws and hypotheses of the Other which can only offer a describable, containable reading of blackness: ‘This same transparency, in Western History, predicts that a common truth of Mankind exists’.<sup>130</sup> ‘Thus,’ continues Glissant, ‘that which protects the Diverse we call opacity.’<sup>131</sup> The opacity of the ‘sacred words’ is rendered by their need to be communicated in the voice. Glissant argues for the ‘right to opacity’,<sup>132</sup> a move which ‘upsets the hierarchy of scale...[b]ut perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of scale. Displace all reduction.’<sup>133</sup> Just as with Baraka, Glissant’s work remains powerful because of its desire to leave such ‘sacred words’ opaque. Yet, as he recalls, it would only have been ‘[s]everal years back’ that such a call for opacity would be met with cries of “‘Now it’s back to barbarism! How can you communicate with what you don’t understand?’”<sup>134</sup> Baraka revels in this very space, offering communication through a voice which cannot be fully condensed.

1967’s *Slave Ship* remains one of Baraka’s most haunting pieces for its unrelenting examination of violences which cannot be rendered symbolically. The voice here moves far from a vehicle for discourse or as a point of aesthetic interest or individual ego projection. Instead, it channels historic and present-day violences. Exploring *Slave Ship* as music proves productive in outlining this channelling; Miles Davis’ growl is here removed from its traditional musical setting and extended, twisted and recommitted over 12 pages of script.

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<sup>129</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 58.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.



is here that we can turn to a sense of the proper name to discuss how this weaponised voice may be distributed to others willing to take up the fight, offered like ‘the consciousness I carry I will to/black people.’ Baraka’s chosen name, Imamu Amiri Baraka in full, offers a sense of how this consciousness may be willed. It is critical, of course, that Baraka does not become a new centre, forcing together *zoe* and *bios*, *phone* and *logos* as per “the Führer” of Dolar’s example.

Hoover’s COINTELPRO was designed to prevent the rise of a ‘Black Messiah’, a stirring orator in the mould of Frederick Douglass.<sup>139</sup> There are many potential candidates for this Messiah figure—Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Martin Luther King Jr. to name a few—and it is their ability to orate in the mould of Frederick Douglass which gave them prime candidacy. As such, Baraka’s chosen name reflects these shared concerns of communication. As William J. Harris notes, Baraka ‘assumed the Bantuized Muslim name Imamu (spiritual leader) Ameer (later Amiri, blessed) Baraka (prince), a confirmation of his blackness.’<sup>140</sup> Baraka as poet then becomes not the *source* of knowledge, but a vehicle for blessings. As previously discussed, the Real element of the voice which re-establishes a relationship with certain cultural praxes also denies self-presence, meaning that the self and the embodiment of those violent struggles cannot both exist in the same space. This is reflected in the ‘sacred words’ which he does not symbolise, justify or describe, but brings into effect nonetheless through the voice. This is the communication of the ‘tragic political despair’ which has now been transformed and weaponised through its being spoken. As Dolar argues, ‘[t]he teacher is the transmitter of Knowledge by his voice...Everything may well be written in the textbook, but this will never be enough until the teacher assumes it by his or her voice which enacts it’.<sup>141</sup> A name full of honours, Baraka brings with his name connotations of force, conviction and wisdom. This name is not then a claim to knowledge, but a claim to experience, a claim to conviction.

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<sup>139</sup> *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots, Volume I: A-M*, ed. by Walter Rucker and James Nathaniel Upton (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 133.

<sup>140</sup> William J. Harris, p. 10.

<sup>141</sup> Dolar, pp. 110-1.

Thinking of the poet in this way, as radical and revolutionary, we can see the outward strength of Baraka in the name he is offered. The voice, weaponised by historic and present day violences, is imbued with this force of radical blessing. This is what Moten refers to as ‘what it is to own one’s dispossession’. As Baraka himself argues, ‘The Black Man is possessed by the energies of historic necessity’.<sup>142</sup> It is profoundly insurgent, directly violent and mediated by the voice: ‘The Black Artist must teach the White *Eyes* their deaths’.<sup>143</sup>

That this is a spiritual leadership touches on Moten’s earlier point of the scope of a black radical aesthetics; a voice must be considered in a similarly wide scope of ethics and politics as well as its fundamentally symbolic and aural qualities (‘Art is an ordering as well. And all these categories are spiritual, but are also the result of the body...’).<sup>144</sup> This name change is all underpinned by choice and adjustment however. Whilst he is given the name, he not only accepts it, but also amends it. “*Barakat*” became “*Baraka*” ‘which is the Swahili pronunciation because I was interested in the African emphasis’.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the rejection of a name with its origins in slavery (LeRoi Jones) was not enough. Choice for Baraka, as we have identified so many times in this chapter, is only worth doing if approached with conviction (‘Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit’). As he states:

The question of the slave name actually was kind of a, we thought of it as an honour to take on African names, you know to get rid of you know—and actually, if you look at our history, you'll find it's not the first time. Although Black people right up to the Civil War abandoned the slave master's name, they would take on Anglo sounding names, most of them...See the thing about Black history is, why it's so

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<sup>142</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 164.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>145</sup> ‘Interview with Amiri Baraka’, *Washington University Digital Gateway Texts*.

important, is the things that we think that we're doing for the first time we find have been done before.<sup>146</sup>

It is a choice made out of necessity, yet the erasure of a former name does not clear the slate of past violences. Rather, as Baraka identifies, failure to conceive of new name within an alternative horizon results in repetition ('you see that Black people have been trying to get out of this for a long time and they've been doing the same things.')<sup>147</sup> For Baraka, the poet must instigate this change. Rejecting a name offers the opportunity to select one from a set of newly constructed mythologies, facilitated and delivered to black people by the poet:

The Black artist, in this context, is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgement. The Black intellectual, in this same context, is needed to change the interpretation of facts toward the Black Man's best interests, instead of merely tagging along reciting white judgements of the world.<sup>148</sup>

To take Baraka's name as an example of this, it is one which embodies—and this is a body, and by extension a voice, ready for violence—the “blessings” which Baraka would render as ‘sacred words’. It becomes one of the new mythologies previously alluded to, embodying the ability to create a new horizon within a framework of extant violences. Imamu Amiri Baraka becomes a kind of *antillanité*, a proposal for ‘the larger New World or American identity’ of black people. This utilisation of *antillanité* as a method connects the name to the voice, engendering a radical insurgent force both within the hypotheses of America as Other

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 167.

yet also outside its symbolic grasp. The voice, as suggested above, is offered as a blessing, a radical chorus which can communicate experiences and histories of violence from within the nation which inflicts such targeted political violence.

### The Anti-Nuclear: Rejecting the Frontier

The violence of Baraka's voice arrives as a result of the need to transform the irresolvable total violence of slavery as well the violences committed against black bodies, psyches and cultures over centuries and in the present day. The voice is always-already there, having recorded and documented these violences. For Baraka, it is crucial that black people come to embody these violences and transform them using the voice, a point echoed by Fanon on the violence of liberation: 'The colonized, who have made up their mind to make such an agenda into a driving force, have been prepared for violence from time immemorial.'<sup>149</sup> As Baraka notes in his autobiography with reference to "A POEM SOME PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND":

I rejected Martin Luther King's philosophy. I was not nonviolent. I had written a poem about this time that ended:

We have awaited the coming of a natural  
phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable  
workers  
of the land.

But none has come.

(Repeat)

But none has come.

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<sup>149</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 3.

Will the machine gunners please step forward?<sup>150</sup>

Baraka's violence exists, at least from this account, on reconsidering those many times that black traditions have simply played by the rules, relying on partially pre-determined solutions which merely extend violence and fail to embody a position which may provide opportunity for transformation ('...you see that Black people have been trying to get out of this for a long time and they've been doing the same things.')<sup>151</sup> In waiting for a Messiah of the predictable future ('a natural/phenomenon'), nothing has changed ('none has come'). Whilst Baraka's poetic voice offers escape from the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, he must also disavow certain elements of black traditions that have worked before him but failed. Baraka invokes the rich history of violence to describe this missed opportunity: 'And there is only one people on the planet who can slay the white man. The people who know him best. His ex-slaves.'<sup>152</sup> Baraka's move is doubled as he also disregards certain black traditions, rejecting the 'Mystics and romantics' that have failed to deliver change, as merely regurgitations of the hegemonic discourse they attempt to escape. The voice provides access to a black experience which Baraka describes as the 'lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order'.<sup>153</sup> The voice empowers those that 'know [the white man] best'. It energises and transforms the 'alien' into the 'radical outsider', as those most capable of slaying him through their collective voices and music:

Man 1. Obata...

(Drums beat down, softer... humming starts... hummmmmm, hummmmmmmmm,  
like old black women humming for three centuries in the slow misery of slavery...

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<sup>150</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), p. 161.

<sup>151</sup> 'Interview with Amiri Baraka', *Washington University Digital Gateway Texts*.

<sup>152</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 169.

<sup>153</sup> Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Black Music*, p. 212.



This latter point is captured by the reading tests described earlier in the chapter. Here, the legal framework to enable enfranchisement exists, but is structured so as to taunt and punish non-whites rather than giving them the genuine ability to empower themselves. We can conversely see how Baraka's poetic voice may provide a reading of the 'cage' Robinson describes; his poetic voice is made available to white audiences, but is always beyond *their* grasp. And by extension, it is also beyond the grasp of those who wish to "possess" the voice, failing as the voice does to offer self-presence or an alternative 'intensively rationalized and rational society'. Baraka's poetic voice refuses to take up the position of the symboliser of the void, of some new coherence. The comparatively unfixed position which the object voice, as it cannot be situated within the symbolic horizon of America as Other, embodies a reworking of the anti-slave for the twentieth century. This is not to say, as stated earlier, that the vocalisations of black radical poets would not be stereotyped and attacked. Instead, they prevent the total absorption into symbolic pseudo-coherence offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

It is here that we can return to the total violences mentioned thus far in this thesis, those which foreclose the very possibility of community building and, accordingly, of subjectivity. I have so far given the examples of the atom bomb and slavery to define this. To consider how "Negro" plays into this—a key term for Baraka and Robinson among many others—can thus allow us to understand its pervading potency and its consistent attempts to act as that force which cancels and expels subjectivity. It is the vacuousness and viciousness of the term which describes how:

...the African was represented as chattel in their economic image, as slaves in their political and social image, as brutish and therefore inaccessible to further development, and finally as Negro, that is without history.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

At its core, as Robinson argues, “Negro” was:

...both a negation of African and a unity of opposition to white. The construct of Negro, unlike the terms African, Moor, or ‘Ethiope’ suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro has no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity which might command consideration.<sup>158</sup>

This frames and strengthens the need for a poetic voice which considers ‘situatedness’ rather than a specific African or American home; Baraka describes ‘Black National Consciousness’<sup>159</sup> as speaking to ‘[a]n oppressed Black Nation “laying” in the Western Hemisphere.’<sup>160</sup> Total violences are not concerned with displacement or relocation, but with annihilation, foreclosure and cancellation. Whilst the *term* “Negro” is afforded a time and a history, those affected by its violence are not. Its definition comes to stand in for “violence carried out against black people” *not* “black people as subjects”. The term “Negro” becomes a symbolic placeholder for the total violences enacted upon black people in the construction of the American symbolic identity. The use of the term “Negro” reactivates and redeploys those present and past violences; the term takes on the symbolic quality of the slave owner’s whip, of the master’s violent assault on Aunt Hester. The term “Negro” becomes the mantra of the Führer in Dolar’s example, the symbolic justification for the collapse of *zoe* and *bios* just as the term “Jew” did for the Nazi Party. Baraka’s voice challenges this totalising violence, keeping open the break between bare life and political life. By working with the term “Negro” and the total violences which it symbolises and embodies, these writers can

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>159</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 166.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p. 161.

transform and redeploy that violence, one which can foreclose the very nature of politics, the self and continued human life.

Having discussed the term “Negro”, we can return to the voice and music to see how they operate through Baraka when faced with such totalising violence. As was discussed in the first chapter, whilst Zen Buddhism never explicitly considered the end of human life on earth, the embodied investigation of the illusion of selfhood is foundational to its practice. This puts it in prime position for tackling questions of apocalypse. Similarly, whilst slavery represents a unique and unsymbolisable series of totalising violences, these experiences give Baraka narratives, musical practices and voices which can articulate what it means to face total violences. That Sun Ra—in *Nuclear War* (1984)—Langston Hughes, Malcolm X and James Baldwin<sup>161</sup>—among many others—connect the world-ending potential of the atom bomb to the struggle for an end to racial violence speaks to this connection. This also returns us to the rape of Baraka’s “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” as a tangible, concrete violence which aims for total destruction rather than mere disruption. Kristin George Bagdanov’s paper “Atomic Afrofuturism and Amiri Baraka’s Compulsive Futures” reminds us that ‘the totalising effects of nuclear war’ do not ‘adequately account for those who have already experienced the end of the world.’<sup>162</sup> These atom bombs, symbols of total violence, have already been detonated both as part of a colonial past and as part of an imaginable future as discussed by Baraka in *Blues People*. As Bagdanov continues, many black artists were already ‘exploring the post-apocalyptic conditions of black life while much of America still believed the apocalypse was imminent, not immanent.’<sup>163</sup> The atom bomb and its potential to foreclose life is baked into the hypotheses of America as Other, deployed as this has been against black people for centuries, rendered discursively in the term “Negro”. The strength of Baraka’s poetic voice in continuing this resistance against subjugation is rendered with great clarity in his play *Primitive World: An Anti-Nuclear Jazz Musical* (1984)—which shall

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<sup>161</sup> As collected in Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism and the Black Freedom Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>162</sup> Kristin George Bagdanov, ‘Atomic Afrofuturism and Amiri Baraka’s Compulsive Futures’, *The Oxford Literary Review*, Volume 41 Issue 1 (2019), 51-67 (p. 51).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

only be briefly mentioned here due to its publication date sitting outside of the chronology of this thesis. The play sees Ham, a statesman, and Maso and Sado, both Money Gods, take the decision to ‘Cancel the world—/Until Further Notice!’<sup>164</sup> Here, Baraka presents the prospect of nuclear war as a fundamentally white fantasy, as one final twitch designed to retain control. Yet it is one which the Money Gods and Ham naively feel they have control over. Maso is delighted to find that the survivors are ‘only niggers! No people’,<sup>165</sup> not forces that could affect their continued dominance. The fact that black people as ‘distorted protoplasm’ ‘have the nerve...to survive’ bears witness to the ability of black people to survive these total violences, ‘to own one’s dispossession’. The nuclear comes to represent not a final twitch, but the continued inability of America as Other to retain its purchase on the stage that it has been expelled from by black voices now that it has been so clearly undermined. Baraka articulates this wonderfully in an exchange from 1967 with Saul Gottlieb. Here, he dictates the power of black people to resist capture, calcification and destruction:

Q: Won’t America try to literally destroy the black community first?

A: They’ve tried to destroy us for, like, the last four centuries, and all the time we’ve gotten bigger and stronger and louder. And we weren’t even fighting back too tough. They can’t destroy us—that’s ego. They can’t destroy anything but themselves...Pretty soon the black man will realise he’s fighting aliens, and once that happens...The fact is we would prevail...The only thing that can happen is the resurrection of new things. Mao Tse-tung said we’ll be here when you’re gone. We were here before you got here, and we’ll be here after you’re gone.

Q: What about the possibility of their using atomic weapons, the bomb?

A: If they want to drop the atomic bomb on themselves, that’s still O.K.—

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<sup>164</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 433.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p. 441.

Q: Then there won't be anybody.

A: Oh, no. That's more ego. The white man doesn't know how to live outside the formulaic designs of his society...It falls into the hands of the strongest and the fastest, and I think they already know who that is.

Q: If they use enough atomic hardware, nobody will be the strongest and the fastest...

A: That's a projection of the white mind—it has the same validity as any other projection; that is, finally incorrect, and doesn't take into consideration that we are not you, but another species who have survived everything you have done to us, have survived and still come out strong... We have our minds back now.<sup>166</sup>

Music and the voice are again critical in *Primitive World*, the play ending with affirmations of life through sound, singing and chanting. As the voice has 'gotten bigger and stronger and louder', the threat of total annihilation proves too weak, too predictable. Understanding these total violences, Baraka's poetic voice remains in the break, out of reach of the predictable positions offered in America as Other. The atom bomb, by this reading, becomes a symbolic rendering of the inability of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other to cohere experience in such a way as to foreclose space for black people. Furthermore, the bomb reminds us that these laws and hypotheses cannot conceal the violence of America's past and present whilst also pointing towards the inevitability of the promulgation of that violence in the future.

Whilst Arendt correctly argues for the status of the atom bomb as a symbolic representation of a kind of total violence, her account fails to recall that similarly destructive violences have been enacted across the non-Western world for centuries from the Crusades through to

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<sup>166</sup> Baraka, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, p. 34.

slavery, all in the name of “progress” and “civilisation”. The atom bomb, by Baraka’s account, destroys a ‘white civilization’, in Harris’ terms, which has never had to face its total destruction. Conversely, the opacity of the black voice, its ability to consider these total violences from past and present experience, positions itself in relation to a horizon of possible positions offered in America as Other which it has faced and denied before, using its experience of these violences to prevent its total destruction and to communicate these stories of violence. *Primitive World* fittingly ends with the destruction of the Money Gods through song and the affirmation of life: ‘YES TO LIFE!/NO TO DEATH!’.<sup>167</sup> Music, as the scream, lasts after the fallout and continues to disrupt and deny placement to the ‘white civilization’ which attempts to destroy it.

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<sup>167</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 449.

### III – Summary

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the importance of the break and the voice in uncovering and transforming relationships with violence as found in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other as offered in the work of Amiri Baraka. For Baraka, ‘[t]he Black Man is possessed by the energies of historical necessity and the bursting into flower of a National Black Cultural Consciousness’.<sup>168</sup> These are energies which words can only document. The ‘bursting’ into flower of this new Consciousness through the voice is opaque—and thus not open to the Other as Symbolic—yet impossible to ignore. The chapter has demonstrated that Amiri Baraka presents a series of works which offer us insights into the ways in which the poetic voice can function to undermine and expose fragilities within the supposed coherence of America as Other. The chapter has offered the term “break”, as found in the work of Fred Moten, to describe an unfixable position which can offer access to stories and experiences of violence which avoid mediation, or pre-determination, by existing hypotheses surrounding those violences. The “break”, like “silence” and the other headline terms which are engaged with in the following chapters, reveals the inherent untenability of the notion that hypotheses offered by America as Other can ever be considered totally coherent. Unlike “silence”, however, which seeks to open up these new unfixable positions, the “break” seeks to offer an unfixable position from which stories of violence can be accessed and told. Where Cage’s “silence” is intentionless, Baraka’s “break” most certainly has aims. In reworking the anti-slave for the twentieth century, Baraka offers a rendering of the voice which can be both discursively impactful, yet always out of reach of the defined and limited possibilities offered for black voices, bodies and stories of violence embodied in America as Other.

The break acts as a counter to America as Other as the supposed *only* locus of meaning, as the only system which unifies and provides coherence to violence in the postwar moment. As Baraka outlines in his discussion with Gottlieb, the atom bomb appears to be a seeming

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<sup>168</sup> Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, p. 165.

inevitability for many artists of this postwar period. Another of these is William S. Burroughs. In *Naked Lunch*, we see the work of a writer one who uses fantastical and paraphilic violences to tease out and map the violence embodied in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. His development of what I will term the scansion, a tool which he quickly loses control of, allows him to undertake this mapping. Burroughs puts the laws and hypotheses of America as Other to the test, extending them to their most violent and apocalyptic conclusions.

### Chapter 3: The Scansion in the work of William S. Burroughs

America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and  
evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting<sup>1</sup>

— William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

#### Introduction

This chapter will seek to give shape to a mysterious component of Burroughs' writing which shall be termed the scansion. This quality of Burroughs' writing works to outline the languages and representations of violence which are codified in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other and engaged with by the citizens which live within its horizon. In spite of the generative nature of its work, the scansion cannot be located or rationalised. The scansions at work across *Naked Lunch*—this text being the chapter's primary though not exclusive focus—are put into motion by the author, but remain radically outside of the author's control. The function of the scansion thus becomes to mark—or “scand”<sup>2</sup>—extend and test the hidden logic America as Other and its interpretations of violence. Burroughs' manipulation, extension and parody of bureaucratic, medical (in the form of Scientism) and political languages serve to demonstrate how the discourses of the ‘speed war’ and the desire for total coherence—both modalities of this hidden logic—come to be concealed by concrete violence which acts as a marker of progress. The scansion serves to slow down this process and deny a new mastery in the author. The scansion offers us a chilling insight into the logic of American postwar violence by marking the connection between Burroughs' decadent, fantastical violences and the all too real hypotheses and laws which underpin them.

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<sup>1</sup> William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The restored text*, ed. by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1959; repr. London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> I am using Bruce Fink's preferred translation of the term so as ‘to distinguish the far more common contemporary uses of scanning...from Lacan's idea here of cutting, punctuating, or interrupting the analysand's discourse.’ (Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 229.)

This chapter will introduce a number of new co-ordinates specifically related to Burroughs. These are the scansion, *jouissance* and mastery. For the scansion, the primary co-ordinates will be the work of Jacques Lacan with reference to Sigmund Freud. Whilst these thinkers will provide initial definition to this term, I am, however, proposing the scansion as taking on a different character in Burroughs. On *jouissance*, Jacques Lacan will again remain crucial. With mastery, material from Hannah Arendt will shape and extend work from thinkers presented in previous chapters (such as Bercovitch and Pease). In the case of mastery, this term will come to mark the ways in which the official political manifestation of America works so as to insist that the laws and hypotheses which constitute America as Other become *the* coherence, as *the* source of laws and hypotheses on violence. The work on coherence which shall frame this turn will be informed by work from Allen Fisher.

Whilst Burroughs is certainly concerned with the interference of the state in the lives of American citizens, his work primarily undermines the logic of violence offered by America as Other by presenting us with often horrific depictions of the violence which becomes possible as an extension of that logic. Rather than scaremongering or as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that logic, Burroughs' violences exist, worryingly, as discernible. These violences come to outline the shape of a cultural death drive. His focus across the trilogy of *Junky*, *Naked Lunch* and *Queer* where he first begins to develop his cut-up method—as well as the interview materials presented here—works to undermine any and all attempts at a simple solution without ever giving up on the possibility of morality, on his childhood 'fear of violence'<sup>3</sup> as noted by Eric Mottram, or on the notion that '[n]o writer has any secrets',<sup>4</sup> that they are always totally vulnerable.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Mottram, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), p. 100.

## I – Coherence and the Scansion

### ‘No longer innocent’<sup>5</sup>

We begin this chapter with a mark. For Burroughs, the atom bomb’s detonation represents a specific, irreversible and profound defilement of the soul in return for salvation (‘Atom bomb is the ultimate soul killer that vaporizes all debts’).<sup>6</sup> We may read this as an extension of Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis of violence as ‘the mark of a failure which nothing can offset.’<sup>7</sup> Burroughs’ framing of the bomb marks the failure of enlightenment morality in the postwar period. The apocalypse which dawns outlines a profound shift in those old moralities; they have been shown to be ineffectual and unable to provide answers to the apocalypse which threatens their own continued existence. This failure is highlighted in the epigraph to this chapter, where Burroughs’ attends to the link between Einstein’s formula and the bomb. The bomb is not an inevitable consequence of Einstein or of science more generally, but rather of a particular approach to them. It is instead, as Derrida argues in “No Apocalypse, Not Now”, a symbolic representation of ‘the brutal acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work’.<sup>8</sup>

Burroughs’ texts do not, however, offer us a new set of moral codes in place of this old, failing set of hard moral codes. Burroughs seems to wish to get as far away from the very idea of fixing morality to a series of definable positions as possible. One of his most staunch remarks in this regard comes in the form of an outright refusal to accept “human nature” as anything other than another form of this institutionalisation of human actions (‘that what passes for the ‘unalterable nature of man’ is actually vested interests./that there is no such thing as ‘human nature’.’)<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Burroughs’ concern is less with humanity as a meaningless,

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<sup>5</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Last Words: The Final Journals of William S. Burroughs*, ed. by James Grauerholz (New York: Grove Press, 2000), p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now’, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> *William S. Burroughs: Cutting Up the Century*, ed. by Joan Hawkins and Alex Wermer-Colan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), p. 186.

homogenous category and more with individuals that are compelled by external forces, by the codification of human actions by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

The bomb therefore embodies the impossibility of forming new, more subtle moralities and relationships with violence. For as long as America as Other represents a fixed understanding of what morality may look like, the opportunity to create new moralities decreases in direct correlation with our march towards apocalypse. Burroughs' desire to drastically reconsider rather than discard these outmoded conceptions—ideas on love, community and innocence for instance—is emphasised in the same entry in his journal as his comments on the atom bomb. This entry also happens to be his very last: 'Love? What is It? Most natural painkiller what there is. LOVE.'<sup>11</sup> There is no attempt here to empirically define love or to give contextual examples, but merely to revel in the rich, vibrant experience of having felt it. It *must* be capitalised, as if, in this moment of declaration, the experience of it is embodied to such an extent that it cannot be contained, its energy spilling out beyond the word.

When we turn, then, to *Naked Lunch*, we find a text which is performing a thorough clearing out of the moral ground that we stand on. One example of this clearing regards innocence. When children, encouraged by their fathers to get their first 'piece of ass', take words to their literal extreme and 'cut a big hunk off', we are presented with a reality of prescriptive literalism.<sup>12</sup> Here, the boy is following the orders of his father. The precision with which he follows these orders without questioning them leads us to one of two conclusions; firstly, that this prescriptive literalism *is* the Law or secondly, that the weight of the Law, defined by its relationship with violence, crushes the boy's own ability to discern right from wrong.

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<sup>10</sup> This echoes Lacan's thoughts on the same topic: 'First off, let's get rid of this average Joe, who does not exist. He is a statistical fiction. There are individuals, and that is all. When I hear people talking about the guy in the street, studies of public opinion, mass phenomena, and so on, I think of all the patients that I've seen on the couch in forty years of listening. None of them in any measure resembled the others, none of them had the same phobias and anxieties, the same way of talking, the same fear of not understanding. Who is the average Joe: me, you, my concierge, the president of the Republic?' (Jordan Skinner, "There can be no crisis of psychoanalysis" Jacques Lacan interviewed in 1974', *Verso Books* <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1668-there-can-be-no-crisis-of-psychoanalysis-jacques-lacan-interviewed-in-1974>> [accessed 3 November 2019])

<sup>11</sup> Burroughs, *Last Words: The Final Journals of William S. Burroughs*, p. 253.

<sup>12</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 100.

As such, his inability to discern metaphor, and the violence which follows, act as both the punchline and as the revelation of the logic within whose horizon the boy lives. That the boy then ‘hump[s] her for kicks’ confirms that this is a prescriptive extension of a familiar logic.<sup>13</sup> Critically, this is not framed as an amoral action—an impossible position which exists outside of a sense of right and wrong. As soon as the boy decides what getting his first ‘piece of ass’ means, as soon as he interprets his father’s words, he takes up a moral position, defined as that is by his relationship with the Other. The very nature of interpretation makes an amoral position impossible in practical terms. As we shall find in the second section, an amoral position *is* discoverable through textual analogy of Mary, Mark and Johnny, but it requires the total violence of the apocalypse of human life in order to achieve it.

Even well-regarded accounts of Burroughs, such as Robin Lydenberg’s *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction*, are too quick to interpret this questioning of the state of morality as a desire for a non-morality, a desire for “non-body experience” and the freedom and purity of silence.<sup>14</sup> As stated, I do not feel that Burroughs believes that such a position is possible. What Burroughs seeks to do, as demonstrated above, is to clear out old moralities by way of forceful analogy and through revelation of the logic of the violence offered by America as Other. His work tests the very limits of that violence, pushing it to its extremes. The result is a series of works which describe how the logic of postwar violence comes to bear on questions of community and of desire. Rather than providing us with a new, fixed moral code or asserting old ones, Burroughs presents us with ambiguity as a response to postwar violence.

