Better tables

James Penney

Dina Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2013

Puncturing through the tired commonplaces of so much contemporary postcolonial and queer studies, Dina Georgis's *The Better Story* develops an insightful and original method for thinking through the complicated link between psychohistorical trauma and cultural representation. Written with a rare combination of theoretical savvy and personal voice, the book works through a fascinating collection of contemporary texts marked by the history of European and Zionist/Israeli colonialism, the legacies of sectarian violence, and the emergence of neo-Islamic fundamentalisms and terrorisms in the West Asia region. *The Better Story* draws from psychoanalytic work on affect, memory and mourning to propose a novel approach to narrative as a means of coping with the shattering hauntings of collective historical trauma. At the same time, however, Georgis also maintains that story-telling can be a creative forum in which postcolonial social futures can be re-imagined in a way that resists the temptation, psychically and politically disastrous, of erasing the traces of irreparable suffering and loss. In the process, *The Better Story* proposes an exciting definition of queer affect as the set of psychical traces left behind by proscribed emotions imperfectly repressed by dominant narratives of postcolonial resistance. In general terms, Georgis's book makes a powerful and convincing case for the continued centrality of psychoanalytic insights to the ongoing development of the queer and postcolonial critical projects. It poses crucial questions about the psychical and political costs we may have paid for our adherence to familiar political paradigms for postcolonial emancipation. How are we to imagine the possibility of more desirable ways of living together if our narratives of political agency are so overdetermined by the defensive disavowal of collective trauma and suffering? And more generally, what are the powers and limits of the emphasis on affect when it comes to the urgent need to think and to effect that possibility?

The Better Story first sets its theoretical argument to work in a reading of *A Different Kind of War* by Nadav Gal (2004). This short film tells the story of Noni, a grade-school boy in an Israeli-occupied section of East Jerusalem during the second Intifada who refuses to join in with his Jewish peers when they routinely taunt their Palestinian counterparts across the wall that separates them. Reading the film as a subversive re-writing of the foundational David and Goliath myth (David would become the king who united the tribes of Israel and the famously larger Goliath was a 'Philistine'), Georgis emphasises the significance of Noni's transsexual yearnings for his decision

DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV01.2014

to engage differently with his Palestinian neighbours. When his brother goads him into finally joining in their anti-Arab shenanigans, Noni instead dons a 'pretty princess dress' (p27) and begins to dance atop the separation wall. In this way, Georgis suggests, Noni becomes a 'different kind of hero', one who could not contrast more sharply with the paradigmatic hypermasculine soldier of contemporary Israeli-nationalist ideology, whose aggressive and threatening stance both stems from, and compensates for, the terrible history of Jewish diasporic displacement and victimisation. For Georgis, the image of the Israeli soldier grounds an idea of an Israeli-Jewish identity or community defined in its essence by a gesture of often violent separation from its Arab other. By contrast, 'the kind of love' embodied in Noni's act 'is not made from within the terms of community and belonging that keep us in perpetual anxiety of exclusion and loss', Georgis writes. 'Instead, this is a love made from risking insecurity and vulnerability' (p46).

In its performative acknowledgment of an inherent and universal psychical vulnerability, Noni's (anti-) heroic act is then suggestively compared to Freud's act of writing *Moses and Monotheism* at the historical moment of European anti-Semitism's apotheosis. Through a careful reading of this text's reception up to Edward Said's *Freud and the Non-European*[1] (including Jacqueline Rose's response, included in the volume), Georgis shows how *Moses*, notwithstanding the question of its historical or anthropological legitimacy, effectively demythologises the origins of Judaism. According to Georgis, Freud insists that the Exodus is effectively Israel's compensatory better story, one which both commemorates and obliterates the religion's non-Jewish and homicidal origins. Recall that in Freud's speculation, the first historical Moses, an Egyptian living among Jews, led Israel out of Egypt only to be killed by those whom he liberated. The memory of this Moses was then fused in the tradition with a second, Jewish, historical Moses. The murder of the first Moses, Georgis argues, 'might be understood as the affective expression of the burden of survival that haunts Jewish history; the murder is the affective symbolization of the belated knowledge of bondage and captivity followed by homelessness and suffering' (p41). Legible only between the lines of the official narrative of Judaism's origins, Freud's Egyptian Moses is the queer affective residue that undoes from within the inward communitarianism that the Jewish thematic of chosenness has instilled across a wide cross-section of the tradition. Admirably, Georgis is careful to underline that this dynamic isn't specific to Judaism. Indeed, her commentary on Said's reading of *Moses* legitimately reproaches the author for failing to apply his remarkable Freudian insights into the impurities of Israel's story about itself to the similarly 'better' features of the various narratives of Palestinian resistance.

The remaining chapters of *The Better Story* stage provocative juxtapositions of extensive theoretical discussion with nuanced affective readings of cultural texts primarily, though not exclusively, from West Asia. For example, Georgis complements a subtle commentary on the heady discourse about colonised

1. Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, London, Verso, 2004.

women and representation famously inaugurated by Gayatri Spivak's landmark essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' with an alternative reading of the Bhuvaneswari story, the same story upon which Spivak bases her own theoretical musings. As Georgis suggests, Spivak's discourse emphasises how the subaltern woman's sociohistorical invisibility grants her no access to agency of any kind, with the result that she becomes the 'depository of *everyone's* unconscious' (p53); everyone, that is, who speaks or thinks about her, including Spivak herself. Without dismissing Spivak's argument per se, Georgis insists that there's a better way, as it were, to read narratives such as Bhuvaneswari's. In this alternative approach to reading, we are called on to 'consider how we can hear [Bhuvaneswari's] voice if we privilege neither class consciousness nor the logic of political agency', aiming in this way to 'recognise the voice that speaks from the self 's strangeness to its own otherness' (p55). Remaining chapters turn to a selection of texts ranging from Marjane Satrapi's Iranian exile graphic novel series *Persepolis* to Rawi Hage's Lebanese Civil War novel *De Niro's Game*; from Hany Abu-Assad's suicide bomber film *Paradise Now* (2005) to Eytan Fox's *The Bubble* (2006), a drama of male homosexual love across the Israeli-Palestinian divide. Georgis's rich readings of all of these texts bring greater nuance to her main contention about how the aesthetic excavation of queer affect can lead to creative forms of subjective revolt.

