

Spectropoetics of the Commons

by

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“Civilization has to defend itself against the specter of a world which could be free.”

— Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*

“Revolutionary moments do not spread by contamination but by *resonance*.”

— Jean-Marie Gleize, *Tarnac, A Preparatory Act*

0 // Introduction

The horizon of socialist, let alone communist thought can be conceived as a problem of psychic scope. At least this was how Bonney said it: “listen, we got every escape hatch blocked. / the center of our orbit is some kind of cynical massacre / some kind of prolapse, that’s all of your logic, your entire poetics, / no-one can even *think* revolt -” (*Happiness* 43). What’s funny is that this poem proposes that there *are* escape hatches latent to the logic of capital; as if spoken from the mouth of one of its henchmen, some border guard who patrols the legal fictions that constitute daily life. Mark Fisher said that artists nowadays no longer have access to the materials necessary to produce the New, and that this is less so a problem of psycho-physical materials but of a larger historical confluence of conditions and the de/construction of possible environments and futures (*Ghosts of My Life* 15).

There are two poles to Fisher’s thought: Capitalist Realism and Acid Communism. Capitalist Realism is the pole we live within, the social sphere of capital’s all-pervasiveness, within which “no-one can even *think* revolt.” Such a psychic conjuncture does not occur overnight, but it moved in quickly. The rise of global neoliberalism after the US-backed Allende coup carved away a probable socialist horizon that was emerging in the sixties and seventies. The installation of Pinochet enforced a militarized forgetting of the Chilean socialist horizon, erasing the worlds Allende made thinkable. Allende was experimenting with a form of socialism which provided an alternative to Stalinist economic austerity. This coincided with the rise of

neoliberalism as the dominant economic ideology. As its embodied in the Thatcherite and Reagan regimes, it must first be understood as a project which aims to destroy — “to the point of making them unthinkable” — global experiments in democratic socialism and libertarian communism like those that were beginning to take hold at the turn of the sixties and seventies. Fisher says that the “military destruction of the Allende regime, and the subsequent mass imprisonments and torture, are only the most violent and dramatic example of the lengths capital had to go to in order to make itself appear to be the only ‘realistic’ mode of organising society” (*K-punk* 1123). Capitalist Realism must be understood as a symptom of neoliberalism, a dissolution of any utopian or collective desire that could be beginning to be felt in those years. The retreat of a once approaching horizon.

Fisher’s unfinished text, *Acid Communism*, describes a way out, a probable escape hatch, or a potential remedy for the reflexive impotence and psychic terminal velocity of Capitalist Realism. *Acid Communism* outlines the necessity to return to the structures of previous decades in order to analyze the dialectical combat that resulted in a hollowing out of any conceivable communist possibility. Fisher discusses the way in which the role of art, specifically during a time which saw the proliferation of psychedelics and hallucinogenics, was useful in performing new conceptual social relations, that it could give a “taste of what the world might look like once the movement had succeeded” (1148). His text, however, remains unfinished, and we are left only with the imperative that “Understanding how this process of consciousness-deflation worked is the first step to reversing it” (1152).

1 // *An Absolute Redistribution of all the Senses, or Rimbaud as Acid Communist*

Rimbaud has been named by figures like Bertolt Brecht and Fredric Jameson to be the first poet to articulate the trajectory of global capitalism. Brecht himself said in conversation with Walter Benjamin that

Marx and Engels themselves, had they read *Le Bateau Ivre*, would have sensed in it the great historical movement of which it is the expression. They would have clearly recognized that what it describes is not an eccentric poet going for a walk, but the flight, the escape of a man who cannot bear to live any longer inside the barriers of a class which ... was then beginning to open up even the more exotic continents to its mercantile interests. (*Aesthetics & Politics* 87)

Kristen Ross notes here that Brecht has connected, simultaneously, Rimbaud's lyric poetry with politics, and history with space. Ross tells how the Drunken Boat, as it sails down the river and into the sea, expresses a movement from market capitalism into global colonialism and further imperialism (75-76). She takes this further, however, that the spatial shift from the local to the global is not only one of importance to political economy, but of revolutionary subjectivity.

Downstream on impassive rivers suddenly
I felt the towline of the boatmen slacken.
Redskins had taken them in a scream and stripped them and
Skewered them to the glaring stakes for targets. (Beckett 93, 1-4)

The line with which boatmen pull the drunken boat down the river is loosened. Rimbaud is released from a linear historical flow through the aid of "Redskins," one of his many often crude cross-racial solidarities in his poetry. The indigenous saviors kill the mercantile boatmen in order to allow the drunken boat to begin its liberation from capital and its weight.

Then, delivered from my straining boatmen,
 From the trivial racket of trivial crews and from
 The freights of Flemish grain and English cotton,
 I made my own course down the passive rivers. (Beckett 93, 5-8)

This is just the beginning of Rimbaudian displacement and what it can do. Rimbaud's virtual emancipatory subjectivity will be shown to play a further, larger part in the transformation of individual perception and the political implications and possibilities of such a shift in consciousness (Ross 119-120). The boat is freed from the grips of market capitalism and sails onward toward new horizons of perception.

The poem follows a subject in the early transformative stages of psychic liberation from the domain of capital, one which performs a shift toward a Fisher-esque perceptual system, going beyond the imaginative bounds of officially proscribed subjectivity, laying the foundations for a new, broader political subject.

Before continuing with "The Drunken Boat" we must make an excursus into the intentional sensorial disorder of Rimbaud's verse and poetic project. As noted above, Fisher marks counterposes two concepts pertinent to capital's psychic domain and our escape from it: Capitalist Realism and Acid Communism, the latter potentially being the antidote to the former. Ross similarly distinguishes between the "ordered disorganization" of capitalism and Rimbaud's "long, boundless, reasoned disordering of the senses," or, between the anarchistic chaos of the Rimbaudian subject and the anarchic chaos of high capital (Ross 102). The overwhelming barrage of the senses is well discussed by Fisher: if "something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is the pathology of late capitalism" (*Capitalist Realism* 25). The value of creating work which *emulates* such pathology is the question. Does a work of

art which solely demonstrates the psychic domain of capital allow for a conceptual escape hatch? While Rimbaud is the poet of this pathology, I want to turn to a more contemporary example to elaborate on this: the music of 100 geecs.

100 geecs is the contemporary product of subjective experience as defined under capitalist realism. The band produces in a genre called hyperpop, a post-vaporwave style which revels less in the hauntological production of nostalgia and more in the auditory manipulation of capital's psychic onslaught of the senses. Fisher has written on the hauntological productions of a literal *contretemps* (counter-time), or anachronistic music which, despite their contemporaneity, invoke formal elements of age: the crackle, dust and scratches on the "record," vocal samples and citations from old movies, etc. I bring up 100 geecs largely to discuss the end of the track "745 sticky" from 1:44 - 2:21. The song takes on a pattern of harsh, stunted crests and troughs. Between bursts of dubs which pull and stretch, morphing around the sounds injected into them: tires screeching, imitations of lasers, what sounds like the blip of time stopping, a dog barking, a drip of water, a woman screaming, and police sirens. The push and pull of this music is like corporate advertising and city traffic: the poetry of consumer society.

This is not just a formal remix, but "a remix of historical information." The music of 100 geecs is something exactly like the method that neoliberal hegemony has used "from its *happy few* to its *mass media*—to feign a *moving beyond*, an eclectic dismantling of its macrocontinuity ... to construct a world of singular images whose linearity has been covered over, hidden ..." (Yépez, *Empire of Neomemory* 233). The proliferation of remixes as a form is inherent to the rise of the neoliberal subject: something composed from the ruins of other fragmented histories. The bombardment of the senses and the psychological damage of this frenetic disorientation is precisely

the establishing of a formal reality principle: the constant *de*orientation of capital which is its own dis/ordered reality. A reality of organized disorder.

The form and content of this music is itself a deficiency of attention, an attention constantly distracted. The Injury Reserve remix of this song takes this form to a further extreme, extending the last forty seconds of the song over its entirety. Car honks form a kind of bass line underneath even more clipped sounds. This is in contrast to the Black Dresses remix, which weaves digitized screams of the lyrics through the song while the instruments reach an auditory glitching and artifacting — as though we were hearing it played at max volume at a house show, as though the peaking were “natural” and not produced. The question is: does such a form and content prove itself emancipatory? Or is it simply another mimetic reification of the form of capital into the practices of art? This will be our anchoring question through the following chapters.

