The Insistent Poetics of Relation

Shahidha Bari

Moten, Fred, *Stolen Life*, Duke University Press, 2018, 336 pp; paperback $27.95; Moten, Fred, *The Universal Machine*, Duke University Press, 2018, 336pp; paperback $27.95.

consent not to be a single being is the evocative title of Fred Moten's trilogy of works about black life, critical race theory, philosophy and politics. The trilogy, now complete with the publication of these latest two instalments, is an eclectic rhapsody, alluringly poetic, demandingly philosophical and playfully colloquial by turns. It is what you might expect from Moten, who is a poet as well as professor of performance studies at New York University, a scholar as devoted to music as he is to phenomenology. His touchstones are as likely to be John Coltrane and 90s rapper Wyclef Jean as they are Octavia Butler, Angela Davis, Jacques Derrida, Avital Ronell, Homi Bhabha and Hortense Spillers. All three volumes are full of complex enquiry and driven by Moten's piercingly original intelligence. They are also idiosyncratic in the extreme and challenging to read. Moten pursues his often circuitous intellectual enquires through connective leaps, and subtle readings, revisions and interpolations are the substance of his thought.

The general title is a good example of this. 'Consent not to be a single being' is a passing remark Moten takes from Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who observes the irony of crossing the Atlantic on a luxury ship while being a scholar of the transatlantic slave trade. For Moten, too, the term 'consent' can be ironised and inverted. In his understanding, it no longer signals agreement or even an act. Instead, consent describes a condition. It refers to the collective inheritance of involuntary passage and the necessity of understanding that experience as an existential phenomena. 'Consenting not to be a single being' is also a methodological imperative for Moten. It is another way of describing the insistent poetics of relation that is his preferred mode of thinking.

It is the poetics of relation that enable Moten to perform the kind of complex intellectual manoeuvres that made the first volume, *Black and Blur* so remarkable. There, Moten powerfully reflected on 'Aunt Hester's scream' as the articulation of sexual violence in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. There, too, he offers an audacious reading of the 1998 R&B classic 'Ghetto Supastar', performed by Pras, Ol' Dirty Bastard, and Mýa. The song, he explained, was an 'interpolation' of Barry Gibbs's 'Islands in the Stream', originally recorded by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, which is given a 'life-giving and anticipatory revision' by the remix. The pleasure and questioning prompted by the song allows Moten

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to develop an idea of a radical black and Marxian interpellation.

The latest two volumes of the trilogy are similarly marked by this audacious facility for insight born of adjacency – the registers of different art forms always available for philosophical illumination. In *Stolen Life* – the second volume – Moten sets out on an expansive exploration of blackness and black life, crossing from technical considerations of Kant and readings of Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative to more local discussions of academic freedom and pedagogy. The essays feel wildly disparate but at the heart of the book is a continuous concern with dispossession and this lends it coherence. What is it to be given 'something to hold, always in common' Moten muses at the beginning of the book, and how could that ever be possible if your inheritance is the legacy of enslavement and disenfranchisement? He describes himself as 'I who have nothing, I who am no one, I who am not one', writing with conceptual elegance and affective power. Blackness is, he explains, a theory of 'surreal presence', the something that is *not*, in between 'the thing itself' of Kantian deduction and the 'nothing' of Heideggerian philosophy. Here, Moten reveals a virtuosic ability to riff and refine, pressing forward new formulations and finding dissatisfactions with old concepts. In Kant's framework, the 'raced figure' is both not human and nothing other than human – that which maintains the distinction and poses the danger of its collapse too.

In the more explicitly political essays, Moten can be cogent and provocative. A short thought piece titled 'Rilya Wilson. Precious Doe. Buried Angel', reflects on the death of three different children recorded as images in various news stories: a photograph of a five-year old named Rilya Wilson, missing from her Florida foster home, whose mother, a former crack addict, explains that the letters of her name are an acronym for 'remember, I love you always'; an unnamed young girl found mutilated and decapitated in Kansas City whose imagined 'face' is reconstructed by computer and given the moniker 'Precious Doe'; and the image of a Palestinian girl, her lifeless body emerging from rubble, titled 'Buried Angel'. These are disappearances, he argues, 'decreed by racist, imperial power even before their deaths'. It's a forceful, controversial assertion, and Moten is unwilling to temper his criticism with polite philosophical restraint. Instead, he reaches to Toni Morrison whose *Beloved* and *Dreaming of Emmett* anticipates the reality of these child deaths. Moten takes their strange titles – Rilya Wilson, Precious Doe, Buried Angel – as symbolic of their fugitive existence, fleeting, distorted and lost in the bigger historical record. And yet in that historical record, the figure of the dead black child repeatedly surfaces and is forgotten, to the point of exhaustion, Moten reminds us.