In a moving epilogue Georgis recalls the occasion when during a Toronto IAW (Israeli Apartheid Week) conference featuring Judith Butler as a keynote speaker, a young Palestinian student shared a dream he had had the previous night. In his dream, Butler invites the young man to talk to an unnamed party, who turns out to be an old teacher whom he hasn't seen in fifteen years, and with whom he begins to engage in a conversation about music. For Georgis, the dream poignantly conveys how 'queerness' - embodied in this instance in Butler's status as a public lesbian and a Jew - serves as an occasion for the pleasurable interaction of two Palestinian men separated by a long and complex history of occupation, displacement, and both 'postcolonial' and diasporic fractiousness. Georgis understands the musical content of the exchange to underline the crucial role of the aesthetic, here understood via Melanie Klein as the arena in which traumatic histories and repressed knowledges of suffering can be symbolised and creatively worked through. In the book's final paragraphs, Georgis references the Arabic word *tarab* ('the experience of euphoria in a musical exchange', 'the mutual exchange between performer and listener'), suggesting that we take the term and its suggestive etymology as the best possible metaphor for what she calls 'political collaboration' (p151). *The Better Story* is surely at its most suggestive and invigorating in such moments when, having exposed story-telling's complicity with a defensive psychical posture of compensation for injury, it also brings out the *power* of narrative, and the aesthetic more generally, to imagine new modes of 'relationality' (p151), new ways to tarry with - without foreclosure or mastery - radical alterity in the Other, and therefore in ourselves. This would

be the story that wouldn't be better; the one that would embrace rather than reject the painfully queer affects that too many narratives work to occlude.

This concluding reference to relationality brings out the one concern I have with this clearly important and original book. Also in the epilogue, Georgis quotes extensively from the fascinating Facebook manifesto of 'Gaza Youth Break Out', in which anonymous Palestinians living under the worst conditions of occupation decry with rage and bitterness their hopeless situation. Here are its impeccably concise opening exclamations: 'Fuck Israel. Fuck Hammas [sic]. Fuck Fatah. Fuck UN. Fuck UNWRA. Fuck USA!' (p148). Georgis tells us how she admires the rebellious young authors for having 'the courage to refuse the conditions of life without a better story for the future', stressing how the text attests to the revolt of a new generation of youth against an older generation silenced by 'Islamist takeover' and 'global capitalism' (p149). Despite the impassioned negativity of the text, however, Georgis insists that it also effectively functions as an invitation to the leaders of Hamas and Fatah, 'set[t]ing the table for a conversation' between the disillusioned and desperate youth of Palestine and their corrupt and despondent leaders. *The Better Story* offers this invitation to dialogue as an example of the new relationality that the aesthetic expression of queer affect makes possible. Taking her cue from Hannah Arendt, Georgis considers this table to be, as she puts it, 'what makes public and political life possible', functioning not only as 'the condition of conversation across difference', but also 'the condition of difference itself' (p149). Around Arendt's political-philosophical table, then, difference is acknowledged and negotiated in a conversation with no discernible terminal point.

My worry is that *The Better Story* translates psychoanalytic conceptuality into a politics that remains comfortably inside the deliberative-democratic ethos of the left liberalism of figures such as Julia Kristeva, who is referenced extensively, and Jürgen Habermas, who isn't. For the Marxian tradition of ideology critique - upon which *The Better Story* also draws - surely enjoins us to think a little harder about Arendt's table. Indeed, it causes us to wonder who it doesn't have space for, who was barred access to the room where it sits. The problem with the relationality the book wants to theorise is that there's no neutral table around which it might be established. As the Lacanian will suggest, the logic of exclusion to which the table's occupants adhere crystallises around a set of explicit or implicit rules and taboos, which organise the unconscious enjoyment that binds them to one another. Perhaps this is a better, though hardly unrelated, way to theorise the consequences of the expression of queer affect. Rather than establish a new relationality, queer articulation exposes a fundamental *non-relation* by bringing to bear the repressed libidinal ties that bind the table's occupants to the law. In other words, *contra* Arendt, the revolt of queer affect makes public and political life *im*possible. Paradoxically, this impossibility makes tangible, indeed affirms, the possibility of a *different* table, one with different occupants and an entirely

different set of discursive parameters. I worry that the kind of aesthetic dynamism *The Better Story* so memorably evokes insufficiently foregrounds how radical psychical transformation can be inextricably bound up with radical sociopolitical transformation. There's a less psychological way of reading the Freudian tradition, in other words, a way that refuses the inaugural liberalist gesture of considering the psychic and the social as conceptually distinct categories. In this alternative scenario, the emphasis would extend beyond the valorisation of survival, coping, and relationality, and towards more 'heroic' and radical themes of militancy, contestation, adamancy, perseverence, partisanship, and the refusal to compromise.

But this reservation should not detract from the message that this book deserves to be widely read by those interested in postcolonial theory, Middle Eastern cultural studies, sexuality studies, and all the queer spaces in between. Its combination of great writing, personal voice, and critical rigour is compelling. In short, *The Better Story* paves the way for a new kind of psychoanalytic postcolonial studies which is at once more attuned to the devastations of historical trauma and more hopeful about the possibility of a different, and indeed better, future.