The tricky thing about our dual notions of Acid Communism and Capitalist Realism is that one can often look identical to the other, even disguised as the other. Rimbaud, in “The Drunken Boat” engages in what we can call a form of acid communism. He outlines this poetic program across letters to Georges Izambard and Paul Demeny on the 13th and 15th of May 1871. First, to Georges Izambard:

Now, I am degrading myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a Seer: you will not understand this, and I don't know how to explain it to you. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of all the senses... I is someone else. It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin and Scorn for the heedless who argue over what they are totally ignorant of! (Rimbaud, *Complete Works* 371)

Multiple terms are introduced here. The transgression of the social category of *poet*, towards that of the *Seer*. I take this word in connection with the Ancient Greek word for “siren” Σειρήν (Seirén) and the Old Norse shamanic practice of *seiðr* (the anglophone equivalent of *seiðr* in fact being *seer*), a later chapter will be dedicated to fully fleshing out what I will call seiretic verse, that which exists at the intersection of these cultural and artistic practices. What is most crucial in this passage is reaching the unknown through the “derangement of all the senses.” He continues this theory of *voyant* poetics in his next letter to Paul Demeny. Keep in mind that these letters are written right before the outset of the Paris Commune, and while it is contested whether Rimbaud was present during the occupation, there is no doubt that the occurrence of the Commune and his visit to Paris shortly beforehand influenced his thinking and poetry (as the whole of Kristin Ross’s book attests to). Rimbaud continues,

The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses*. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself ... He reaches the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other one collapsed! (*Complete Works* 377)

It is “reach[ing] the unknown” through a “rational derangement of all the senses” which is of our interest. This is what is proposed by acid communism, that you can escape or think your way outside of capitalist realism through art which lays bare the structures of contemporary stultified thought. What is incredible is the way in which Rimbaud conceives of this as a larger historical process that exists not solely within one individual’s psyche: it is a collective project that endures beyond the lifespan of one worker-poet. “Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and

unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other one collapsed!” Later in this paper we will discuss Sean Bonney as one of the acid communist poets who began at the horizon where Rimbaud left off, but for now, we must bring Marcuse into the fold in order to sharpen our understanding of this horizon. A horizon which is still open.

2 // *You Must Change Your Psychic Reality Principle*

Largely Marcuse has already been here, weaving inbetween these threads, or perhaps his thought has been the thread itself. Much of Fisher's thought is built on what Marcuse put forth in *The Aesthetic Dimension* and *Eros and Civilization*. The very notion that capitalism's all-pervasive psychic domain can prevent the thinking of any alternative futurity draws from Marcuse's writing, and so this may sound familiar, but it predates the publication of *Capitalist Realism* by nearly half a century

As stated at the outset, the horizon of socialist possibility at the turn of the sixties into the seventies was a felt thing, and the conditions which made it so have only grown more acute as we burrow into the twenty-first century. But the worsening of conditions has not necessarily correlated with a growth in communist optimism. The psychic reality of capital runs deep, and we are well acquainted with the ways in which capital will advertise its own downfall as a form of militant pacification. The continual renarration of the past is what causes the perpetual reconstruction of such nihilist narratives. We cannot simply say "the Sixties led to neoliberalism" as I have done, but we must examine what neoliberalism was a reaction to: namely, the rise in scope of the socialist horizon. The installment of neoliberal individualism was, in fact, a counter-measure defined against the collective subjectivities emerging from the end of the sixties. A mass *unforgetting*, then, is required through our analyses of this moment. Fisher believed that there is a political necessity to return to

the optimism of that Seventies moment, just as we must carefully analyse all the machineries that capital deployed to convert confidence into dejection. Understanding how this process of consciousness-deflation worked is the first step to reversing it (*K-punk* 1152).

I take as my starting point the horizon where Fisher left us. To perform a “counter-exorcism of a world which could be free” — his brilliant inversion of Marcuse — we must understand the lengths to which capital will go in asserting itself as the only *thinkable* option (*K-punk* 1129).

We must have no illusions about the efficacy of art in changing the scope of the thinkable. Marcuse himself was clear on this:

Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world . The movement of the sixties tended toward a sweeping transformation of subjectivity and nature, of sensibility, imagination, and reason. It opened a new vista of things, an ingression of the superstructure into the base. (*Aesthetic Dimension* 32-33)

It is not only that art cannot change the world, but that art cannot change the world directly. It is always triangular, the transmutation of poetry into action is a long and indirect process. The work of art in the age of pre-industrialization shows this. The Marxist anthropologist George Thomson’s seminal study *Marxism and Poetry* features a detailed account of his findings on poetry and/as magic.

His study recounts his stay in 1923 on one of the few originally Gaelic-speaking regions at the time, Na Blascaodaí (the Blasket Islands) off of southwest Ireland. It was during this visit that he not only immersed himself in the language, but began his study of the language and particularly speech as a necessary tool in the relations of production. Thomson was named Seoirse Mac Tomáis by his hosts on the islands and he befriended and studied alongside the poet and memoirist Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, later encouraging him to write and publish in Gaelic and arranging for his translations into English. He was interested in the still-thriving oral poetic tradition, how it “lives on their lips” and was regarded as common property (*Marxism & Poetry*

8). We could of course make another excurses here to discuss the pre-industrial poetry of the commons as compared to contemporary bourgeois publishing practices, but we shall save this for later.

Bringing about a material change in the world is not impossible through the intervention of speech. It is, however, roundabout. And on Na Blascaodaí it was regarded as magic. Thomson defines a magical act as one in which the practitioners “strive to impose their will on the environment by mimicking the natural process that they desire to bring about.” Magic, then, is simply a desired reality enacted in mimicry (10). A mimetic *preenactment*, one which is aimed and targeted at the production of a new material outcome. Poetry was simply another tool used in daily life and work.

Thomson defends this definition against the claim that the production of the desired effect is illusory by citing its very illusion. By using the example of peasant girls planting potatoes he demonstrates that the immediate effect of their accompanying song and dance is *indeed* illusory, but a productive illusion which is

not futile. The dance cannot have any direct effect on the potatoes, but it can and does have an appreciable effect on the girls. Inspired by the dance in the belief that it will save the crop, they will proceed to the task of tending it with greater confidence and so with greater energy than before. And so it does have an effect on the crop after all. It changes their subjective attitude to reality, and so indirectly it changes reality. (13)

The song’s effect manifests itself in a triangular fashion: by inspiring the girls and assuring them that their crop will grow well through their labor, they motivate themselves to work harder and more diligently in tending to their crop. So while the song does not directly *make* the potatoes

grow, it aids the girls in their work so as to care better for their potatoes and therefore has an material effect on reality in an indirect manner. Of course, the use of *inspiration* is questionable. How can one necessarily measure the effectiveness of such an ephemeral quality or state? Perhaps somewhere in the song and dance is the performance of a collective subjectivity, in the transference among individual desire to that of the common desire of a pluralized subject.

Thomson later clarifies that an artist who we call *inspired* is simply one who “is more at home than other men in this subconscious world of fantasy.” The psychical dissociation and inward-turning of the artist in their production allows them to reflect on the relationships and contradictions between aspects of waking reality. The role of the poet is to function as a social organ who channels societal contradictions and provides a “relief” in synthesizing a material and emotional response. The poem is, then, a virtualized sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the contradictions at hand.

The discords of reality are resolved in fantasy. But, since this world into which he retires is less individualized than his conscious life, since it is common to him and his fellow men, the poetry in which he formulates his experience of it evokes a general response, striking a chord in every heart, expressing what his fellows feel but cannot express for themselves, and so drawing them all into a closer communion of imaginative sympathy (26).

What is fascinating here is Thomson’s claim regarding the “world into which he retires,” that of the individual subconscious, being “less individualized than his conscious life, since it is common to him and his fellow men...” This is maybe a Freudo-Marcusian claim: that the individual naturally tends toward collectivity, but that this is crushed under the prevailing social relations and can only be intuited and hinted at in art.

Thomson's thinking and even language here draws on Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*, where Caudwell first articulated that the "retreat into fantasy" is not what might be regarded as an escapist illusion, but an effectual inward-turning which in turn lets the artist produce a material and ideological product. He describes this inward relapse as a necessary movement in the process of emotional organization. The poet "plays on the inner world of emotion as on a stringed instrument" and his art is able to penetrate a

common inner reality, because it is achieved by men in association and has a complexity beyond the task of one man to achieve, also exposes the hearts of his fellow men and raises the whole communal feeling of society to a new plane of complexity. It makes possible new levels of conscious sympathy, understanding and affection between men, matching the new levels of material organisation achieved by economic production (*Illusion & Reality* 171-171).

Caudwell clarifies for us that the work of art plays a role in reintegrating the psyche to newer relations of production. Though "reintegrating" is the wrong word here, and I mean something more like the sublation of social relations along the dialectic as the subject moves towards a greater understanding of themselves in relation to their own labor and the labor of others.

Caudwell appears to have a more post-industrial understanding of the work of poetry, which will be helpful to us when we approach the work of Sean Bonney and Ben Lerner; but for now, Thomson's studies on Na Blascaodaí provide us with a pre-industrial understanding which will allow us a deeper knowledge of the larger historical movement of art in relation to work.

Towards the end of Thomson's book he approaches a more overtly Marcusean articulation and understanding of the practice of art in such social constellation, stating that poetry is able to assert

the refusal of the human consciousness to acquiesce in its environment, and by this means there is collected a hidden store of energy which flows back into the real world and transforms fantasy into fact. (66)

All of our discussion thus far has involved the injunction of art into economic production, what Marcuse called the "ingression of the superstructure into the base" (*Aesthetic Dimension* 32-33). The release achieved in song seeps back into the production of reality, asserting its influence in the triangular fashion demonstrated above. This cuts against the grain of a typical understanding of the production of culture as he outlines at the start of his book: "with the change in production relations, art itself is transformed as part of the superstructure" (1; Lu Xun *Selected Vol. II* 445). Much of the argument presented here hangs on this thesis, that just as economic reality influences the production of art, the production of art can influence economic reality. At least that was seen in the poetic dances of the Irish peasant girls and what I have been moving toward through the poetics of Rimbaud and Fisher.