Entirely different in register, Moten's essay 'Air Shaft, Rent Party' – which begins bombastically, 'I'm here to announce that the formation of a new political party is serially announced' – is a piece of mischief, deliriously mocking the desperation of the politically dispossessed. The new party, he

jokes, is 'not the grand old party' and more like a 'house party', except it is precisely for those to whom house ownership could only ever be a wild impossibility. There is a similar levity to a letter addressed to his students, in which Moten declares jubilantly 'I think I figured out what my job is', before instructing his students' to experiment with their assignments. Teaching should be, he explains, a 'disorganisation'. And so, pedagogy, too, is the object of his analysis. In particular, Moten remarks on the special reflexivity of critical black studies and how it points to the systematic 'denial of access to subjectivity by way of exemplary assertions of subjectivity'. It's a brilliant insight. By contrast. Moten who mostly writes with assurance and agility, strikes a false note in a fulsome encomium to his colleague, Avital Ronnell. It feels misjudged in this collection – a piece of collegial flattery that plays on Derridean inscription and telephone metaphors, incapable of extending its knowing in-jokes beyond itself, and it sits awkwardly in an otherwise dignified collection.

The final volume of the trilogy – *The Universal Machine* – returns to more solid ground, as Moten presents three essays on Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Frantz Fanon. Here, blackness both poses a challenge to philosophy and revitalizes it. The reading of Levinasian ethics next to the work of artist William Kentridge is original (if hard to follow). More compelling is the critique he issues about Arendt, pointing to her 'profound misunderstanding of black insurgency'. In Arendt, he recognises a troubling academic monolith – taken too readily by scholars as a supreme intelligence. This 'supremacy' is not far from a 'supremacist thinking', he observes. It's a startling argument, but Moten is determined to strip us of easy illusions. He locates Arendt in the context of the Chicago that would become her post-war sanctuary, whilst also insisting we place her in conversation with her contemporary Chicagoans, singer-songwriter, Curtis Mayfield, jazz composer Anthony Braxton, and prominent African American leader James Forman. Next to their ardent commitment to African American civil rights, Arendt appears as figure of patrician disdain, demonstrating what Moten calls a 'managerial distaste' for black students and their experience. When Arendt dismisses the 'clearly silly and outrageous demands of negro students' in *On Violence*, Moten reads her as an 'upwardly mobile 'voluntary' immigrant, turned citizen' whose obligation as such is 'to put black people in their place'. It's a striking intervention and Moten is unhesitating in making it.

Altogether, the two volumes confirm Moten's ability to turn discomfort into rewarding observation, the tenacious questioning and examination that invariably yields insight. The last essay on Fanon investigates the question 'What is the matter with black folk?' tracking how what is claimed in the name of blackness is cast as a disorder. 'Some folks relish being a problem', he laughs, affectionately naming the writer Amiri Baraka, and his own peer Nikhil Pal Singh. But it's an insight that moves into poetic melancholy and a meditation on what it means to be a dispossessed people, with nothing to

hold. 'It is terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation', he writes. This is a bravura work, that insists on blackness as property that cannot be held other than in an 'open collective being'. Reading it, it is impossible to deny that Moten's fiercely committed and demanding work is setting out to into these waters with intelligence and daring.

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An historically conjunctural phenomenon

Jacob McGuinn

Marjorie Levinson, *Thinking Through Poetry: Field Reports on Romantic Lyric*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 352pp; £60 cloth

Form and history might be considered incompatible in lyric poetry. Indeed, recent debate over lyric genre can be abstracted as a debate about history as a form of 'compatibility'. To the extent that lyric formalises its materials it makes them less historical, less like themselves, more lyrical. Lyric designates incompatibility, this lack of fit, between the constraints of form and the requirements of historical representation.[1] Or, lyric traces its own technical history which might intersect with, but is not necessarily identical with, history itself.[2] This question of compatibility is of between two different systems, or two versions of systematicity. What is commensurable between the system of historical representation and the systematicity of lyric form: what could sonic, melodic, rhythmic, or visual poetic patterns – poetic material – capture of historical material? I want to follow this question of the compatibility of form and history, and of form and material, by thinking about that connection itself. What is the 'compatibility' which lyric puts into question? What is it to think, to turn to Marjorie Levinson's book, *through* poetry? In a series of essays on Romantic poetry and critical theory, by reconsidering their systematicity, Levinson's *Thinking Through Poetry* offers one way to think about those different systems – history and form – in common. Rather than being the organising container for material, Levinson's form is a system of materialisation itself. Understanding this means accounting for the kinds of mediation which lyric form makes available. I want to suggest that this attention to mediation allows us to think how history *materialises* in lyrical form.

Reviewing this argument in a book as richly expansive as Levinson's will require me to be selective. I shall follow the way the question of history leads Levinson to the idea of materialisation as 'conjunction', a process of critical differentiation which is folded into lyric's systematic materialisation. This seems to me important, firstly, for lyric theory, and – because of the nature of the theory of lyric Levinson proposes – important also for the ways this lyric theory rearranges a critical theory which would read it.