If the bomb is a symptom, Burroughs, who himself also ‘had a lifelong interest in drugs and medicine and illness’,<sup>15</sup> provides us with a diagnosis (‘In *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs: 1960-1997*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), p. 447.

*Machine* I have diagnosed an illness.’).<sup>16</sup> As an extension of Einstein’s formula, the atom bomb is symptomatic of an unbending Scientism, the devotion to progress through the scientific method as *always* Good in its own right, driven by a desire for mastery of rationality and reason. A firm connection is made between “Good” as an absolute category and science as an embodiment of that category. The bomb is produced as a consequence of America as Other being posited as *the* total coherence by official political administration—the God function—on questions of violence, as that which attempts to symbolise the unsymbolisable Real which the atom bomb—ironically—exposes more vividly than ever. Burroughs highlights how this unbending thirst for progress leaks into the wider public in an interview with Gérard-Georges Lemaire entitled “Terrorism, Utopia and Fiction”. Discussing the influence of writers concerned with violence in late-1970s America,<sup>17</sup> Burroughs outlines the spread of this narrative of violence from the state to citizens:

Not too long ago, a young man, no degree in physics, some kind of an economist, managed to make public plans for an atomic weapon based on non-classified documents. Of course, it was only your garden-variety hydrogen bomb, but adequate, even so, to take out the center of a city...But if this kid could do it, anyone can.<sup>18</sup>

Once the possibility of such violence is created, it is impossible to renege on. In reaching for reason, for a technological answer to end the war with Japan, a weapon and a possibility was inaugurated whose payload, under ordinary circumstances, would be considered absurd, abhorrent and unimaginable. Paul Virilio identifies such a phenomenon in *Speed and Politics* (1977), a text which details the importance of speed in propaganda and the violence

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Lotringer ed., p. 403.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 404.

which that speed is able to mask. Not only does speed cause the active participant—the warring government for example—to lose sight of danger, it also prevents the society living through such speed from observing the violence being wreaked by that speed. With control proving so vital in Burroughs’ texts, undermining America as Other as a set of laws and hypotheses which come to bear upon interpretations of violence, becomes critical.

Derrida’s extended critique of the bomb in “No Apocalypse, Not Now”, draws our attention to this same ‘war of speed’. The speed race is determined by ‘a structure of getting absolutely carried away, a quasi-infinite acceleration [*un “gagner de vitesse”*] that makes possible the “always already” *in general.*’<sup>19</sup> This ‘brutal acceleration’ for Derrida is not driven by the bomb, but rather the ‘acceleration of a movement which has *always and forever* been at work’.<sup>20</sup> The ‘quasi-infinite acceleration’ inevitably *births* the bomb. This acceleration is driven, in part, by a bureaucratically-driven Scientism, one which justifies any and all violences under the banners of reason, rationality and security. Burroughs proposes disruption as a remedy to this exponential “getting carried away”. To tackle this, Burroughs frequently works with analogies familiar to those of America as Other—those of medicine and science—but often with a particular focus on aspects of human life where reason is only part of the equation: drug addiction, sexual desire, homosexuality, violence etc. Burroughs presents a series of limit cases, giving examples of what happens when reason and rationality overreach in their attempts to explain away and master those unruly elements which resist explanation or mastery—the Real. At a textual and textural level, one way to disrupt the violence that this thirst for mastery produces is with the cut-up method.

It is important to note at this stage that *Naked Lunch*, the primary focus of the chapter, is not a cut-up work. However, as Timothy Murphy states, ‘its “mosaic” structure of routines anticipates many of the disjunctive effects of the cut-ups.’<sup>21</sup> The cut-up is primarily

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Vol. 1*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 388.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 71.

associated with the Nova Trilogy—often simply known as the Cut-Up Trilogy—published between 1961 and 1964. The three texts which make up the trilogy—*The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), and *Nova Express* (1964)—utilise the cut-up at the level of the sentence, the short phrase or the word. In *Nova Express*, Burroughs utilises the fold-in method, where one takes two sheets, folds them linearly and lays them on top of one another creating a series of new permutations. The use of both of these techniques creates passages of highly fragmented prose. In spite of the radical potential of the cut-up to offer us new, hitherto inaccessible interpretations, we must also be wary of overstretching this technique as if increasing degrees of fragmentariness may induce ever more potent results. As Frank Kermode writes with reference to an early moment in the history of the literary fragment:

The absolute fragment is a tease, more or less invented in its modern form when millions of people were being fragmented, warmed therefore by a rather desperate gaiety that was founded on the disparity between the world as officially presented and the facts of the battlefields.<sup>22</sup>

Just as, for Kermode, the ‘facts of the battlefield’ should not be denied, fragmentation should not become their only presentation. To do so would be to smooth over this disparity, the over-fragmented working to conceal stories of violence rather than present them. This in turn would act as a coherence on violence of its own. Where the cut-up texts do not arrive at, nor aim for, the tease of the ‘absolute fragment’, degrees of fragmentariness across Burroughs’ texts do serve different purposes. The more fragmented cut-up texts attempt to offer, as Burroughs outlines, a set of new futures: ‘Perhaps events are prewritten and

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<sup>22</sup> Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) pp. 142-143

prerecorded and when you cut word lines the future leaks out'.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, the ““mosaic” structure’ of *Naked Lunch* offers the space for Burroughs’ decadent, prescient allegories of current positions on violence to play out. *Naked Lunch* primarily offers a tracing of the disparity between the ‘world as officially presented’ and ‘the facts of the battlefields’. As this chapter shall outline, this often arrives in the form of an allegory which demonstrates the points at which the laws and hypotheses of violence offered in America as Other—and the ways in which they are justified by official administrations during the Cold War—are found to be at odds with the results of that violence. Where, for instance, the atom bomb is presented as necessary to ‘defend [the United States] against any possible aggressor’ by President Truman, Burroughs’ text outlines how the bomb is instead legitimised by a narrative of progress and mastery which continues to unfold after the bomb’s creation with potentially apocalyptic consequences.

This practice from its earliest moments extends the Modernist tradition of collage. Burroughs cites T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as ‘the first great cut-up collage’. Tristan Tzara and Dos Passos’ *The U.S.A. Trilogy* also proved inspirational.<sup>24</sup> As Eric Mottram notes, Burroughs’ sense of his own work was ‘a vision of a waste land: in his own words, “a new mythology for the space age” which replaces “broken-down old mythologies.”’<sup>25</sup> The cut—distinct at this point from the cut-up method—utilised in *Naked Lunch* allows for the creation of ‘a new mythology for the space age’, a series of unfixed positions which can be accessed without a tip into atomisation.

Regardless of the text in question, the act of cutting into the text presents the reader with a decision. The decision is how one makes sense of the new arrangement that the cut figures.<sup>26</sup>

To cut is deliberate, but this action can be particularly generative if it feels arbitrarily

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<sup>23</sup> *William S. Burroughs: Cutting Up the Century*, ed. by Joan Hawkins and Alex Wermer-Colan, p. 327.

<sup>24</sup> *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs: 1960-1997*, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> I do not believe Burroughs to be in control of the majority of his cutting. As suggested in the introduction, the material cut-up is chosen and derived from the author. However, as the novel progresses, where exactly these cuts have been made become less clear. One starts to see and find the possibilities of cuts which are not even there. This is, I contend, intentional and designed to eschew mastery and “definite meaning” in the text.

deployed ('Be just and if you can't be just be arbitrary').<sup>27</sup> Simply offering the opportunity to be confused does, in some ways, already begin to prefigure how confusion itself may resist violence; if a simple, clear message cannot be communicated quickly, this may—at the very least—offer pause for thought by forcing the reader into contemplation. On a technical level, then, cutting into the text method aims to slow down our reading, to disrupt our unconscious intuitions, to de-program us from the logic embodied in America as Other. As Allen Fisher notes in *Imperfect Fit: Aesthetic Function, Facture, and Perception in Art and Writing Since 1950* (2016), the cut works, in the example of Burroughs work with collaging newspapers, to 'overlap or interfere with the primary column being read' by '[picking] up another or more than one text or image from parallel columns'.<sup>28</sup> This means that 'the perceptive and physiological experience of the assembled effect can surprise or undermine expectations.'<sup>29</sup> This effect is engendered, in part, by the recognition that 'each so-called coherence is in fact a partial or pseudo-coherence that is only part of the picture that could constitute coherence.'<sup>30</sup> Critically for Burroughs, and as Fisher quotes at the end of his chapter, '[e]ither-or thinking just is not accurate thinking. That's not the way things occur, and I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the great shackles of Western civilization. Cut-ups are a movement toward breaking this down.'<sup>31</sup> Whether in the cut of *Naked Lunch* or the cut-up of later texts, this process works to undermine the idea of one fixed narrative, one final say. As Fisher elaborates in conversation with Juha Virtanen, the cut is the work of deliberate interference, yet this is an interference of 'multiple consciousness', one which offers the sense that 'the visual gave you messages and information that might have related to the text or might not have done.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Allen Fisher, *Imperfect Fit: Aesthetic Function, Facture, and Perception in Art and Writing since 1950* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016), p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Juha Virtanen, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 172.

If we cannot prevent imbuing discourses, violences and emotional responses with meaning because we are compelled to judge—both due to our relationship with the Other and our own desire to understand and comprehend the world around us—the result of the cut provides us with alternative readings which cannot be easily absorbed and defined by the already extant laws and hypotheses of America as Other. This is due to both their ability to induce confusion, but also to mark the points at which the laws and hypotheses of America as Other fail to provide coherence. As such, rather than asserting new meanings, Burroughs pushes the logic of America as Other to breaking point by offering readers what Fisher calls an ‘engaged damage’.<sup>33</sup> *Naked Lunch* is, according to Burroughs, ‘a blueprint, a How-To Book’<sup>34</sup>, which forces us, as readers, to re-evaluate a bankrupt conception of violence, morality and innocence:

Jack the Ripper, Literal Swordsman of the 1890s and never caught with his pants down... wrote a letter to the press:

“Next time I’ll send along an ear just for jolly... Wouldn’t you?”<sup>35</sup>

Necessarily, the bankrupting of innocence creates a gap where that particular model of innocence once stood, a gap which must either be filled by that same invalidated model of innocence or by some other form. One way to explore these gaps and thus better understand the conditions upon which this previous morality has failed is to follow where these openings lead us. Sometimes, such gaps can be created by the artist who, by cutting into the text, creates moments of ambiguity. Some of these gaps, created by an act of violence on narrative tradition, on individual characters, and on the text itself, are clearly intentional. Burroughs’ work is to cut these “gaps” into the text, these moments at which we must

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<sup>33</sup> Fisher, p. 168.

<sup>34</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

reconsider our own position in relation to what we are reading. In doing so, the scansion which come to populate the text after the cut—a technical difference which will be explained further momentarily—prevent the avowal of an old or new code of innocence to be put in place, instead proposing an ambiguous response. Postwar America must live without a fixed code of what innocence might be because whilst this may make us precarious in denying us a roadmap to moral action, any reassertion of an old or new code will return us to the ‘[e]ither-or thinking’ which has produced such violence. This is not to avow amorality, but rather to resist the codification of morality offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

The cuts which Burroughs deploys can be physical—through the cut—or textual—through rapid shifts in tone, scene, character response etc. Their function, however, is similar; cuts are decisions made by the author to deliberately disrupt the process of reading by inducing the possibility of new interpretations out of previously contiguous material. The possibilities that the cut can produce are still limited, however, as they rely on authorial intention; they are the *poiēsis* (creation) of an individual which cannot help but speak using a morality which has been, in part, influenced by the Other. In the chapter on John Cage, we have spoken about this with regards to a fixed style. The scansion which marks Burroughs’ cuts, deliberately antagonises such authority, such fixity of style. As we shall discover momentarily, this is because the scansion, once made possible, begins to mark much more than those moments that the author has selected. If the cut creates the initial gaps, the scansion permeates the text, figuring conditions whereby gaps can be imagined or fantasised even when no cut has been deployed. By creating such an uncertain space where the foundational principles of the text are demonstrated to be continuously unreliable, Burroughs disavows mastery over the text, allows its contradictions to slide over one another and facilitates—in the “gap” which the cut creates—the kind of spacing between opening and totality which Derrida hails in “Violence and Metaphysics” as the only possible ground for new ethical action:

...the result is nothing without its becoming. But neither will we sacrifice the self-coherent unity of intention to the becoming, which then would be no more than pure disorder. We will not choose between the opening and the totality. Therefore we will be incoherent, but without systematically resigning ourselves to incoherence. The possibility of the impossible system will be on the horizon to protect us from empiricism.<sup>36</sup>

In Derrida's words, it is not that we should 'explore this space', but rather '[f]aintly and from afar, we will only attempt to point it out.'<sup>37</sup> These gaps created by Burroughs in the text appear like cracks in the pavement from which new plant life can spring, but only if their right to "be gaps", to be opaque as Glissant would term it, is protected. Accordingly, the closing of these gaps through the maintenance of the same morality which caused the war and the atom bomb is a violence of its own. It is Burroughs' work to produce the possibility of the "scansion" of these gaps which are generated aside from the "mastery" of the cut of the author. To disavow coherence through cutting is to, by extension, disavow mastery over any supposed meaning of text. Our investigation of such generous writing must accordingly remain vigilant. We are here presented with ambiguity as response to forthright morality.

### Scansion

Whilst the term "scansion" has literary connotations, it takes on another meaning in the psychoanalytic practice of Jacques Lacan. In this setting, scansion is a technique used to interrupt the analysand mid-discourse and end the session prematurely. It is worth noting that Lacan's career is arguably defined by an early scansion. His first attempt to describe "The Mirror Stage" at a conference in 1936 was met with early termination by Ernest Jones

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 104.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

who deemed Lacan to have overrun his allotted time.<sup>38</sup> The addition of the “scansion” to Lacan’s practice came to mark his resignation from the Société Parisienne de Psychanalyse in 1953.<sup>39</sup> In many ways, his career was defined by these two interruptions. In practice, scansion can be an attempt to interrupt the analysand as they get carried away, as they enter into a moment of potentially ‘quasi-infinite acceleration’, with their own discourse. For Lacan, as described by Bruce Fink, ‘[p]atients do *not* spontaneously home in on the subjects that are most important, psychoanalytically speaking; they spontaneously avoid them, for the most part.’<sup>40</sup> Uncomfortable truths, often covered by what Freud termed negation (“It’s definitely nothing to do with my mother”), must be pointed out by the analyst and the scansion is one tool for marking these. Furthermore, the arbitrariness of the full-length session for Lacan should never take priority over good “work”. If great insight occurs after 5 minutes, it would be foolish to continue for administrative reasons, smothering the moment of revelation in idle chat. Of course, the risk remains that interjection by the analyst prevents a gradual unfolding that would otherwise lead to greater insight.<sup>41</sup> In short, the scansion works to highlight the uncertainty made apparent by the analysand through their discourse, the point at which their spoken testimony may have either hit the nail on the head or become dislocated from their unconscious understanding of something vital. I contend that both Lacan and Burroughs involve some form of “scansion” as an interruptive technical apparatus which occurs without the wont or prediction of the reader or analysand; in other words, the scansion must always surprise, offering us something outside of our intuition, modified and controlled as our intuition is by the hypotheses, laws and languages embodied in America as Other.

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<sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, ‘The mirror stage: an obliterated archive’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 25-34 (p. 25).

<sup>39</sup> Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2009; repr. 2017), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> A frequent criticism of the scansion is that it denies the analysand the opportunity to speak, to work through their discourse, that it denies them the opportunity to tell their story and to decide when they are ready to move on. The scansion does appear to place the analyst in a position of uncomfortable authority over what is, ostensibly, the analysand’s work. Fink offers a defence of this in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (pp. 15-19).

However, as has been shown above, Lacan's "scansion" shares many of the qualities of Burroughs' cut; both are events deliberately brought into being by an individual that, in some way, holds a position of authority (the analyst and the author respectively). Here I seek to parse Lacan's term, dividing them into the moment at which the analyst terminates the session and the subsequent gap that is opened up in the analysand's discourse as a response to that termination. Where the first is a cut, the second is the marking of a shift. The moment at which the analysand is held in abeyance—when their discourse is interrupted—is the moment where the "scansion" is felt. This is the moment where it feels as if the brakes have been put on, where, to take an example, the negation of "it is nothing to do with my mother" is put into question rather than simply passed over. This scansion which necessarily follows the "cutting" of a session does not always have to be immediately perceptible. Indeed, the analysand may leave the session without anything more than a passing curiosity about the session's premature end, only later feeling the effect of the scansion in the form of numerous questions surrounding the reasoning behind the analyst's decision to terminate the session when they did ("why did they end the session then?", "what was it that needed to be highlighted?" etc.)<sup>42</sup> To return to Allen Fisher, the scansion is not the act of cutting, but rather the 'perceptive and physiological experience of the assembled effect', that which 'can surprise or undermine expectations.'<sup>43</sup> The laws and hypotheses of America as Other are undermined cutting produces, again from Fisher, 'interference and damage'.<sup>44</sup> This 'interference and damage', these gaps and inconsistencies which appear over the surface of the text, is the marking of the scansion. These methods, continues Fisher:

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<sup>42</sup> Of course, this can also have negative consequences: as previously highlighted, it can affirm the analyst as master of the session, the one with ultimate control, or could even reinforce certain issues within the analysand's psyche ("Did I say something wrong?", "Do they find me boring?" etc.) which if left unconsidered may cause greater harm in the short or long term. This, once again, leans on the analyst's personal style and sense of whether the scansion would be productive or harmful.

<sup>43</sup> Fisher, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 160.

...produce transformations from collage or post-collagic facture, and both directly link to metaphors for social praxis and the human condition, their reproduction, replication and repetition, and the method of his [Burroughs'] production, involving damage, provides a metonym for contemporary civic life.<sup>45</sup>

Through the channelling of 'multiple consciousness', the scansion brings into play 'contemporary civic life', allowing the logic of America as Other and the struggles and concerns of America in 1959 to leak into the text.

This distinction between the cut as deliberate and the scansion as arising from that cut in unruly and unpredictable ways can be made clearer by turning towards the literary scansion. By way of comparison, the literary scansion, as a marking, is primarily used to designate stresses in order to outline a poem or play's meter. Incorporation of stress marks new and otherwise unforeseen possibilities that a non-marked text may not highlight.<sup>46</sup> In psychoanalytic practice and in literary studies, scansion the session or scanning the poem is a response, a necessary interjection to mark something as note-worthy. In the case of Lacan, the analyst creates the decision to end the session. The response of the analysand which eventually follows this cut is a result of the scansion, the mark which designates that the session is over *beyond* the mere practical fact of it ending. In Burroughs' writing, this is taken one step further as the scansion is less deployed than allowed to self-generate; the scansion is brought into play by its own possibility. Burroughs' cutting, and the fact that where these cuts occur is not always discernible, prevents the reader from understanding exactly *where* they are supposed to be making connections and conclusions. Scansions may

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Arguably the most famous line written by Shakespeare ('To be, or not to be, that is the question') still attracts a vibrant scholarly debate as to whether the foot of 'that is' is trochic or iambic. This alters the stress of the line dramatically, marking either *that* as stressed (indicating a revelatory "finding" of the question) or *is* as stressed (that the question was perhaps known and Hamlet returns to it through habit or through a *need* to solve the riddle). Of course, focusing on the neglected, unstressed term yields even further complications: by emphasising *that* and neglecting 'is', we eschew or deny our responsibility for answering this important question—we play dumb—and by emphasising *is* and rejecting 'that' we forget that every return is original and that "that question" still remains regardless of whether we attempt to answer it or not.

well directly follow Burroughs' cuts—as with the Lacanian scansion above—but the deliberate unruliness of the scansion in Burroughs' texts means that *praxis* (the process by which some conviction or theory is embodied) is not merely the result of *poiēsis* (the creation of a hitherto non-existent quality, entity, object or form)—the *praxis* here being the ambiguity created by the scansion, the *poiēsis* being the cut. The “activity” of the scansion evades origin, mastery or capture. These scansions may induce a series of alternative readings which, rather than relying on intuition, present us with a choice: we can force narrative coherences where they are no longer reasonable, accommodate contradiction, spend longer with them prior to decision or accept an ambiguity which promises no action, but does not affirm inaction. Critically, all of these options bar the first require slowing down in order to think through and process these complex ideas and contradictions. This may prove critical in transforming our relationship with violence, in slowing down the speed race and in allowing us to come to an unfixed and non-codified position in relation to the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

### Performance and Medicine

Just as with Cage's doubting of the security supposedly offered by the threat of mutually assured destruction, it will take some work to convince the various others under the horizon of America as Other that this particular interpretation of postwar violence is not necessary. In fact, any work which seeks to undermine this must demonstrate that this inscription of violence is damaging to prospects of safety, encouraging its own surreptitious continuation through discourses of violence. As such, Burroughs' texts are appropriately cautious in spite of the gratuitousness of their representations of violence. Whether in the text or on the operating table, the riskiness of the deliberateness of the cut—as Freud argues—is in the ‘hands of an unconscientious doctor’ rather than in the cut itself.<sup>47</sup> As he continues, ‘no

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<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVI, Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)*, p. 462.

medical instrument or procedure is guaranteed against abuse; if a knife does not cut, it cannot be used for healing either.<sup>48</sup>

The outright rejection of structured narrative and of prescribed notions of order and literary intentionality in Burroughs' early texts generates gaps and contradictions at the text's surface. The deliberate cuts allow the scansion to both mark these cuts and, subsequently, to self-generate without needing a cut to mark. The scansion may also serve to redirect us by critically re-engaging with the violence of previous sections. This re-engagement may arise as the result of a realisation we have about that violence after the fact. Nowhere in Burroughs is this complex relationship with the cut more prominent than in *Naked Lunch*. And nowhere in Burroughs is there a more 'unconscientious doctor' than Benway:

Doctor Benway is operating in an auditorium filled with students: "Now, boys, you won't see this operation performed very often and there's a reason for that... You see it has absolutely no medical value. No one knows what the purpose of it originally was or if it had a purpose at all. Personally I think it was a pure artistic creation from the beginning. Just as a bull fighter with his skill and knowledge extricates himself from danger he has himself invoked, so in this operation the surgeon deliberately endangers his patient, and then, with incredible speed and celerity, rescues him from death at the last possible split second..."<sup>49</sup>

In hands and situations where the knife is ordinarily to be used for healing, it is used here for show. Accordingly, Benway attaches virtuosic signifiers to the 'performances' of Doctor Tetrizzini:

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<sup>48</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVI, Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)*, trans., ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), pp. 462-3.

<sup>49</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 52.

“Did any of you ever see Doctor Tetrizzini perform? I say perform advisedly because his operations were performances. He would start by throwing a scalpel across the room into the patient and then make his entrance like a ballet dancer. His speed was incredible: ‘I don’t give them time to die,’ he would say. Tumors put him in a frenzy of rage. ‘Fucking undisciplined cells!’ he would snarl, advancing on the tumor like a knife-fighter.”<sup>50</sup>

Tetrizzini displays both the speed and seething desire for purity and mastery which mark Scientism. These features of Tetrizzini are sources of fascination for Benway. The ‘speed’ could describe Tetrizzini’s dramatic entrance just as well as it could describe his surgical prowess. The image of the ‘knife-fighter’, warily facing their opponent so as not to be caught unawares, is not one required when your “opponent” is not fighting back. The stance is all for show. The captivation for Benway rests in Tetrizzini’s masterful theatrics. The performing *of* medicine as its own goal results in celebrity doctors sustaining their legend through increasingly irresponsible manipulations of medical ethics. Tetrizzini represents what happens when science is treated as masterable; the performance becomes an indicator, a performative revelation, of that mastery. We can see here how taking “science” as a total coherence—as in the most extreme examples of logical positivism—is what sustains the notion that it can be mastered. Scientific practice is thus enjoyed not merely as a tool which enables healing as in Freud’s scalpel. The desire to virtuosically wield the knife, to master the creation of the cut (*poiēsis*) and the embodied practice (*praxis*) of that cut, overtakes its intended function. Where the *praxis* of the conscientious doctor is, vaguely speaking, “healing”, for Tetrizzini, it is “performing science”. All the while, the *poiēsis* which results from said performance is still “the cut”. A surgeon getting enjoyment from “healing” a patient as a perk of the job is something we would likely wish to accept. Enjoying the *performance* of “cutting”, however, renders the function of cutting *itself* as pleasurable. It is

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

pleasurable because it is a clear marker of success, a clear marker of the mastery of the surgeon over their craft. Rather than “healing”, which is reliant on a consideration for the welfare of an-“other”, when “cutting” becomes the source of pleasure, this is no longer the case; cutting simply requires a knife and a body to cut. The cut then becomes both the embodiment of doing something (*praxis*) and the thing created by that doing (*poiēsis*).

Benway’s nostalgic retelling of Tetrizzini also results in violence through copy-cat behaviour. We witness the introduction of an ‘*espontáneo*’, ‘a bull-fighting term for a member of the audience who leaps down into the ring...and attempts a few passes with the bull before he is dragged out’.<sup>51</sup> The bull-fighting image simply re-asserts the confusion surrounding the knife-fighter from above. The true “threat” is elucidated by Benway: ““Stop him before he guts my patient!””.<sup>52</sup> If anyone is doing any gutting, it will be Benway. The threat, thus, becomes the *espontáneo* themselves who, via their insistence on becoming today’s star, hijacks the performance. In turn, they distract from the seamless mechanics of this controlled yet out-of-control performance of violence, potentially inviting questions from audience members who were erstwhile distracted by the lure of the concrete violence on display, a violence that was controlled by medical professionals. Inspired by Tetrizzini, the *espontáneo* advances ‘like a knife-fighter’, seeking to imitate their idol. And just as in a bullfight, they—and the homemade bomb maker from Burroughs’ earlier quoted interview—are the disruption in a theatre of legitimised violence. As highlighted in Artaud’s First Manifesto on the “theatre of cruelty”, the *espontáneo* ‘breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms.’<sup>53</sup> Peeling away the artifice, their interruption, their over-performance of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, reveals the illusion; violence is being manipulated to masquerade as science. They are then removed under the guise of “protecting

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), p. 91.

them from themselves”. In seeking celebrity, the *espontáneo* reveals the hidden, legitimised violence which lurks under the surface of this entertaining performance.

This tendency to “perform science”, to “perform medicine” and to “play doctor” is to blame for the medical violence presented here. This passage extends that logic to its extreme. This is in spite of the fact that the scientific method was designed to be impartial, falsifiable and thus avoid the trappings of ideologically driven interpretation. This is a wariness of the problem we spoke about at the start of this chapter; this method attempts to prevent interpretation of anything other than “the data”. As Burroughs demonstrates however, even the scientific method is prone to misinterpretation because it is put into action *by people*. No matter how objective one is, we always observe other structures from within our own structure of biases, narratives, delusions and confusions. As seen in the passage from Burroughs presented above, any method we utilise to assert narrative intentionality or any attempt to explain these strange and at times nonsensical characters, leads to confusion. However, by doing so, we are able to uncover the logic of the unconscious doctors of the Interzone.