The problem is in bridging the gap between individuals' unique experience. Thomson and Caudwell believe that a work of art can alone penetrate the thinking of those who experience the base in similar relation, that this incision leaves a scar of radical departure from business as usual. Obviously, poetry of the social arrangement which Thomson studied is far from the current relations of production for contemporary poetry, this will receive due attention when we turn to our contemporary exemplars.

A sensorial shift at the level of one person — the shamanic inward turning and subsequent mimetic production — can potentially have an emancipatory effect on a collective. This is to be understood as the theory latent within acid communism, part of the long, gigantic, and (ir)rational displacement of capitalist realism. Ross and Jameson describe this virtual sensorial shift and the political emancipatory possibilities it opens up as a movement from the superstructure to the base, with the understanding that the base has its own influences in the production of that very superstructure. Jameson's term for the inward-turning of Thomson and Caudwell comes directly from Rimbaud: his *fermentation* (*Modernist Papers* 246). Kristin Ross marks the new thinking made possible through such a process. The virtual yet liberated subject in the poem is able to engage in

a perceptive system distinct from terrestrial perception, a more-than-human “language” different from the language of earth. The boat frees itself from the yoke of commerce, and the child also renounces links to the earth ... as if it is only through the most extreme solitude that one can arrive at a new solidarity among humans, a kind of floating population, apt to transform the circumstances of their lives but only on the condition that they first sever the cords that tie them to the earth. (Ross 119)

The poet, as described above, necessarily removes to an inward-solitude within which the creation of new solidarities becomes possible. There is always a silence before the work, a silence where the work begins.

3 // *The Work of Art in the Age of Reflexive Impotence*

As has been previously established, Rimbaud's "reasoned disordering of all the senses" and the "ordered disorganization" of capital are dynamically opposed in the same way Fisher establishes his dichotomy. Rimbaud seeks the "closure of the fields of socially available perception" which produce capitalism's entropic order. The neoliberal subject propagated by late capitalist development performs a violence to the individual, and Rimbaud aims to work against the erosion of individuality. He calls for a "hypersensorial, more-than-human perception. Grotesque. hyperbolic, extraordinary, superhuman perception ... advocated in opposition to what capitalist development is at that moment defining (in the sense of setting the limits) as human, as *ordinary* perception." (Ross 102)

This recalls the same question of 100 geecs: does 100 geecs's extremely organized chaos — the emulation and simulation of capitalism's violence to the contemporary psyche — does this reproduce the structures of its violence in a nihilist or emancipatory fashion?

To discuss this further, I will again invoke a concept from *Capitalist Realism*, namely, "reflexive impotence." Fisher defines reflexive impotence as not a worldview of apathy or cynicism, but something altogether different. An unstated principle which dominates contemporary thinking, even as it is unstated. The hollowing out of the socialist horizon, which occurred *before* the lives of most of the British youth he worked with, has had devastating consequences on the social and psychological realities of his students. This is where he coins the term *depressive hedonia*, the other side of depressive anhedonia; where the typical depressive can no longer seek pleasure, the contemporary subject can engage in nothing but the pursuit of pleasure (*Capitalist Realism* 21-22).

Fisher's configuration of protest is helpful in the construction of reflexive impotence, specifically through his Freudian/Lacanian analysis.

The protest impulse of the 60s posited a malevolent Father, the harbinger of a reality principle that (supposedly) cruelly and arbitrarily denies the 'right' to total enjoyment. This Father has unlimited access to resources, but he selfishly — and senselessly — hoards them. [It] is not capitalism but protest itself which depends upon this figuration of the Father; and one of the successes of the current global elite has been their avoidance of identification with the figure of the hoarding Father, even though the 'reality' they impose on the young is *substantially harsher* than the conditions they protested against in the 60s. (20)

Protests organized in reaction to this Father will always fail. There are no demands. The Father does not exist. With the inability to posit an alternative the movement floundered and sunk into the grips of capitalist realism. This same problem of protest has been seen time and time again, failed gestures toward revolution quickly become pleas for reform, or worse, coopted by the state into reified demonstrations, empty gestures of sentiment. From Occupy to the mass uprising following the murder of George Floyd; it is not something wrong with the impulse to protest but rather the logic of the protest form as such. I remember the moment at a protest this summer I realized the crowd wasn't leading the cops but the cops were herding us. It was the logic of the kettle we were already inside, physically articulated by lines of cops, cordons of bikes: the neurological blockade at the end of the official world.

A protest never moves outside the walls of reflexive impotence, outside the borders of capitalist realism, while it is still a protest.

4 // *The Horizon is a Kettle*

Bonney knows this, in his *Letters Against the Firmament*, where he begins to sketch the valences of a new prosody and poetics, he warns that “you are right to worry I’m making a fetish of the riot form” (8). Bonney develops his synthesis of Marx and Rimbaud over a number of these letters, but truly its development can be traced across the whole of his poetic work. We will use his *Letters* as a reference point for his poetics as we follow this thread.

To begin, his first collection of texts, published as *Blade Pitch Control Unit*, charts his development from 2000 to 2005. *Filth Screed*, a text situated at the heart of this book, holds the first overt articulation of his poetics we will discuss.

All poetry that does not testify to an awareness of the radical falsity of the established forms (of life) is faulty. Understand prosody via black bloc tactics. No-one has yet spoken a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce, and benefit from the facts. Language is conservative. Its conservatism issues (a) from its utilitarian purpose, (b) from the fact that the memory of a person, like that of humankind, is short. (Bonney 87)

Contemporary prosody moves, as it always has, with the flow of official traffic. The Black Bloc seeks to build collective solidarity through mass anonymity. A message printed on the inside of 9000 masks distributed at the June 18th, 1999 Carnival Against Capital, which destroyed the financial district of central London, reads:

Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloguing: in knowing who you are...our masks are not to conceal our identity but to reveal it...Today we shall give this resistance a face; for by

putting on our masks we reveal our unity; and by raising our voices in the street together, we speak our anger at the facelessness of power...

The function of all-black uniforms and mask is symbolic and useful: to embody a collective subject in form and to resist individual identification by state forces. The Black Bloc has its roots in European anarchist organizing, specifically in retaliation to police evictions of mass squats across the continent and the cultures and communities facilitated here. Almost like clockwork, whenever a squat was evicted or a member arrested or killed, storefronts were destroyed. What is important about Black Bloc prosody and tactics is the recognition of its temporary utility.

It is important that we neither cling to it nostalgically as an outdated ritual or tradition, nor reject it wholesale because it sometimes seems inappropriate. Rather we should continue working pragmatically to fulfill our individual needs and desires through various tactics and objectives, as they are appropriate at the specific moment. (Young, "Autonomia")

The Black Bloc was an answer to the problems posed by one moment, but this does not mean it necessarily suits our needs or desires *now*. Bonney will carry this further with regard to the function of the revolutionary poem as something which can "name the task specific to [that] moment" and "exert force inasmuch as we would have condensed and embodied the concrete analysis of the concrete situation" (*Letters* 141). When Bonney says that "All poetry that does not testify to an awareness of the radical falsity of the established forms (of life) is faulty.

Understand prosody via black bloc tactics" he pulling poetry in tandem with the protest form (*Blade Pitch* 87). Following the tension in our dialectic of capitalist realism and acid communism: the form of protest remains as such while it is trapped within the walls of its form,

nothing changes until it bursts and sublates to a new layer of collective motion altogether: the riot.

Andrea Brady said of Bonney's verse that it is literally *dictated* by the rhythms of police violence, and she is absolutely right in this (*Communism & Poetry* 132). Acid communism must always necessarily emerge from capitalist realism, the formal reality principle within which it is constrained. 100 gees takes on the formal properties of capital's psychic terror and whiplash, and it is from this ecstatic movement where new possibilities begin to ferment. Their work is, however, not the same as Bonney's. Bonney takes on a certain embodiment in the necessity of failure in his position, though it is a position from which he can stake new claims regarding the virtual figuration of a way *out*. The music of 100 gees, while raising an awareness to the psychic violence of capital, does not propose in their art a way forward. It is the form of capital reified in pleasure. The music simulates our churning and churning in the stifling fire of late capitalism into something which one can find enjoyable, catchy; bizarrely we are able to partake in the logic of our own collapse with pleasure. As if there were any other option.

The logic of our very dissolution is where Bonney's work begins. The first books collected in *Blade Pitch Control Unit* demonstrate this. The subject of these poems oscillates between their immediate environment and internal associations with said stimuli. "Fast. Victoria to Warren St" shows Bonney's verse in an early stage of developing black bloc prosody.

got getta
back to my flat
gotta flat gotta key cos gotta flat gotta TV
gotta lovely gotta cat gotta flower got
got gotta come got gotta see
what mirror what left at the mirror ...