Hieroglyphics of the flesh

Dhanveer Singh Brar

Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014, 224pp

Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* is the latest iteration in the current reinvigoration of black diasporic thought. Perhaps best read in tandem with this year's publication of Nahum Chandler's *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, Weheliye can also be situated alongside Denise Ferreira da Silva, Jared Sexton, Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman in terms of understanding the activity taking place within black diasporic thought as an ensemble project.[1]

1. Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2014

Habeas Viscus feeds into this furiously complex joyful noise in two ways. One is the tacit deracination of critical theory that seems to have become a dominant trend in Euro-American thought for a number of years. This was a process undertaken in the name of political generalities over the apparent limitations of racial, sexual and gendered particularities. The other position Weheliye occupies is that of a black studies theorist addressing his own field. Over the course of its breakdown into various delineations of area studies, he argues, black studies has become far too comfortable as a mode of scholarship orientated towards targets and calculability. The result for Weheliye is a waning of the intensely poetic - and no less empirical - experimentation that was the engine of the project. The same could be said of black diasporic thought in the UK, which after the demise of Cultural Studies (the only place it found a home) has been repurposed as a policy device within the field of sociology.

What ties Weheliye's book to the work of the black diasporic thinkers named above is that he deploys these two threads as part of a fundamental commitment to the truth that abolition remains incomplete. Whilst some identify property or the administered world as the focal point for ongoing abolitionism, in Weheliye's case the target is Man.

Thus *Habeas Viscus* instrumentalises Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter in order to disestablish two dominant features of deracinated critical theory - biopolitics and bare life. The means for this reordering lie in taking seriously the proposition that the enfleshments of Atlantic slavery and colonisation are not solely racialised renderings of duress, but have also always carried the capacities to generate further genres of the human through the actions of the populations who were the objects of those systems. Such a claim sounds bold when made in isolation, but what Weheliye is able to do is make it, much like Chandler, a constitutive function of the architectures of his book. The danger in trying to desediment the overbearing presence of Giorgio Agamben

 DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV02.2014

and Michel Foucault in a work of this type, is that an author may commit too much space to these monoliths, thereby dulling the edge of the promised counter-argument. Weheliye avoids these pitfalls by leading with Wynter and Spillers in the opening two chapters ('Blackness: The Human' and 'Bare Life: The Flesh'). He makes the case for the strategic foregrounding of these two as nothing other than thinkers whose reach is without limits precisely because of their attentiveness to the massive and world forming dislocations of slavery and colonialism. Even when Weheliye does set aside the majority of chapters four and five ('Racism: Biopolitics', 'Law: Property') to bare-life and biopolitics, the neat theoretical concentrations which close each section remind the reader of how these close readings function as part of the text's overall line of argument.

As a result the foundational arguments of *Habeas Viscus* are given room to breathe. Agamben and Foucault, with bare life as an essential biological substance and biopower as a fundamentally new form of European racial organisation, arrived at schematics of violence and power that were built upon the logic of exceptionalism and were ahistorical. Their major theoretical formulations were developed often in distinction or without recourse to the long histories of globalised racial power. Particularly in Agamben's case, what Weheliye calls 'racialising assemblages' (50) appear as a function of bare life discourse in *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*. It is just that Agamben appears to have found a circuitous route around this knowledge.

Conducting a thought experiment whereby he recalibrates bare life and biopolitics by way of racial slavery and imperial capture, Weheliye positions Spillers and Wynter as *the* primary means of tracking the possibilities for over-turning Man as the structuring device for the world. The reason for his turn to these largely neglected theorists is in the name of asserting not so much totalities (which is the flaw in both Agamben and Foucault) but the fundamental generalisability of their combined projects. For Weheliye, Spillers arrives at a theory of bare life by way of an exhaustive study of the aesthetic and social reverberations of racial slavery, but for her it has never been bare. Instead the flesh life of the slave was always in transmission spatially and temporally by way of the variegated dynamics of its blackness. Weheliye's turn to the relatively obscure Caribbean thought of Wynter is due to the way she seeks to dislocate renderings of humanity from the fixed object of liberal self-possessed Man. For her this requires recognising that the whiteness of Man was assembled in the heart of the colony, and any serious practice of radical thought would not require a simple opening up of the category to those previously racialised as 'not-quite-humans and nonhumans' (p8) but its fundamental dissimulation.

These then are the structuring devices of *Habeas Viscus*, and it is no accident that Weheliye has foregrounded two thinkers for whom the question of blackness is indivisible from the sexual and gender limitations Man places on the various modes of social experimentation.

Weheliye is not using *Habeas Viscus* to conduct a game of oppression Olympics though. Instead his aim is to show how the ur-text of biopower and bare life (the holocaust) operated within the same ocean as settler colonialism, chattel slavery and the middle passage. What this draws out across all of these instances is how, within what from the outside seemed to be limit point conditions, occurred the engineering of modalities of life that overpopulate the dominant liberal designation of self-possessed Man. The histories of slavery, colonialism and the holocaust are replete with this knowledge.

There are two questions that are worth raising about *Habeas Viscus*. Even though Wynter and Spillers are placed front and centre, a third dominant - if slightly spectral - presence permeating the text is Edouard Glissant. Early on Weheliye sets out his preference for Glissant's relationality as a way to avoid the weaknesses of comparative methods. Yet the Antillean seems to be more deeply embedded in guiding the trajectory of thought in this book than the few overt surface references to him indicate. The appearance of C.L.R James in the seventh chapter prompts me to ask what a dialectical practice of thinking might do to the relational codes of *Habeas Viscus*? How might the Marxian mode of analysis to which James was committed in his version of black study re-orientate the inflections of Glissant here?

The second is not so much a question as a hope. There are moments in the text where Weheliye pauses to engage with contemporary black diasporic music. In an interview he has disclosed how his next project will take the foundations laid down in *Habeas Viscus* into a techno-aesthetic encounter with 1990s RnB, a critically underappreciated musical style within studies of black diasporic culture. This is good to hear, because, as Weheliye suggests, the mutational capacities of black diasporic music from the late twentieth century onwards point to the continual repurposing of the hieroglyphics of the flesh. The other world has always been available by way of its audibility. It's always been here - now - felt as the future in the present.