‘The young... Always they are in a hurry.’<sup>54</sup>

In Burroughs’ writing, one of the functions of the scansion is to tease out the connection between concrete acts of violence and the concealed logic which perpetuates them. The scansion, just as with Lacan, is therefore part of a wider analysis. In the case of *Naked Lunch*, the text offers us, amongst many other things, a reading of violence in America. Benway’s call to expel the *espontáneo*—even though both parties are attempting to perform the same act of violence—is an allegory which describes the attempts of Benway to conceal the logic of America as Other—of which he is an embodiment—which sustains those individual acts, a logic which threatens to bubble up and reveal itself. The attempt to prevent

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<sup>54</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 159.

this unconscious logic from ever rising up is found in the conflation of *poiēsis* and *praxis*, the attempt to master “science” or “violence”. As with all repression, Benway is attempting to conceal the logic of violence which is at play. The Other is a force which bears on his agency, on his behaviour, on his interpretations of what is legal regarding violence, even though the Other does not possess agency itself.. By removing the *espontáneo* with such force and speed, Benway is attempting to prevent “why?” from ever being asked in relation to his violence. Asking “why?” by slowing over—through interruption—the material circumstances of the performance of the operating theatre would reveal that the reasons given by Benway for the same ‘brutal acceleration’ of violence which generates the bomb—i.e. as justifiable in the name of defence—only serves to conceal a cultural death drive. The notion of a cultural death drive will return in the second section. For now, it is important to sketch this trajectory in order to more clearly identify what the scansion is marking—the moment at which this hidden logic reveals itself and the shape of that logic.

Just as with the analytic session, these moments of revelation can arrive in many forms and at many different times. For instance, as mentioned earlier, this scansion can sometimes only be recognised much later on or when our expectation of a specific revelation is in some way undermined. The transition between the chapters of “the examination” and “have you seen pantopon rose?” marks one of the many ways in which this difficult text can undermine our expectations as a form of disruption. The transition between these chapters also marks a profound change in the text at large—if read from front to back. Whilst noticeable, this transition is felt as an aftershock, a change whose effects creep up on us as we read further. This moment is anxiogenic and perplexing. The incision made at the end of the chapter is visible, but the scansion which results does not merely perform the same work as the cut (i.e. the formal process of indicating the end of the chapter) nor does it do this at the same time. This change—which is rendered visible through the jarring absence of the extreme violence that we have come to expect from the text—acts without the reader necessarily initially perceiving it. This change requires us to read on and come to a realisation in the middle of a

later passage. This makes said change a question of past and future readings as well as the present one. At this particular moment, the dark vitality, the energetic decadence and the orgasmic dysfunction of previous chapters vanishes. Benway's interaction with Carl is not debauched, but bureaucratic, cold and relentless:

For the first time the doctor's eyes flickered across Carl's face. Eyes without a trace of warmth or hate or any emotion that Carl had ever experienced in himself or seen in another, at once cold and intense, predatory and impersonal. Carl suddenly felt trapped in this silent underwater cave of a room, cut off from all sources of warmth and certainty.<sup>55</sup>

Not only is there an attempt by Carl at a genuine connection—Benway's cold, impersonality is understood as such because it signifies a *lack* of familiarity—the section continues relentlessly towards Carl's demise. Echoing Ivan Sechenov's work on the "orienting response/reflex",<sup>56</sup> a new phenomenon has entered Carl's immediate environment which is not jarring enough to engage the immediacy of the "startle response/reflex". The orienting response signifies his cautious engagement with said anomaly. Where in earlier passages of *Naked Lunch* the startle response appeared necessary for survival, this section is absent of anything that would immediately shock. As Freud identifies in the uncanny, it is that which 'arouses dread and creeping horror'<sup>57</sup> whilst retaining a relationship to the 'homely'.<sup>58</sup> There is something off about this otherwise familiar situation. Accordingly, the anomaly does not move quickly nor show its teeth. Benway's cold stare remains an unintelligible code.

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<sup>55</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew M. Colman, *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 535.

<sup>57</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans., ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955; repr. Vintage, 2001), p. 219.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Burroughs indicates that Carl is cut off from ‘all sources of warmth and certainty’. Yet if *Naked Lunch* has taught us anything so far, it is to be aware of Carl’s impending death.

By presenting “certainty” as something Carl needs for his own security, we can see how Burroughs deliberately undermines his own words. Unlike the naïve Carl, we can see “the twist” coming due to the previous pages of violence and death. Benway’s examination is, surely, just another performance of physical violence in the name of Cold War Science. Yet the uncanniness of this scene rests in the fact that this never arrives. This is the absence of clear concrete violence, that which has come to structure our understanding of the Law of the Interzone. Burroughs has so successfully introduced us to this initially perplexing Law that we begin to think along its lines and finish its logic. Just as this moment of “understanding” occurs (“Ah! “Certainty”. Yes. Fool me once...”), the Law that we have begun to grasp once more slips through our fingers. The strangeness of this chapter’s conclusion is, on a first pass, jarring. Despite this, its effects are not initially seismic but disarmingly subtle. After Benway’s work is completed, he asks:

“Do you often doze off like that? in the middle of a conversation...?”

“I wasn’t asleep—that is...”

“You weren’t?”

“It’s just that the *whole thing* is unreal...I’m going now. I don’t care. You can’t force me to stay.”

He was walking across the room towards the door. He had been walking a long time.

A creeping numbness dragged his legs. The door seemed to recede.

“Where can you go, Carl?” The doctor’s voice reached him from a great distance.

“Out...Away...Through the door...”

“The Green Door, Carl?”

The doctor’s voice was barely audible. The whole room was exploding out into space.<sup>59</sup>

Benway appears to end by releasing Carl from his charge with a wink and a nudge (‘Well, I guess we can uh *dismiss as irrelevant* these uh understandable means of replenishing the uh *exchequer*.’).<sup>60</sup> Whilst this is purely a bureaucratic pardon hidden behind innuendo, it is not followed by sadistic violence as is often the case with Benway. Rather than the intimacy between bodies that Burroughs’ violence regularly depicts, everything finds itself ‘exploding out into space.’ In turn, our own ‘warmth’ and ‘certainty’, which we have come to derive from continued displays of decadent violence, is dismissed.

This is testament to the state of violence in the postwar period. When clear—as in the textual “cut” or Benway’s operating theatre—it is easy to contend with. However, as Larry Ray argues, the twentieth century does not mark a decrease in violence. Instead, the West has simply become better at hiding it away. In turn, we have become better at subconsciously accepting it as part of everyday life. The above passage “scands” this shift from Burroughs’ concrete textual representations of violence to the hidden logic which makes that violence acceptable. It is through the scansion that these acts of violence are connected to the logic which drives them. As with the *espontáneo* this is one form of the “peripheral reading” offered by Fisher. This particular scansion requires us to read on in order for its effects to be felt, smearing this mark over the next pages and over the text at large. Here and throughout the text, the scansion is unruly and taking ownership of it is a fool’s errand. Not only are these scansions innumerable—especially on re-reading—and lacking origin or mastery from the author, taking ownership of such unruliness would simply render them as “cuts”; “I, William S. Burroughs, choose to mark here”. As Lydenberg argues, cutting creates for

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<sup>59</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Burroughs ‘a “third mind”...neither author nor reader’, one that is ‘not even present except as “an absent third person, invisible and beyond grasp, decoding the silence”.’<sup>61</sup> We have come to term gateway to this “third mind” the scansion. To conflate the cut and scansion would thus undermine this ambiguity; by virtue of making cuts, he must not attempt to control the scansion. Just as with Cage’s intentionless silence, this is not an act which Burroughs can perform anyway. It is a deliberate refusal of mastery. Thus the only move is to allow the scansion to do its work without attempting to master it.

If the scansion is to prove crucial in identifying the hidden logic of the violence of America as Other—which remains masked by the speed war, of the rapid absorption of violent acts into “necessary measures” for state defence for instance—it becomes pressing to ask how Burroughs sees such violence as infecting society at large. Here, it appears important to turn to another of Burroughs’ major concerns during this period: that of brainwashing. Burroughs’ fears surrounding the violent invasion of one’s own thoughts by an ideological bureaucracy regularly recur in *Naked Lunch*. The inclusion of Latah and the Senders bring particular focus to this concern. For all the violences depicted in Burroughs’ work, he describes brainwashing, in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, as ‘the vilest form of crime against the person of another’.<sup>62</sup> We see the consequences of brainwashing across *Naked Lunch*, many of which return us to the notion of reframing the tools of medicine for violent means:

There are various ‘psychological methods,’ compulsory psychoanalysis, for example. The subject is requested to free-associate for one hour every day (in cases where time is not of the essence).<sup>63</sup>

(Latah is a condition occurring in Southeast Asia. Otherwise sane, Latahs compulsively imitate every motion once their attention is attracted... They

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<sup>61</sup> Lydenberg, p. 125.

<sup>62</sup> David Seed, *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control: A Study of Novels and Films Since World War II* (London: The Kent State University Press, 2004), p. 134.

<sup>63</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 24.

sometimes injure themselves trying to imitate the motions of several people at once.)<sup>64</sup>

Kicks to hypnotize a priest and tell him he is about to consummate a hypostatic union with the Lamb—then steer a randy old sheep up his ass. After that the Interrogator can gain complete hypnotic control—the subject will come at his whistle, shit on the floor if he but say Open Sesame.

“Needless to say, the sex humiliation angle is contraindicated for overt homosexuals.”<sup>65</sup>

For Benway, the self-declared ‘*pure scientist*’, brainwashing is not merely another tool in his arsenal.<sup>66</sup> It becomes a guiding methodology which the tools of medicine are manipulated to serve. Burroughs’ response to brainwashing in the previous passage with Carl is to cut by ending the chapter. This “scands” our expectation of violence. But we are not only being asked to redirect our thirst for violence. When our expectations are subverted, we receive a temporary, fleeting moment of self-reflection. We see that the Law of the Interzone has brainwashed us into seeking or expecting violence. This scansion acts slowly through its gradual reveal, but does offer the potential to pull us out of the spell. This highlights the importance of slowing down and the scansion’s role in diverting us, in frustrating a desire for meaning and coherence.

### Desire and *Jouissance*

The scansion marks the desire for mastery as a way to assuage insecurity or vulnerability. However, the urge to master becomes justified by acts of violence. Conflating ends and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

means, the action becomes its own justification, resulting in infinite recursion of which violence is the both by-product and marker of progress. Simply, acts of concrete violence act as signals that the laws and hypotheses of the Other remain the Law in practice in human affairs. In practical terms, this means that America as Other remains supposedly “coherent” and that the results of the violence of the official American political administration demonstrate this—guided as it is in part by these laws and hypotheses. If the atom bomb is seen as ‘merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of righteousness’ in the words of President Truman rather than as an abhorrence, the detonation of the bomb marks that those laws and hypotheses are seen as coherent. This is akin to the junk addict for whom “the feeling of injecting/snorting” is both the state which is created (*poēsis*) and the action embodied to make that state (*praxis*). In Lacanian terms, the pleasure derived from the correct functioning of the drive—sometimes to the extent that it transgresses the pleasure principle and produces pain—is called *jouissance*. For Lacan, *jouissance* is a compromise where ‘pleasure *and* pain are presented as a single packet to take or leave’.<sup>67</sup> For example, the junk addict does so to receive pleasure. Pain, as a by-product, becomes an acceptable consequence or compromise. Freud would term the role that this pain takes on as ‘primary gain’, the satisfaction derived from the correct functioning of one’s symptom.<sup>68</sup> This is not, however, a case of “excess desire” as desire is directed towards the Other. *Jouissance* is shaped by the Other in some sense—in the injunction of the Law to “enjoy” maximally for instance, a Law which finds itself clearly expressed in the mass advertising which spread during the postwar period. Yet desire, for Lacan, ‘is a defense, a defense against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*’.<sup>69</sup> The constant deferral of desire—which prevents fixation because once something has been attained, it can no longer be desired—defends the subject, only partially, from the danger of excess *jouissance*, from total fixation which turns any drive into the death drive. There are many distinctions to be made between desire and

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1960)*, trans. by Dennis Porter, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 189.

<sup>68</sup> Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (The Hogarth Press, 1973; repr. London: Karnac Books, 2006), p. 183.

<sup>69</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 699.

*jouissance*, but one of primary importance here is explicated in Lacan’s Seminar X on “Anxiety”:

The symptom, in its nature, is *jouissance*, don’t forget this, a *jouissance* under wraps no doubt, *unterbliebene Befriedigung*, it has no need of you, unlike acting-out, it is sufficient until itself. It belongs to the realm of what I taught you to distinguish from desire as *jouissance*, that is, it steers towards the Thing, having crossed the barrier of the good...that is, the barrier of the pleasure principle, and this is why this *jouissance* can be translated as an *Unlust*—for those who haven’t heard it yet, this German term signifies *displeasure*.<sup>70</sup>

The Thing (*Das Ding* in Freud) shall be elaborated on extensively in the second section. For now however, it is enough to say excess *jouissance* is borne of the urge to break through the pleasure principle towards The Thing, that which *l’objet a* signals towards. Unlike in desire, *jouissance* in its push for the infinite functioning of the symptom, turns every drive into a death drive; for Lacan, it is ‘the path towards death’.<sup>71</sup> Where desire moves metonymically along the signifying chain, *jouissance* gets stuck. Where desire is temporarily assuaged by the receipt of that which is desired at a particular moment, engagement with *jouissance* means that we seek out repeated engagement with that item or idea as if to isolate the very cause of desire itself, *l’objet a*.<sup>72</sup>

Like *jouissance*, the uncontrollable pursuit of exponential progress leads to the contravention of scientific principles most would deem sacrosanct—the health of the patient,

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<sup>70</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X: Anxiety*, trans. by A. R. Price, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 125.

<sup>71</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 92.

<sup>72</sup> There are similarities here with capital. As Karl Marx contends in Part I, it is not possible to isolate the exchange-value of a commodity. Similarly, it is not possible to isolate *l’objet a* in anything other than fantasy, although the attempted isolation of *l’objet a* is, for Lacan, the primary goal of sadism (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Pelican Books, 1976; repr. Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 126.)

the preference to not harm others etc. To reaffirm, the issue is not in progress, nor in science, nor rationality. When *poēsis* and *praxis* are conflated however, the search for knowledge—where “knowledge” becomes both *poēsis* and *praxis*, just as “injecting junk” becomes both *poēsis* and *praxis* for the addict—becomes caught up in the speed war, the interminable reach for excess *jouissance*. This, as a by-product, creates violence. We see exemplified in conversations between Benway and Schafer:

“Gentlemen, the human nervous system can be reduced to a compact and abbreviated spinal column. The brain, front, middle and rear must follow the adenoid, the wisdom too, the appendix... I give you my Master Work: *The Complete All American Deanxietized Man...*”<sup>73</sup>

Some members of the jury, upon hearing the accusation against Schafer of ‘*forcible lobotomy*’, ‘fall to the floor writhing in orgasms of prurience’.<sup>74</sup> This passage’s initial connection to the transgressive sexual character of *jouissance* is clear. Schafer, in overstepping his bounds, induces orgasm in others from how excessive his actions are. The performance of extreme violence in this surgical context becomes that which the jury derive pleasure from. Importantly, the jury derive their pleasure from the correct functioning of the Law of the Other. Idealised attempts to aim for the “perfectibility of man” overstep the mark. Where orgasmic dysfunction is traditionally considered to be the inability to *reach* orgasm, the one delivered by excessiveness here becomes a question of how to *stop* orgasm. This boundless orgasm becomes a concrete rendering of the death drive; as Freud argues in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, where ‘the life drives have so much more to do with our inner perception, since they behave as troublemakers and constantly bring tensions...the

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<sup>73</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 88.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

death drives appear to do their work unobtrusively.’<sup>75</sup> The infinite loop, in ‘quasi-infinite acceleration’, is unstoppable, always already silently at work, driving actions without making its presence known. Another issue in considering the “perfectibility of man” craved by Schafer is in considering his motivations:

“You know,” he says impulsively, “I think I’ll go back to plain old-fashioned surgery. The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate? We could seal up nose and mouth, fill in the stomach, make an air hole direct into the lungs where it should have been in the first place...”<sup>76</sup>

This does not appear to be to advocate the non-body position suggested by Lydenberg, concerned as it is with the uncanny manipulation found in the passage with Carl. There is a concern that the normalisation of such violent claims under the humorously manipulated nostalgia of ‘plain old-fashioned surgery’ will come to represent the logical end of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. This lust for *pure* total knowledge and total mastery of the human body is pathological. This is as a result of the impossibility of the task, but also as a result of the violence that such monomaniacal focus wreaks. These instances of violence make manifest the dangers of unchecked, ideological devotion to progress.

The scansion works, as with Cage and Baraka, to expel the Other from the stage by highlighting its lack of coherence. Yet the scansion cannot be absorbed into that same horizon which it has expelled because it is a force with no intention and no master of its own. This rendering of the scansion has also highlighted that violence occurs as a result of the conflation of *poiēsis* and *praxis*. In the case of Benway’s operating theatre, rather than “a

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<sup>75</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006) (pp. 132-195) p. 194.

<sup>76</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 110.

healthier person” (*poiēsis*) being a result of “medical surgery” (*praxis*), the latter becomes both *poiēsis* and *praxis*. Medicine conducted at the altar of science as the only truth results in extreme violence (as found in the human experiments of Wirths and Heim, or the ongoing experiments in 1940s-1960s America on an unsuspecting public).<sup>77</sup> From here, we discussed the scansion as separate from the cut. Uncreatable, self-generative and without fixed location, the scansion marks the hidden logic which anticipates concrete violence. In the case of brainwashing, the scansion generates a moment of self-reflection, temporarily snapping us out of the spell of the Other’s Law. This is the ambiguity which Burroughs’ text proposes. The generation of uncertainty is an attempt to slow the careless reading which propagandists require. We closed by discussing *jouissance* in relation to desire. This began to tease out a question which will be discussed in the next section: what happens when violence which is generated as a result of the conflation of *poiēsis* and *praxis* becomes the source of pleasure?

The next section will also consider how the process of reading Burroughs’ fantastical violence may combat the interpretations of violence offered in America as Other. Here, we will have a better view of exactly how, if at all, “ambiguity” is able to transform violence. The chapter will close by considering the hidden logic which Burroughs’ allegory of Mary, Mark and Johnny in *Naked Lunch* appears to reveal: that of the cultural death drive.

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<sup>77</sup> For further information on scientism and its role in producing violence in the form of human experimentation in Cold War America, see Jonathan D. Moreno’s *Undue Risk: Secret State Experiments on Humans* (2013) and Eileen Welsome’s *The Plutonium Files: America’s Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War* (2010).

## II – The Cultural Death Drive

### Describing the Static Horror

The “thrill of the chase” experienced by the addict is a very bad place to find oneself stuck. At such a juncture, any relationship to an object has become folded into the individual’s continued existence. It becomes the search for the pure desirousness, one which is endless, which *l’objet a* embodies. In the case of America in terms of its tangible political leadership—which, at the time of *Naked Lunch*’s publication was headed by Dwight D. Eisenhower—this is exemplified in the pursuit of mastery. As such, America as Other—it comes to bear on the laws and hypotheses by which any potential practical, political decisions may be shaped—must become a total explanation, a total coherence. In short, a claim that the laws and hypotheses of America as Other are coherent enables a justification of mastery and violence based upon those laws and hypotheses by official political actors. This endless pursuit, the justifying of the American Dream as that total coherence and justification, is rendered as a new form of that Western frontier so baked into the American Dream. Like the frontier, this pursuit of mastery is one which is self-promulgating, ceaselessly driving political decisions towards increasingly volatile acts of tangible violence. Burroughs’ work is to shake us out of this particular manifestation of the Dream, to offer uncontrolled, uncontrollable moments of irruption and reflection where concrete violences give way and reveal the speed war and the hidden logic of America as Other which influences them.

It is no coincidence therefore that Burroughs explores addiction so deeply. Whether “chasing the high” of junk or seeking the total consumption of the ego via sexual intercourse, Burroughs’ most nuanced thoughts on excess, speed and violence regularly arrive in the form of bodily interactions. The ways in which Burroughs documents these interactions between bodies, their fluids and the foreign bodies that enter from outside the body will assist in mapping the spread of violence as its self-generation spirals out of control. This

chapter will provide a detailed analysis of the sex scene between Mary, Mark and Johnny in *Naked Lunch* whilst also referencing passages from *Junky*, *Queer* and interview materials.

Consideration of the relationship between violence and fantasy—both sexual fantasy which can be physically actualised and fantasy which remains fictive—is consistently at play in *Naked Lunch*. As elucidated previously, whilst violence can be simulated in the text by the cut, unmasking violences which are the result of a hidden logic—such as the shift in tone at the close of “the examination” with the death of Carl—can often be presented in nonviolent terms. Tangible violence on the page can be seductive, clouding and confusing the hidden violence which the scansion attempts to reveal and undermine. The body complicates this further. The fantastical violences against the body depicted by Burroughs allude to a more subtle line of thought on those violences than their gratuitousness. This is brought to our attention by virtue of their physical impossibility. The requirement for certain fantasies to remain impossible is what makes them nonviolent. However, this still enables them to be explorative of violence. It is the impossibility of certain fantasies—their being “fabulous textual” as Derrida would argue<sup>78</sup>—which enables them to act as thought experiments with which we can scand, trace and undermine the hidden logic of the violence that we are seeking to reveal and explore.<sup>79</sup>

To begin by turning to sexual fantasy in Burroughs, there is rarely a chapter in *Naked Lunch* which passes without the revelation of a new paraphilia. In this text, and in others of Burroughs’ oeuvre, these often appear algolagnic or, at the very least, as a sexually-driven “playing with power” or “pain”. Burroughs’ thoughts on the bomb can be extended here:

1900: What safety, stability a different light. Gone forever now.

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<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 1984), 20-31 (p. 23).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

The earth has been violated by the atom bomb. No longer innocent. It was the Apple, and the Pentagon slobbered it down, boiling blood drooling from their smacking lips:

“Just let me sample some more of that.”

“Don’t bother me with the war. It’s such a bloody bore.”

(You’re getting a bit vague, old thing. Why not tuck it in for now?)<sup>80</sup>

There is something oddly toothless, biteless, even cut-less about this particular state violence even in light of the extremeness of that violence—the metaphorical consumption and digestion of the ‘Apple’ of knowledge/innocence and a profound violation of the Earth. Even when the image of blood is introduced, it is done through ‘boiling’ rather than cutting, relating it more closely to Lacan’s ‘burning hearth’ of *jouissance* than to the cutting of teeth.<sup>81</sup> The kind of violent transgression that ‘violated’ implies certainly holds sexual connotations, this link between the ‘grind’<sup>82</sup> and writhing as sexual imagery and consumption remaining prominent throughout *Naked Lunch* (‘His stomach rumbles. His whole body writhes in peristalsis.’)<sup>83</sup> Even a scene such as Benway’s story of the Talking Asshole—which, as Timothy Murphy, argues remains ‘the most famous and most analysed routine’<sup>84</sup> in the text—features eating and ‘teeth-like raspy incurving hooks’.<sup>85</sup> This said, there are many instances where sucking, draining and swallowing take precedent over the cutting violence of teeth or blades. Once again, the comparative subtlety of “sucking” or ‘boiling’ over the penetration of “cutting” brings the hidden nature of this violence into

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<sup>80</sup> Burroughs, *Last Words*, p. 207.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIII: The Object of Psychoanalysis 1965-1966*, trans. by Cormac Gallagher, Unpublished <<http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/13-The-Object-of-Psychoanalysis1.pdf>> [accessed 4 November 2019], p. 148.

<sup>82</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>84</sup> Timothy Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 91-92.

<sup>85</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 111.

view. It is the draining and oozing of shooting up which gives us the violence of junk rather than the penetration of the needle. As Burroughs writes in *Junky*, '[e]ven so, he had to shoot in the skin about half the time. But he only gave up and "skinned" a shot after an agonizing half-hour of probing and poking and cleaning out the needle, which would stop up with blood.'<sup>86</sup> As with "the examination", it is the uncanny nature of this violence, the fact that Burroughs' prose draws us not to the obvious "cutting" of the needle but to the grotesque horror of the repeated cleaning of clogged blood, which remains vital. As with the bite of a tick, to focus on the "cut" of the tick's teeth would come at the expense of the bite's purpose; it is a bite that enables drainage. Just as the bite hides this draining, concrete violence can overwhelm the work of the scansion if we do not read closely and slowly. Burroughs is not, however, writing so as to produce a moral for this story. To do so would merely reinstate mastery with the author now central to delivering that total coherence.

To continue consideration of this "draining" metaphor, we can turn to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. In Arendtian terms, the violence of bureaucracy is akin to draining and can be identified in the introduction of the "social" realm into the "private". By making private needs—eating, sleeping, sex etc.—a public concern, the privacy of the individual is annihilated. This move also involves the public realm in the day-to-day necessities of the private, preventing the public realm from remaining one which can be concerned with political life and community. As over-simplified as this distinction may feel, it does offer us a useful starting point from which we can consider the impact that the laws and hypotheses of the Other exert on the private lives of American citizens. The violence of bureaucracy is described by Arendt as a violence which 'under certain circumstances, [may] even turn out to be one of its crudest and most tyrannical versions.'<sup>87</sup> Rather than a sharp cut, the leaking between the private and public which marks the violence of bureaucracy comes in the form

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<sup>86</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Junky: The definitive text of 'Junk'*, ed. by Oliver Harris (New York: Ace Books, 1953; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2003)

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

of less alluring oozings and drainings. A passage from *Junky* describing heroin withdrawal makes this vivid:

I had been off junk two months. When you quit junk, everything seems flat, but you remember the shot schedule, the static horror of junk, your life draining into your arm three times a day.<sup>88</sup>

What this ‘static horror’—the ‘frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork’—is this chapter’s target.<sup>89</sup> *Junky*, a text which is defined by this invasion of the public into the private and its manipulation by William Lee, begins to frame what may be at the end of the fork. *Junky* is carried by the momentum that his search for the perfect hit generates, one best embodied by the search for another doctor that can be manipulated into supplying Lee with grains of morphine. The permeable barrier between the public and the private, and the seemingly infinite manipulability of various medical professionals, is the life force behind Lee’s continued procurement and the text’s continued unfolding. Whilst the site of injection, the drug and the addiction could be identified as violent—‘But he only gave up and “skinned” a shot after an agonizing half-hour of probing and poking and cleaning out the needle, which would stop up with blood.’—it is the crushing *passivity* of ‘draining’, of ‘the static horror’, which elucidates the Real of addiction. This is another scansion—separate from but generated by the penetration of the needle—which truly marks the ‘horror of junk’. It is the fact that an individual is compelled to use their freedom in a way that is determined by the Other, the commandment to ‘enjoy’ which drives our relationship with *jouissance*. The hypotheses of America as Other drain into the blood of William Lee. The “compelled freedom” of addiction—its socially instituted component—mirrors the same phenomenon in bureaucratic governance.

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<sup>88</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, p. 117.

<sup>89</sup> Murphy, p. 78.

Accordingly, swallowing in Burroughs is regularly linked to manipulation rather than only intense physical struggle ('...he degrades the female sex by forcing his chicks to swallow all this shit').<sup>90</sup> This also occurs in the case of Latah, a condition where individuals 'compulsively imitate every motion once their attention is attracted'.<sup>91</sup> As Oliver Harris states, this is also 'linked to forced cultural training in general and in particular to what Anna Freud termed "identification with the aggressor"'.<sup>92</sup> The individuals of the Interzone are limited by the laws and hypotheses of the Other to perform certain actions, one's which they ordinarily may not otherwise choose. To return to Phillips, they are unable to form more subtle moralities. This is a state which can be induced by liquid in *Naked Lunch*<sup>93</sup> where some even 'wanta play' Latah.<sup>94</sup> Coupled with Burroughs' mention of the Pentagon slobbering down the apple, this indicates that swallowing has a potential relationship with control. Furthermore, the desire of a person (or group) to be subjugated by liquid is brought to bear on the sexual in Burroughs. It is related to the desire to *be compelled* or the desire to *be desired by allowing oneself to be compelled*, of deriving pleasure from forced addiction. This place, seemingly realised in *Junky*'s "The Valley", acts magnetically, drawing in those who would do better to avoid it:

... where the new anti-life force is breaking through.