(6). The refrain and declination of the verb "to have" acts as an organizing gravitational logic here, possession of property as foundational to the constitution of the subject; the Hegelian

subject gone haywire in its lust to be differentiated through *having*. The violence in the logic of ownership come to its ultimate conclusion: the speaker is what owns, the speaker is built on owning. The sonic refrain of voiced velar stops (“g”) against unvoiced alveolar stops (“t”) produces a harsh and jutting grain, and this paired with verse composed of predominantly monosyllabic words. “gotta flat gotta key cos gotta flat gotta TV,” *gotta* performs a dual function here. As in contemporary English it means both “I need to do *x*” or “I have *x*,” thereby it denotes simultaneously an imperative to perform some sort of activity and the performance of ownership over an object. A gloss of this line could equate to something like “I have a flat / need to get a flat / need to be in the state of owning a flat *so* I have / need to get / need to use a key to enact the ownership of my flat and therefore I have / need to get / need to watch TV.” I’ve got this key because I’ve got this flat and since I have a flat I have a TV.

This is bourgeois life, the “interpassivity” that Fisher reminds us of: capital never attempts to “make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief” (*Capitalist Realism* 12-13). Capitalist realism demonstrates the degree to which art can perform our radicality for us even as it cancels out the radical aspect. “The autonomy of art reflects the unfreedom of individuals in the unfree society. If people were free, then art would be the form and expression of their freedom” (*Aesthetic Dimension* 72). 100 gees’s ecstatic momentum in reality aligns with the frenetic bombardment of advertising’s contemporary attention economy, and turns this very assault into a mutated pleasure. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it, “All reification is a forgetting,” and Marcuse continues this further,

Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance.
Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality

principle. In contrast, remembrance spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanence of joy. But the force of remembrance is frustrated: joy itself is overshadowed by pain. Inexorably so? The horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions (*Aesthetic Dimension* 73).

This is where Marcuse's text ends, by calling for a cultural revolution that goes further than merely the Leninist sense. Fredric Jameson expands on the notion of a cultural revolution to include the transformation of individual and collective subjectivities. The negative function, its critical function, is what demands a socialist defense of art as a useful pursuit in revolution. The negative and critical function "ranges from outright social content to the very practices of sense perception itself ... and the conduct of daily life" (*American Utopia* 35-36). Hence, Rimbaud and Bonney.

Blade Pitch Control Unit exhibits Bonney's first experiments in "rational derangement." Specifically here he is most interested here language "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" (*Letters* 141). His poem at the beginning of *Document* in *Blade Pitch Control Unit* marks a formal shift in Bonney's poetics

this is the ever same
 as abject ghost buzz shatter
 you in voice prism; adjust
 you, says, countersign / fixion, says
 star kick equal not you
 twitch radio in burnt red,
 your juncture voice implode. starling.

(143). An almost syllogistic logic energized by the push and pull of capital's static begins to take shape. Strings in frenetic parataxis: "abject ghost" announces a specter whose "buzz" will "shatter / you in voice prism." His black bloc prosody oscillates between a strategy of high paratactic paranoia and a schizophrenic seamstress who weaves a logic throughout the chaos. The violence of the quotidian business as usual, "this is the ever same," contrasted against "star kick equal not you / twitch radio in burnt red," the beginnings of Bonney's Rimbaudian derangement of the senses take on this quality of capitalism's high entropic dis/ordered anarchy and the ways in which it rattles contemporary subjectivity.

His understanding of black bloc prosody is negated from the outset. The black bloc must always articulate itself in negation to the formation of capital's henchmen, and in this sense is always formed in reaction through attempting this counterformation. In his *Letters Against the Firmament* he carries black bloc prosody further.

I'll give you a small thesis on the nature of rhythm — (1) They had banged his head on the floor and they were giving him punches. (2) He was already handcuffed and he was restrained when I saw him. (3) He was shouting, 'Help me, help me'. (4) He wasn't coherent. (5) I went to speak to his mum. (6) He couldn't even stand up after they hit him with the batons. (7) They knocked on her door three hours later and told her 'your son's died' ...

Official poetry can only ever "transform into the endless whacks of police clubs." The police bullet is at the center of all officially sanctioned art, is its very content (*Letters* 12). He goes further to claim that "There is no prosody, there is only a scraped wound — we live inside it, like fossilized, vivisected mice ... Our stab-wounds were not self inflicted" (13). Because the violence of informing verse with the form of state terror can only go so far before we realize we

perform that same violence ourselves unknowingly. Keston Sutherland in his lecture “Blocks: Form Since the Crash,” delivered a theory of the transformations UK poetry underwent as a result of the financial collapse of 2007-2008. Sutherland argues that so much of left British poetry turned to prose as a result of the implementation of kettling in and after 2008. As soon as the kettle was implemented globally by police in reaction to widespread protests he saw a marked shift in the production of poetic form. This form and its aesthetics of frenetic reading comes, like conceptualism, straight from the formal logic of empire itself, only each is performed differently. Conceptualism carries a colonialism wherein it reproduces empire in poetic form. Heriberto Yépez puts this succinctly in his poem “[Post]Gulf War Poetics”

American government
, oil

Conceptual poets
, text

How [to] appropriate
E+V+E+R+Y+T+H+I+N+G

(*Transnational Battle Field* 64). Here, conceptual poetics like that of Kenneth Goldsmith are counterposed metonymically to the wars of terror fought for the sake of extractive capital. When Goldsmith took the autopsy report of Michael Brown, remixed it and performed it, he enacted the form of global extractivist colonialism on an individual scale. The murdered body of a brown boy was mere material, nothing but the day’s spoils (Steinhauer “Goldsmith Remixes”). American empire deploys an army or a puppet dictatorship in the same fashion as conceptual poetry’s surgical butchery: to stake a name on a market, to lock down a natural resource, to suck the area dry. We will further examine the poetics of capitalist extraction in a later chapter.

The paranoid bloc(k) of prose, Sutherland argues, is a product of the claustrophobia caused by kettling. Thus, kettled verse cannot be “our” form as it is us being *articulated* by

police. Our rhythms and movements are dictated by police violence, by their shoves and bullets; our poetry is always in response, our grunts and shouts. (Brady, *Communism & Poetry* 132). This may be why Bonney's "police realism" can only take us so far: he knows his poetry is just as easily trapped within capitalist realism.

After 2008, poetic production on the left responded to global financial collapse by shrinking, screaming, some poets' velocity of reading increased, growing schizophrenic and paranoid. This style of reading feels particularly marked by the violence of living under capital's logic and attempting to articulate against it. You can't. If we read Bonney correctly, he understands that poetry withers with the state, that the collapse and realization of all literatures happens outside the poem, outside poetry. Which is why he and Rimbaud do not seek to be poets in our traditional understanding of the word. Sutherland's argument that block poetry emerged after '08 as a result of clashes with police, the implementation of kettling, protesters being suffocated, stuffed into smaller and smaller spaces. The state seeps back into our poetics even as we rage against it. The felt shift of noticing the flow of a protest is not led by the crowd, but herded by the cops. It is the terrifying logic felt at the end of the world, the psychic border patrol ensuring you will never leave. There is no escape hatch.

5 // *Seiretic Dyschronia*

When Marcuse tells us that “[t]he horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions” (*Aesthetic Dimension* 73). I believe that this is at the center of Bonney’s poetry, it is what I approach in the term *seiretic*. As above, I defined this neologism as derived from the Ancient Greek word for “siren” *Σειρήν* (Seirén), the Old Norse shamanic practice of *seiðr*, and the anglophone equivalent itself being *seer*, which carries with it qualities of the Rimbaudian project. The matter of his poetry summons the specters of past futures, conjures the amputated limbs of the futures lost, cancelled from contemporary imagination. Bonney’s verse engages in an attempt to constellate antichronological solidarities: folding moments of fissure out into larger strings of possibility that scar the official body. In his second epistolary poem to Katerina Gogou in *Our Death*, Bonney makes mention of

a mournful sound of deep peril [in] the center of your language, [which] in a way gives back to the word “siren” the meaning that police use had tried to take from it. I mean, they probably don’t even know what the sirens were, that their songs were said to contain knowledge of everything, all possible pasts and futures. (117)

He is referencing the strict censorship laws in Greece (the Idiomynon) which forced Katerina’s expletive verse toward the ecstatic shriek of law which covers them. A high frequency bleating under the orchestral jazz, spreading as if from the center of her voice; the law as croaked from a blackbird’s syrinx. A crucial feature of this censor is its formal self-imposition. The music plays under it, so it is layered within the original tracks and not run over the instruments: only over insurrectional expletive speech. Take the track “Monaxia,” for example, around 2:50. Katerina

reads (sings, shrieks) as if she never stops reading, the lyrics roll out of the censor-blare and onward, as if it never happened or as though the sirens were produced by Katerina, herself a siren. It is the perfect apparition: the sound appears and melts into air. The siren — both mythical allure and legal repellant — is a specter that haunts the legal imagination.