Women, Crime and Sexual Transgression

Jade Munslow Ong

Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2013, 246pp, £17.99 paperback

Lucy Bland's *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* is an incisive and highly accomplished study of constructions of femininity and sexuality in war and post-war contexts. Through analysis of the role of young female protagonists in a range of British court trials that took place between 1918 and 1924, Bland skilfully weaves together complex arguments about gender, sexuality, class, race and national identity.

Although material contained in four of the five chapters has appeared in shorter or altered forms in previously published articles and essays, the thematic synergies between the topics covered means that the book still warrants attention as a single, unified piece of work. The previously unpublished second chapter, 'Butterfly women, "Chinamen", dope fiends and metropolitan allure', is an excellent addition, as it helps to bring together the different strands of Bland's arguments about 'types' of women (p4), and examines in depth the meanings generated by recurrent use of Orientalist discourse in trial proceedings, press coverage and other media. Each of the chapters introduces accounts of the key events, protagonists and context, before moving on to investigate the broader social resonances, connections and lasting corollaries of the trials. This structure is readily accessible and makes for compelling reading as it allows Bland to demonstrate her skills as both story-teller and critic.

The introduction delineates the cultural significance of the figure of the 'modern woman-cum-flapper', who, Bland argues, represents 'immorality, generational challenge, and the erosion of stability, particularly in relation to gender relations and the family' as well as class and sexuality (pp3-4). Lines of enquiry pertaining to the presentation of women in criminal and legal contexts are laid out, as is the role of the popular press in sensationalising, perpetuating, and occasionally, challenging, a range of female 'types'. Bland carefully maps out important contextual details, including the impact of war and immigration on gender relations, sexuality, leisure and lifestyle, in order to provide the necessary backdrop to the events explored in the book. The legacies of the nineteenth-century newspaper and the famous trials of earlier figures such as Constance Kent and Madeline Smith are also referenced in ways that illuminate the issues under discussion.

Chapter one focuses on the libel case raised by dancer Maud Allan against the right-wing MP Noel Pemberton Billing for publishing a paragraph

DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV03.2014

entitled 'The Cult of the Clitoris' in *The Vigilante*, which implied that Maud was a lesbian. The complexity of the case and its breadth of cultural implications cannot be fully addressed in this short review, so only a brief account is provided here. Bland states that the trial was 'so fascinating at the time, for it involved a rich mix: a decadent play (*Salome*), a notorious figure of those days (Oscar Wilde), a celebrated Edwardian dancer (Maud Allan), and a paranoid rumour about conspiracy, German infiltration and sexual vice in high places (the "Black Book")' (p16). The presentation of Maud as potentially conspiratorial and treacherous, as well as decadent, degenerate and sexually aberrant, meant that 'the defence of this criminal libel resulted, in effect, not in Billing being on trial, but Maud and *Salome*' (p18). Bland shows how national, wartime, sexual and class concerns were linked in this case, as the dominant idealised notion of English womanhood as patriotic, sexually conformist and morally upright was contrasted with Maud's apparent 'cosmopolitan modernity […] sexual knowledge and sexualised dancing' which was frequently described using negative racialised discourse (p44).

Chapter two explores the array of early-twentieth-century fears associated with Chinese men having relationships with English women. It draws on evidence from various trials and newspaper articles on miscegenation, and the history of drug use and trafficking. The chapter is structured to allow Bland to analyse 'three different "types" of modern woman: the "butterfly" woman of the West End, the "lured" young woman attracted to the "Chinamen" of the East End, and the female "dope fiend" who moved between East and West ends, trafficking drugs' (p56). The analogy of the flittering, fragile butterfly is used to describe the 'flapper' as a creature 'who dared to act on impulse and succumb to the "lure" of nightclubs, dope, or "Chinamen"' (p90). One example, the trial of Brilliant Chang, shows how a Chinese restaurant proprietor was cast as a threatening Oriental 'other', and condemned publicly, although not by the court, for supplying the 'butterfly' woman, Freda Kempton, with the drugs that caused her death. Freda was depicted as a victim, whilst Chang was described as a typical "Chinaman", a figure who 'in the fiction and "fact" of the day was represented as duplicitous, cunning, mysterious, and effeminate' (p67). Leaping off from this case study, Bland then uses the rest of the chapter to develop her sophisticated analysis of anxieties generated about Chinese male sexuality, miscegenation and degeneration in the context of London drug culture.

The Thompson/Bywaters case is the focus of Chapter three, and here Bland offers an in-depth study of Edith Thompson, a woman found guilty of incitement or conspiracy to murder her husband, Percy, and sentenced to death by hanging. The courtroom and press depicted Edith as an extravagant modern woman who was professional, fashionable, fond of dancing, and neglected her marital life. Edith's lover, Freddy Bywaters, was eight years younger, and had been in a relationship with her for fifteen months when he accosted the Thompsons on their way home from the theatre and fatally

stabbed Percy. Bland shows how public interest in the case 'demonstrates how trials were a central cultural site for the contesting of societal moral boundaries' (p106), particularly as 'Edith's behaviour was deemed triply inappropriate and unacceptable: initiating, adulterous and cross-generational' (p111). Bland's nuanced consideration of the presentation of Edith as a femme fatale figure, whose passionate letters to Freddy were used as incriminating evidence, is carefully juxtaposed with the view that Edith was, in Barrister Curtis-Bennett's words, 'hanged for immorality' (p104), rather than because she was actually guilty. These points are fully contextualised through reference to anxieties around the woman reader and 'the dangerous power of cheap fiction' (p117), as well as through analysis of negative press responses to the new female 'public audience keen to consume the drama of the court' (p119).