Death hangs over the Valley like an invisible smog. The place exerts a curious magnetism on the moribund. The dying cell gravitates to the Valley.<sup>95</sup>

Burroughs makes the connection between *Junky*'s 'Valley' and America clear: 'All the worst features of America have drained down to the Valley and concentrated there.'<sup>96</sup> The

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<sup>90</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> Harris, 162

<sup>93</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>95</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, p. 89.

return of the metaphor of “draining” here combines a concentration of people with the ‘worst features of America’. The desire for mastery exhibited by the official political administration drains into the public realm as individuals become inexorably drawn to the Valley.

So far, the violences of bureaucracy, drug use and sex have been connected through metaphors related to swallowing and draining. The violence of bureaucracy is related to the infection and total domination of the private realm by public concern. We can see here how Arendt’s ‘most tyrannical’ violence of bureaucracy relates to Burroughs’ ‘vilest form of crime against the person of another’. As mentioned earlier, Burroughs is suggesting something specific by presenting the Pentagon as engaged in a swallowing fantasy. What motivates this, the laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other—as opposed to the clear, physical violence of biting or chewing—is revealed by Burroughs through an allegory of sexual fantasy.

In this instance, it feels prudent to assert a conclusion first and support it afterwards; *it is the bringing into reality of a potentially violent fantasy from which sexual fulfilment is derived that turns that harmless violent fantasy into actual violence*. This mirrors the machinations of violence hidden by speed and driven by a monomaniacal relationship with mastering the object of one’s desire (*l’objet a*). To use the language of this particular fantasy, Burroughs represents the desire for mastery which drives Scientism—which itself is an attempt at total coherence—in the fantasy of “swallowing whole”.

Sexual desire aroused from a swallowing fantasy is a variant of vorarephilia. From the Latin and Greek respectively, the term has roots in vorare (“to devour...to swallow”)<sup>97</sup> and philia (“love”).<sup>98</sup> Vorarephilia is defined as the often sexual desire to consume or be consumed. Critically, for the forthcoming discussion of violence and The Thing, some of the narratives

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Vorare’, in *Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary*, ed. by John Carey, LL. D., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Spottiswoods, 1823), Google eBook.

<sup>98</sup> ‘-philia’, *Online Etymology Dictionary* <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/-philia>> [accessed 4 November 2019]

generated by vorarephilia are described as ‘unbirthing’ where the individual is swallowed, either by the mouth or vagina, before returning to the uterus.<sup>99</sup>

Burroughs’ decision to represent the Pentagon’s consumption of ‘the Apple’ of innocence is taken in order to outline the pleasure derived from the consumption of something sacrosanct. It is the desire to transgress and consume something that is forbidden—the consumption of the very idea of innocence—in order to enable mastery in the form of ‘*pure*’ knowledge. As stated in section one, the consumption of innocence as a whole—a move which forecloses our ability to devise a more subtle moral position on innocence—is seen as an acceptable trade-off. And as argued at the close of section one, the “pain” of this trade-off is part and parcel of the experience of *jouissance*. The gravity of the Valley is testament to the fact that many others are lured in. The draw of this “purity” is present in *Queer*’s boys with ‘fierce innocent black eyes’ and ‘a dazzling sexless beauty’ where it is the fetishised element (‘innocent’, ‘dazzling sexless’) which acts as the lure in the form of a taboo.<sup>100</sup> As proposed by Freud, the “taboo” of virginity, for instance, is partially explained by the now disproven suggestion that ‘[w]hen a virgin is deflowered, her blood is as a rule shed’.<sup>101</sup> Distinct from the lure of the boys of *Queer*, arousal derived *from* the shedding of blood has a very distinct and violent character; it is the arousal derived from *both* the ‘shed blood’ which represents the transgression of a taboo *and* the violence of the consumption of that innocence which the taboo is designed to symbolise. In an instance which produces violence, the *poiēsis* of the shedding of blood is not put into *praxis* purely as a means to enable sexual intercourse. This would keep the two separate. Instead, the shedding of blood becomes both *poiēsis* and *praxis* where sexual pleasure is derived *from* the shedding of blood and any potential pain which may follow.

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<sup>99</sup> Amy D. Lykins & James M. Cantor, ‘Vorarephilia: A Case Study in Masochism and Erotic Consumption’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43 (2013), 181-6 (p. 182).

<sup>100</sup> William Burroughs, *Queer*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985; repr. London: Picador, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XI (1910): Five Lectures of Psycho-Analysis Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans., ed., by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1962), p. 196.

Returning to the oral drive as described in Lacan's Seminar XI to enrich our understanding of transgression in relation to vorarephilia, Lacan notes that 'it is not the food that satisfies [the drive], it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouth.'<sup>102</sup> To turn this towards a swallowing fantasy, pleasure is not being derived from "the mouth" in its chewing or tasting, but rather from the transgression of the taboo—what is prohibited comes to be that which is most desired. It is not the case, however, that because there is no "tasting" of the apple, that pleasure is *absent* in the Pentagon's swallowing. Rather, the drive has transformed into a drive which enjoys transgression, where violence enacted acts as a marker of that transgression and subsequently comes to justify and generate itself. Burroughs' work, therefore, is to open up the text to the scansion so that it may reveal the Other's logic and undermine it, exploring and scansioning its endless reach for excess *jouissance*. Additionally, Burroughs' choice of the swallowing metaphor elucidates the lure of concrete violence and its ability to conceal the corrupted logic which propels it.

However, just as a vorarephiliac may desire to be consumed—or to consume—any continuation of this form of desiring *must* rest upon a contradiction. The fantasy must never be brought into reality as this would result in death and thus the end of the subject and of their desire. As highlighted earlier, desire seeks the continuation of desire making the end of the subject a highly unfavourable outcome. When a swallowing fantasy remains a fantasy, this results in the survival of the individual. This also means that the fantasy can be relived. Desire is thus maintained by what Derrida would term a 'possible-impossible' aporia;<sup>103</sup> the very possibility of the fantasy hinges upon its impossibility in actualisation. Similar to Lacan's conception of The Thing—the ultimate object of loss which sits at the "end" of *jouissance*, at the moment of supposed "capture" of *l'objet a*—the actualisation of said fantasy is less a "real object" than a point, a marker of a boundary which cannot be crossed. When the gap between reality and fantasy is maintained, the subject can continue to exist.

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<sup>102</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981; repr. 1998), p. 167

<sup>103</sup> Jack Reynolds, 'Jacques Derrida', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/>> [accessed 4 November 2019]

Many paraphilias are satisfied harmlessly in the conducting of roleplay or through other nonviolent means.<sup>104</sup> Through these methods, sexual gratification can still often be achieved. It is this that separates vorarephilia from sexual cannibalism. Whilst the former is content with fantasy, it is the urge to close the gap between fantasy and reality, between the *poiēsis* of the swallowing and the *praxis* which embodies it—which can range from writing through roleplay all the way up to actually swallowing—which creates violence. The contradiction elucidated above—which hinges on the distinction between one’s consumption and subsequent miraculous survival—is respected by the individual who understands that this is required in order to maintain both desire and subjecthood. Indeed, this is simply the case for all forms of sexual activity. For the sexual cannibal, however, their actualisation of consumption serves to close the contradiction and unify the consumer with the consumed. This is elucidated by Jeffrey Dahmer:

“I killed a man...and ate him; since then, he is always with me”

“It made me feel like they were a permanent part of me. Besides, besides the mere curiosity of what it would be like, it made them feel that they were a part of me, and it gave me a sexual...uh... satisfaction to do that,”<sup>105</sup>

Sexual gratification is thus garnered from the violent act. Burroughs’ texts regularly document these incidences where the desire to close the gap between fantasy and reality creates violence. What Burroughs’ texts thus achieve is the space in which to explore what happens when these violences are pushed to their extremes, well beyond the realms of individual safety and ethical concerns.

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<sup>104</sup> Lykins & Cantor, p. 182.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

Having explained how the conflation of *poiēsis* and *praxis* transforms a sexual fantasy into sexual violence, we can now see how Burroughs allows this to play out in the text. The chapter “a.j.’s annual party” depicts the result of overwrought, unquenchable lust; the search for excess *jouissance* and the race for The Thing. The increasingly ultraviolent sex of Mary, Mark and Johnny is implicitly justified as necessary to reach some imagined final denouement. The scansion marks one further always already there moment of sexual violence, predicting that concrete violence will continue due to a hidden logic which remains repressed, masked by speed and the concrete sexual violence on display. This corresponds to Derrida’s *gagner de vitesse* once more; in reality, there is no end to the race where *l’objet a* is finally captured, where The Thing is finally reached. The acts in this scene are also not presented as competitive between the parties involved. They feature what could be considered assertive pillow-talk, driven by arousal. By way of seemingly demonstrating their obliviousness towards the logic of the Other’s violence, this is a sex whose goal, for now, is sexual pleasure. We have already discussed how the focus on total coherence obscures violence and lures individuals into accepting that logic under some other guise—such as “reasons of national security”. But we can now begin to consider how violence generates lust when concrete acts of violence also become fuel for the fire. The collective exit of Mary, Johnny and Mark at the close of their scene enhances this reading of the illusory nature of capturing the cause of desire:

Fade out.

(Mary, Johnny and Mark take a bow with the ropes around their necks. They are not as young as they appear in the Blue Movies... They look tired and petulant.)<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 87.

I choose here to start at the end of their scene to emphasise the illusion; this is only a performance, emphasised by the tropes of the cinematic sex scene ('A train roars through him whistle blowing...sky rockets burst...').<sup>107</sup> This is a trite point on the surface, but has implications when considering the pornographic nature of the scene. Extending Lacan, the lust which pornography elicits is not wholly due to the objectification of the pornographic actor. Emphatically one sees another subject, but a subject which, crucially, is compelled to manifest lack. This subject flaunts this lack by desiring another entity on-screen or by addressing the viewer directly. The viewer, thus, becomes the imagined object of the pornographic actor's desire. The implication is that they are doing it *for you because they lack you*.

This raises obvious questions surrounding the violence of pornography, how this thesis defines it and how it offers us insight into Burroughs' partial construction of this scene. For both performer and viewer, any acceptance of their subjecthood by another subject is never enough. As Burroughs' passage on Mary, Johnny and Mark elucidates, the true "pervert" is the filmmaker who—in understanding that these two subjects do not specifically lack one another—traps both subjects in this eternal spiralling of desire. If left unchecked, this is a desire which turns to *jouissance*. The actor's pretence to enjoyment is not enough to indicate a removal of agency; this reading would deem all acting violent and also propose a return that which Ellen Willis criticises: the 'neo-Victorian idea' 'that men want sex and women endure it'.<sup>108</sup> Subjects are perfectly able to enjoy being desired. What creates violence is *the reduction of a subject to their desire alone*. They are a subject, but as per Arendt's criticism of bureaucracy, they are forced to use their freedom to desire *to serve a system of desiring which the logic of pornography requires to function*. Their actions are restricted to those that sustain the compulsive return of desire required by the film and the capital which sustains its business. Furthermore, the attempt to promote the illusion that some "perfect person"—

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>108</sup> Ellen Willis, "Lust Horizons", *The Village Voice* <<https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/10/18/lust-horizons/>> [accessed 4 November 2019]

defined as the “ego-ideal” which is itself received from the hypotheses of America as Other—lacks both the viewer and the actor *specifically* is an attempt to conceal from both parties the many reasons that would likely make such a union impossible. This rejection of both individual’s desires in favour of a unified goal—that which we may call the “progress of desire” towards the “mastered relationship”—attempts to assert the existence of perfection, much like Schafer’s ‘*Complete All American Deanxietized Man...*’. On the contrary and as per Lacan, ‘there is no such thing as sexual rapports’<sup>109</sup> and acceptance of this necessary difference between the desires of two parties is what prevents a slip into the impossible task of asserting oneself as the *sole* solution, the total coherence, to the desire of an “other”.

Similarly, Mary, Mark and Johnny are compelled to maintain the laws and hypotheses of the Other’s, thus giving those laws and hypotheses the illusion of coherence, through their scene of increasing violence. This does anything but offer coherence. With the addition of violence, the scene becomes a “mise en abyme”; an infinitely recurring sequence of exponentially ferocious violence. Access to this “infinite exponentiality”, to the ‘burning hearth’ of *jouissance*, is normally prevented by what Freud terms end-pleasure. In the particular case of sex, end-pleasure is orgasm. With Mary, Mark and Johnny, we are presented with an orgasm rendered dysfunctional in a way similar to the jury quoted earlier—as unable to be stopped—and by the collapsing of individual desire described in the section on pornography above. Because all participants are compelled to simply “enjoy” without satiation by the Law of the Interzone, their own desires are disregarded; this is no longer desire, but the bottomless well of *jouissance*. In this scene, *jouissance* is allowed to propagate without satiation and, as such, ‘end-pleasure’ loses its ability to force an ending. The question arises of what occurs when this mise en abyme is driven by the violence which it produces, a violence produced as a by-product of the conflation of *poiēsis* and *praxis*. Acts of violence become the marker of progress towards this goal. Through this repetitive

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<sup>109</sup> Bailly, p. 151.

engagement with *jouissance*, the subject necessarily pushes towards The Thing—a point which, for Lacan, means apocalypse for the subject. Extending this to Burroughs’ critique of mastery, the allegory of Mary, Mark and Johnny demonstrates that the attempt to render the Other as a total coherence, and to defend it accordingly, runs on parallel tracks with Mary, Mark and Johnny’s pursuit of excess *jouissance*—the latter being the total coherence which would be achieved through the capture of *l’objet a.* As per Lacan, these drives for total coherence are in direct correlation with the drive for death.

### Body Horror and the Speed Race

The reason for turning my focus towards this scene in particular in *Naked Lunch* is because it represents a clear articulation of Burroughs’ stretching of the logic of the Other to its fictive limit. In being able to offer us concrete violence acted on bodies in a fictional space, Burroughs can offer us one potential result of the pursuit of total coherence. As the nuclear horizon remains for Derrida ‘fabulously textual’—only possible in the text because the bomb’s actual payload would render documentation of that payload impossible—Burroughs’ work scands the speed war which leads to this ‘getting carried away’. In the case of Mary, Mark and Johnny, whether they have enjoyed themselves or not speaks to the aforementioned ambiguity with Burroughs blurring the boundaries of sexual desire and the compelled freedom of the search for excess *jouissance*. Kathy Acker, upon whom Burroughs was a huge influence, articulates this blurring in *Eurydice in the Underworld*: ‘INTENSE SEXUAL DESIRE IS THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD’.<sup>110</sup> The ambiguity, the caution of Burroughs, which Acker continues, forces us to ask “greatest in what sense?”. As Acker continues, this elevation of sexual desire represents a space where the subject is irrecoverably lost: ‘More than this: Janey can no longer perceive herself wanting. Janey is Want.’<sup>111</sup> Whilst, as Leo Bersani offers, ‘[i]t is possible think of the sexual as, precisely,

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<sup>110</sup> Kathy Acker, *Eurydice in the Underworld* (London: Arcadia Books, 1997), p. 49.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self’, this loss in Burroughs’ scene—as marked by his analysis of brainwashing presented in section one—is co-opted and compelled by forces beyond that individual’s control.<sup>112</sup>

It is the moment of realisation that the actors are being observed, through the realisation on the part of the reader that this has all been for them, that has the power to be so disturbing. This scene is a show *for you* as the reader and the fact that their post-performance bows feature no mention of an in-house audience only amplifies this. And just as in “the examination”, the wild scansion reminds us that we have been duped into expecting or even desiring violence. Our desires, just as with our desire in chapter one, has become compelled by the Law of the text. Laura Mulvey’s canonical essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” reinforces the feedback loop that we have identified so far in this chapter. She affirms that ‘[i]n *reality* the phantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it’<sup>113</sup> and that film’s ‘formal preoccupations reflect the physical obsessions of the society which produced it’.<sup>114</sup> The ego-ideal, the symbolic introjection of the Other’s hypotheses in the subject, encourages violence in the Interzone which subsequently reinforces the introjection. Violence begets violence ad infinitum. Violence, *jouissance* and sexual prurience all have the potential to be trapped in this loop of exponential increase.

Much like Benway’s operating theatre discussed in section one, this scene is not without dark humour. When Mark ‘kicks like a chorus-girl, sending the shorts across the room’<sup>115</sup> or when—whilst hanging Mary—he screams “”Wheeeeeee!””,<sup>116</sup> the invasion of Broadway glitz into proceedings is at the very least jarring. Their utterances do not always arrive as explicit articulations, but in the form of non-verbal screams, yells and cries. These voices, as found in Baraka, communicate a rich tapestry of fantasies and narratives which burrow deeper than discourse, down towards the source of American symbolic violence, the logic which drives

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<sup>112</sup> Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, *October*, Vol. 43, (Winter, 1987), 197-222 (p. 218).

<sup>113</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>114</sup> Mulvey, p. 15.

<sup>115</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 78.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

these individuals. As J. L. Austin offers, ‘language develops in tune with the society of which it is the language.’<sup>117</sup> Reading this alongside Mulvey, we can see that if such vocalisations lead to violence, this reflects the invasion of the “corrupted” social into the private bedroom.

This is not say that this whole scene is *solely* commenting on the relationship between the social and the private as identified by Arendt and which Burroughs troubles with the images of injection presented in *Junky*. There is a separate concern of desire, addiction and *jouissance*. This is driven by desire for mastery and the compulsion to repeat. At first however, Burroughs’ trio does not appear to be committing to such acts for anything other than their own enjoyment:

“Wheeeeeeee!” the boy yells, every muscle tense, *his whole body* straining to empty through his cock.<sup>118</sup> (my emphasis)

“So what shall I do? Can’t shit with that dingus up me. I wonder is it possible to laugh and come at the same time?...”<sup>119</sup>

He runs slow eyes over Johnny’s body. He smiles and licks his lips<sup>120</sup>

Such passages indicating the return of draining imagery, of lust, enjoyment, and sexual adventure are not hard to find, so this list is merely indicative. However, within a few pages, they give way to increasingly gruesome forms of sexual violence.

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<sup>117</sup> J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 245.

<sup>118</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 76.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

“Let me hang you, Mark... Let me hang you... Please, Mark, let me hang you!”<sup>121</sup>

Johnny dowses Mary with gasoline from an obscene Chimu jar of white jade...He anoints his own body...They embrace, fall to the floor and roll under a great magnifying glass set in the roof...burst into flames with a cry that shatters the glass wall<sup>122</sup>

Damp hairs on the back of his balls dry to grass in the warm spring wind. High jungle valley, vines creep in the window. Johnny’s cock swells, great rank buds burst out. A long tuber root creeps from Mary’s cunt, feels for the earth. The bodies disintegrate in green explosions.<sup>123</sup>

There is a tension between the “pleasure of the genitals” and the pleasure derived from exceeding this pleasure (*jouissance*). Indeed, this scene, which at first glance appears to offer us an account of sadomasochism, comes to present a questioning of *jouissance*. Where *jouissance* is a compromise mechanism where ‘pleasure *and* pain are presented as a single packet’, the ‘sado-masochistic drive’ for Lacan gives pleasure as a result *of* pain in a move which is designed to bring the Law to bear.<sup>124</sup> Their post-performance ‘bow with the ropes around their necks’ appears to indicate that the trio’s freedom is indeed being shaped by the laws and hypotheses of the Other.<sup>125</sup> The violence which results from their search for excess *jouissance* is thus framed as within Mary, Mark and Johnny’s control, as something which they *could* repudiate.<sup>126</sup> Reading this passage determines that such an interpretation is insufficient, failing as it does to focus on the ‘static horror’ which unfolds. The sustaining of the illusion that the troupe is the source of this seeking of ‘*jouissance* beyond the pleasure

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>124</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 183.

<sup>125</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 87.

<sup>126</sup> To return to the introduction and to my comments on Ayn Rand, comments such as “If they didn’t want to do it, they could choose to stop” is to repeat the Other’s logic and allow it to propagate. Narratives of personal responsibility and individual sovereignty frequently ignore this consideration of the importance of the social.

principle<sup>127</sup> covers the hidden law of the Other which comes to bear on their pursuit and what they pursue. That Burroughs cuts back and forth from this scene in the text makes identifying the moment of transition from pleasure into sexual violence, that which the scansion would mark, impossible. We are left, simply, with a reading that America as Other, as a series of laws and hypotheses, comes to bear on and shapes this tip into sexual violence from sexual pleasure.

Burroughs identifies how this “getting carried away” depicted on the stage leads to scenarios whereby the laws and hypotheses which govern this scene may undergo their total erasure as quickly as they have been instated. Once the performers tip into the pleasure derived from receiving excess pleasure, the drive which pleasure verifies becomes the death drive. Just as pleasure confirms the functioning of the drive, so pleasure *from* violence—a pleasure which works ‘unobtrusively’, hidden behind the manifest sexual actions—validates the functioning of the death drive. How this violence comes to be, I argue, rests in the aforementioned distinction between sexual acts whereby the by-product is violence—simply “getting carried away”—and sexual acts which then comes to derive pleasure *from that* violence—where the very nature of “getting carried away” and the destruction that it wreaks creates further *jouissance*.

We quickly find that identifying the point at which our performers are switched to the death drive is impossible. Rather than having a limit from which a safe amount of pleasure can be derived, the death drive is much simpler: its goal is binary and its total satisfaction is possible. Yet, in this instance, to reach it is impossible to *experience* other than in fantasy. The performers die repeatedly, yet they always return for more. Burroughs’ depictions of bodies in this scene, and what they endure in the pursuit of unbounded “progress”, extends and twists the logic of the Other. To crudely summarise, this scene can be considered to have three stages:

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<sup>127</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 184.

1. *Non-violent intercourse*: The opening interactions between Mary, Johnny and, eventually, Mark are slow and easily discernible as sexually pleasurable. There is little in this first encounter that could be termed violent.
2. *Violent intercourse*: We return to the breaking of necks, gallows, cannibalism and murder. A passage in *Junky* foretells this scene when describing the relationship between the pain of junk withdrawal and the pleasure of an unexpected orgasm as ‘the orgasm of a hanged man when the neck snaps.’<sup>128</sup> Whilst the participants appear to garner pleasure from this, the rapid escalation towards body horror and—crucially—their attempts to flee from said pain (‘...she screams, shitting and pissing in terror...’)<sup>129</sup> along with its decadent cruelty appears to indicate enforced violence. Pleasure is derived from the enforced suffering of another. This is often shown outwardly as pleasurable for both the victim and the perpetrator. Where orgasms in stage one are grounded in their description (‘Johnny gives a great sigh, squirming in ecstasy’),<sup>130</sup> orgasms in this stage are decorative, transcendent and metaphorical (‘...the shattering blue of sky, the rising sun burning over his body like gasoline, down past great oaks and persimmons, swamp cypress and mahogany, to shatter in liquid relief...’).<sup>131</sup> The violence becomes increasingly extreme and the passage progresses. This is an orgasmic dysfunction of its own, meaning that the participants never receive sufficient end-pleasure to terminate proceedings. As such, fore-pleasure builds without release. This results in the exponentially increasing *always already* speed race pushing into more decadently violent acts without ever receiving satisfaction. The implications of this, where tension builds and cannot be released, are rendered clearly by Burroughs in a later passage: ‘Possibly, the subject, unable to discharge his tensions in motor activity, would succumb on the spot like a jungle rat. Interesting cause of death...’<sup>132</sup> This reaching towards *The Thing*—which the

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<sup>128</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, p. 64.

<sup>129</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 82.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

capture of *l'objet a* and the end of *jouissance* promises—results in a ‘fabulously textual’, but only textual, possibility.

3. ***Reaching The Thing***: Our performers never die, simply returning from the wings and upping the ante. The “closing scene” of this *mise en abyme* is a return of the “cleansing” that was witnessed at the beginning of the scene (“I’ll go wash my ass.”/“No, I’ll wash it.”).<sup>133</sup> This occasion is more gruesome (‘He gives her a *douche* of jungle-bone softener, her vaginal teeth flow out mixed with blood and cysts’)<sup>134</sup> before he is consumed by her using a swallowing, draining metaphor (‘...drawn in by a suction of hungry flesh.’)<sup>135</sup> This returns us to the fantasy of *vorarephilia* where Johnny is consumed by Mary vaginally, representing a toothless “unbirthing”. Johnny’s fate is uncertain, but it is seemingly blissful and fixed:

The bodies disintegrate in green explosions. The hut falls in ruins of broken stone. The boy is a limestone statue, a plant sprouting from his cock, lips parted in the half-smile of a junky on the nod.<sup>136</sup>

This is the total encroachment of the Real in all its ‘static horror’. It is the ‘total defilement’ of the bomb, the total loss of innocence beyond repair. If we read Johnny’s calcification fully as an “unbirthing” narrative—as the unimaginable possession of *The Thing*—he returns to a state of subjectlessness, cancelling his entry into the Symbolic and thus the Law, rendering him lifeless yet inert and content. We see that violence has been both created in pursuit of *The Thing* and also that pleasure has been derived *from* the violence this pursuit generates. Yet ultimately it is the total violence of *the end* of this pursuit that brings us full

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

circle to addiction, bureaucracy and, critically, the bomb as the device which comes to symbolise The Thing as the end of both the subject and of the Law of the Other.

We can see Mary, Mark and Johnny as becoming dominated by, rather than being in control of, the Other's hypotheses and laws on violence. As with those in *Queer*, '[a]n addict has little regard for his image', and Mary, Mark and Johnny's scene demonstrates this as they carry the laws and hypotheses of the Other's violence to their fullest conclusion.<sup>137</sup> This end, as an allegory for apocalypse, marks the end of those laws and hypotheses as well. When the performers return to bow, the scansion marks it, surprising the reader with one final, miraculous survival. And indeed, the fact that we never come to discern *when* the drives become the death drive, never see the scansions which mark these specific changes, *this* very condition becomes the scansion. The scansion thus marks our unknowing, our inability to ever achieve total coherence, and the violence which results from our naïve pursuit of it. This process of "getting carried away" is continuous and without specific marking and we can never know when the drive becomes the death drive.

It is the scansion's ability to disrupt our reading beyond the control of the author which induces this transformation. It is writing and 'reading', as stated by Paul Virilio in *Speed & Politics*, which 'implies time for reflection, a slowing-down that destroys the mass's dynamic efficiency.'<sup>138</sup> Burroughs echoes as much in the introduction to *Queer*:

I was also taking pains to ensure further writing, so as to set the record straight: writing as inoculation. As soon as something is written, it loses the power of surprise, just as a virus loses its advantage when a weakened virus has alerted antibodies.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Burroughs, *Queer*, p. 10.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Burroughs, *Queer*, p. 12.

I would argue that Burroughs' writing as examined here undermines his thesis that something, when written, 'loses the power of surprise'. Yet Burroughs' implication that the power of writing can "slow down" intensity—whilst retaining and allowing us to observe said intensity—certainly appears at work in his writing. This links with Burroughs' assertion that 'Junk wins by default';<sup>140</sup> writing and reading become ways to slow the inevitable spread of its 'static horror'. Another "speed race", as documented in the allegory of Mary, Mark and Johnny, demonstrates the damage done when there is no mediating force to slow things down: the ability to remedy our relationship with violence becomes invisible to us. By slowing down, the laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other can be rendered more clearly if never fully undermined or escaped.

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<sup>140</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, p. xl.

### III – Summary

This chapter has sought to demonstrate a particular quality in Burroughs' writing which has been termed the scansion. The scansion marks points at which the laws and hypotheses of the Other are undermined or shown to be unstable or untenable. In short, the scansion marks the failure of any claim to total coherence. The scansion also maps the logic of that claim to total coherence and the ways in which individuals within the system—such as Benway—use legalised violence in order to reassert it.