What is important about the specter is that it can never “be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*,” (Hägglund qtd. in Fisher, *Ghosts* 18). The ur-specter being the primal haunt: *Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa* — the specter of communism (Marx & Engels 158). Jacques Derrida hears this as “the rumbling sound of ghosts chained to ghosts,” potentials aching to break loose (*Specters of Marx* 3). He describes the specter as what “looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral assymetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony” (6). It begins by coming back and we are urged to follow it, to repeat the motion of a ghost. It leaves footprints, impressions on us, even as it is air. Pushes us in certain directions even as it is a negative entity, a merely possible object. The specter is that which haunts you into other futures, it acts itself into existence from outside what is.

The siren is a living specter; that “mournful sound of deep peril” is the sound of air-raided sirens and waves of police static injected into Katerina’s music; is Katerina and Sean’s purposeful re-optation of this co-opted aesthetic. Speaking against capital in its own grotesque, inaudible language which it itself fails to understand. The siren carries a cancelled school of poetic knowledge that opposes the musaic tradition; one grounded in material prophetics and voyant poetics. Bonney uses seiretic verse to transcend the imperial calendar, to go beyond the vocative “O” of the muses and their empty vowels of memory. The sirens sing in all tenses, will strip you of memory to give you a perfect analysis of your present. They are Marx’s diagnosis of

a revolutionary poetry which goes beyond its past to arrive at an analysis and understanding of its own moment (*Brumaire* 18). Revenants to haunt you into alterity.

Bonney employs a non-euclidean geometry of spatiotemporal history in his poetry. Official maps fold in on themselves, counter-calendars act as negation of the bourgeois organization of time; the work day, the seasons of the market, the myth of discontinuous historical rupture. The moments in which history seizes itself in riot form a long, simultaneous tradition of opposition in open air. Years stand beside each other. Imperial cartography is folded. Omonia Square opens onto Kreuzberg canals, Tottenham's fires melt into the fires of heaven as seen on burning barricades. At once every rupture in Minneapolis and Santiago is linked to the possibility of a world which haunts the contemporary imaginary.

All of these temporal bursts occupy time both within and outside the flow of capital, forming pocket dimensions whose music seeps in as sung from the parallel mouth of future in alterity. Fissures in the texture of historical time take shape in a larger system of chronological solidarities (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 205-206). We are haunted by the passing of these moments, that they are so constellated, that they are not resolved into a singular coherent future. Mark Fisher's use of *hauntology* after Derrida insists on "things which never happened but which could have," emphasizing the futures we were once promised which have been perpetually deferred into some distant Future. "The failure of the future haunts capitalism: after 1989, capitalism's victory has not consisted in it confidently claiming the future, but in denying that the future is possible" (*K-punk* 941).

One of Bonney's most chronologically active books is *The Commons*, where he experiments with a lyric that is shot through with both capitalist realism and acid communism.

The speaker/specter is everywhen at once. Pulled from the 17th century to the early aughts in an almost elliptical whorl around some cosmic clock.

For some reason, it was 1649,
 we were trapped inside it, clutching
 our most reasonable point of view.
 I can't say more / vast territories
 of our singing selves, decommissioned.
 Maybe it was 2003, or something,
 I don't remember, my favorite laws
 were just a system of false brains
 I recognise that / splintered & oblique
 social utterance flaming malevolence
 magnetic, wound soon go dancing etc

(68). This subject gravitates toward both extremes as though on a carnival ride. They are an obedient organ one moment “my favorite laws” and the enjambment splits them in two “my favorite laws / were just a system of false brains,” and it is the knife of enjambment which constantly enacts this splicing and splitting. One moment the subject is a liberated string, “social utterance flaming malevolence” and the next moment “magnetic, would soon go dancing etc,” as though that comma were all of capital’s eventual boredom, the psychic drop of clocking back in to business as usual.

The Commons is concerned primarily with the psychic constraints of being trapped inside one year — 1649, 2003, 1868. The bourgeois mind would sooner gnaw off a leg than think outside its cozy exterior. Bonney’s construction of antichronological solidarities must be thought of in terms of the transformation of social space that Paris underwent in the spring of 1871:

“Street fighting does not take place on the street but in the houses, not in the open but undercover.” [It] depends on mobility or permanent displacement. It depends

on changing houses into passageways — reversing or suspending the division between public and private space... the interior becomes a street. (Ross 38)

The Communards' suspension of vertical space and its immediate horizontal redistribution — walls between houses demolished to make footpaths for soldiers — is analagous to Bonney's virtual reconfigurations of spatiotemporal history. The walls between years are torn down to allow for a free flow of revolutionary time.

The theory at work in Bonney's verse is that the bridging of revolutionary time works further toward the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity. He follows Rimbaud's "long systematic derangement of the senses" as a literal re-ordering (*déranger*), an "absolute redistribution of all the senses" (Rimbaud, *Complete Works* 371; *Happiness* 39). To lay a foundation for new forms of perception and potential consciousness outside capital's psychic domain, allowing for different futures to emerge as the result of this new confluence of the senses. The poem not as magical thinking but "as analysis and clarity," specifying where and when to strike. A force around which to organize; a spark to start a prairie fire. The only way to break out of the psychic realm of capital is through a psycho-physical reorientation. Just as Marcuse said of Mallarmé's poetry, that it "conjure[s] up [new] modes of perception, imagination, gestures— a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle" (*Aesthetic Dimension* 19). This is Bonney's project in the Rimbaudian vein, to use linguistic derangement as a strategy to reorient ourselves within capital, to engage in a morphing of the senses which can allow us to perceive what could lie beyond the official horizon.

Thinkers like Marcuse, Jameson, and Fisher have long contested that art which demonstrates an alternate reality principle within the dominant ideology can indeed alter our notions of the thinkable. A reconfiguration of geography in the limited, virtual space of the poem

has larger implications regarding laying the foundations of new global solidarities. This is what Bonney calls his “new geography of delight,” one which has gone beyond the violent fictions of borders and their bullets. His thoughts on antichronological time are described further in his *Letters*, he says it’s

as if there were two parallel time tracks, or maybe not so much as parallel as actually superimposed on each other. You’ve got one track, call it antagonistic time, revolutionary time, the time of the dead, whatever, and its packed with unfinished events: the Paris Commune, Orgreave, the Mau Mau Rebellion. There are any number of examples, counter-earths, clusters of ideas and energies and metaphors that refuse to die, but are alive precisely nowhere. And then there is standard time, normative time, a chain of completed triumphs, a net of monuments, dead labor, capital. The TV schedules, basically. (116)

To map these moments onto a calendar would deploy four dimensional space on a three dimensional model. I have tried to conceptualize this calendar, and the best I can approach is something like a cube or a sphere wherein revolutionary bursts in time are plotted (somehow the space within shape has a logic to designate how and where time flows, where one quadrant of time, say the 1600s, ends and the next one begins). One line weaves these events together, the line of official, linear chronology. But each rift in the fabric of normative time births a specter, a ghost which haunts the possibility of the future it conceived even as it closed. This is perhaps akin to what Heriberto Yépez terms *Osiric time*, where dispersed parts would reunite after a yawning gap of “waiting,” (*Empire* 95) Only this negative space is an impossible void, a facism which can only begin to close when the ghosts born by each rupture continue their respective times onward. When Marcuse tells us that “[t]he horizon of history is still open. If the

remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions,” it is an emphasis on the hauntological (*Aesthetic Dimension* 73) With an urge to perform a “counter-exorcism of a world which could be free” — we seek to set the specters of once-futures loose to finish what they started.

6 // *The Withering Away of Poetry*

Jameson in *An American Utopia* notes that the kind of literature which would be consumed and produced in a utopian society occupies a lapse in utopian thinking (64). Despite this, through a Marxist-Lacanian analysis, Jameson predicts that the literature of a post-revolutionary society would predominantly feature negotiations between characters regarding individual desires. The high-school movie is an example of this literature: a genre which highlights the “necessarily antagonistic nature of individual life and experience in a classless or communist society.” Classless here meaning that as collective contradictions are resolved and eliminated, individual antagonisms rise to prominence (63 & 68). Probably the closest example we have of contemporary poetry which can be imagined as a product of a utopic moment would be Bernadette Mayer’s *Utopia*, though as much as this book demonstrates a peaceful reality principle under a communism, it is still articulated against capital from within capital, and this is felt in its form and content; the social reality of its production is from within capitalism. Take “A Fish That Looks Like a Bishop: Debate of the Utopians,” this poem, like others of Mayer’s, most closely comes to Jameson’s Lacanian analysis: that utopian literature will feature a variety of “types” and the mediation of personal disagreements and conflict (*American Utopia* 63). Perhaps daily life will feel a bit like a Henry James novel. Nevertheless, Mayer’s poem introduces a cast of characters from literary and philosophical history, ranging from Plato to Gertrude Stein, who simply enter into the conversation like they were already engaged in it. Each one begins their respective “dialogue” anew, as if no former conversation took place. The poem is formatted like a play, and Grace and Bernadette are the two characters who pose a sort of refrain and order in their commentary on the “conversation.”