In Chapter four, Bland queries the determinants of the 'extraordinary outcome' of the trial of Mme Marguerite Fahmy, who was found 'not guilty' of murder and manslaughter despite killing her husband by shooting him in the back, neck and head (p133). Bland contends that Mme Fahmy's vindication occurred because 'the defendant was taken as emblematic of "Western Womanhood", standing against the brutality of the East' (p165). This argument is pursued through careful analysis of the racial prejudices of 1920s British culture, and the racialised language used in the trial and press. Thus Bland shows how Mme Fahmy's Egyptian husband was cast as a 'sexual pervert' and 'sadist', and was seen as 'bestial' and 'ruthlessly cruel', all of which were 'central tropes in the West's construction of the Oriental male' (pp140-1). Bland goes on to develop some of the ideas raised in Chapter three by reading the courtroom as 'a theatrical spectacle and space par excellence' (p150). This enables her to expand her arguments around negative depictions of the female trial spectator and female reader in relation to popular literary and film genres such as the desert romance.

The final chapter assesses the Russell vs. Russell case, in which the Hon. John Russell denied paternity of his wife's then unborn child, and 'petitioned for divorce on grounds of adultery' (p178). The protagonists drew attention because Christabel Russell was 'represented as an exceptional and exceptionally modern woman' who nevertheless had 'a profound ignorance of, and intense dislike for, anything to do with sex', and John was known for 'regular and incongruous cross-dressing as a woman' (p176). The real sensation arose around John's claim that for the two-and-a-half years of their marriage, the couple practised 'incomplete relations' that in his view could not lead to pregnancy, a claim that seemed to tally with the fact that Christabel's hymen remained unbroken. Focusing most particularly on the disjuncture between Christabel's appearance as a typical modern-woman-cum-flapper with her presentation of herself as a sexually ignorant, asexual, maternal character, Bland argues for a 'rethinking of this key 1920s female representation as necessarily sexualised and childless' (p202). This argument is enriched with evidence taken from the fashions, slang and leisure pursuits

associated with the flapper, and supported with evidence from publications of the period, most notably Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918).

In the conclusion, Bland links issues arising out of early-twentieth-century trials and newspapers to gendered, sexual, national and racial discourses and identities, noting that the flapper 'represented not only newness, hedonism and "anything goes", but also disruption, change and a frightening, uncertain future' (p218). This is an apt end to a meticulously constructed and highly stimulating work that will undoubtedly open new potential and areas for study across the arts and humanities.

Can sociologists write?

Caspar Melville

Michael Billig, *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 215pp.

In my first years as editor of a small intellectual magazine I commissioned a lot of articles from academics. This tactic had several advantages: academics are accessible (they advertise their expertise and e-mail addresses online); willing (it's part of their job to get their ideas into the public sphere); and cheap (they often would not expect to be paid at all, unless they were Americans, who did). I was also enamoured of the idea that I might be able to make a modest contribution to the building of a bridge between the academy and the world of ideas beyond.

It wasn't long before I abandoned this presumptuous notion. The theory was fine, and I continue to believe that good ideas should be shared as widely as possible, but in practice it was a failure. While, with a bit of jiggling, I could usually get useable, sometimes brilliant, contributions from journalists, non-professionals, students, bloggers, and activists, the submissions from academics which had seemed in embryo so promising proved time and again to be, well, rubbish. At first I thought this was because of a difference in terminology, and if I only worked diligently on translating the academese into everyday English - and believe me I tried - all would be well. In fact there was an inverse relation between effort and outcome: the more hours spent scrubbing the long words, jargon and qualifications from the text the more likely it was that the whole thing would fall to tatters in the end. It is only now, in hindsight, that I can bring myself to admit the terrible truth: academics can't write.

Having read Michael Billig's wonderful new book, *Learn to Write Badly: How to succeed in the Social Sciences*, I think I now know why. It is not that academia necessarily attracts bad writers, or merely fails to teach academics how to write better. It's worse. It is precisely the way academics are trained and told what is expected of them if they wish to succeed, Billig argues, that teaches them rigorously and specifically the art of bad writing. As Billig puts it in his introduction, 'You have to study long and hard to write this badly' (p11).

Billig, a Professor of Social Sciences at Loughborough for more than 25 years, marshals a compelling case. He analyses in detail texts from several social science disciplines, including, devastatingly, his home discipline of social psychology, but the case applies much more broadly to the social sciences as a whole and far beyond.

The main charge is that academia teaches a series of styles and habits

DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV04.2014

which move the researcher as far as possible from the dynamism, clarity and specificity that good writing requires. Among these are the overuse of nouns, especially those ending with '-isation or -ification' - the bigger the better; overreliance on the passive voice, which avoids the tricky task of saying who did what; a tendency both to conceal and exaggerate research findings and, despite claims that a technical vocabulary avoids the indeterminacy of everyday speech and the ideological pitfalls of 'common sense', an almost complete lack of specificity.

His numerous examples are not used to name and shame individuals but to indict the system as a whole. In this looking-glass world, the very brightest, the most garlanded, are the ones who assimilate the bad writing rules most completely; and precious few, and certainly not Billig himself, as he admits, are able to resist the professional pressures that lead to hasty jargon-heavy publication. The failings are not individual but institutional.

Those whose taste runs to irony will especially enjoy the passages on the linguists, 'unable to learn their own lessons', who critically analyse the practice of turning verbs into nouns yet deliver their findings in papers peppered with verbs-turned-nouns like 'de-agentialisation', 'nominalisation' and 'passivization'. Billig is emphatic that he is not anti-theory as such, and he recognises that analysis will often need to develop a distinct technical vocabulary. But his convincing deconstruction of the wildly variant (and even mutually exclusive) uses of the term 'ideational metafunction' in the sociology of education proves his larger point that just because definitions of these terms exist is no guarantee that they will be used consistently. Too often, he argues, such concepts are used ritualistically merely to produce the impression of precision. He does similarly detailed debunking of the overreliance on acronyms and jargon, the use of the passive voice and the treating of sociological concepts as if they were things, parsing texts by some of the superstars of sociology, including Ulrich Beck and Nikolas Rose, and his own mentor Henri Tajfel.