Additionally, whilst all the key terms for this thesis' chapters work to reveal the untenability of America as Other as a total coherence by presenting a series of unfixed and unfixable positionalities in relation to it, the scansion differs significantly from both "silence" and "break". The key difference with "scansion" lies in its mapping. Thus first, where Cage's "silence" was intentionless, revealing the lack of coherence in any kind of positionality as proposed by his Zen training, Burroughs' scansion marks the failure of specific proposed coherences. Where Cage's "silence" has little *specific* to say to human sexuality, for instance, the scansion marks the points at which human sexuality may be influenced by the hypotheses and laws of the Other and how this may come to bear in terms of real-world state governance. Secondly, in Baraka's poetry, the break—as accessed through the voice—becomes an unfixable position from which a shared history of violence can be accessed and told; it is a site of action. Comparatively, the scansion is not a site from which action is generated, but rather an apparatus which tracks and maps where the laws and hypotheses of America as Other fail to provide coherence.

What Burroughs has revealed about violence in the postwar moment is its 'static horror'. When Burroughs tells us that *Naked Lunch* is about 'the frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork', he is justified in saying so. What his work reveals is that we are seemingly unable to resolve this relationship with the laws and hypotheses of the violence of America as Other. The most chilling realisation of *Naked Lunch* is that the text is

a fantastical, allegorical rendering of specific violences which are already occurring. The scansion comes to mark this moment of realisation that getting sucked into the decadent violence of the text is merely an extension of the hypotheses and laws of violence of America as Other. What is on the end of the fork—and that which caused me such difficulty in re-reading the text—is our cultural death drive: our singular, inexplicable desire to destroy ourselves, perhaps best embodied in a contemporary moment by the ‘slow violence’ of climate heating. It follows that *Naked Lunch* is, worryingly, just as prescient now as it was in 1959. This cultural death drive has not fallen away, but simply found new outlets.

These revelations in Burroughs’ texts put us in a vulnerable position, one which is constantly unsure and ungrounded. However, accepting vulnerability and precarity in postwar America becomes essential, the alternative being exponential increases in violence. The next chapter on Denise Levertov will extend these concerns related to innocence alongside the violence of the Vietnam War. In an increasingly globalised world, and as America begins to again test its military might in Vietnam, citizens are given little opportunity to distance themselves from world suffering—a problematic which resonates deeply in the present day. As the laws and hypotheses of America as Other come to bear on not just our understandings of violence, but also the ways in which we interact with one another, everything consumed and interacted with is somehow linked to untold violence. In challenging the Vietnam War through her poetics, Denise Levertov seeks to explore the fallout of war, its relationship with vulnerability in the age of globalised violence and what this means for a relationship with violence in the threshold. In a prolonged study of her writings on war, the breath and woman, this final chapter reconsiders Levertov’s often maligned war poetry as critical in demonstrating the impact which war has on deep and serious engagements with violence through aesthetic practice.

#### Chapter 4: The Threshold in the work of Denise Levertov

they begin to be remembered  
as gifts, goods a basket  
  
of bread that hurts  
my shoulders but closes me  
  
in fragrance. I can  
eat as I go.<sup>1</sup>

— Denise Levertov, “Stepping Westward”

#### Introduction

This chapter will read Denise Levertov’s poetry as providing us with an unflinching and sensitive articulation of violence. This will be conducted through an analysis of her writing on the threshold. A central concern of her work from the 1950s onwards, Levertov’s writing on the threshold demonstrates how violence comes to affect our ability to relate to one another. She proposes a kind of “active precarity” as having potentially transformative effects on the laws and hypotheses on violence of America as Other as they come to bear in the Vietnam War. Through such an engagement with the threshold, it is hoped that we may be able to come to more subtle and personal articulations of our own relationship with violence as influenced by America as Other. It is important to note, as Ben Hickman has argued, that Levertov’s war poetry does at times portray the Vietnamese as a ‘simple specimen...pastoral, idyllic, and without history, agency or subjecthood’.<sup>2</sup> This feels correct and is not a point that I will seek to challenge. However, I contend that Levertov conducts a serious and deep engagement with the relationship between poetry, aesthetics and violence

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Levertov, *Selected Poems* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Hickman, p. 99.

in America specifically in the postwar moment.<sup>3</sup> By considering material from letters, interviews and from selected poetry, I will seek to demonstrate that much of the criticism of Levertov's war poetry—from writers such as Robert Duncan, Marjorie Perloff and David Perkins—fails to properly consider her writing on the threshold. Whilst the war certainly had a profound impact on Levertov's writing, I will conclude by seeking to demonstrate that it is her unflinching urge to consider violence in the threshold which foments much of the most spurious criticism against her work, driven as it is by an implicit expectation of the role of the woman poet.

As with previous chapters, I will also introduce a number of additional co-ordinates. These include the threshold, precarity, infection, the breath and motherhood. The development of Levertov's conception of "threshold" will be elucidated in stages. The threshold is first articulated in her work as a space to cross, a location between two points. Eventually, Levertov articulates the threshold as a space without outside reference, one which does not define interactions between *distinct* parties or act as a locus of production—as per Agamben's definition—but one which *makes the very possibility for said interactions possible*. This is not a place to "access" or be productive in, but rather to be sensitive to. Being in the threshold requires a blurring of activity and passivity; it requires actively making oneself precarious in order to become sensitive to the threads of "others". This sensitivity will be termed an "active precarity", to be found, in particular, in her metaphorical references to breathing. Where Judith Butler's most well-known use of "precarity"—'that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death'<sup>4</sup>—has specific socio-political overtones, Levertov's precarity is closer to the aporic precarity of mourning.<sup>4</sup> Levertov appears to suggest that, the inexorable violence of war having already made us precarious, we must embody an "active precarity" in order to remain sensitive to the threshold and thus to "others" if we are to transform our relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, p. 25.

with the violence of America as Other. The co-ordinates of infection will be primarily articulated through the work of Mary Douglas. Douglas' work. The breath will turn to the respiratory philosophy of Lennart Škof and Petri Berndtson. Finally, the closing investigation on motherhood will discuss the work of Elissa Marder. All of these co-ordinates will, however, be primarily shaped by Levertov's own thoughts.

### I – The Threshold and The Breath

#### Restriction/Expansion

The majority of critical writing on Denise Levertov's poetry points to a rupture occurring sometime in the mid-1960s. Her close friend and poetic ally Robert Duncan marks this in a letter of December 1966 in which he advances to Levertov that 'this nation's War is taking over your life'.<sup>5</sup> The poem enclosed by 'Denny' which drew such reaction was "Advent 1966". This poem, along with many others published by Levertov in the late 1960s and early 1970s, drew and still draws criticism. However, to frame her poetry as suffering a rupture from her earlier heralded work is, as I aim to demonstrate, rash. This mistaken assertion of a rupture can be identified in the difference between criticism before and after the rupture's supposed occurrence. Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace offer praise of her early work with particular focus on what Levertov herself refers to in "Advent 1966" as her 'poet's sight'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Letters of Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan*, ed. by Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 563.

<sup>6</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 84.

Her eclecticism let her move easily between plain and richly descriptive language, between a vivid perception of the “thing itself” and the often radiant mystery that, for Levertov, arose from such seeing.<sup>7</sup>

Praise of this nature is found frequently across critical work on Levertov’s early poetry. This quality may, at first glance, put her in the company of George Oppen, a poet concerned with communicating the object in the poem *as object* with a sincerity and focus which attempts to avoid concern with the “voice” or “music” of the poem itself. Yet an all too frequent refrain follows when the subject of Levertov’s war poetry is raised. ‘Her overtly political poems’, they claim, ‘are not often among her best, however; their very explicitness restricted her distinctive strengths as a poet, which included a feeling for the inexplicable,<sup>8</sup> a language lyrical enough to express wish and desire, and a capacity for playfulness.’<sup>9</sup> Klinkowitz and Wallace appear to indicate that she becomes too transfixed by the directness of her subject, losing the ‘inexplicable’ in the process. This is a feeling shared by David Perkins in his anthology *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* where he states that Levertov’s ‘poetry of antiwar protest fell into loose rhetoric, sensational imagery, and violent emotions.’<sup>10</sup> In what is seemingly for Perkins the cardinal sin of the poet, this work lacked ‘intelligence’ and ‘described a simplified world of heroes, innocents and demons.’<sup>11</sup> Charles Altieri laments her political poetry as ‘embarrassingly simplistic’,<sup>12</sup> a poetry whose ‘loose propagandistic phrases...neither create fresh insights nor bear up under intellectual analysis.’<sup>13</sup> As praise for her early work proved unified, it is supposedly clear for these same critics that Levertov loses the sensitivity of her poet’s sight, blinded by the violence of the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume E: Literature Since 1945*, ed. by Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, 8<sup>th</sup> edn (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 419.

<sup>8</sup> As shall hopefully become clear, this ‘feeling for the inexplicable’ is rendered in Levertov’s war poetry as the “threshold”.

<sup>9</sup> Klinkowitz and Wallace eds., p. 419.

<sup>10</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987; repr. 2001), p. 508.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (London: Association University Presses, 1979), p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> Altieri, p. 234.

war. '[R]ichly descriptive language' gives way to 'sensational imagery', 'radiant mystery' to 'embarrassingly simplistic' agitprop. I wish to complicate this overly simplified reading, arguing instead that whilst her poet's sight is indeed challenged, this is due to her attempts—and the very many successes which result from these attempts—to place her practice under pressures which can only be generated by a serious engagement with violence.

Such reproach levelled at her work is very much echoed in Levertov's correspondence with Robert Duncan. His tone drifts somewhere between genuine concern, patronising paternalism, manipulative bargaining and—in a move which Perkins revives—an attempt to assert himself as the ever-elusive voice of Wallace Stevens' "transcendental poetic spirit", so sure of what poetry should and should not do. Whilst all of these registers share commonalities, the blunt condescension—whose capitalisation should not confuse it for Olsonian boldness—of 'THERE HAS BEEN NO TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY THAT WAS NOT A TIME OF WAR' differs substantially from the gaslighting present in remarks such as 'Denny, the last poem ["Advent 1966"] brings with it an agonizing sense of how the monstrosity of this nation's War is taking over your life, and I wish that I could advance some—not consolation, there is none—wisdom...'.<sup>14</sup> Whilst this can be read as concern for a fellow poet and friend seemingly consumed by the poem's subject, its assertion of dominance is clear. The breadth and depth of Duncan's side of their collected letters cannot, and should not, be reduced to these two extracts in isolation. However, I feel unpersuaded by Marjorie Perloff's praise of Duncan's criticism of Levertov as 'stringent, learned, and brilliant'.<sup>15</sup> Whilst moments of his disapproval of the poetic texture of Levertov's work feels fair, these criticisms are on the whole unspectacular<sup>16</sup> and the tenor of his critical voice is

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<sup>14</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. xix.

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 220.

<sup>16</sup> Take for instance his criticism of the 'coprophiliac spasm/that smears the White House walls with its desensitized/thumbs' from 1971's "Staying Alive". (Denise Levertov, *To Stay Alive* (New York: New Directions, 1971) p. 30) Duncan's criticism is pedantic, stating that '[s]ince I know of no story of Johnson's being a coprophiliac, I can only imagine that your projection alone supplies this as an image of evil.' (Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 672.). This image can be critiqued and rendered as trite or immature with relative ease, yet Duncan offers little beyond this. As Levertov correctly highlights, it is the tone which renders such criticism lacking: '...how perverse it is to quibble and say "I know of no story of Johnson's being a coprophiliac" etc. "Personal associations" indeed! Come off it. It is as if I should start to fault you because somewhere in this letter (#3) you

often specious and his analysis pedantic, based as it is on simplistic reading. To take an example, we can observe Duncan reprimanding Levertov for the ‘certain cases in which you do not approve of laughter and pleasure’ in her poem “Tenebrae”.<sup>17</sup> Here, Levertov picks Duncan up on his predetermined simplification,<sup>18</sup> asserting that:

It shd be obvious to any reader not looking for evidence (desperately) of a perverse thesis, that the grownups...in “Tenebrae” are not “disapproved of” for laughing (who says they are laughing anyway!) but that grief is being expressed about their resolute deliberate halfconscious *refusal* to recognize the *disaster* occurring at the very same time and *in which they are implicated* by their tacit agreement to it at the very least. When people who have the responsibility of political consciousness nevertheless laugh and have a good time they do so in the knowledge that you can’t make a revolution worth a damn by being grim and solemn all the time.<sup>19</sup>

Levertov is correct to say that there is no dissuasion of pleasure or laughter in “Tenebrae”. To accuse her of admonishing something as specific as laughter should at least require direct citation, a tenet from which Duncan feels exempt at this particular moment. As Marjorie Perloff states, “[o]ne cannot...present the horrors of a particular battle or bombing, a

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say Horseshit. “Are you projecting your personal associations with police horses onto the People’s Park demonstrations? I know of no story in which the National Guard or the Alameda Sheriffs used cavalry.”... etc.’ (Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 685.)

<sup>17</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 672.

<sup>18</sup> Duncan’s primary criticism of “Tenebrae”, outlined in a letter of October 19th 1971, centres on its ‘Gowns of gold sequins’ which he sees as ‘displaced bigotry’, that ‘women who are concerned about their gowns...are accused of “not listening.”’ (Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 666.). As Levertov’s response highlights, this is not a move of disapproval—Duncan’s hypothesis requiring as it does the fabrication of her alleged criticism of laughter— but of attempting to catch a glimpse of the society which does not live in a warzone, but certainly lives under its shadow. To me, it appears that Duncan’s criticism is partially fair; there is a danger that poems such as this be read as elitist or priggish. Again, whilst the surface criticism may be fair, Duncan’s, once again, pedantic reading is based upon the fabrication of elements not present in the poem. It feels as though this issue of the “superior poetic voice” more points towards the nihilistic lassitude which appears to creep into Levertov’s poetry of the early 70s.

<sup>19</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 685.

government edict or military law, without contextualizing it.’<sup>20</sup> Yet for Perloff, Levertov’s contextualisation of a certain psychological phenomenon of middle America does not appear to count. Instead, she criticises her for an event ‘never mentioned in *To Stay Alive*—namely the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, with its attendant purges, arrests, and killings’ as if Levertov, by writing on war, must either write on *all* war and *all* conflict or not at all.<sup>21</sup> This is based on the ridiculous assumption that war poetry can only be about warzones. Levertov is instead writing on the (sometimes) wilful ignorances which foster violence “at home” in America. In short, Levertov is manifestly doing that which Duncan and Perloff accuse her of not doing. Furthermore, for as long as war poetry remains exclusively about warzones, violence remains simplified, contained and justifiable. This plays directly into the hands of the American political administration because it ensures that war remains about vanquished enemies, about good and bad, about battlefields. By Perloff’s account, the war remains geographically “over there”, isolated and “under control”, an interpretation of violence which is easily contained within the positions on violence offered in America as Other.

Framing Levertov and Duncan’s disagreement—and the critical responses to said disagreement—serves two purposes here. Firstly, it outlines that much secondary criticism is based on an overly generous reading of Duncan and an overly harsh reading of Levertov. This demonstrates an unwillingness to engage with her war poetry in the contexts of her developing poetic practice and her discourses on precarity and violence. Secondly, this framing allows for further exploration of these differences between Duncan and Levertov. These disagreements, I argue, are framed by divergent approaches to engaging with violence through aesthetic practice.

Duncan’s central thesis on violence is that ‘the poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it.’<sup>22</sup> I contend that Levertov’s poetry does not enter this debate in the simplified terms offered by Duncan. Rather than seeing her ‘very explicitness’ as restriction or

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<sup>20</sup> Perloff, p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 669.

simplification, I contend that it is the result of a genuine attempt to refigure poetics in relation to a violence which is embedded within the culture, within the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. Duncan's criticism—along with many other critical voices—fails to understand the complexity of Levertov's engagement with violence as read through the threshold. To engage with this narrative and follow its trajectory is to reveal a poet who understands that poetry no longer has the luxury of disengagement. As Bertholf and Gelpi record, Levertov's poetry aims to 'to break through "white middleclass skin," including her own, to grasp "what is really going on, even if through small analogies"'.<sup>23</sup> I wish to frame Levertov as the generator of a new and generous practice; an engagement with violence through the threshold. I propose that one of Levertov's foremost engagements with the threshold occurs through an engagement with the breath. Before we arrive at the breath in Levertov's work as a way of engaging with the concerns of the threshold however, we must turn to the language of war. This will assist in mapping the ways in which the laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other come to bear on the particular context of the Vietnam War. By asking questions of the relationship between war and the discourse which surrounds it in this particular historical moment, we will then be able to see how the metaphor of the breath may trouble assertions which depict war as inevitable or desirable.

In her entry in the *Posthuman Glossary*, Jolle Demmers defines war as 'organized violence'. She extends this by quoting Schröder and Schmidt who argue that '[w]ars are made by those individuals, groups or classes that have the power successfully to represent violence as the appropriate course of action in a given situation'.<sup>24</sup> War is a decreed and public performative utterance, a codifying, of violence by a state power. In the case of America, the interpretations of war on offer to the official state power are shaped and defined by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. The Vietnam/American War, for all it inaugurated, also broke new ground in respect to this "performing" of war. Whilst not the first use of

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<sup>23</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. xxvi.

<sup>24</sup> Jolle Demmers, "War", in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 453-5 (p. 453).

exclusive presidential power to commit U.S. troops to ground, the catastrophic violence and over-commitment of the Vietnam War did lead to the War Powers Resolution.<sup>25</sup> Designed to prevent a commitment to armed conflict without direct approval from Congress, the act's major flaw has persisted. The resolution only holds when the President "performs" a formal declaration of war and, since World War II, the United States has never officially declared war.

The Declaration of War is a clear, marked performative utterance. The clarity provided by Roosevelt's declaration of war on Japan exemplifies this: 'I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.'<sup>26</sup> In the absence of a clear declaration such as this, war *itself*, and thus violence itself, utters itself into being. How the United States entered the war in Vietnam was, accordingly, not a performative declaration of war, but a performative declaration of identity. Lyndon B. Johnson's inaugural address—which sat between the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the United States' deployment of ground troops in Vietnam—revealed a world which was becoming increasingly impossible to impose order upon. The bespoke declaration of war was replaced by another "American Covenant" in the rich history of American Covenants:

Change has brought new meaning to that old mission. We can never again stand aside, prideful in isolation. Terrific dangers and troubles that we once called "foreign" now constantly live among us. If American lives must end, and American

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<sup>25</sup> 'U.S. Code CHAPTER 33— WAR POWERS RESOLUTION', *Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School* <<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/50/chapter-33>> [accessed 4 November 2019]

<sup>26</sup> 'Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt, New York (Transcript)', *Library of Congress* <[https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022\\_ms2201/?st=text](https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022_ms2201/?st=text)> [accessed 4 November 2019]

treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know, then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.<sup>27</sup>

Channelling the rich history of American Covenants from Winthrop to Kennedy, Johnson declares that:

They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.<sup>28</sup>

The first quoted portion of this speech self-elects the United States as a defender of the faith selected by God's mandate to preserve un-foreignness. The United States never had to declare war because *it is* a state of war. To frame it as a performative, "I hereby declare war" is replaced by "I hereby become war". As Derrida pronounces in "Plato's Pharmacy", 'He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices.'<sup>29</sup> The American Covenant thus becomes an attempt by the American political administration to step into the God function, to justify and explain all violence—including that of the unexplainable Real—by virtue of its bringing into political discourse its interpretation of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.. Outside of relationality, the "speaking" of the Covenant now delivers an exceptional Law. The move to this Absolute Otherness is driven by a fear of the "foreign", fear that alternative interpretations of violence which sit counter to those embodied in America as Other may be possible, fear that America as Other may not represent a "total coherence" on interpretations of violence.

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<sup>27</sup> 'Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th President of the United States: 1963-1969: The President's Inaugural Address', *UC Santa Barbara, The American Presidency Project* <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26985>> [accessed 4 November 2019]

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p.76.

By 1965, the self-decreeing power of the American Covenant set Johnson's 'graduated response' to the war in Vietnam in motion. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution acted not as a declaration of war in and of itself, but rather authorised the President 'to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.'<sup>30</sup> The vagueness of a preparedness 'to take all necessary measures' led to a stark irony. The paranoid discourse of Domino Theory—proposed by Eisenhower a decade earlier which so dominated the justification of military intervention in Vietnam—had become internalised, driving an increasing military presence in perpetuity. The Vietnam War—authorised by self-decreed covenant—was driven by this fear of infection by Communism. The polluting of American society with violence self-generates through three primary channels, all of which result as an attempt to sustain the continuation of America as a symbolic identity.

Firstly, the absence of a declaration of war institutes the state body of America, and thus the citizens which live within it, as the generator of a state of war *from its own identity*—America as Other—rather than from laws and hypotheses outside itself. In short, America as Other attempts to affirm its "radical Otherness" *through* its acts of violence. Secondly, the desired vagueness of phrases such as 'all necessary measures' affirms any actions which can be justified as defending the positions offered by America as Other, a symbolic identity which has, as was outlined through the historical exegesis of this thesis' introduction, always been guaranteed and bolstered through acts of violence. Thirdly, the categorisations required to sustain structural violences—such as which groups may count as "foreign"—also sustains the '[e]ither-or thinking', as Burroughs would term it, required to justify a narrative of "us versus them". As demonstrated by Executive Order 9066, this results in the separation and fragmentation of communities and spaces due to the now partitioned citizens of America. Thus, as the war pits America—and all the signifiers which construct its symbolic identity—

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<sup>30</sup> 'The Tonkin Gulf Incident; 1964', *The Avalon Project, Yale Law School* <[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/tonkin-g.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/tonkin-g.asp)> [accessed 4 November 2019]

against the “foreign” North Vietnam, so the ways in which American citizens interact with one another becomes infected by its relation to the war.

When war is in the air, such firm distinctions of what it means to “be America”, as Lyndon B. Johnson highlights, are hard to shake. A strong sense of identity in times of crisis provides the illusion of certainty and control. The importance of avoiding this slip into the violent assertion of such a firm identity—war being reliant on such distinct categories of the human—was summed up by one marine at the Vietnam War’s outset. Unfamiliar with less immediately explicable phenomena like terrain, customs and political alignments of the Vietnamese *on sight*, the Marine captain stated that ““The problem around here...is who the hell is who?””<sup>31</sup> One problem with asserting strong, unified identities is how to proclaim a united “self” in a world of complication and contradiction. Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* explores how we create, at the very least, a ‘unity in experience’. Douglas attempts:

...to show that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So far from being aberrations from the central project of religion, they are positive contributions to atonement. By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed.<sup>32</sup>

This has clear relevance to this thesis as a means of having ‘symbolic patterns...worked out’ in its relation to America as Other, a rendering of the Symbolic order. Yet this also has clear links to Levertov’s explorations of violence. As we shall see momentarily, her engagement with the messiness of the breath—messy in terms of the way it blurs the erstwhile firm boundary of inside/outside—places her at this imaginative threshold between purity and impurity where one cannot help but be overwhelmed. By becoming overwhelmed,

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<sup>31</sup> ‘The River Styx (January 1964-December 1965)’, *The Vietnam War*, dir. by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, PBS, 24 August 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966; repr. 2015), p. 3.

Levertov's poetry embodies the belief that, in Olsonian terms, those poems can transfer some form of the energy of violence from the source to the reader. As she highlights in 'Stepping Westward':

If I bear burdens  
they begin to be remembered  
as gifts, goods a basket  
of bread that hurts  
my shoulders but closes me  
in fragrance. I can  
eat as I go.<sup>33</sup>

As is often found in *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), Levertov's first collection published after American involvement in the war began, there is optimism here. There is a sense that the space which she occupies, the unfixed position which she takes up, can be nourishing for her and those reading. This is exemplified in 'a basket//of bread' which causes pain, yet also 'closes me//in fragrance.' It is only at this threshold between pain and nourishment that the 'symbolic patterns', the laws and hypotheses of violence of America as Other, can be 'worked out and publicly displayed.'<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, President Johnson's remarks on the threat of infection sit counter to Levertov's desire to work in the threshold. As Douglas states, '[i]t is only by exaggerating the

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<sup>33</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> This bears similarity to the discussions surrounding *jouissance* in the previous chapter. It is by accepting both pain and nourishment that we hopefully become capable of growing to understand our own more nuanced understandings and positions in relation the Other. This bears similarity to Burroughs' statements on addiction from his prologue to *Junky*: 'I have never regretted my experience with drugs. I think I am in better health now as a result of using junk at intervals than I would be if I had never been an addict. When you stop growing you start dying. An addict never stops growing.' (Burroughs, *Junky*, p. xl-xli).

difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.’<sup>35</sup> The American Covenant is wary of this: the ‘terrific dangers’ which ‘constantly live among us’ require an enduring ‘conviction’. All of the above do not sit well in the confused, chaotic space of postwar America. America is driven by a lasting conviction ‘[c]onceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union’ that represents ‘the hopes of all mankind.’<sup>36</sup> Chronicles of the Vietnam War convince many readers that the American government failed to assert order. But rather than this occurring because of poor military tactics or a lack of troops, it is nearly always due to a lack of understanding.<sup>37</sup> This is both an understanding of who they are fighting and an understanding of the sheer confusion which life after World War II presents us with. Pollution of the breath, acting as more than just a metaphor for this blurring of distinctions which the postwar moment asks us to contend with, assists in indicating that this is not a problem which can be muscled through. War, by this distinction, is the result of attempting to “push through” and provide coherence where it cannot be asserted. We must be willing to be surprised by others rather than defining them as simply an extension of ourselves, an inevitable consequence of our own unfolding history. The interaction with this problem is unavoidable for Levertov. As she articulates in “Kingdoms of Heaven”, we are always affected by the other: ‘You/walk in; sit down in the dark, it/draws you into itself’.<sup>38</sup>

### Breathing

Rather than thinking of the breath as a guiding principle, for Levertov, it is one of the few consistencies which, by virtue of being universally experienced, is possible for us all to share in. It therefore implicitly muddies the distinctions between inside/outside, good/bad,

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<sup>35</sup> Douglas, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th President of the United States: 1963-1969: The President's Inaugural Address’, *UC Santa Barbara, The American Presidency Project*.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Gregory A. Daddis, Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing America’s Strategy in Vietnam’, *New Books Network: Military History*, New Books Network, 9 February 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 50.

right/wrong. Most critically, the importance of breathing to life means that we cannot choose to *not* engage with it on some level.

Indeed, “respiratory philosophy” aims to reintegrate—and in some cases simply integrate—breathing into social, cultural, poetic and political concerns. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson trace the erasure of the breath back to several key moments, settling most poignantly on Descartes. For them, ‘[i]t could be argued that modern philosophy’s dualism is impossible if the starting principle of philosophizing is the experience of breathing, as breathing perpetually intertwines the self, the body, and the world.’<sup>39</sup> Their regular attendance to the dangers of “not breathing” in their introduction does, however, risk becoming isolated in the “presence” of breathing. This can centre arguments on the individual that is breathing and thus render arguments devoid of considerations of the outside or of the other. Indeed, this is counter to even the functional process of breathing. As Leslie Kaminoff and Amy Matthews highlight:

It is important to note that in spite of how it feels when you inhale, you do not actually pull air into the body. On the contrary, air is pushed into the body by the atmospheric pressure (14.7 pounds per square inch, or 1.03 kg/cm<sup>2</sup>) that always surrounds you. This means that the actual force that gets air into the lungs is outside of the body. The energy expended in breathing produces a shape change that lowers the pressure in the chest cavity and permits the air to be pushed into the body by the weight of the planet’s atmosphere. In other words, you create the space, and the universe fills it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. by Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (Albany: University of New York Press), p. xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Leslie Kaminoff and Amy Matthews, *Yoga Anatomy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Leeds: Human Kinetics, 2012), p.6.