Grace pauses: “I’ve tried to tell you something about the future, it was amazing the way love tore down my smashed in the neck thoughts not ready for new things and love even

came out of the stove as if it had become, having been turned off because love's pea soup was supposed to be on, only a turkey carcass soup according to a cruel mother who doesn't give you every thought dressed completely new since ideal perfection and everything, even ideal blue is nothing, this is our world.”

Bernadette: Let's call Peggy, let's go back into the future together.

Grace: You idiot! It's not the right time.

(doorbell rings, it's Thomas More)

(Mayer 95). This is only a taste of the pleasure principle a conceptual utopia could operate under.

To underwrite this in a Marcusean sense: Eros has triumphed over Thanatos. *Love tore down my smashed in the neck thoughts not ready for new things*. A more frenetic example of this seemingly bizarre pleasure principle would be

Hawthorne: With the luck I'm having, this next visitor might turn out to be a man.

Fuller: Another point in the agreement: we each decided to bring a beard to this meeting. Do you have yours?

Nightingale: Mine is divine, its line is below the knees. What does your husband do?

Fuller: You know him, he farts. A politician.

(enter Sappho)

Sappho: Darling you're right on the button, but where did you learn to talk so beautifully baby?

(enter H.G. Wells)

Wells: Ahem, we were just upon the point of coming upon our first true utopian man but of course compulsion destroys freedom altogether.

William Carlos Williams: Shut up this idiot altogether!

(98-99). This is what Mark Fisher in the introduction to the unfinished *Acid Communism* said of how there could be “no limit to how long conversations can last, and no telling where encounters might lead...you can transform yourself according to your desires, according to desires which you didn't know you had” (*K-punk* 1140). This is perhaps the other pole to Bonney's linguistic derangement: a reorganization of the social senses (language prime among them) and therefore the boundaries of conversation, its potential for boundlessness. In one direction verse is pulled

into the compression of neoliberal austerity, and in another it loosens and expands, atoms appear as if from other universes and disappear just as quickly.

It would be a hasty and not entirely false claim to say that no art produced under capitalism is capable of imagining social relations which have yet to come into existence. Any analysis will be pure conjecture, as there is no alternative but to see what happens. As we see in Bonney and Mayer, they enact the necessary function of literature under capital to lay a groundwork in the superstructure without which we would never be able to imagine any alternatives in the base. Bonney's formulation of "the collapse and realization of all literatures," is not a defeatism. Naturally, it conveys the notion of the impotency of poetry as an art toward any actual revolutionary change, which we have already discounted in our discussion of the crucial role art plays in the shifting psychic reality of the neoliberal subject. Rather, his claim is that poetry is powerless so long as it remains poetry.

We have already examined Bonney's formulation of black bloc prosody, and we will now look further towards his communist poetics as he outlines them across his letters. "We've never seized control of a city. But ... we can still understand poetic thought in the way I, and I hope you, work at it, as something that moves counter-clockwise to bourgeois anti-communication ... We can engage with ideas that have been erased from the official account" (*Letters* 141). This is the same formula presented by Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension* and Fisher in *Acid Communism*: the goal is to return to the specters of revolutions past and let loose those ghosts into the contemporary imagination. We have been assigned the task to finish the moments that they started, to make the conditions possible for their happening and continuation. Bonney wants to write a poem which

(1) could identify the precise moment in the present conjuncture, (2) name the task specific to that moment, ie a poem that would enable us to name that decisive moment and (3) exert force inasmuch as we would have condensed and embodied the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. (*Letters* 141)

This is moreso an attempt to outline an explicitly Marxist poetics, a *militant* poetics as outlined by Bonney. A poem is no longer a poem. It is a plan of attack.

7 // *Illyric Elegies*

Ben Lerner's "Didactic Elegy" is more of a syllogism than a poem, a logical inquiry into the function of art under capitalism. In order to give a sense of his findings I need to take you through the flow of the poem. It begins with a potential artist, perhaps the specter of art itself, here dubbed *Intention*, drawing "a bold black line across an otherwise white field." A critic approaches the once-negative canvas and, upon inspection, his eye "establishes gradations of darkness / where there are none" and thus imposes narrative time onto the canvas. The eye "constitutes any disturbance in the field as an object," which is its grammatical function: to distinguish between objects, to posit depth, to assign value where there is none. It is nearly impossible for the eye to perceive difference without assigning value. Lerner enacts a refrain across this poem. He will posit a few stanzas of a thesis and then, posing a question, will refute it and turn toward a new position.

Even if the artist is a known quantity, interpretation is an open struggle.
 An artwork aware of this struggle is charged with negativity.
 And yet naming negativity destroys it.
 Can this process be made the subject of a poem?

No,
 but it can be made the object of a poem.
 Just as the violation of the line amplifies the whiteness of the field,
 so a poem can seek out a figure of its own impossibility.
 But when the meaning of such a figure becomes fixed, it is a mere
 positivity. (*No Art* 123)

Naming the negativity of the primed canvas asserts it positively. But a work of art in constant interrogation of its own struggle toward meaning can take on a negative function. The second thesis of "Didactic Elegy" reads that "Events extraneous to the work, however, can unfix the meaning of its figures, thereby recharging it negatively." The rupture of 9/11 enters the field here. "For example, / if airplanes crash into towers and those towers collapse / there is an

ensuing reassignment of value.” He says that art which survives these moments of radical revaluation can be called masterpieces. The anxiety induced by artwork in the age of 9/11 produces a fear of irrelevance. Which the critic experiences as “a loss of capital,”

To the critic, the black line has become simply a black line.
 What was once a gesture of negativity, has lost its capacity to refer
 to the difficulties inherent in reference.
 Can this process be made the subject of a poem?

No,
 but a poem may prefigure its own irrelevance,
 thereby staying relevant
 despite the transpiration of extraneous events.

The only perfect memorial to the events of 9/11 is a work composed synchronous to the collapse. A score which is its own collapse. William Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops*, a collection of old tapes he had dug up and was in the process of restoring, coincided with the towers collapsing across the water from his roof. The magnetic tape deteriorated each time it passed under the tape head, and he allowed the music to continually disintegrate as more and more space was filled with gaps and crackle.

Lerner’s fourth thesis deals with the difficulty in distinguishing between event of the towers’ collapse and the image of the towers’ collapse,

The image of the towers collapsing is a work of art
 and, like all works of art, may be rejected
 for soiling that which it ostensibly depicts. As a general rule,
 if a representation of the towers collapsing
 may be repeated, it is unrealistic. (126)

Again, Basinski’s tapes cannot be repeated. Each time he fed them to the cassette player they fell apart further. It is only through the transference of this disintegration, itself being captured digitally, that we can repeatedly experience the collapse of structure.

Formalism is the belief that the eye does violence to the object it apprehends.

All formalisms are therefore sad.

A negative formalism acknowledges the violence intrinsic to its method.

Formalism is therefore a practice, not an essence ...

Negative formalisms catalyze a certain experience of structure.

The experience of structure is sad,

but, by revealing the contingency of content,

it authorizes hope.

This is the role of the artwork—to authorize hope,

but the very condition of possibility for this hope is the impossibility of its fulfillment.

The value of hope is that it has no use value.

Hope is the saddest of formalisms. (127)

The *uselessness* of art is precisely where its use lies: in its refusal, its very *irrelevance* which is a loss of capital. Lerner then goes on to describe the negative lyric, stating first that the distance between the lyric I and the lyric poem is like the relation between star and starlight. “The poem and the I are never identical and their distance may be measured in time. / Some lyric poems become visible long after their origins have ceased to exist.” Rimbaud knew this. He posited the I itself as an unknowable Other, at least An-Other, meaning one separate from myself, from my conception of myself (Rimbaud 371; Lerner 128).

The heavens are anachronistic. Similarly, the lyric

lags behind the subjectivity it aspires to express. Expressing this disconnect

is the task of the negative lyric,

which does not exist.

If and when the negative lyric exists, it will be repetitious.

It will be designed to collapse in advance, producing an image

that transmits the impossibility of transmission. This familiar gesture,
like a bold black stroke against a white field,
will emphasize flatness, which is a failure of emphasis.

The critic repeats herself for emphasis.

But, since repetition emphasizes only the failure of sense,
this is a contradiction.

When contradictions are intended they grow lyrical
and the absence of the I is felt as a presence. (128)

The task of the negative lyric is to reach towards a new subjectivity. This Un-lyric, A-lyric, *Illyric* subject is tasked with the composition of contradictions, and in the formal arrangement of contradictions the illyric must intend as little as possible. It must draw a “bold, black line across an otherwise white field” and we must keep discussion of its meaning to a minimum. In closing the event of the art from interpretation, we keep it from becoming a masterpiece.

The key is to intend as little as possible in the act of memorialization.

By intending as little as possible we refuse to assign value where there is none.

Violence is not yet modern; it fails to acknowledge the limitations of its medium.

When violence is aware of its mediacy and loses its object
it will begin to resemble love.

Love is negative because it dissolves
all particulars into an experience of form.

Refusing to assign meaning to an event is to interpret it lovingly. (129)

The Disintegration Loops is the perfect memorial to 9/11 in that its elegy was unintended. In his unintention Basinski did not assign value to the event of the music or its supposed object, he couldn't have. An object in the distance fell as the tapes came apart. History unfolded as the songs did, and whatever value the critic sees in it is coincidental.