Billig is not the first or only writer to have noticed these tendencies, of course. In his conclusion he makes the obligatory genuflection to Orwell's essay *Politics and The English Language*, and his book covers some of the same ground as Howard Becker's book *Writing for Social Scientists* (1986), though it's less of a cheery how-to guide for students and more a how-not-to guide for tenured dons, with Becker's aw-shucks folksiness replaced by Billig's deadpan mordancy.

But Billig does add something new, convincingly arguing that things have got a good deal worse in recent times. He is right, in my view, to identify the increasing globalisation of education and the consequent commercialisation of the university - where 'success and boasting seem to go hand in hand' and 'big words have become part of the product portfolios we promote' (p5) - as a significant driver. (And yes, I know that these are two big nouns, but Billig is not saying you can't use big nouns at all, just to use them sparingly and

with care.) The simple equation here is that the need to teach increasingly value-sensitive paying students while simultaneously maintaining a career-boosting research profile drives the reliance on bad grammatical habits, empty technical jargon and over-inflated claims. These function both as time-savers and personal academic brands.

There is a grace note of melancholia. It's not quite the longest suicide note in history, but only because, at just over 200 pages, it's not that long. Billig writes as an established Professor who no longer needs to worry about building a career, as if he is getting off his chest a lot of things he could not have said earlier: the academic equivalent of one of those post-sack final columns where the first letter of each line adds up to a final fuck you to the bosses. An image he provides is of himself standing on the hard shoulder of the academic superhighway, as truck after truck of new research thunders by, muttering at the traffic. He doubts if any social scientists will find time to read the book, and doesn't expect much in the way of change even if they did.

But if there is to be change it will have to come from the next generation of scholars, amongst whom (grey hair notwithstanding) I now count myself. Having swapped magazine editing for lecturing on courses with themes like globalisation, convergence, disintermediation and de-westernisation, it could be that I have taken my first steps on the path to a successful career as a bad writer. Maybe Billig could help inoculate me from the worst excesses. It may not be as hard as he thinks to recruit others to his modest proposal that 'now might be the time for simpler language' (p94).

That Dawn to Be Alive

Joseph Darlington

Andrew Gibson, *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012, 326 pp, £70 hardcover

Under the long shadow of postmodernism, the project of assigning any final meaning to history has come to be considered by many as naïve, if not dangerous. A conception of the human story which moves towards a future end point - a final totality associated with Hegel or Marx - is routinely dismissed by both critical theorists and empirical historians alike. Damning such theories at one moment, however, in the next the very same thinkers will replicate narratives of progress and development; statements aligned with a linear model if ever there were. Between such a linear model and pure relativity it falls to critical theory to provide some new alternatives. It is into this space that Andrew Gibson intrepidly goes with his work *Intermittency*.

The new approach to historical reason that Gibson proposes is smuggled out of France in the guise of a review of contemporary continental theorists. However, as Alain Badiou states in both a foreword and a dusk-jacket quotation, it remains 'the most subtle and original study of a crucial orientation' to have been written: suggesting Gibsonian 'intermittency' may become a theory in its own right. Presented through the work of five philosophers (Alain Badiou, Françoise Proust, Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau and Jacques Rancière), the 'intermittent' approach to history is to see it as a series of rupture points, crises, or Events, which shatter an otherwise concrete normality. Drawing on Jambet's conception of esoteric Islam, Gibson suggests these moments to be 'a juddering series of unpredictable and discrete singularities, "the multiplied one", 1X1X1X1X1 …' (p8). History is not linear, like a melody, it is not even staccato, as each of the notes appears in the middle of a profound silence, each representing a new beginning. Once the new moment of history happens, one is then defined in terms of how one relates to the new Event. Gibson fittingly presents each of his five readings as distinct responses to the central insight of the theory of intermittency.

The general outline of the theory will be familiar to readers of Badiou's two-part magnum opus *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, and it is from this philosopher's works that the central concept of intermittency is excavated within the first chapter. Badiou 'rethinks the world from the ground up on the basis of the absolute philosophical privilege of contingency' (p24), re-emerging into ethics, politics and truth through a commitment to the Event. The 'exceptional value' springs from the morass of 'unexceptional non-value' (p52) and it is on these rare occasions, occurring intermittently within history,

 DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV05.2014

that theory and practice unite in authentic response. Such a response is found in Françoise Proust's reading of Kant's 'exceptional value' of the Sublime: 'Critique does not get its truth from history. The historical and critical events are rather two coincident presents' (p80). Kant enters modernity without an end in sight; his 'Enlightenment' is a process of becoming and, through Proust's encounter with the *Critiques*, Gibson aligns it with the project of historical intermittency. This early negotiation of Badiou and Proust's Kant erects the banner under which Gibson will march for the rest of the book: History happens, get used to it.

So how do we get used to it, or, in more academic terms, how is one to align one's subjectivity in response to the Event? Through his readings of Jambet, Lardreau and Rancière, Gibson suggests a number of possible responses, each of which reframes the initial conception of the Event in its elaboration. Christian Jambet's study of Islamic gnosticism presents the most insightful historical example of 'intermittency' in practice. In the medieval Ismaili stronghold of Alamut, society lives in an 'imaginal world' ruled over by an absent God who is 'not of the whole or the One, but of lack'. Through the Ismaili linear history a total stasis comes into effect until, that is, the long awaited messianic moment when divine insight will rend apart society and all shall be set in flux again. Yet none of these messianic moments represents the final end. Each eventually settles into stasis and awaits the next return of divinity. In spite of the apparent conservatism of such a view - justice is only fleeting, and only comes from God - Gibson argues, through Jambet, that the very possibility of infinite illumination and truth which the Ismailis await is a radical break from both the Shi'a and Sunni traditions which eventually invade and dismantle Alamut. These mainstream Islamic traditions, premised on Qur'anic study and dependent upon Imams, maintain permanent historical fixity, where the Ismailis celebrate crisis, rupture, iconoclasm and creation.