Instead of being internally forced, breathing is a process of giving way, of renouncement and withdrawal. This is even the case at the “birth of the breath” of the foetus, these being associated with ‘pressure and volume changes’ rather than a sharp “sucking-in” of air.<sup>41</sup> In short, we cannot breathe without yielding to that which is outside of ourselves. To emphasise, this does not situate breathing as a centre or, more accurately, as a way of centring ourselves. I contend that the reason for Levertov’s continued return to the breath is inspired by the very different questions that breathing asks of complicity. With breathing, we are, at least partially, responsible for the air that we breathe. Beyond our responsibility, we must also face the simple fact that if we poison the air, we will breathe that same poison back in. As such, it is the curious liminality of breathing—the confusion of inside and outside, action and passivity—which makes it so capable of exploring violence through the production of an aesthetic position, or style, which remains unfixed.

Just as with violence, pollution is, for long periods, often invisible. It is only when it becomes “too much” and too close to home that we become unwilling to accept it. So just as when violence is legalised through bureaucracy, so pollution is legalised until it spills out beyond the control of the legislative body. This consideration of pollution provides a point of comparison with violence. Rather fittingly for Levertov’s explicit poetic turn towards war and violence, 1966 saw the third New York City smog in just over two decades—previous events had occurred in 1953 and 1963—which cumulatively resulted in over 1,000 deaths.<sup>42</sup> Whilst the smog was a choking physical and visual reminder that the city was being rendered unliveable, it was also a reminder of the slow violence—as proposed by Rob Nixon—of the environmental disaster which had been killing before it was rendered as smog. The occurrence of the smog in an urban centre masks the wider impact of pollution on long-term public health and climate heating beyond the city. Breathing back in our own poison is thus not a sufficient explanation to end with because it places “us” at its centre. To

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<sup>41</sup> A. D. Milner and R. A. Saunders, ‘Pressure and volume changes during the first breath of human neonates’, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 52 (1977), 918-924 (p. 918).

<sup>42</sup> Edith Iglauer, ‘The Ambient Air’, *The New Yorker*, 13 April 1968, p.51.

refer again to Larry Ray's *Violence and Society*, pollution can be said to have been effectively hidden rather than reduced. The half-century since the Clean Air Act has demonstrated that we are still unwilling to grasp that which is invisible until it prevents *us* from breathing. These invisible concerns are often discarded as falsified or as unempirical. Levertov's poem "Biafra" from 1970 touches on the inevitable strain that such actions place on us in the end:

... Now we look sluggishly  
at photos of children dying in Biafra: dully  
accumulate overdue statistics: Massacre  
of the Ibos: Do nothing: The poisoning  
called 'getting used to'  
has taken place:<sup>43</sup>

This 'getting used to', synonymous here with "giving up", is a poisoning of the mind. Just as pollution is eventually rendered as smog, lassitude blooms into a kind of wearied acceptance in Levertov's poem. As highlighted by Baraka then, these are not new violences, but violences that have been thus far ignored because they have happened "away" from America. Is 'getting used to' poisoned air—of breathing on regardless—a step towards acceptance of our own culpability in violence? Levertov is quick to highlight that this is not enough: 'And the news from Biafra/...doesn't even get in past our eyes.'<sup>44</sup> The poison, the 'getting used to', presents acts of violence as a series of images which we retain a stubborn distance from. The television, as the new window in the corner of everyone's living room, projected the Vietnam War, the world's first televised war, onto the psyches of millions of Americans. Intra-community violence is tangible, contestable and explicable. The rapid

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<sup>43</sup> Denise Levertov, *Poems 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions Pub., 1987), p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

deflation of boundaries which the television offers brings the violence of Vietnam into American living rooms. “Biafra” attempts to ascertain our level of culpability in a war which makes our involvement apparent yet is also in so many ways beyond our control.

The urge in Levertov to “*do something*” is to be commended according to the terms of this thesis: it is an attempt to engage with violence *through* imagination. Duncan’s response to Levertov’s desire to oppose ‘the whole system of insane greed, of racism and imperialism’<sup>45</sup> subsequently highlighted their fundamental disagreement on the role of the poet during war:

These, Denny, are empty and vain slogans because those who use them are destitute of any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism or imperialism is like. The poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it: what if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoyevsky opposed Raskalnikov—the vital thing is that they *created* Iago and Raskalnikov. And we begin to see betrayal and murder and theft in a new light.<sup>46</sup>

For Levertov, this sense of the ‘poet’s role’ is not that simple. Levertov has ‘*created*’ conditions in which poetry can oppose an imperialist war whilst also seriously engaging with the effects of its violence on the poetic imagination. She will do this through the threshold. For Levertov, this distinction, along with Duncan and his partner Jess’ decision to ‘wear black arm-bands’ as opposed to tackling violence directly in his poetry, adds up to a series of non-engagements.<sup>47</sup> Levertov understands that it is not a case of whether we can engage or not. The air is infected and we have no choice.

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<sup>45</sup> Bertholf and Gelpi eds., p. 669.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 669.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. xx.

## Thresholds

This writing on the liminality of the breath enables an articulation of Levertov as writing from and on the threshold. This closing subsection of section one will define and justify the threshold as not *merely* a material or symbolic liminality which straddles two or more spaces as many readings presume. Furthermore, and as generative as this definition is, I will not be taking Agamben's definition of "threshold" as a space whose indeterminacy acts as a locus of production.

The threshold is a doorway, a border, the 'beginning of a state or action, outset, opening', or a lower or upper limit (i.e. the threshold of consciousness or the threshold for boiling water into steam).<sup>48</sup> This last definition of the "limit" feels closest to how Levertov comes to use the term. However, rather than a limit to simply pass over/through or to avoid reaching, the threshold is a space we must work to remain sensitive to, that unfixed position between active/passive, present/absent, inhaling/exhaling. As with the breath, it is in this space that we can remain sensitive to violence and to others. In addition to this, I posit that Levertov adds further subtlety, distinguishing the threshold as a space which is without geographical co-ordinate (physical or psychical) because it is defined not by the received understanding given to individuals by America as Other, but by those differences between various "others" which are incommensurable (i.e. the "thing" that makes them "other", that which allows for interaction, their Real-ness).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the threshold for Levertov represents a space which opens one up to violence within the poetic imagination (i.e. one must already be in or concerned with the threshold in order to *then* consider violence in the threshold). Levertov is attempting to articulate the threshold as *a pervasive, active vulnerability and precarity*. We here find a poet who is alive to the space which violence opens up in the poetic imagination.

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<sup>48</sup> 'Threshold', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <http://www.oed.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/view/Entry/201234?rskey=dWK8vQ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 5 November 2019].

<sup>49</sup> To clarify this with the example of breathing, we could say that the threshold is not the point at which an inhale becomes an exhale; this would simply exacerbate the paradigm of inside/outside. Rather the threshold is found in the space that is opened up by understanding that all inhaling and exhaling is dependent on external pressure rather than a force out from "within". It is this space which does not have a co-ordinate or reference, but is simply a marker of sensitivity to the fact that one's own breathing is dependent on forces outside oneself and, thus, on others.

The risk of writing off Levertov's war poetry is to therefore miss a crucial discourse on precarity.

Levertov's discussions of thresholds—and threshold-like metaphors—are extensive. Explicitly, she refers to “thresholds” in earlier poems such as “Action” (1958) (‘...and cross/the whispering threshold and walk right into the clear sea...’)<sup>50</sup> through to and beyond the eponymous “Threshold” from 1964's *O Taste and See*. Mark Staff Brandl extensively covers Levertov's description of thresholds and the tantalising nature of their appearance. ‘The *threshold*’, he describes, ‘is a particularly *rich* image.’<sup>51</sup>

As Levertov's central trope, thresholds are locations requiring critical decisions or at least moments of decisive speculation. Her line endings are brinks over which both she and the readers make a leap of logic.<sup>52</sup>

Staff Brandl's essay is thorough and broad, but it is important to note avenues which he does not explore despite occasionally gesturing towards them. Firstly, Levertov's engagement with the threshold is not restricted to the one term. Staff Brandl is wary of this, describing the threshold as her ‘central trope’ and listing a series of near-synonyms (‘a brink, condition, edge, juncture, limit, moment, time, verge.’)<sup>53</sup> Extending this, we can begin to see how Levertov arrives at a series of complex and subtle metaphors which may give us different tactics for investigating, acting, and describing interconnectedness and precarity from an unfixed position. Secondly, Staff Brandl's analysis does not write on her war poetry in any depth. Whilst his consideration of the threshold in her pre-war poetry is well considered, prolonged studies of the threshold in Levertov must be concerned with violence. We can

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<sup>50</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Staff Brandl, ‘Metaphor(m) in the Poetry of Denise Levertov; Line Endings are Thresholds’, *Metaphor and Art* <<http://www.metaphorandart.com/articles/levertovmetaphorm.html>> [accessed 5 November 2019]

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

observe from this study how the threshold moves from the “border” of “Action” (1958) through the rich generative space of “The Thread” (1961) to a space which violence leaks into in much of *The Sorrow Dance* (1967). This indicates that Levertov’s writing on thresholds begins long before her concerns of war. This relationship to the threshold quickly changes from aesthetically engaging and vibrant to ethically vital and discomforting.

The threshold becomes an increasingly dangerous space which mirrors the consequences of polluted air. Due to each individual’s own unique relationship with America as Other, the threshold is not a demarcated, communal space in which we all share in the same thoughts on and experiences with violence. Rather, each individual’s experience of the threshold is private and incommensurable, dependent as it is on our own individual experience of living in a communal world. The inherent solitude of the threshold space makes interactions between such incommensurable voices possible because it does not *presume* a specific other by shaping them to a collective set of ideals or positions. Unlike America as Other, the threshold offers no unified narrative on violence, instead offering the opportunity to shape the subtle, more complex responses which have been a focus throughout this thesis. This will necessarily involve the embodiment of an unfixed, unfixable position. Levertov positions the threshold during war as a space which enables interaction, but one infected by a fixed rendering of violence, the same rendering of violence embodied in America as Other which is used to justify the Vietnam War.

Although Staff Brandl’s articulation of the threshold is not inaccurate, it is limiting. Returning to precarity, Levertov presents a compelling argument for the threshold as a space in which we can—and should—be precarious. Articulation of this comes not through the threshold, but through the “thread”. As found in *The Jacob’s Ladder* from 1961, “The Thread” is a rich imagining not of the threshold itself, but rather the mysterious interactions we engage in within it. To quote the poem in full highlights its frailty and how this frailty is inaugurated by the poet to remain sensitive to others:

Something is very gently,  
invisibly, silently,  
pulling at me – a thread  
or net of threads  
finer than cobweb and as  
elastic. I haven't tried  
the strength of it. No barbed hook  
pierced and tore me. Was it  
not long ago this thread  
began to draw me? Or  
way back? Was I  
born with its knot about my  
neck, a bridle? Not fear  
but a stirring  
of wonder makes me  
catch my breath when I feel  
the tug of it when I thought  
it had loosened itself and gone.<sup>54</sup>

Looking at the opening four lines, a thread represents an intriguing relationship to the threshold. It is somewhat half way between the concrete and abstract. It does not necessarily describe a firm, tangible object either without or within the poem ('invisibly, silently,') but rather alludes to a force. The effect of this force is certainly "felt", yet it remains largely outside of articulation. We thus do not feel its concrete being, but rather the effect it has on

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<sup>54</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, pp. 40-1.

us. The effect of such a delicate phenomenon extends silently and profoundly, leading Levertov to question ‘Was it/not long ago this thread/began to draw me? Or/way back? Was I/born with its knot about my neck, a bridle?’<sup>55</sup> This is a question of relations with others, the inexorable push and pull of differences which define us in relation to other “others”. The thread then marks this liminality, not reducing sensitivity to categorising “push” from “pull”, but from understanding the threshold space as the indeterminate liminality between the two. As a pre-war poem, Levertov’s interaction with the threshold ends with a sense of near-divine interjection:

but a stirring  
of wonder makes me  
catch my breath when I feel  
the tug of it when I thought  
it had loosened itself and gone.<sup>56</sup>

There is evidence here of the openness that may be required in order to articulate and potentially transform our relationship with the positions on violence instantiated by the onset and unfolding of the Vietnam War. The violence of war insists on the kinds of categorisations that also limit our interactions with one another to a series of clearly defined positions. Conversely, the ‘stirring/of wonder’ of the thread reminds us that the positions offered in America as Other are only one set of possible interpretations. The thread instead offers us a way of considering interaction not shaped by the America as Other, but instead by engagement with the inexplicable Real (‘invisibly, silently’). As in all interactions with the Real, the thread comes with danger and uncertainty, but also with ‘wonder’. It is the abstract intangibility of the thread which prevents the reabsorption of our relations with

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

others into a familiar system of thought, into a system of interaction with one another that has become shaped by the violence of the war. Levertov is writing on a sensitivity to the inexplicable, irreducible differences of others, as opposed to writing on “being in a certain mode”.

Cultivating sensitivity in the threshold thus requires a focus on mystery, one which the thread helps to articulate. Levertov, giving no sense of its tangibility, does not indicate that just as the thread pulls us, we can “pull back”, and find out what is at the end. The thread becomes metaphor for *the influences of the other who is always-already there at work in the threshold*. The thread becomes that which defines an “other” by difference and without direct interaction. This troubles the idea of a radically singular “other” or self, one outside of relationality, one of total coherence.

The threshold can be thought of as precarious space into which Levertov’s threads find us hooked. An earlier poem from *Overland to the Islands* (1958), “Action” (quoted here in full), articulates the affirmative potential of the threshold. This poem takes on a particularly Whitmanian optimism towards commensurability. Importantly, unlike above, Levertov marries the tangibility of the bare earth to the abstract experiencing of that earth:

I can lay down that history  
I can lay down my glasses  
I can lay down the imaginary lists  
of what to forget and what must be  
done. I can shake the sun  
out of my eyes and lay everything down  
on the hot sand, and cross  
the whispering threshold and walk  
right into the clear sea, and float there,

my long hair floating, and fishes  
vanishing all around me. Deep water.  
Little by little one comes to know  
the limits and depths of power.<sup>57</sup>

This is not a description of the *experience* of thresholds since “Action” is grounded in a conception of the threshold as a place to cross, a place that we travel towards and will arrive at. Levertov’s conception of the threshold would move further away from this definite boundariness and into the more abstract articulation of the boundless threshold that we observed in “The Thread”. Yet, as Rudolph L. Nelson argues in “Edge of the Transcendent: Poetry of Levertov and Duncan”, she is only able to move towards the abstractness of the threshold due to a more subtle understanding of the relationship between one’s experience and the objects that are experienced:

Levertov’s calculated avoidance in her poetry of the language of traditional transcendence is evidence that she, much more than Duncan, is a product not only of the real world of immediate sights and sounds but of the equally real world of twentieth-century science, philosophy, and theology.<sup>58</sup>

As Nelson closes, ‘Levertov probes beneath the threshold of the here and now and finds the transcendent within the stuff of immediate experience.’<sup>59</sup> I would like to propose taking this one step further. Nelson’s description feels lacking as her work moves through *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961) into *O Taste and See* (1964) and *The Sorrow Dance* (1967). Thresholds

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<sup>57</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Rudolph L. Nelson, ‘Edge of the Transcendent: The Poetry of Levertov and Duncan’, *Southwest Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 1969), 188-202 (p. 200).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

increasingly come to mark not a stable location for potential transcendence, but a site of always becoming precarious in light of the need to act in respect to an imagined other. Levertov is the best placed to tackle questions of war precisely because—as with the other writers of this thesis—she already finds herself asking these questions before the Vietnam War manifests itself in her poetic imagination. Rather than retreating, Levertov stays in the threshold, against the advice of Duncan, and finds a generative space which is in contact with the ethical questions which surround relationality and violence.

Having begun as a literal, grounded border, the threshold in Levertov becomes more abstract and indicative of an interconnectivity which is not centred on any definite “selves”. As the subtlety of the metaphor increases, so does the reliance on phenomenological depictions. Once she begins to write on war and violence, the threshold begins to ask vital yet troubling questions of violence. The result is a poetry which faces an age old question: how can I develop a poetic imagining of violence which is effectual rather than merely descriptive? How can I commit poetics to “action”? Levertov desires to retain this newfound potency of the threshold—its potential for describing the relationship between interconnectedness, precarity and violence—whilst making it forceful and material enough so that the poem, in context with other voices, may have influence as part of a programme of sustained action against the war. With the inescapability of violence now intermingled with the threshold, the closer Levertov gets to describing the threshold, the more violence appears to affect the most basic structural and syntactical elements of her poems. Again from “Biafra”:

trying to make room for more knowledge

in my bonemarrow

...

And know

no hope: Don't know

what to do: Do nothing:<sup>60</sup>

Levertov's poetic voice, faced with the new detached horror of war on television and in newspapers, is reduced to staccato bursts of distress. As she highlights in "The Necessity" from 1961's *The Jacob's Ladder*, semantic disruption is a necessary price to pay when distancing oneself is not an option. Levertov does not shy away from the fact that maintaining our sensitivity to the threshold is vital work. A sensitivity to the effect of the threads 'pulling at me' is an obligation:

for love and  
or if in fear knowing  
the risk, knowing  
what one is touching, one does it,<sup>61</sup>

This openness, aside from preventing singular interpretation, depicts the complexity of the interconnectedness between terms by gesturing towards that interconnectedness. We see how, just as in "Biafra", 'knowing the risk' of the threshold—its relationship with violence—is critical. This is a firmer articulation of why Duncan's detachment is not possible for Levertov; it is only in making ourselves actively precarious to the threshold, and thus to others, which the thread palpably marks, that we can begin to seriously tackle questions of violence. The question thus becomes whether in affirming the threshold we can engage with the violence of war.

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<sup>60</sup> Levertov, *Poems 1968-1972*, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 42.

## II – War Writings

### A Vision (of) Life at War

The following quote demonstrates the ‘semantic difficulties’ of imagining violence in the postwar moment, given as they are by former member of the United States Marine Corps, Philip Caputo:

The shattering or fragmenting effect of high explosive occasionally caused semantic difficulties in reporting injuries of men who had undergone extreme mutilation... They did not have enough of him to fill a willy-peter bag... In effect, Colonel Meyers had been disintegrated, but the official report read something like “traumatic amputation, both feet; traumatic amputation, both legs and arms; multiple lacerations to abdomen; through-and-through fragment wounds, head and chest.” Then came the notation “killed in action.”<sup>62</sup>

The solution provided by the Marine Corps to these ‘semantic difficulties’ at play during the Vietnam War is bureaucratically cold and functional. As the death count rose, the time and space available to provide a personal send-off was reduced. A degree of emotional detachment was therefore required. In the memoir of his Vietnam service *A Rumour of War*, Philip Caputo reflects on his role as ‘OFFICER IN CHARGE OF THE DEAD’:<sup>63</sup>

As fighting increased the additional duty of casualty reporting officer kept me busiest. It was also a job that gave me a lot of bad dreams, though it had the

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<sup>62</sup> Philip Caputo, *A Rumour of War* (London: Macmillan, 1977; repr. London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 167.

<sup>63</sup> Caputo, p. 175.

beneficial effect of cauterizing whatever silly, abstract, romantic ideas I still had about war.<sup>64</sup>

There is little space here to render the dead as any more than, at times ‘disintegrated’, bodies. The death of a friend is registered as a “necessary sacrifice” to defend America and, by extension, the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. As President Richard Nixon outlined in his 1973 “Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.”, ‘[L]et us be proud of the 2 1/2 million young Americans who served in Vietnam...let us be proud of those who sacrificed, who gave their lives so that the people of South Vietnam might live in freedom and so that the world might live in peace.’<sup>65</sup> In times of war, this narrative of necessary sacrifice becomes one of a very limited number of hypotheses of violence which attempt to “make sense” of the otherwise inexplicable violence of war. The heralding of deaths as “sacrifices” comes to normalise an interpretation of violence from the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, one which subsequently justifies and perpetuates that same violence and those same deaths. In turn, the notion of sacrifice—a term which can be extended to the suffering of those who cannot mourn their loved ones, civilian casualties as well as those that are distressed by the war from afar—alters the ways in which we may be allowed to consider violence with those who oppose the war or stand against this narrative being accused of being un-patriotic or un-American. As argued in section one of this chapter, the war becomes a putting into action of laws and hypotheses of violence through official political administration. These actions in turn limit the ways in which we may understand or respond to violence. In addition, due to the reliance on categorisation—us/them, good/evil etc—which this interpretation of violence

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<sup>64</sup> Caputo, p. 165.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam’, *UC Santa Barbara, The American Presidency Project*  
<<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-announcing-conclusion-agreement-ending-the-war-and-restoring-peace>> [accessed 20 May 2020]

and war requires, this also limits the ways in which we can interact with one another outside of the warzone.

Levertov points us towards a radical solution to this issue. The threshold offers us alternative ways of engaging with violence, war and its resulting deaths outside of the hypotheses and laws of America as Other. By accepting the vulnerability and precarity which the threshold offers—engaging as it does with the inexplicable Real—we may instead be able to transform such imagining and thus our relationship with violence. It is the relationship *itself* between Levertov’s subtle and complex discourse of the various thresholds in her pre-war poetry, and the directness found in her intra-war poetry, that presents a writer willing to take a risk with her poetic imagination, to place her writing under certain unique pressures, in order to transform our relationship with violence. This profoundly masculine symbolic identity is being disrupted by a female poet in a radical way. Richard O. Moore’s documentary series *USA: Poetry* spends one episode with Denise Levertov. Shot in 1965—just after the publication of *O Taste and See*—we see Levertov as a poet compelled to write on the war. This compulsion was so strong that ‘not being able to do it’ rendered her ‘unable to do anything else as a result’.<sup>66</sup> The poem which undid this blockage would go on to be called “A Vision”, sharing book space with the poem that it unblocked, “Life at War”. When Levertov states that “A Vision” is ‘totally unrelated to anything like that’, we should be hesitant.<sup>67</sup> She is not stating that they are unconnected as, in terms of the genesis of “Life at War”, they manifestly are. “A Vision” opens Levertov up to the possibility of creating “Life at War” through the threshold and the breath. In turn, this maps the inseparability of violence and the threshold in her work.

Levertov’s continued striving for an effective political poetics is manifest in the epigraph to “A Vision”, refracted as it is through Pound from Spinoza: ‘*The intellectual love of a thing is the understanding of its perfections.*’<sup>68</sup> The poem proceeds to seemingly undermine this

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Denise Levertov and Charles Olson’, *USA: Poetry*, dir. by Richard O. Moore, KQED, September 4 1966.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 76.

positive affirmation of “the thing” and ‘its perfections’. Instead, it is consistently pulled away from ‘the perfections of scarlet’ towards the others which manifest it (‘leapt up among blues and greens strongshafted,/and among amber down illumined the sapphire bloom’).<sup>69</sup> “A Vision” begins by considering angels yet quickly finds itself drawn to the negative space which they outline (‘Two angels among the throng of angels/paused in upward abyss,/facing angel to angel’). She is keen to point not to the ‘wingfeathers’, but rather that they ‘blue and green glowed’, mingling with the ‘red to gold’ of ‘the sheen/of the other’s.’<sup>70</sup> “A Vision”, then, alludes to an Olsonian reading of space; ‘...the problem now is not what things are so much as what happens BETWEEN things’.<sup>71</sup> This brings us towards one of Levertov’s most palpable articulations of the threshold:

for one saw the seafeathered, peacock breakered  
crests of the other angel’s magnificence,  
different from his own,

[...]

never became a shrinking to opposites,  
  
and they remained free in the heavenly chasm,  
remained angels, but dreaming angels,  
each imbued with the mysteries of the other.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>71</sup> Olson, *A Charles Olson Reader*, p. 81.

<sup>72</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 76-7.

The poem's narrative arc is one of resolution. Initial conflict ('...These two//so far as angels may dispute, were poised/on the brink of dispute, brink of fall from angelic stature')<sup>73</sup> is resolved through the hospitality of the threshold, through the indefinability of their interaction ('each imbued with the mysteries of the other'). The threshold transforms antagonism by a beauty advanced through disruption, offering each angel 'newly-seen/hues', preventing 'a shrinking to opposites'.<sup>74</sup> The 'mysteries of the other' which appear to signal the end of conflict also signal one connection between "A Vision" and "Life at War". This is a reconciliation which is dependent upon a respect for the other as a distinct other. Levertov's vision, concerned as it is with the 'discovering pause' and the 'silent interchange', is held in abeyance. This interaction 'never became a shrinking to opposites', yet it does not suggest a contraction into singularity either.<sup>75</sup> That 'each angel was iridescent' points us towards the aforementioned buffeting of the self which being sensitive in the threshold offers. This iridescence is generated by not only our narrative perspective nor the narrative perspective of the angels. It is also generated by conditions of light and space that are far beyond our control. The poem becomes a space in which the reconciliatory act is beyond imagination or symbolisation *alone*. It is also consistently open to the effects and "threads" of the threshold. The suspension which the poem closes on is maintained by these unsymbolisable 'mysteries of the other' which we have thus far implicitly referred to as the thread.

We can thus further outline the connection between the limited interpretations of violence which are offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other and how the 'mysteries of the other', accessed in the threshold, may provide us with new interpretations. Previously, we discussed how the categorisations required to sustain violence in the form of war also places limits on the ways in which we can interact with one another. This leaking of the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

warzone into interpersonal relationships is mapped by Levertov in her use of the metaphor of the breath.

For Philip Caputo, war forcibly reframes the death of friends as necessary sacrifices for America and American values. This is a space of certainty, one in which death is made coherent by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. By contrast, the process of mourning, a process which is sidelined in war, does not attempt to offer, and in fact resists, coherence. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* describes mourning as ‘something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.’<sup>76</sup> Butler’s ‘ties’ bring us close to Levertov’s ‘thread’ with the ‘threshold’ becoming the space which we have to be sensitive to in order to feel the pull of such threads. Grief is, by this reading, a mandated engagement with the threshold, a forced sensitivity to, as Butler puts it, ‘the thrall in which our relations with others holds us...in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.’<sup>77</sup> Finding ways to grieve the many losses associated with war serves to undermine the restrictive categorisations which come to bear upon us by the unfolding of that war. In turn, disentangling ourselves from the laws and hypotheses of America as Other may offer us new relationships with violence. To do this, Levertov must resensitise us to the threshold, allowing ourselves to be surprised by the Real ‘mysteries of the other’ rather than attempting to explain those mysteries away in a series of violent categorisations gathered from America as Other.

### Breath at War

One of the most frequent criticisms of “Life at War”, as described at the beginning of this chapter, is its ‘loose rhetoric, sensational imagery, and violent emotions.’<sup>78</sup> David Perkins’

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<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, p. 22.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>78</sup> Perkins, p. 508.

critique that her poetry lacks ‘strong individuality’<sup>79</sup> is rash, based as it upon the assumption that she ‘could not integrate the shock of war with her vision of human nature’.<sup>80</sup> This is in spite of the fact that much of Levertov’s poetry of this period mourns this loss of such a vision, one which may in itself offer transformation (‘my clear caressive sight, my poet’s sight I was given/that it might stir me to song,/is blurred.’)<sup>81</sup> To reference Audrey T. Rodgers:

The critics who chose to attack the turn in Levertov’s journey from the subjects of nature, women, marriage, children, and myth to the more immediate problems of the ‘60’s labored under a double misapprehension. First, they had completely failed to recognize the social awareness that was the underpinning of many of her earlier poems; and, secondly, they dismissed her poems on Vietnam and the evils perpetrated by that war as unfit subjects for poetry (from a poet with “Orphic” gifts).<sup>82</sup>

Perkins’ reading of Levertov also appears to lack a sense of *why* one might display anger in the face of such violence or a sense of the intelligence of her engagement with precarity.<sup>83</sup> As we shall observe momentarily, this critique not only suffers from that which it alleges to criticise, but also finds itself summarily dismantled in Levertov’s own work. “Life at War” certainly does not assuage Perkins’ aversion to the poetry as ‘it gains in decibels’—one step away from calling her “hysterical” and getting it over with—but does point towards not only

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 509.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 508.