In positing a narrative from without, the work is immediately negated from having a content of its own. It is all outside. Extraneous events seep into the form and the music boils down, boils over as it “collapse[s] in advance, producing an image / that transmits the impossibility of transmission” (128). The notion of being designed to die is important here. From the manufactured scarcity of late capital to early expiration dates: commodities come packaged with their own lapse into uselessness. So too the work of art, according to Lerner, is tasked with a kind of *uncreation*. “All poetry that does not testify to an awareness of the radical falsity of the established forms (of life) is faulty” (Bonney, *Blade Pitch* 87). The negative lyric is designed to collapse in advance, to fall apart as it plays. The lyric always lags behind the subjectivity it desires to express, such as Rimbaud’s *voyant* dilemma and Bonney’s frenetic speaker of *the Commons* and his deployment of Blanqui, which I will come to shortly (Lerner 128). “A statement that at one point would have been punishable by death is now the only thing worth saying” (Bonney, *Burning Earth* 46). All of our words must whither as they are born onto the air. *You will notice the weather only when it starts to die.*

8 // *Against the Wall of Official Memory*

Bonney, Lerner, and Yépez reach an understanding of capitalist poetics through similar roads of thought: understanding the construction and compression of space and time under empire. In Bonney's essay on the Communard Louis-Auguste Blanqui, he approaches a theory of revolutionary time on a cosmic scale, and in doing so articulates capitalist poetics via negation (and the other side of that coin could be a militant poesis). Blanqui's thought supposedly occupies a "counter-universe, an anti-gravity, a negative magnetism that the thought of the bourgeoisie cannot enter, encompass, or occupy" (*Burning Earth* 24). Contrast this with his position that "Revolution doesn't become poetic, poetry shatters itself in the process of becoming revolutionary" (28) Maoist literary theorist Lu Xun understood this.

All literature is shaped by its surroundings and, though devotees of art like to claim that literature can sway the course of world affairs, the truth is that politics comes first, and art changes accordingly ... Events are seldom what men of letters expect. That is why the so-called revolutionary writers *before* a great revolution are doomed. Only when the revolution is beginning to achieve results, and men have time to breathe freely again, will new revolutionary writers be produced. (italics mine Xun, *Selected Works Vol. III* 52)

This was understood by writers like George Oppen and other revolutionaries of his time: an "abstention from writing" is "a way of manifesting that writing in the world" (Knowles 13). The poem becomes the world in our process of shaping it. Interestingly Xun's phrasing of "breathe freely again," which we might want to connect to Bifo in his book of the same verb. Bifo uses Deleuze and Guattari's language of *chaosmosis* to think through conspiracy (breathing-together), and how we conspire under the chaos of late capital. His claim is almost that of an

absurdist gazing into the abyss: that we must embrace chaos as an ally, that poetry must “prepare our lungs to breathe at the rhythm of death” (Berardi 127 & 140). As it so happens, I have already dispensed with this claim early on: that work which merely adapts the skin of capital’s logic cannot solely through the occupancy of its form produce social change. In doing so, you are a Goldsmith, a Clinton, an Obama. If breathing at the rhythm of our death is all Berardi can offer us, he has gone no further than capitalist realism. We want an acid poeisis, not a police bullet.

Lu Xun was invited to give a talk at the Huangpu Military Academy in 1927, where he was surprised at the number of students, students who had taken up arms in the revolutionary struggle, who wanted to hear him talk about literature. In this talk he says that

For revolution we need revolutionaries, ... revolutionary literature can wait, for only when revolutionaries start writing can there be revolutionary literature. [T]o my mind it is revolution which plays a big part in literature. The literature of a revolutionary period is different from that of ordinary times for, in a revolution, literature changes too. (Xun, *Selected Vol. II* 445)

He understands the students’ appeal in believing the superstructure’s ingression into the base being more immediately profound or impactful than it is, but Xun claims the opposite is always true: that changes in the superstructure occur more likely as a result of changes in the base, that an actual revolution is more likely to impact the production of art than the reverse. Nonetheless, what is important here is Xun’s equivalent formulation: that revolutionary poetics is only articulatable by revolutionaries, not poets.

So far all of our characters have named themselves in opposition to the term *poet*. Whether this makes them *seers*, *sirens*, *illyic-I’s* or what have you, they all stand against the traditional term poet, against the tradition of poetry. To return to Bonney’s seiretic deployment

of Blanqui: the poetic imagination, “as used by Surrealists like Césaire ... is that which explodes the continuum of history in the same way that Blanqui’s barricades smashed apart the smooth flow of capital through the streets of Paris.” The Commune was a direct impediment to the natural course of capital. Even though it occupies a blip in its official history: it was a blockade *against* the logic of the official ledger. For Bonney, poetry can do the same.

“In Blanqui’s system, the Communards do not die, but dissolve into a metaphoric squall, a revolutionary poetics” (Bonney, *Burning Earth* 30). This is identical to what I outlined earlier as the function of *seiretic verse*: to point to all of the sirens and specters forced back into invisibility by capital, to make them shriek their “[songs which] were said to contain knowledge of everything, all possible pasts and futures. (*Our Death* 117). Aimé Césaire in “Poetry and Knowledge” said just this,

It is not merely with his whole soul, it is with his entire being that the poet approaches the poem. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience: all the women loved, all the desires experienced, all the dreams dreamed, all the images received or grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experience. All the possibility. Around the poem about to be made, the precious vortex: the ego, the id, the world. And the most extraordinary contacts: all the pasts, all the futures (the anticyclone builds its plateaux, the amoeba loses its pseudopods, vanished vegetations meet). All the flux, all the rays. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has a right to live. Everything is summoned. Everything awaits. (*Refusal* 139)

The surrealist revolutionary performs this mass conjuring through their poetry and art, what is said here to be essentially necromancy. Bonney always insists on this, that “They will probably raise the dead. Like 19th Century Anarchists, they will convert the divine universe into a

shadowy system of bombs and barricades.” As communard Louise Michel said as she stood trial for her life

‘I do not wish to defend myself . . . I want to erect a wall of flames.’ And their wild orbits, disappearing for millennia only to appear again, they echo her great poem marking the murder of the Commune: ‘We will return, an infinite mob / through all your doors, we’ll return / vengeful spectres, out from the shadows / with raised fists, we will return.’ (Bonney, *Burning Earth* 32; Michel 470)

Bonney then moves to say that “Poetry itself is a cell, only possible as the expression of a cosmic trap.” That cosmic trap is the logic of capitalist realism, its sealed escape hatch. The anti-poet, as Octavio Paz claims, has “no other mission than to transmute history ... the only truly revolutionary poetry is apocalyptic poetry” (33). When Blanqui says “you confiscated the guns but the bullets have taken off,” he is marking that the trajectory of those bullets, what those bullets *aimed* at, was the sinister logic of capital itself. Even without their guns, those bullets are always flying toward that logic. We live forever in this recoil.

Heriberto Yépez in *Empire of Neomemory* approaches an understanding of capitalist poetics by tracing its imperial origins in North America, specifically in USAmerican literature across the Oxident; North American poetics, drawing particularly from Whitman/Olson/Pound et al. and its will-to-accumulate. Whitman’s joyous parataxis is the violence of bipartisanism. “I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves,” (Whitman 71 & Yépez 153) He

organized materials and jammed them together, following his own pantheism, his poetics of enthusiastic paratactical erasure and re-drawing, in order to achieve a poem that might be a geography where incompatible cartographies could coincide, in a happy meeting of distances and dis-instances.” (Yépez 155)

This is not the same as Bonney or Césaire’s counter-cartographies. Maps which reveal the moments where alternate worlds were born and died. The goal of empire’s parataxis is to compress time into discrete spaces, to *spatialize* our understanding of time, to do away with time altogether. Whitman-Olson-Pound’s, i.e. capitalist poetics, approach the poem as *pantopia*, a unit of space which gathers names, data, places, events as it “destroys historical time and does away with diachronics, the time that excludes one event from another, because in the *total place* of the modern poem, everything occurs in a zone where time, as a line, is no longer” (157). American imperial poetics is essentially surveillance capital. It is Goldsmith accumulating raw material from the body of a murdered boy, it is America’s wars on/of terror for the sake of oil.

Yépez traces North American extractive poetics across Mexico, particularly in Yucatán, where poets time and time again — be they Olson, Artaud, Ferlinghetti — have sought answers from the ancients. Only this impulse is always colonial and colonizing in intent. Olson stole artifacts and glyphs from Maya ruins as they had been bulldozed at the behest of the Mexican state. His search for such holy (hiero)glyphs came with a *deciphering* intent, and the fear that such cipher was impossible was a chance he could not risk (116). In order to decipher the Maya, and, by extension, their culture and ideology Olson had to construct a go-between,

an intermediary space, a mixed culture—that is, a culture in which differences might be converted into synthesis ... to imagine that intermediary culture ... makes it possible to resolve in fantasy the contradictions unresolved in reality. The hybrid and the mythic are one and the same. They are the false reconciliation of opposites. (118)

This process can be likened to Thomson’s demonstration of poetry as magic, only where it once functioned as a tool for labor’s emancipatory collectivity it now serves as a weapon of empire.