In stark contrast to the religious rendering of intermittency, Gibson presents us with two more equal-yet-opposite responses to the Event through the repentant radical Lardreau and the radically egalitarian Rancière. While Lardreau may pursue 'irony' and the care of the self, and Rancière the unmediated egalitarian moment, both are presented in contradistinction to 'the error of any spontaneous and uncritical belief in the masses. The Maoist apotheosis of the uneducated [or else] Marxist condescension' (p159). The ghost at the feast, the absent God of Alamut, is revealed within Gibson's political theorising in the shape of the Lacanian Real. He may begin the work agreeing with Badiou's appraisal of Lacan as an 'anti-philosopher', yet it is the Lacanian assertion that reality is ultimately inconceivable that is revealed as the great trauma driving *Intermittency*. Beyond the pages of Hegel, 'historical reason' appears to be just another set of floating signifiers. One is left wondering how to bring politics into existence in any meaningful manner. The promise that History might not be occurring now but will be occurring soon at least makes possible a contingent politics. It is this gambit which

births Badiou's philosophy, and it is Gibson's work which has foregrounded it as a major philosophical concern of our time.

Being both a scholar of philosophy and literature, Gibson provides examples of each philosopher's theory in fictional practice by engaging with both British (Orwell, Wordsworth) and continental writers (Flaubert, Rimbaud, Kleist, Rosselini, Sebald). 'Literature picks up the loss that others leave in their wake', he argues. 'It opens up events, pays tribute to them … this, too, is a reason for the necessity of literature' (p283). With excellent studies of Joyce and Beckett to his name, Gibson is no slouch when it comes to nuanced close reading. The relative scarcity of actual historical examples of Events, however, which appear bolted-on towards the end of the conclusion ('1261 … 1569-73, 1579-83, 1597-1603 … 1641…1789 …1848 … 1875-91… 1916' (p284)) raise more questions than they answer. Literature is necessary, but should it be privileged over empirical history? One is left with the feeling that this study is not as much concerned with the study of history as it first appears; it is about something maybe more vital. Gibson is confronting the void head-on, demanding that it be possible to grasp history, live it, form it as a material substance. We cannot return to the grand narratives of the early twentieth century, but neither can we afford to linger on in a state of postmodern malaise. It is not a question of capturing history, but of becoming history; something that exists in the moment, in literature, but must forever elude archaeological recovery where it emerges only in fragments. As a concept, 'intermittency' approaches the feeling of history, and it is that daringly subjective notion that historians and critical theorists alike are in need of right now.

Again Antigone

Elena Tzelepis

Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism
Edited by S.E.Wilmer and Audron Žukauskait, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010

The volume of essays *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism* is a profoundly important contribution to the existing scholarship on Sophocles' *Antigone* as well as to philosophy and cultural criticism. In vigorously investigating this tragedy as a site of multiple readings, aesthetics, histories and modernities, the volume enacts in the most eloquent way what it means to critically theorise within the continental tradition. This means to think within difference, that is, within different epistemological perspectives and interpretive dissonances; to inhabit tensions and unresolved struggles over signification; to shed light on the presuppositions and hidden biases of thinking itself; and to think with time, tracing the historicity of ideas, engaging with the present, and mapping a non-teleological future. This is precisely what this volume does. As it lies at the crossroads of philosophy, literary criticism, political and psychoanalytic theory, classical and performance studies, feminist theory, postcolonial studies and art history, it proposes insightful interpretations over the ways in which, to use Luce Irigaray's words in the volume, the myth of Antigone has been embodied in history. Under searching examination are put the biases of the famous interpretations of *Antigone* in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, texts that have situated Antigone, either in the private sphere of domesticity or in the realm of desire. The wager of the volume is to account for the resonances of Sophocles' *Antigone* and of Antigone's character in our contemporary times of the democratic polity. The editors of the volume, ask provokingly in their introduction: "Why *Antigone*? … why does the Antigone character still capture our imagination?" (p1). And yet, as the book demonstrates, this is not a question that waits to be resolved but rather stands as an aporia that enables and structures the possibility of our reflections and actions over and over again.

Suggestive here is Plato's gesture in the *Republic*, his warning of tragic poetry's capability to blur the boundaries between the authorial subject and its objects and so to initiate and propel one 'to become every sort of thing,' a playfulness and imaginativeness that ultimately threatens the moral integrity, stability and political harmony of his utopic society. What happens, then, when thought critically interrogates tragedy, which belongs to eventuality, contingency and possibility? This is the task of the distinguished contributors of the volume, who engage with the Sophoclean tragedy in various registers: as

DOI:10.3898/NEWF.83.REV06.2014

a text, in its hermeneutic or philological dimensions, as an aesthetic form, and as a matrix of psychic phenomena. Theoretical formulations that inform the writings of the volume are Hannah Arendt's figurations on 'naked life', public space and the figure of refugee; Giorgio Agamben's formulations on bare life and 'states of exception'; Jacques Lacan's treatments of 'raw' humanity; Michel Foucault's interconnections of biological rawness and state power relations; Jacques Derrida's insights on responsibility and irresponsibility; J.L. Austin's formulations on performative language, and Judith Butler's renderings on Sophocles Antigone as a crisis of representation.

The essays, twenty-one in number, are grouped in four parts: Philosophy and Politics; Psychoanalysis and the Law; Gender and Kinship and Translations, Adaptations, and Performance. In her piece, Deborah Roberts analyses how the 'Greek word nomos (νόμος) is one of a cluster of words in the play that are both critical and contested, used in different senses at different points or by different characters' (p299). Similarly, nomos - in the form of juridical laws, psychic structures, family customs, translation norms and theatrical conventions - is understood in its constitutive disjunctions, contingencies and instabilities, and thus becomes a recurrent figuration that connects the thematic units and explorations of the volume. In their contributions, Judith Fletcher and Klaas Tindemans further add to the 'precarious power' of law (p169) by treating Creon's and Antigone's laws not as nomos but as *kêrugma*, that is, performative utterances of power and insurgence respectively, which can be potentially ineffective (as in Creon's failure to control his subjects by language and in his doing of the burial that he initially forbade), but also potentially promising in their carrying out new sociopolitical acts (as in Antigone's entrance in the public space and her embodiment of democratic debate).