<sup>81</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 84.

<sup>82</sup> Audrey T. Rodgers, *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement* (London: Associated University Presses, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>83</sup> This issue of disconnect from the real-world impact of violence is at play in Duncan’s critique (i.e. seeing violence as isolated individuations or events rather than as a force which disrupts self-identification and identification with others).

how she got there, but why it remains relevant, complex and (affirmatively) full of fire.<sup>84</sup> Levertov's work requires that she place her poetry under the pressures of violence. By committing to re-sensitising us to the threshold, Levertov must articulate our essential precarity.

With "A Vision" sitting on page 73 of the original publication of *The Sorrow Dance*, "Life at War" comes only six later on page 79. Between her interview with Moore in 1965 and both poems' publication in 1967, the sense that these two works must remain in proximity to one another remains clear. We may hear the voice of "Life at War" refer backwards, asking after its own connection ("Something is very gently,/invisibly, silently,/pulling at me – a thread"). Just as the pull of the absent other may be a reductive, summary definition of the thread, "A Vision" and "Life at War" consistently pull at each other, defining themselves by one another. Yet Levertov goes a step further in "Life at War" where she integrates the breath and toxicity into already rich articulations of the threshold. This, in turn, feeds back into articulations of precarity. The starkest images in "Life at War" are those which are articulated by the breath. By doing so, Levertov invokes normative distinctions between inside/outside, good/bad and presence/absence before dismantling them:

The disasters numb within us  
caught in the chest, rolling  
in the brain like pebbles...<sup>85</sup>

Her articulation of numbness is less calcifying here than in works such as "Biafra" and appears to engender action, 'caught' as if it could be dislodged, 'rolling' as it does 'like pebbles' in seemingly both the 'chest' and 'brain' simultaneously—and subsequently

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<sup>84</sup> Perkins, p. 508.

<sup>85</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 78.

questioning the mind/body distinction as the breath does. Speaking of this numbness in the context of “Biafra”, Audrey T. Rodgers argues that:

Again, Levertov dwells upon the sacrifice of innocence, massacre, and violence, but we have become inured after Vietnam...In many ways, “Biafra” is a frightening poem as it testifies to our own loss of compassion, our inability to take action, and our indifference.<sup>86</sup>

“Biafra” feels, on occasion, too reliant on self-chastisement and, as Rodgers argues, upon the ‘unconvincing joining of the dying babies in Biafra and the dying children on Vietnam.’ (sic)<sup>87</sup> “Life at War”, however, remains in staunch opposition to resigned helplessness. To do so would be to utilise the imagination that is ‘filmed over with the gray filth’, the fixed interpretations of violence offered by America as Other, rather than attempting to articulate how such filth may be transformed or removed. In order to remain sensitive, “Life at War” proposes a project which attempts to be precarious in the threshold. It attempts to peel away ‘the gray filth’, ‘the mucous membrane’ and examine them in order to both represent and analyse the precarious conditions of the threshold and its relationship with violence.

To do this, Levertov has to return to forces which are sensitive to such poisoning (of which numbness to violence and insensitivity to others is the result) *and* which may also provide transformative potential in the form of dislodging said numbness. In other words, they must be both sensitive and active *through* said sensitivity and precarity. In “Life at War”, it is the breath which provides such sensitivity:

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<sup>86</sup> Rodgers, p. 98.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

The same war

continues.

We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,

our lungs are pocked with it,

the mucous membrane of our dreams

coated with it, the imagination

filmed over with the gray filth of it.<sup>88</sup>

The richness of this stanza rests on its encounters with the past, with mourning and with the other. The ‘mucous membrane’, designed as it is to coat the respiratory system in order to trap bacteria and debris, has itself become ‘coated’ and overwhelmed by ‘the grits’ of the violence of war. This both nullifies its therapeutic properties and has great impact on the respiratory system as a whole. In order to render in speech the voiceless (*p, k, t*) stops found in “pocked” and “grits”, we must cease airflow by blocking the vocal tract. That ‘our lungs’ are now coated by the cessation of airflow is not only indicative of the immanence of violence within our systems of thought and imagination (‘the imagination/filmed over with the gray filth of it.’). It also suggests that we must breathe at a time when breathing itself has become an issue. Breathing is now defined by the cessation of airflow due to internal systems (‘the mucous membrane’) which have been impacted by external factors beyond our control (‘The same war’) which began before our birth (‘We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives’). We are surrounded by interpretations of violence from America as Other, a Symbolic order which we are born into. This gestures back to the creeping invisibility of polluted air which resulted in the New York smog as well as the ‘brutal acceleration’ of the bomb as discussed in the chapter on William Burroughs. Without stepping towards the resignation of “Biafra”, Levertov’s “Life at War” proposes urgency. Rather than accepting

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<sup>88</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, pp. 78-9.

our relationship to breathing as reflexive, we must look at how and what we breathe. Breathing becomes a metaphor for the relationship with violence in postwar America as one that has been allowed to become reflexive. Levertov appears to propose that, with attention, our relationship with violence can be transformed through our relationship to the breath as a metaphor for the threshold. The threshold space can help us to understand how to figure alternative relationships with violence rather than to simply accept, and breathe in, those proposed by America as Other without reflection or resistance.

### Hysterisation

The urgency of the need for this kind of sensitivity is what appears to permeate “Life at War” and much of the poetry in *The Sorrow Dance*. Violence, as we have already discussed, is magnetic—both repellent and attractive—to criticism and creativity. Levertov nails her flag to the mast, rejecting the notion that one can or should be coolly detached with regards to the violence of the Vietnam War. The outline of Burroughs’ double-gesture—to first highlight the allure of violence then play it out as decadently as possible as a way of both revealing and undermining it—is present here. Yet Levertov’s “threshold”, unlike Burroughs’ “scansion”, is less concerned with mapping the Other’s violence. Instead, Levertov’s poetry on the threshold highlights that, in spite of such volatile emotional engagement with violence, we must find a way to resensitise ourselves to the threshold and make ourselves more vulnerable to the psychical and interpersonal impact of violence in America in the postwar moment. Whilst this violence is incomparable to that experienced by the Vietnamese, this is a necessary step if a certain relationship with violence, that relationship with violence sustained in the hypotheses and laws of America as Other with produces the Vietnam War, is to be transformed and avoided in the future. Therefore, the threshold cannot be presented as isolated, as anything other than ‘filmed over with the gray filth’. To isolate the “threshold” away from violence would label it as an escape in a world

of violence which has no escape—incribed as it is into the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. These are the consistent pressures which Levertov's practice is put under at this time through her engagement with violence. As Rodgers wonderfully puts it:

Levertov has been censured as "hysterical," over emotional, lacking control and order which she so highly prizes. There is anger but not "hysteria" in the poems in *Life at War*.<sup>89</sup>

Levertov accepts her anger, violence's force and the threshold's potential as starting points. It is her willingness to be surprised by the threshold, to make herself precarious and vulnerable to it in this period, which is her radical gesture. As one of the very earliest woman poets to lead protest against a war so directly and visibly, Levertov subverts the pejorative tone of "hysteria", finding a sensitivity and precarity which may be transformative of a fixed relationship with violence.

Rodgers is right to encourage a move away from the pervasive narrative of Levertov's war poetry as hysterical, inflected as such criticism is with misogyny. Lacan, however, offers an alternative interpretation of the "hysteric", one which rejects this colloquial understanding of the term. In Lacanian terms, the hysteric's discourse is not the language spoken by someone "hysterical", but rather the *only* discourse which produces new knowledge.<sup>90</sup> As he outlines in Seminar XVII—one given during the tumult of the May 1968 student riots—Lacan considers any subject which speaks through the hysteric discourse as one that understands, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's words, that there are "known unknowns": A summary of the hysteric's discourse for Lacan could be rendered as such: "I do not know what I am (because I understand that the "known unknown" of *l'objet a* exists—yet I cannot know what that is).

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<sup>89</sup> Rodgers, p. 90.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan : Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Russell Grigg, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 23.

So I ask the Master to give me knowledge so that I may understand what that *je ne sais quoi* (*l'objet a*) is.” In this particular instance, the Master of this discourse is not the American political administration, nor is it Levertov’s male contemporaries. Instead, Levertov asks those indefinable others which she may find in the threshold. She seeks guidance from “unknowables”, those interactions which remain undefined and undefinable by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. The hope is that the threshold, and the Real interactions which it offers, may be turned into a space which can actively disrupt the laws and hypotheses of violence which come to bear on our interactions with one another. Whilst the connotations of Lacan’s term are certainly worthy of criticism, this conceptual framing offers us a unique insight into not only how Levertov subverts the pejorative use of the term, but also the ways in which her poetry aims to be transformative of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other.

Whilst *l'objet a* is never grasped—as outlined in the chapter on William Burroughs—the subject which speaks the hysteric’s discourse in Lacan’s formulation is, to use Lionel Bailly’s terms, ‘fed knowledge instead, and without setting out to become one who knows, ends up knowing.’<sup>91</sup> Indeed, the hysteric’s discourse is so important that Lacan declares that ‘[w]hat the analyst establishes as analytic experience can be put simply—it’s the hysterization of discourse.’<sup>92</sup> The transformative potential of this discourse breaks down when the subject speaking through the hysteric’s discourse projects their lack (“What am I?”) and receives nothing in return. This breakdown of the lines of communication is that which Levertov mourns with a somewhat disabling melancholia in “Biafra”. Unlike Duncan and Perkins, Levertov sees that violence is not isolated or isolatable in the “poetic imagination” and that she cannot in turn allow *herself* to become isolated. She must risk interaction with the threshold in order to generate any potential transformation in our relationship with violence.

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<sup>91</sup> Bailly, p. 161.

<sup>92</sup> Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 33.



There is risk here, as numerous critics have highlighted, that Levertov comes to conflate the ‘lingering’ of napalm on the skin of Vietnamese children with her own suffering. The ‘flesh on fire...wholly human’ runs this risk, shaping the affected Vietnamese into some perfect exemplification of the “human”. Of course, it is humans too that drop the napalm—that cause the ‘moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed’—as well as those suffering from it.<sup>94</sup> This reinstates the kinds of categorisations—human/inhuman—that her poetry is so regularly attempting to escape. The path ahead consumed by ‘gray filth’, Levertov reaches towards categorisation as a form of explanation. This, in turn, places limits on any claim to the transformative potential of poetry in discussing violence, in poetry’s ability to escape the categorisations of America as Other. The conflation of the failing ‘poet’s sight’ and the Vietnam War is a violence of its own.

Levertov does, however, move quickly to discuss these limits. By “Advent 1966”, Levertov is moving away from the threshold of “A Vision” towards sight itself. This move is caused by the fatigue of working through images of such intense violence for so long (‘because of this my strong sight/my clear caressive sight, my poet’s sight I was given/that might stir me to song,/is blurred’). “Advent 1966” is prime for the criticism of Duncan—i.e. in attempting to fully realise violence, Levertov merely aestheticises it. A fair criticism on the surface, this once again fails to consider the gravity of what Levertov is considering or the journey that has been undertaken to get there. Overexposure has led to her own co-opting by a ‘monstrous insect’ which ‘will not permit me to look elsewhere’ than the ‘dulled and unfocused/the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned.’<sup>95</sup> The poem appears to be the beginning of a turn inward, towards a reflection on the magnetic quality of violence. At this time, Levertov remains sensitive to the threshold, but she is aware that she is becoming infected by her subject, a turn inward which she subsequently reflects upon.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

However, “Advent 1966” also presumes the strength of her sight which, fairly, finds itself open to criticism. How can Levertov claim to work through violence when she cannot be sure that her sight is stronger than the sight of others, especially those Vietnamese citizens directly affected by the war? This feeds back to the criticism from Hickman offered at the beginning of the chapter. James F. Mersmann, seemingly in support of Levertov, crucially asks of her image of the ‘monstrous insect’:

At what point and from what cause does the blurring of vision occur? Is it in the seeing, or in that which is seen? Is the insect in the head or is it an emanation and reflection of the chaotic facts of the war? The poem’s realization seems to be, in fact, that the disordering of the sight and the disordering of reality are the same.<sup>96</sup>

The ‘monstrous insect’ comes to manifest the intermingling of violence with the threshold. This understanding, that ‘the disordering of sight and the disordering of the reality are the same’, finds itself reflected in the poetry. Yet this failure of sight is intimately connected to the subject matter of the poem and the investigation of that failure remains critical even if, at points, it carelessly conflates personal guilt with the violence in Vietnam. It is her fatigued relation to the threshold, to the intensity of the violence that she witnesses, which causes her to lose sight of the threshold and its transformative potential. Levertov is mapping a severe limiting of possible interpretations of violence, interpretations which are closed off by the nature of war and the need for categorisation from official political administrations which sustains it.

Levertov’s metaphor of the breath, just as with her poet’s sight, similarly finds its potential stunted as her involvement in the campaign against the war progresses. “Staying Alive”, the

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<sup>96</sup> James F. Mersmann, *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: a study of poets and poetry against the war* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), p. 89.

central poem of 1971's *To Stay Alive*, retains the anger of "Life at War" and "Advent 1966", but recombines this with the breath as a form of action. Initially, it appears to be closer to the passages of communal ecstasy in Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra" ('It's not the vast plains mute our mouths/that fill at midnite with ecstatic language/when our trembling bodies hold each other/breast to breast on a mattress—').<sup>97</sup> However, "Staying Alive" moves to highlight the ways in which those limited interpretations of violence are returned from the warzone:

Bulldozers have moved in.  
Barely awake, the people –  
those who had made for each other  
a green place –  
begin to gather at the corners.  
...  
now, the clubs, the gas  
bayonets, bullets. The War  
comes home to us...<sup>98</sup>

The poem initially appears—and to an extent remains—self-centred and unapologetically so. Yet the poem's focus remains on the potentially generous threshold—articulated here as the 'green place'—a space which is emptied to 'the corners'. Sensitivity to the threshold—and thus to alternative relationships with violence outside of the limited offerings of America as Other—is here closed off. Violence returns in the form of a 'gas' which seeps into the fertile 'green place'. Levertov identifies the return of this violence through the breath and through

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<sup>97</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (USA: HarperCollins, 1996; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 169.

<sup>98</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 96.

pollution. The hysteric's discourse, which requires asking the Master—those interactions in the threshold—for knowledge, is blocked, the poet receiving no pull of the thread in return.

In “A Vision”, “Life at War” and “Advent 1966”, the violence of war which Levertov depicts is a gradual creeping, one mapped through the polluting of the poetry with the violence of war and the limits that this places on its transformative potential. This is outlined in “Fragrance of Life, Odor of Death” from 1975's *The Freeing of the Dust* where her venturing outlines that she is unable to access the threshold, so consumed is America by the interpretations of violence offered by America as Other:

It's in America  
where no bombs ever  
have screamed down smashing  
the buildings, shredding the people's bodies  
...  
it's in America, everywhere, a faint seepage  
I smell death<sup>99</sup>

The ‘faint seepage’, much like ‘the gas’ of “Staying Alive”, the ‘lingering,/cinders’ of “Advent 1966” or the ‘grits’ of “Life at War”, brings us back to the breath as a metaphor for an engagement with violence which cannot withstand the force of postwar American violence. In inhalation, the breath also brings violence (‘I smell death’). This does not indicate the failure of the breath and thus the threshold, but rather their aptness. As Levertov outlined in her disagreements with Duncan, to write poetry at this time is to engage with violence, and a seriousness and earnestness in that engagement is required. In spite of this, her poetry of this intrawar period does appear to indicate that the potential of the breath to

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

act as a force which, as Škof and Berndtson argue, ‘perpetually intertwines the self, the body, and the world’ and thus one which undermines the basis of firm categorisation—inside/outside, good/bad etc—has become diminished by the force of the violence of the Vietnam War. The breath which, like the threshold, stands for the right to liminality must face the laws and hypotheses of violence which come to bear upon, and stand against, its transformative potential. As a poet who takes the risk of making herself publically vulnerable, Levertov’s ‘hysterization’ of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other reveals the fixity of positions on violence in the postwar moment, reflecting on her inability to significantly trouble these positions. However, it is that engagement with the violence of the Vietnam War which enables Levertov to map the scale to which these laws and hypotheses have come to bear on our own understanding of violence in the postwar moment.

#### Writing on violence and Misogyny

Levertov’s work on the threshold in her war poetry is often undervalued or, in many cases, simply unexplored. Whilst Levertov’s attempted ‘hysterization’ of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other reveals their resilience as well as revealing the impossibility of not engaging with them—mapped through her metaphor of the polluted breath—these attempts have not always been well received. As discussed, the term “hysteric” has two distinct connotations, firstly as a term which works to stand in for and negates the distress and suffering of women and secondly, as defined by Lacan, as one who ventures/risks for knowledge and agency. In this latter offer, the hysteric is one who comes to knowledge through an understanding of the necessity of, and willingness to take, risk. This risk is a willingness to face the Real of this violence and to attempt to understand the role of poetry in relation to the conflict. Whilst Levertov is not justified in her conflation of the violence of the Vietnam War with her ‘poet’s sight’, she does reveal how the war, and the laws and

hypotheses which are utilised in order to justify it, places limits on our ability to interact with one another outside of those same laws and hypotheses.

The role of the venturer, of one that takes risks, is a role not traditionally afforded to women. The risk taker, the one who explores new frontiers, is traditionally signified male. “Hysteria” in its conventional sense is permissible, but so long as this does not come to afford women power or agency. This crucial second component of Lacan’s function—agency through the generation of knowledge—is excluded, traditionally under the guise of “women knowing their place”. This exclusion is also extended to women poets. In this closing subsection, I will consider the resistance to Levertov’s poetry and the ways in which a woman poet reshaping and resensitising us to violence has so frequently been misread and disparaged.

To discuss Levertov without considering her work as a feminist thinker is to miss much of her most insightful thought. As she was never part of any defined feminist movement, her thinking on violence and women remains underexplored compared to the work of, say, Adrienne Rich. To consider this work closely reveals the ‘strange space’, a threshold of sorts, which Elissa Marder later conceives of as the ‘maternal function’. The importance of destabilising the category of “woman” in Levertov’s work is a critical angle in her project of transforming our relationship with violence alongside the explosive lure of the Vietnam War. As argued previously, war requires distinct categorisations—good/evil, American/un-American etc.—in order to function. The laws and hypotheses of America as Other, those that come to bear on that series of categorisations, are inclusive of the limited positions offered to women in postwar America. In turn, by taking on the role of, say, the “obedient housewife”, those laws and hypotheses are reinforced. Any woman who decides to step outside of the very limited number of available positions afforded to women comes to challenge the coherence of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, the coherence of “Americanness” in the postwar moment. Levertov, and the other writers of this thesis, have challenged this notion of America as Other as a coherence. For Levertov, one cannot exist outside of relationality, as a mythical complete Other, defined as we are by our Real

interactions with the threshold. Levertov's work is to keep the space in which this can occur open. The centrality of "woman" as a mythical centre, as a point of creation, works against this attempt at openness. The mother, when discussed as an archetype, has the potential to bolster these fixed categorisations. It is Levertov's refusal to take up this role—that of the 'potential mother' or the "hysterical woman"—and the precarity inherent in such a refusal, which adds great weight to her discourses on violence.

That Levertov's poetry stimulates certain criticism is indicative of such in-built roles. Women are not seen as being there to create, but they are instead form, muse or a vessel through which content (signified "male") passes. Women are seen as, in Marder's terms, 'potential mothers'.<sup>100</sup> Mother is rendered here as "protector", but arrives as either the helpless carer or as the mother supportive of violence who defends her symbolic "homeland". Neither of these roles come with agency. Levertov steps outside of this not by opposing war; this is a position open to the "helpless". Forbidden are acts which put her "inherent feminine weakness" into action. The historical precedent for just how action from vulnerability, from not symbolising the unsymbolisable, can be is found in Anne Hutchinson, whose work in Puritan New England caused her to be pilloried for putting herself in a place of public vulnerability. As Cheryl C. Smith argues, Hutchinson's use of her voice 'freely and forcefully' led to her banishment.<sup>101</sup>

Community leaders started to worry that if they could not keep her religious/social dissent under control, all the women and even many men could end up like her: hyper-sexual and distinctly anti-Puritan—more like the savage Indians who

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<sup>100</sup> Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Cheryl C. Smith, 'Out of Her Place: Anne Hutchinson and the Dislocation of Power in New World Politics', *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 28.4 (December 2006), 437-453 (p. 437).

embodied the colony's vulnerability than one of the privileged flock who could secure it.<sup>102</sup>

The construction of a more localised, nuanced and vulnerable—and therefore a less universal, fixed and tyrannical—relationship to others was unacceptable to the powerful Puritan clergy. This lays bare “the rule”: women are allowed to be vulnerable and to offer vulnerability, but not in a way that gives them power. To flip this paradigm upsets patriarchal structures which use vulnerability as an excuse to protect women and, thus, remove agency from them. Hutchinson's destabilising effect on the Puritan community was so great that she and her followers were tried, convicted and banished. Levertov's gesture is to suggest that sensitivity to the threshold—and thus the pull of the other—is to be maintained. She places herself in this position of precarity and exposes poetry to the violence now inherent in remaining sensitive to the threshold, and thus, remaining sensitive to each other.

To take such a radical position, to reveal so much about the political limits of poetry and interpersonal relation, is sure to provoke defensive reactions. However, it is the misogyny inherent in “acceptable roles for women” that lead to the vitriol surrounding Levertov's work. The upholding of the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, so crucial for official administration in times of war where clarity and supposed coherence of purpose are paramount, requires that women take up positions which support those laws and hypotheses. That such criticism is withheld from a writer such as Allen Ginsberg, one also known for directness, gives some further historical justification for this claim. Klinkowitz and Wallace stated that the ‘very explicitness’ of Levertov's war poetry ‘restricted her distinctive strengths as a poet... a language lyrical enough to express wish and desire, and a capacity for playfulness.’ Comparatively, they praise Ginsberg's ‘gentle and persuasive presence’ and his

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<sup>102</sup> Cheryl C. Smith, p. 439.

serving as ‘a kind of guru for many young people disoriented by the Vietnam War.’<sup>103</sup> Imbued as this quote is with an understanding of its helplessness, quite how ‘I lift my voice aloud,/make Mantra of American language now,/I here declare the end of the War!’ could be classed as ‘gentle’ or ‘persuasive’ is beyond me. Yet this criticism is a compliment. Ginsberg’s poetry which, to my mind, contains a similar anger to both the war and to poetic helplessness and is inflected with a certain sense of irony, appears to be “guilty” of the same “crimes against poetry” as Levertov. Much as Levertov stated in her defence of “Tenebrae” against the criticism of Duncan, Ginsberg’s anger here is humorous because, as per Levertov, ‘you can’t make a revolution worth a damn by being grim and solemn all the time’. That he can be praised for his gentleness and humour whilst Levertov is lambasted for lacking such gentleness is indicative of the structural misogyny that meets women writing outside their role.

Whilst it is Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* from 1976 that is seen as *the* pivotal text on motherhood, Levertov’s poetry of the mid-70s onwards also works to present the mother’s symbolic deification as damaging to all, and how disruption of this deification can become transformative of violence. Rich opens by offering us the aphoristic ‘[w]e know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood.’<sup>104</sup> For a poet with as rich an understanding of the complexities of the breath as Levertov, this opening claim becomes contestable. Nevertheless, Rich’s profound work on motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience opened up a tradition of philosophical writing on mothers which had been gestured towards by Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex* six years previously. I would argue that Levertov’s unique and often overlooked contribution to “the mother” as a philosophical idea worth grappling with is entwined with the breath and with violence.

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<sup>103</sup> Klinkowitz and Wallace eds., p. 492.

<sup>104</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977; repr. 1984), p. 11.

A brief tangent in order to consider a song from 1980 marries this expectation of the role of the mother back to the breath. Kate Bush's song "Breathing" provides a metaphorical rendering of this link between this troubling quality of the breath and motherhood. Again highlighting the yielding of the breath ('Outside gets inside'), we can see how the openness of the breath allows for the entry of the potentially unwanted outside. Having blurred the inside/outside distinction, an attempted but futile re-creation of these boundaries is quickly attempted: 'I've been out before/But this time it's much safer in'.<sup>105</sup> These imagined barriers offer little resistance. The barriers can only be constructed in light of the symbolic role of the mother as protector. When they fail, it will be the mother who takes the blame. Bush's lyrics indirectly call back to Levertov's work on the breath, but also enliven us to a peculiar quality of her "breathings". As discussed earlier, even the first breath of the child after birth is subject to the other of "space"; if we are to live, we must continue to take what we are given. Much like the New York smog and its cognates with war which Levertov outlines in "Staying Alive, the breathing in of noxious air begins long before its manifestation as smog. We can observe this in etymological terms as well; the "noxious" air and "innocent" child share the PIE root of \*nek- meaning "death".<sup>106</sup> We begin with death which takes two separate branches into the blamelessness of innocence (harmless) and the active violence of noxiousness (harmful). The tension between life and death at work in this shared etymological root opens us towards what Elissa Marder calls the 'strange space' of the 'maternal function':<sup>107</sup>

The figure of the mother tends to be both excluded from the realm of representation on the grounds that she is "natural" and simultaneously inscribed into representational practices as the very name for that which cannot be represented. In

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<sup>105</sup> Kate Bush, "Breathing", *Never for Ever*, LP, EMA, EMA 794, 1980.

<sup>106</sup> '\*nek- (1)', *Online Etymology Dictionary* <[https://www.etymonline.com/word/\\*nek-](https://www.etymonline.com/word/*nek-)> [accessed 8 November 2019]

<sup>107</sup> Marder, p. 2.

other words, the “mother” is often the philosophical name given to that which cannot be thought philosophically.<sup>108</sup>

Whilst the mother ‘ostensibly grounds a specifically human separation between nature and culture’, it is ‘the maternal function [which] opens up a strange space in which birth and death, *bios* and *techné*, the human and the nonhuman are brought into an intimate and disturbing proximity with one another.’<sup>109</sup> This is found most jarringly by Marder in birth, which, ‘depicted as the epitome of a purely natural act’ has ‘been obliquely recognized as the first defining instance of human work. As such, the maternal function implicitly haunts the figure of work itself.’<sup>110</sup> It is vital not to conflate the “work” of giving birth with the symbolic “home” which the mother has come to represent. To do so would be similar to the occasion spoken of in chapter three where the necessary space between the *pōiesis* (in this case of home) and the *praxis* (in this case of the ‘human work’ of raising children) is crushed. Such conflation leads to women becoming ‘assigned to a particular, symbolically loaded place within the culture: the place of “home,” “origin,” “certainty,” and “nature,” indeed the very place of place itself.’ For Marder, ‘the consequences of defining the cultural concept of “Mother” as the symbolic place-holder for “home” as a stable point of origin remain not only problematic but also inherently untenable.’<sup>111</sup> The result of this conflation is violence both against women and in the form of violence *qua* violence. The former is manifested by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other which offers women a limited series of set roles.