Yépez is always clear that there is no such thing as synthesis, only dissection. Poets are the playthings of empire. All “empires have imposed their dreams on them ... The society to which they belong prohibits them from moving radically outside the dominant ideology.” Poets are the lightning rods of empire, struck by their form so often that they can do little but replicate it in their verse (127). The poet of capitalist realism is one who thinks there is no alternative, one who refuses to even search for one, one for whom this notion does not occur.

Bonney uses Blanqui’s cosmology to signal the revolutionary break emitting to all corners of history, all times. Yépez uses the Mayan god, Quetzalcóatl, as an example of psychic alchemy. Though, and this he stresses, that alchemy in and of itself is a metaphor for methodologies of metamorphoses in states of mind.

Quetzalcóatl is a series of teachings about how people might transcend their habitual condition. How people might elevate themselves above rules. Quetzalcóatl is measure and excess. Indigenous cultures came to the conclusion that it was necessary to unite forces. The force-of-below, symbolized by the serpent, and the force-of-above, symbolized by the quetzal bird ... What we have here, by the way, is a similar concept to that symbolized by the Jewish star of David—the union of two triangles in different orientations—which as a symbol is even related to the union of the horizontal plane with the vertical, symbolized in the Christian cross. Quetzalcóatl symbolizes the union of opposite forces as a method of overcoming obstacles. (141)

Quetzalcóatl is a pre-model of Mao’s union of opposites, a dialectical divinity which in itself acts as but one part in a larger unfolding. This is what is known as *kinh*, the primary Mayan divinity.

Only in order to understand “kinh” conceptually we must remember that in these ancient cultures, “god” signified “process.”

All the gods in the pre-Hispanic pantheon are the unfolding of a single concept. Let us not forget that in the beginning there was Ometéotl. The dual-lord. His two manifestations are Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca. Quetzalcóatl corresponds to the encounter of the forces-of-above with the forces-of-below, from the perspective of ascent. Of how the force-of above goes down and how the force-of-below goes up. And Tezcatlipoca corresponds to descent in general. (173)

Yépez, however, is careful to mark this theory as distinct from Maoist synthesis; that Ometéotl is not the combination of Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoc, but the *friction* which results from their encounter. A cosmic fusion as a result of fission.

Fundamental undivided reality (Ometéotl) becomes duality (Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca) and from the encounter of these opposites-doubles it is not a synthesis that occurs but rather “flaming water”—tremendous energetic process. Opposites have collided and from that collision—not from their synthesis, but from their living crash—emerges what we know as *reality*. The world is the product of the struggle between two forces. All objects, phenomena, ideas, sensations, all things, space, and time are made by the struggle between the two elements that make up Ometéotl.

Ometéotl is not a dialectical synthesis of Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoc, but the resulting tension of opposites. The boiling lake at the beginning of the universe. Yépez provides us now with an updated translation of god/process, “What the Maya wanted to say with the term *kinh* was *how the real is actualized*,” (174-175).

Bonney, Yépez, and Lerner all trace in their respective studies this identical problem: how is it possible for the superstructure to reckon with the base? Can the base be altered by disruptions in the superstructure, etc? Lu Xun, writing during Mao's revolution, spoke of the unfolding of "revolutionary literature" as a historical event which could only follow a successful revolution and erupt as a result of it; "to my mind it is revolution which plays a big part in literature. The literature of a revolutionary period is different from that of ordinary times for, in a revolution, literature changes too" (*Selected Vol. II* 445). A revolution is nothing if it does not produce changes in the base and superstructure alike. Both affect the other, only Xun believes material results in the base will likely occur *before* this revolutionary literature appears. Revolution, then, disrupts the form of literature, issues unalterable breaks in the art. For Xun, revolutionaries take up writing as an ideological vehicle in service of a winning struggle. The superstructure is marked by successful changes in the base. What, then, happens to poets who become revolutionaries and suffer failed revolution?

If we believe that Blanqui's bullets are always flying toward the logic of capital, hung forever suspended in the spectral air, the goal is to make the conditions that led to those bullets palpable once more. The Paris Commune, Orgreave, the Mau Mau Rebellion are all blemishes on the official map, the official clock; blemishes which reveal the armor plating of capitalist poetics to be permeable, porous, subject to decay like everything else (Bonney, *Letters* 116). Like Bonney's speculative map, each of these junctures represents a time out of joint. A moment in the firmament where celestial bodies *could have moved* this way or that. The official universe might originate in different points—*co-big bangs*—that then fuse or fight to fundamentally alter the laws of the others, of their respective existences. This could be a total war, with various universes simultaneously or successively

colliding, coaffecting each other from a distance or as already intertwined bodies trying to impose their laws as nothing more than interstellar guerillas whose objective is to infiltrate, dominate, rebirth, or kill other universes. (Yépez 252)

We don't even need to map this in the stars to understand it as correct; we witness the battle for domination between different universes in our everyday lives. The walls erected for the sake of preserving capitalist realism are physical metaphors. They are the sentences of judges, the bitter poetry of capital is written by the border guard and beaureaucrat alike. Each revolutionary break is a big bang, setting into motion counter-universes where it continued and was not forced back into invisibility by capital.

How to reverse this logic. It is an entire civilization, inscribed in all the moments of our lives. For Yépez, it is all wrapped inside the word *Aletheia*. Not-forgetting. Empire demands us to never forget it. This is how it sustains itself, vampire on the brain. "And yet, the Lethe, this river that leads to forgetting, calls out to us again and again, because now more than ever forgetting is the only way of continuing. When I imagine how to exit this generalized *film-loop*, the only thing that I can see in my mind is a bonfire that burns itself out (242-243). Fisher's unforgetting is a necessary step in removing the shackles of fascist renarration, to return to moments of physical and emotional rupture and analyse what it was that made capital clamp down so hard. "Understanding how this process of consciousness-deflation worked is the first step to reversing it" (*K-punk* 1152). But after this step we must leap over the horizon. It has shown itself as permeable, there are pinpricks of light in its shell we call the stars.

Yépez is asking us to approach lethal memory, memory that burns on impact, that self-destructs as you open it, that falls apart in you run it through the cassette player. Lerner said just this, the task of the negative lyric is "to collapse in advance, producing an image / that

transmits the impossibility of transmission. This familiar gesture, / like a bold black stroke against a white field, / will emphasize flatness, which is a failure of emphasis” (128). Marx himself said that revolutions fail because they are always drawing from the past, always re-membering, trying to put those pieces together in exactly the same fashion as before. This was his intent in saying

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase. (*Brumaire* 18)

The use of seiretic verse will only get us so far. Their song strips you of memory to give you a perfect analysis of your present. This maxim for the nineteenth century does not map exactly onto our present. Revolutionary poetry of the twenty-first century cannot move beyond our dead because we live a perpetual dying (neoliberal austerity, climate collapse, global pandemics). The call is for a poetry of the dead burying their dead; turning from those graves to these borders and the all-death they imply and enact. Writing as the shadows our bodies have lost as we bleed against the horizon.

We require a lethal memory, a poetry of a seiretic continuous present. Constantly mapping past specters onto the present and always forgetting where we put them. Again this recalls Rimbaud, “Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other one collapsed!”

(*Complete Works* 377). But as Yépez has correctly noted, revolutionary moments live in a *film-loop*, whenever history approaches a moment of rupture, right as one is about to leap over the horizon, or perhaps at the very moment of their disappearance, time is reset. Crossing the event horizon means no information can ever return. It is the *complete loss* of whatever has crossed that threshold. Anything that enters a black hole can never return. The body of the universe rebels against permanence.

Science becomes an absurdity if it doesn't heed that principles discovered today will serve only for a certain, indeterminate, perishing space-time because life is a life always inside another death. All memory is temporal. All laws will perish. All history has limits. All texture loses its plot. (249-251)

“A culture based in memory will always be conservative” (243). Memory, according to Yépez, is a fascism. It is empire constantly burrowing itself into your speech, into your days. This is identical to Bonney's formulation regarding black bloc prosody:

No-one has yet spoken a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce, and benefit from the facts. Language is conservative. Its conservatism issues (a) from its utilitarian purpose, (b) from the fact that the memory of a person, like that of humankind, is short. (Bonney, *Blade Pitch* 87)

“The chaotic is the definitive proof of the existence of freedom,” the existence of the Universe is absurd, but no matter its absurdity, we must assert it (Yépez 252). It is in this very assertion we stake our own sovereignty. Were the universe an absolute, total, all-encompassing bank of memories, it would be empire. Entropy tells us otherwise. Decay is anti-cancerous. Aletheia, “truth” is *unforgetting* against Fisher. It is all-memory, non-forgetting. A poetry of the present must forget. Memory cannot be remade, revolutions which insist on the past show us this. “We

must remember that memory is a fantasy,” (Yépez 251) and, in doing so, come to understand the present as all that is. Poetry which falls apart in our hands.

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