The storyline of *Antigone* has been repeated in numerous translations, performances and adaptations, in various languages and cultural contexts. In her drastic claim to tend the exposed dead body of her brother Polynices, who has been declared a traitor and thus denied the honour of a proper burial, Antigone enters into an irresolvable and violent conflict with the head of the state - the tyrant of Thebes - and her maternal uncle, Creon. As a result, she is transformed into an enemy of the city and is condemned to be walled alive in a cave. She hangs herself in the tomb, while Creon's son Haemon kills himself out of love for Antigone. Polynices is finally buried by the repentant Creon. In its multiple iterations, the text does not simply become multilingual and international; instead, as Derrida's theorisation of citationality has taught us, it both disengages from its original moment of production, authorised convention and authorial intention, and engenders new historical contexts. In tracing such reiterations, this collection pays attention not only to the original text but also to contemporary adaptations in the context of political theatre in Ireland, Latin America and Africa. Maria Nelli, S. E. Wilmer and Astrid Van Weyenberg point to adaptations of *Antigone* in different geopolitical

situations of crisis. Antigone is rewritten as the political activist imprisoned in the apartheid Robben Island prison (*Island*, devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Nshona); the IRA prisoner in Northern Ireland who dies on hunger strike demanding his status as a political prisoner (in Seamus Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*); the 'disappeared' in Buenos Aires (*Antígona Furiosa* by Griselda Gambaro); and the homeless in New York (Janusz Glowacki's *Antigone in New York*). While the textual elements of the tragedy mark the materiality of language and its travels and transformations in new translations and through various adaptations, as Deborah Roberts and Sean Kirkland analyse, the aesthetics of the staging of the tragedy renews its political significance, and this is what Erika Fischer-Lichte and María Nelli illustrate in their chapters.

Noticeably, while the distinction between the tragic figure of Antigone and the play from which she emerges is rather confused in the essays, it is perhaps the character of Antigone that emerges as more pronounced in this merger. Ultimately, as Ahuvia Kahane explicates, it is Antigone's *atê* that is at the centre, yet this *atê* is 'the "whole drama" that surrounds the figure of Antigone at its center' (Kahane, p159). Antigone is emphatically treated with polysemia and so she is represented as a figure of abjection whose vulnerability promises a new political order; performative agency; alternative kinship; and 'unspoken' laws which do not separate civil and religious duties. Also, she stands for the excluded whose present absence is constitutive of the social; she signals the violated female body as well as the exiled and disenfranchised minor who claims her right to political belonging. The volume instigates a thorough discussion of Antigone's political (re)signification. What kinds of redefinition of the political does Antigone point to? How does Antigone radicalise the political so as to reinvent it beyond the horizon of the established matrix of intelligibility? Tina Chanter, Cecilia Sjöholm and Audronė Žukauskaitė point to the polis as the biopolitical site in which Antigone constitutes the irreducible limit of humanity: the marked and dreaded Other who is banished from the political domain as female body, as foreign body, as mere body, and, at the same time, represents the abject ground on which the 'body politic' claims to be constituted. How to deal with a public sphere that dismisses certain forms of life and relatedness as unviable? How are we to imagine the social conditions of livability through the figure of Antigone? As the authors explore such questions, they ask the critical question of who belongs to the polis and who does not; who is included and at what price. What they seem to suggest is that Antigone calls for a deconstructive redefinition of the contours of the political in ways that are responsive to the policed exclusions and abjections that constitute it as such. In the line of Antigone's an*other* kind of politics, Eugene O' Brien, Terry Eagleton, Mark Griffith and Calum Neill describe Antigone's ethical gesture of defying the state law and burying her brother as deconstructing the law. In their account, Antigone reinvents the political but also moral, sexual, and kinship laws beyond rules, and she bespeaks a certain disposition of the self towards the other; she becomes responsible

and response-able to the face of her br(other). In other words, she submits to a moral law that is detached from the empirical world for the disinterested love of the other in its difference and irreducible singularity.

How can the arrival of the other, of the dead Polynices, be fully and effectively received, however? Is Antigone's mourning a passive and legitimate lament, a proper language-in-the-feminine, as, according to Martina Meyer, the classical and modern visual tradition predicates? Or is hers an event of protest as she leaves the domestic domain to publicly claim the body of an enemy? Where is Antigone speaking from? Is she the representative of a maternal genealogy and culture - a figure that values life and generation as opposed to the inheritance of goods, functions and names - as Luce Irigaray suggests in her contribution? Is she emerging from the matrixial space that, according to Bracha Ettinger, connects siblings beyond life and time? Or, as Liz Appel suggests, does she erase her own genealogy and 'represent an origin from nowhere'? (p235). Isabelle Torrance inquires about the kind of special sexual relationship between Antigone and her brother. One might further build upon this line of questioning and ask: Is death sexually marked? Can we think of sexual difference in terms of finitude? How to ask the question about the sexual difference of death and the death of sexual difference? Can we also think sexual difference in terms of the possibility of impossibility as aporia, or as Jacques Derrida wonders in *Aporias*, is death the absolutely singular occurrence - the only possibility of the impossible? To ask these questions is to think of being a desiring and desired body in the world, up-until-death.

In encountering diverse interpretative formulations of Antigone, the volume succeeds in tracing the ways in which the passionate claim of Antigone is reinvented in multiple contexts of gender/sexual culture, national positionality, colonial and postcolonial history. These multiple and antinomical Antigones embody different responses to the call of the other, and, most significantly, to the call of the unfamiliar other, the 'stranger'.