As with Marder, Levertov’s mode of speaking on motherhood and breathing appears to have similarity to this ‘strange space’ of the maternal function. Rather than conceding to the view

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

that women are always seen as ‘potential mothers’,<sup>112</sup> “Stepping Westward” from *The Sorrow Dance* deliberately upsets the notion of woman as ‘potential mother’ and, thus, as “home”: ‘If woman is inconstant,/good, I am faithful to//ebb and flow...’.<sup>113</sup> This ‘ebb and flow’ speaks to a looseness of identity and gender. She speaks of this ebbing and flowing as she does the breath: ‘If her part//is to be true,/a north star,//good, I hold steady/in the black sky//and vanish by day,/yet burn there’.<sup>114</sup> This is a sense of self, a position or style, which remains unfixated. It is a position not rooted in home nor in homelessness (‘good, I hold steady...and vanish by day’). She is neither flexible caregiver nor arbiter of certainty (‘If her part//is to be true’), neither present nor absent (‘and vanish by day,/yet burn there’), neither measurable nor immeasurable (‘I am, a shadow//that grows longer as the sun/moves, drawn out//on a thread of wonder.’).<sup>115</sup> Critically, this is a position with agency. This is also picked up in “The Woman” from 1975’s *The Freeing of the Dust*, once more being taken to ways in which the ‘ebb and flow’ may disrupt or disturb existing roles for women:

It is the one in homespun  
you hunger for  
when you are lonesome;  
  
the one in crazy feathers  
dragging opal chains in dust  
wearies you  
  
wearies herself perhaps  
but has to drive on  
  
....

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Levertov, *Selected Poems*, p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 61-2.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

But the one in homespun  
whom you want is weary  
too, wants to sit down  
...  
...Can you endure  
Life with two brides, bridegroom?<sup>116</sup>

It would be to essentialise to present womanhood or motherhood as “the position of existing in thresholds”; this is merely another “home”, as a carer without agency. “The 90<sup>th</sup> Year”, from 1978’s *Life in the Forest*, speaks to the damage that the assertion of “mother-as-home” causes when mourning the death of Levertov’s own mother:

It had not been given her  
to know the flesh as good in itself  
as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her  
the human body has been a husk,  
a shell in which souls were prisoned.  
...  
'I am so tired,' she has written to me, 'of appreciating  
the gift of life.'<sup>117</sup>

The mother presented in Kate Bush’s “Breathing”, in Rich’s account and in Levertov’s poems here, is one doomed to fail, doomed to be hated and blamed. This in turn both

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 115-6.

<sup>117</sup> Levertov, p. 138-9.

explains a particular brand of criticism levelled at Levertov and the importance of the threshold in both defying such criticism and responding to violence. To take the first: Levertov emphatically rejects the limited positions which are offered in the laws and hypotheses of America as Other. She does this by engaging with the threshold rather than through one of the defined roles of “woman”. To return to Audrey Rodgers, Levertov turns to write on the ‘subjects of...women, marriage, children’ yet from this unfixed position of the threshold and with the intensity which that space offers. By feeling the ‘pulling’ of ‘the thread’, Levertov enters into discussion with this ‘strange space’ elucidated by Marder; she is emphatically individual, responding to her own threads and interactions within the threshold. This does not map onto the traditional role of the mother, subservient as she must be to her children, partner, and nation. Understanding that she exists in the threshold with violence, Levertov sees her role neither as the calming nor the patriotic mother. Whilst there remains much to criticise in Levertov’s war poetry, some critics cast her as “hysterical”, diminishing the potential impact of her subtle critique, a work which began long before the war. ‘[H]er part//is to be true’, not “home”, certainty or any other archetype of woman. Levertov writes in contact with the threshold, emphatically stating that the mother is not the point of origin that we think she is. This brings us back to the precarity of the threshold as a space which we must endeavour to find ourselves in relation to. “Movement”, from *Life in the Forest*, speaks most pertinently to this and is one of Levertov’s clearest presentations of the threshold as transformative:

Towards not being  
anyone else’s center  
of gravity.

A wanting  
to love: not

to lean over towards  
an other, and fall,  
but feel within one  
a flexible steel<sup>118</sup>

Levertov quickly moves to decentre in the opening two lines. If we are to ‘fall’, it is neither because we were dragged nor because we felt compelled. It is because we allowed ourselves to be acted upon, because our ‘flexible steel’ was bent too far by the thread which ‘silently’ pulls at it. To ‘lean over towards/an other, and fall’ is to affirm the idea of the mother as an inevitable failure governed by impossible rules. It is not that one is to avoid falling, but rather that if we are to fall, it will be due to the thread. Levertov reminds us that if we are to transform our relationship with violence, we must always be willing to be precarious. It is this visibility and forcefulness in explicating roles of women and the war which renders her a unique figure. Whilst Nancy Cunard, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mary Borden are all examples of women who wrote on war with great directness, Levertov remains one of the very first woman poets to lead protest against war with her poetry. Borden’s *The Forbidden Zone* was rejected for publication in 1917 as, in the words of Jane Potter, it ‘[came] at a time when public morale was being sorely challenged...It was not just that Borden’s text was unsparing in its explicit account of wartime nursing, of the suffering of soldiers and the gruesomeness of their wounds; it was that it offered no consolation.’<sup>119</sup> There is a question to be asked, in relation to both Borden and Levertov, of whether these aesthetic investigations of violence were rejected due to their confirmation of violence *as it occurred* rather than after the dust had settled. The most affective artworks reflect the culture back at itself and, often, this is hard to look at. This is only exacerbated by the fact that “woman” is seen as a

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<sup>118</sup> Denise Levertov, *Life in the Forest* (New York: New Directions, 1978), p. 115.

<sup>119</sup> Jane Potter, ‘Episode 3: Minds at War: Series 5’, *The Essay*, BBC Radio 3, 7 November 2018.

centre for man, as vulnerable but powerless, as allowed to be affected by violence, but prevented from pointing at it directly as it occurs.

### III – Summary

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the many ways in which Denise Levertov presents the threshold as essential in attempting to transform a relationship with violence in a time of war. A final sub-section detailing her work around the roles of woman and mother within the same 1960s and 1970s America which inaugurated the war served to demonstrate the ways in which her work on thresholds can also be used to consider the roles played by women within the same system of categorisation required to sustain discourses of violence. The threshold offers the possibility of interacting with others outside of the categorisations which also sustain the violence of war.

What Levertov's work has revealed about violence in the postwar moment is the ways in which the laws and hypotheses of America as Other, which are brought to bear on official political justifications of war, also come to bear on our interactions with one another. The threshold differs somewhat when considered alongside the headline terms discussed in previous chapters ("silence", "break" and "scansion"). The threshold certainly compares to Cage's "silence" as intentionless, as a space which marks interaction with the Real which requires that we break from existing laws and hypotheses which govern interpretations of violence. However, the threshold is intimately connected to the ways in which breaking from those laws and hypotheses affect our interactions with one another, a function which Cage's silence can only create space for. Similarly to the "break", the threshold can be thought of spatially, but unlike the break it is not a site from which action is generated, but rather a space which we are sensitive to. Whilst, as with the scansion, the threshold is involved in mapping, at its simplest, the threshold both maps the ways in which our interactions with one another have become impacted by the laws and hypotheses of America as Other as well as marking the space in which the Real interaction, the 'mysteries of the other', may be able to occur.

## Conclusion

This study presents a deep aesthetic engagement with violence taken through four commensurable yet distinct lenses. The study has highlighted that, in postwar America, the positions on violence offered in America as Other can be mapped and disrupted through aesthetic innovations. Through their tracings, the artists here are able to offer brief openings—as found in Cage’s silence, Baraka’s break, Burroughs’ scansion and Levertov’s threshold—which may allow us to temporarily step outside of these limited positions and propose alternative and more subtle relationships with violence. This is shown to be possible by denying stability to seemingly unshakeable categories which are gathered from the laws and hypotheses of America as Other in the postwar moment and used to legitimise violence against those that attempt to sit outside these laws and hypotheses. It is this same violence which comes to embody the incorporation and absorption of disparate materials into the horizon of America as Other, a process which only increases in force and effectiveness in the coming decades with the onset of neoliberalism. These writers find that entering into intimate relation with violence through their various aesthetic practices requires us to become deeply engaged with, and thus vulnerable to the effects of that violence, to the Real of the atom bomb, the Holocaust, slavery and the twentieth century’s many violent atrocities. America as Other, as a locus of meaning, remains potent even with these writers going beyond language in their aesthetic practices. However, in accepting the precarity which such a rapport with violence requires, the writers here offer ephemeral spaces outside this horizon where we may be able to engineer new, more subtle and complex moralities which may put the inevitability of violence towards new horizons rather than the maintenance of old ones.

## Projecting Forward

It is unquestionable that the twenty-first century has, so far, represented a period of great change. We have witnessed the waning, or at least weakening, of liberal democracy in many of the West's major powers since the early 2010s, the breakdown of political "cordon sanitaires" designed to keep more extreme ideologies out of mainstream politics and the subsequent rise of national populism. For many voters, national populism has proved more effective at providing coherent answers to issues and allaying certain fears than the alienating and alienated centre-ground. Whilst comparisons to 1930s Europe have been made, these concerns also resonate with the historical period marked in this thesis.

To take an example, the "cordon sanitaires" of the Cold War—embodied by the containment policies proposed by George F. Kennan and enacted by President Harry Truman—resulted in a tacit acceptance of anti-Communist and pro-American zealotry of all stripes, best embodied in the Red Scare. After the Vietnam War and the subsequent presidencies of Nixon, Ford and Carter, the Reagan Doctrine of 1985 sought to return to a more aggressive combating of the Soviet Union. The result was an increase in domestic paramilitary activity and violence. As Kathleen Belew identifies, '[White Power activist Tom] Posey's stance reflected not only the thoughts of mercenaries on the fringe but an interventionist current in mainstream conservatism that gave rise to increasing paramilitarism within the Reagan administration itself.'<sup>1</sup> As Belew later argues in an interview with *Democracy Now!* discussing the "Unite the Right" rally of Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017:

...although it seems new to us to have a moment of sort of a wink and a nod of allowing this kind of activism in the public sphere, actually it's not new. This is a movement that radicalized under the Reagan administration. It turned violent against the state in 1983 at a moment of executive—sort of executive acceptance. And

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (London: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 82.

because of that, we shouldn't think that the wink and the nod coming from the Trump administration might mean that these activists will be content with simply demonstrating in the public square.<sup>2</sup>

What Belew highlights here is the link between executive acceptance of violence through its laws and hypotheses and a subsequent increase of violence in that mould on the streets. Much like the Cold War strategists, America in the twenty-first century is demonstrating that the construction of unbending categorisations—those which attempt to secure the symbolic identity of a nation—results in increased violence, or calls for violence, from certain groups in the public sphere.

Accordingly, whilst the concerns of this thesis are at least partly historically framed by the postwar moment, the discoveries made by the artists in question can be helpfully projected onto contemporary writings. To draw out some of the possible connections is to open up new ways of considering these contemporary works as part of a rich tradition of discussing violence through aesthetics.

The neo-conceptual work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place finds itself somewhat isolated in the field of contemporary poetic studies on violence. In favouring the “idea of the work” and attempting to all but foreclose the possibility of discussing its aesthetic value, neo-conceptualism champions itself as the heir to the throne of one brand of the American avant-garde, one preceded by Marcel Duchamp and continued by Andy Warhol. Yet the key differences between, say, Cage's work and that of the neo-conceptualists can again be found in this treatment of violence. The neo-conceptual model can be seen as an attempt to map discourses of violence without alteration. Place's *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010), for instance, presents the statement of facts from a criminal rape trial almost verbatim—

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<sup>2</sup> “‘Bring the War Home’: The Long History of White Power and Paramilitary Violence in the United States”, *Democracy Now!* <[https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/24/bring\\_the\\_war\\_home\\_the\\_long](https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/24/bring_the_war_home_the_long)> [accessed 8 November 2019]

identifiable information is however removed. As Insert Blanc Press' copy outlines, this is in part to outline the many 'implicit arguments' made in what are meant to be factual statements.<sup>3</sup> This highlights not just the desire to influence a reader towards a particular point of view, but also that legal discourses of violence affect how we read violence—a point made many years before and with sufficient force by Robert M. Cover and Jacques Derrida, among many others, for it to not require repeating.

This model falls prey to that which Cage's best work avoids. Such sustained engagement with violence through legal discourse aims to render analysis the only fruitful tool, a move which has potentially rewarding results. However, Cage's best works avoid this authorial gaze which serves to calcify a very real interpersonal violence. Whilst the violence in *Statement of Facts* is in part enabled by the languages surrounding the body and sexual desire, these are not separate from the act, something which Place's work appears to imply. This move, to drain compassion and the communal telling of traumatic events, is part of the intention of legal discourses which wish to focus on the "factual". The dislocation of the text from its intended usage and into a book of poetry does not bring us closer to violence, but rather removes us from a crucial perspective on it. The repeated instantiation of that violence ends up detaching us from it. This has intriguing implications and, as Place may desire, the "idea" of considering violence in this way indicates much to us about the language that is used: the violence of the rape in question drifts further out of reach. The moral implications of this are stark. For a thesis which has considered the importance of vulnerability, these texts—such as Goldsmith's *The Body of Michael Brown*—deny the victim agency or voice, preventing them from telling their own stories in favour of some larger, already well-established point on the role legal discourses play in detaching us from concrete violence. In short, it is work which is deeply untransformative. Where Cage's work is at its best, as in *4'33"*, it presents us compelling readings of violence by looking away in order to bring

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<sup>3</sup> 'Vanessa Place Statement of Facts', *Insert Blanc Press* <[https://www.insertblancpress.net/products/vanessa-place-statement-of-facts?\\_pos=1&\\_sid=e728d61e1&\\_ss=r](https://www.insertblancpress.net/products/vanessa-place-statement-of-facts?_pos=1&_sid=e728d61e1&_ss=r)> [accessed 8 November 2019]

attention to, and dislocate us from, our present relationship with violence as determined by America as Other.

Such questions of vulnerability and precarity, in part fuelled by the hugely influential work of Judith Butler, remain imperative to another Anglo-American alignment of contemporary poets and authors considering the relationship between poetry and violence. Poets working in the San Francisco Bay Area such as Julianna Spahr, David Buuck, Joshua Clover and Chris Chen have continued urgently to question what an effective, transformative militant poetics may look like.

In *An Army of Lovers* (2013), Spahr and Buck figure a triangulated concern common to these writers; what is the connection between the poetry, the poet and violence? The text would seemingly support Clover's assessment that 'many of us poets have been telling ourselves lies about the political force of poetry'.<sup>4</sup> Yet Spahr and Buuck are compelled to write in spite of poetry's limited capacity to directly affect social change in the contemporary moment. The second section entitled "The Side Effect" follows two lead characters bitten by a tick. Initial internet searches lead to diagnosis from a specialist: "You have something living inside you," Laura said. "And there's no cure. I cannot fix you," she said, "it cannot be cut out of you. And you will be sharing it with others for the rest of your life...it will always be one step ahead of you."<sup>5</sup> Another character, Koki, is producing 'a piece that might take all that she could know and feel about a military prison in another country and the bodies inside it, their movements and actions and sounds, and then somehow shape this into music, or protest, or she did not know what.'<sup>6</sup> As one reviewer put this, these are 'allegories of the body failing under the knowledge of the world's unending violence.'<sup>7</sup> That they occur in a mode which shares the concerns of William Burroughs (the bite of the tick which disguises the draining 'static horror' of the world's violence) and Denise

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<sup>4</sup> Hickman, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Julianna Spahr and David Buuck, *An Army of Lovers* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2013) pp. 49-50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Burger, 'Review: An Army of Lovers by Juliaan Spahr and David Buuck', *Your Impossible Voice* <<http://www.yourimpossiblevoice.com/review-army-lovers-juliana-spahr-david-buuck/>> [accessed 8 November 2019]

Levertov (the failing ‘poet’s sight’ in light of that violence and the inevitability of said violence leaking into the work) is telling of the legacy and relevance of such considerations by these early Cold War writers.

For Sean Bonney, in conversation with Stephen Collis, this plays into a sense that how we position ourselves remains potentially transformative. This marks the sense that the present state of violence may otherwise overwhelm us:

Whether it’s the avant-garde writing subjectivity out of poetry, or international capitalism denying realities that exist outside of their version of reality, it’s to be resisted, a very important part of the struggle. If we think about solidarity and struggle emerging from where we are, where we work, then our poetry becomes that site of struggle. There are voices to be conducted, to be brought into play.<sup>8</sup>

As he crucially notes, ‘it is easy to deny subjectivity when yours is the dominant. There’s no need to assert it because it permeates the entire atmosphere of social reality.’<sup>9</sup> Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) highlights this forcefully as she documents the microaggressions, wider languages and assumptions surrounding violence. These testify to the importance of some form of subject for evaluating social realities. As she outlines in chapter 3: ‘Another friend tells you you have to learn not to absorb the world...Your friend refuses to carry what doesn’t belong to her.’<sup>10</sup> Echoing Levertov’s urgency of engagement, the lyric subject throughout *Citizen* is not the focus, but rather a point through which these racisms can be explored. This uncertain positioning of the lyric subject, between the sovereign “I” and the collective “we”, is disturbingly illustrated at the close of chapter 6

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<sup>8</sup> Sean Bonney & Stephen Collis, ‘We Are An Other: Poetry, Commons, Subjectivity’, in *Towards. Some. Air.*, ed. by Fred Wah & Amy De’Ath (Banff: The Banff Centre, 2015), pp. 283-294 (p. 285).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>10</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 55.

where the names of those killed by racial violence are drained of colour and clarity as the page progresses. This bleaching sits most compellingly against the double page spread of chapter 3: 'I DO NOT ALWAYS FEEL COLORED' and 'I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND'.<sup>11</sup> It is the bleaching of the subject, the subject under erasure, which then stands out most vividly in chapter 6.

The subject comes to stand out in its absence as a marker of racist violence, a move only made possible by the liminal positioning of Rankine's subject. Critical to this is the solidarity generated by the sharing of those violences through a collective voice, a move also undertaken in Baraka's work. For Bonney, the solidarity felt whilst 'storming the Tory Party HQ' was 'a solidarity so intense that I no longer felt like an individual at all—or rather that my individuality was part of a collective whole.'<sup>12</sup> There are echoes of Baraka here: the dissolution of the self will not occur through focused "work" designed to dissolve it, but rather through dissolving into some other sense of what it means to be a subject or by dissolving so intensely into the object of focus—into the histories and narratives of the violence being challenged and lived through—that the edges between various individuals become little more than a memory. The 'impetus towards a "common address"' is critical for Collis. Yet it is critical that we remain sensitive to the possibility of a 'common condition' which manages to respect that 'though that crisis is common, it nevertheless impacts us quite diversely. The question then becomes '[t]o what extent can we generalize from these differences?'<sup>13</sup> How can a collected voice against the various extreme violences of capital—ranging from punitive welfare sanctions through internment and detention—accommodate the specificity of the stories of those that remain marginalised? For Bonney, it appears to come in the form of 'a seance' which is enabled by this collective "I". There is a channelling of Baraka here—perhaps unsurprisingly as Bonney wrote his PhD thesis on Baraka—in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-3.

<sup>12</sup> Bonney & Collis, p. 284.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 291.

particular the weaponisation of the voice, one enabled by the collecting of those individual stories and grievances into a collected subject.

These thoughts were gathered together in *Towards. Some. Air.* in 2015, the same year in which Bonney published *Letters Against the Firmament*. His collection is a series of these weaponised séances targeted at the relationship between the grandees of the political ruling class and their culpability in sustaining systems of violence. This move, echoed in Verity Spott's *Gideon* (2014), of channelling violence through the collective I which experiences them—and joins in the calls for retribution—again points towards the 'object voice' alluded to in Baraka; the collective I carried through the poem is unified in a single voice which can only allude to the multitude which it contains. There is a desire to go beyond those languages and representations of violence as summarised in "Letter on Poetics": 'In the enemy language it is necessary to lie. & seeing as language is probably the chief of the social senses, we have to derange that.' The "I", which is transformed into the collective when it all kicks off', is perhaps in fact what is 'deranged' when placed in comparison to the positions offered by the Other, an "I" which, in an individualistic society, can only ever mean one sovereign individual and not a group.<sup>14</sup> It is a moment of transposition which cannot be predictably inscribed into a future, a stepping-over the threshold that fails to clearly mark itself—much like the radical potential of Cage's silence or even in Burroughs' scansion.

These conversations on violence in contemporary poetics, once again, appear to return us to precarity and to the importance of evaluating that precarity in line with violence and within a historical and political context which feels immovable. Rather than considering precarity in the postwar moment, these contemporary writers are considering precarity in light of the failure of late-twentieth century liberal democracy to answer the questions violence asks of it. These are often the same questions that were asked by the writers of this thesis in the late-1940s through until the mid-1970s. With the ever-increasing reach and globalisation of

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<sup>14</sup> Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015), p. 141.

capital, these writers also do this without a clear, desirable, achievable political alternative being readily available or desirable to many others. The precarity of the contemporary moment is one of feeling unable to offer or imagine a different future in a world where the institutionalisation of violence has continued.

### Closing Remarks

Judith Butler's account of precarity is an account of a discovery that had been made through the aesthetic practices of the writers of this thesis some 50 years before. This is not to undermine her work, but to make two clear points. Firstly, that the argument made in this thesis' abstract—that critical work always lags behind creative practice—has certainly held true in this instance. Secondly, it highlights that we are dealing with a similar relationship with violence in the contemporary moment to the one considered in the early Cold War by these writers. It is one defined by an inability to understand precarity in the postwar moment. This is borne out in the work of the contemporary writers mentioned above. The legacy of the writers of this thesis is thus, potentially, a worrying one: their work remains relevant because the condition of violence in the present moment remains eerily similar to that of 50 years ago. The need to undermine a series of fixed positions on violence and to then present new futures which do not adhere to this limited horizon remains of great importance. There is an urgent need to continue to imagine these new futures because, in the present moment, they are often considered to be in short supply. It is slow violences—such as climate heating—which increasingly mark the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is here that the works of Cage, Baraka, Burroughs and Levertov—among many others—can still be transformative for us. As Mark Fisher describes, a new danger which the contemporary moment presents us with is pre-corporation, 'the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.'<sup>15</sup> Our biographical existence

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009), p. 9.

has become shaped by capital—and the violences which sustain capital—before we even have the opportunity to shape our lives in alternative ways, ways which may be more preferable to us.<sup>16</sup> This does not, however, exclude moments of temporary irruption or resistance to pre-corporation, moments which the artists of this thesis have offered. We are being offered the possibility, the “perhaps” as Derrida would term it, of disruption and of transformation.

As such, the after effect of this thesis, and of these writers, is somewhat to leave us in suspension. Yet suspension, undecidedness, unfixeness, may in fact prove to be fine places to find ourselves, so long as they do not become new centres or places of intellectual refuge. Resisting suspension as a place of sanctuary and, instead, reframing it as a place to make ourselves precarious to violence in our aesthetic practices became a primary focus of the chapter on Denise Levertov. Another place which we may accordingly hope to find ourselves suspended in is the Cagean silence, a space from which we may find ways to be disruptive and in which we may find new ways to develop a new, subtler relationship with violence. Or perhaps Baraka’s work may help us to generate the space required for stories of violence to be heard. So perhaps rather than it being a sign of our continued and unsuccessful attempts to reshape a certain fixed relationship with violence—although this is, of course, part of it—the continued relevance of these artists may in fact be indicative of their ability to provide us with access to an understanding of violence by offering not tools and methods, but experiences. The fact that they remain simultaneously connected to and transcendent of their particular historical co-ordinates is testament to this. It is as though the artists presented here, rather than being irreversibly anchored to the postwar period, provide us with a legacy of repeatedly renewable and generative modalities which deeply involve us in the heuristics, languages and histories of the violence of our time.

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<sup>16</sup> Since 1975 and the onset of neoliberalism as an economic and political outlook and strategy, the use of legalised violence to sustain the state is also always a sustaining of capital.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – “Piano Preparation” for Cage’s *Bacchanale* (1938/40)<sup>17</sup>

PIANO PREPARATION

TONE	MATERIAL	STRING (left to right)	DISTANCE FROM DAMPER
	small bolt	2-3	circa 3"
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	screw with nuts & weather stripping*	2-3 1-2	** **
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**

\*fibrous

\*\*Determine position and size of mutes by experiment.

<sup>17</sup> John Cage, *Prepared Piano Music: Volume I, 1940-47* (New York: Henmar Press Inc., 1960; repr. 1999), p. 4.

Appendix 2 – Preparations page for Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48)<sup>18</sup>

TONE		MATERIAL	STRINGS LEFT TO RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMP. PER. (INCHES)	MATERIAL	STRINGS LEFT TO RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMP. PER. (INCHES)	MATERIAL	STRINGS LEFT TO RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMP. PER. (INCHES)	TONE	
16va					SCREW	2-3	1 1/8*				A	
					MED. BOLT	2-3	1 3/8*				G	
					SCREW	2-3	1 5/8*				F	
					SCREW	2-3	1 7/8*				E	
					SCREW	2-3	1 9/8*				D	
					SM. BOLT	2-3	2*				C	
					SCREW	2-3	1 1/8*				C*	
					FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	2 3/8*				C	
					SCREW	2-3	2 1/2*				B	
					SCREW	2-3	1 1/8*				B	
					MED. BOLT	2-3	2 3/8*				A	
					SCREW	2-3	2 1/4*				A	
					SCREW	2-3	3 3/4*				G	
					SCREW	2-3	2 5/8*				F*	
			SCREW	1-2	3/4*	FURN. BOLT + 2 NUTS	2-3	2 3/8*	SCREW + 2 NUTS	2-3	3 1/4*	F
	8va					SCREW	2-3	1 5/16*				F
					FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	1 7/8				E	
					SCREW	2-3	1 5/16				E	
					SCREW	2-3	1 1/6				C*	
					MED. BOLT	2-3	3 3/4				C	
					SCREW	2-3	4 7/8				B	
			RUBBER	1-2-3	4 1/2	FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	1 1/4			A	
					SCREW	2-3	1 3/4				A	
					SCREW	2-3	2 5/8				F*	
			RUBBER	1-2-3	5 3/4						F	
			RUBBER	1-2-3	6 1/2	FURN. BOLT + NUT	2-3	6 7/8			E	
					FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	2 7/8				E	
			RUBBER	1-2-3	3 5/8						D	
					BOLT	2-3	7 7/8				D	
					BOLT	2-3	2				C	
			SCREW	1-2	10	SCREW	2-3	1	RUBBER	1-2-3	8 1/4	B <sup>b</sup>
		(PLASTIC (S&G))	1-2-3	2 5/8				RUBBER	1-2-3	4 1/2	G*	
		PLASTIC (OVER L UNDER 2-3)	1-2-3	2 7/8				RUBBER	1-2-3	10 7/8	G	
		(PLASTIC (S&D))	1-2-3	4 1/4				RUBBER	1-2-3	5 1/6	D*	
		PLASTIC (OVER L UNDER 2-3)	1-2-3	4 3/8				RUBBER	1-2-3	9 3/4	D	
		BOLT	1-2	15 1/2	BOLT	2-3	1 1/6	RUBBER	1-2-3	14 1/8	D <sup>b</sup>	
		BOLT	1-2	14 1/2	BOLT	2-3	7/8	RUBBER	1-2-3	6 1/2	C	
		BOLT	1-2	14 3/4	BOLT	2-3	9/16	RUBBER	1-2-3	14	B	
		RUBBER	1-2-3	9 1/2	MED. BOLT	2-3	10 1/8				B <sup>b</sup>	
		SCREW	1-2	5 7/8	LG. BOLT	2-3	5 7/8	SCREW + NUTS	1-2	1	A	
		BOLT	1-2	7 1/8	MED. BOLT	2-3	2 1/4	RUBBER	1-2-3	4 1/8	A <sup>b</sup>	
		LONG BOLT	1-2	8 3/4	LG. BOLT	2-3	3 1/4				G	
				BOLT	2-3	1 1/6					D	
8va. 6ns		SCREW + RUBBER	1-2	4 7/8							D	
16va. 6ns		ERASER (OVER D UNDER C* E*) ASTEBOL CO. #396	1	6 3/4							D	

\* MEASURE FROM BRIDGE.

<sup>18</sup> John Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes* (New York, Henmar Press Inc., 1960), p. 5.

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