The first link in this plot concerns history as a non-causative system of conjunctions.[3] Levinson's book performs this system. Encompassing essays from 1989's 'The New Historicism' to the present, *Thinking Through Poetry* consists in 'reports on the Romantic lyric' over a thirty-year period. How the book accesses and reflects on its own materials and procedures is therefore significant. Re-framing these essays purports to place them on the kind of horizontal axis of interpretation for which the book advocates. Rather

1. See Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (eds), *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014; see also *PMLA*, 123, 1 2008, pp181-310.

2. See Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015.

3. Like the 'new materialists', Levinson here follows Louis Althusser's 'The underground current of the materialism of the encounter' in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, (trans.) G. M. Goshgarian, London and New York, Verso, 2006, pp163-207.

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than a progressive, vertical elaboration of an idea, the book proposes to think about the 'conjunctures' of these essays in its organisational frame. That is to say, the book's *form* incorporates – quite literally – the *history* it recounts. But it also reconceptualises it in ways that put pressure on the concept of history.

Chapter two, 'The New Historicism' (1989), in this sense re-evaluates its own historicism: the question of the commensurability of the present of reading with the past it might hope either to capture or articulate. In the new frame of the book, this evaluation is exposed to a new conjuncture:

> The key axiom is that the material (and/or nature) – its provenance, locus, content, and effects – is neither an essence nor a social construction (as in, either a hegemonic or consensual projection) but a historically conjunctural phenomenon in the sense of an objective convergence of historical forces. […] every act of materialist critique must first labour to determine what matters (which is to say, how matter materialises) within a given conjuncture (p2).

Thinking material as a 'historically conjunctural phenomenon' means thinking it together with history. The framing thus performatively differentiates *Thinking Through Poetry*'s 'history' from the commitments redeployed in the second chapter. There, 'our reluctance to relate ourselves by difference to the objects we study is an attempt to save the present and its subjectivity from objectification by a critically transformed past' (p37). The present is redeemed by a 'textualised' past, articulating 'the literatures of the past in such a way as to accommodate the contingencies of the present' (p37). This re-articulation is motivated by 'the structure of the past as an absent cause' constructed 'only by the retroactive practice of the present. Our totalizing act thus becomes part of the movement by which history continually reorganizes itself' (p38). The 'field-theory of reading' (p272) of *Thinking Through Poetry*'s framing is not a re-inscription of an absent cause, but the registration of the absence of cause in the present of reading. The 'New Historicism' essay is interesting, then, for the way it displaces itself. It is not tenable to continue the activity of that kind of New Historicism merely by increasing the range of factors it includes. The point is instead that the structural absence of cause, once in need of redemption by its incorporation into the present, is here more fully incorporated into a concept of history without that reading redeeming it. The past does not need to be textualised; nor, in fact, do its totalisations need to be resisted. Instead, Levinson demonstrates the totalising force of that non-causative systematicity. The totalities resisted by New Historicism are reframed in a different concept of form.

Levinson makes this connection in the chapter 'New Formalism' (2007). She pushes against a notion of 'form as organic and totalizing, a fantasy

machinery for converting fact into symbol, leaving no remainder and no marks of labour' (p153). It was precisely this absenting of labour which alienated historicising criticism from its object's history, and which motivated the turn to New Historicism as redeeming its own manipulations of its object by becoming itself the object of that past. But if New Historicism 'continually reorganizes itself' along with its historical object, then its organisation implies a theory of form for which it does not explicitly account. Historicist criticism cannot be identical with its object, 'total', because if it were so then it would not be susceptible to reorganisation by it. But positing its own non-identity with its object means also positing some absence of the object in the critical present, some phantom-object. The problem of New Historicism turns into the problem of form: how to model self-organising *difference*. How should reading reflect the vacuums it identifies in that organisation?

This question of history thus bears upon the question of form. The problem of thinking history's absent cause in a text turns into the problem of thinking the non-causative, agentless, but agent-like processes of materialisation in a text. This is not a question of redeeming an absent cause, but rather of thinking how a text functions without causative processes, compelling a 'swerve from history to thought as the dynamically materializing agent in our acts of knowing' (p69). We are compelled to think, as postclassical science thinks, the ways 'agentless processes give rise to effects that behave as agents' (p134). This means turning away from history as a determining context of literature to history as a field of conjunctions immanent with, and folded into, a text. This is where lyric is helpful. Lyric constitutes a 'through' point of text and reading which includes reading not as a context but as part of the materialising process of the text. This mediality, lyric's 'complex self-organizing system' (p262), is modelled in the post-organic systematicity of evolutionary biology. The organism as a 'middle term' between species and genes is connected with genre as a 'midlevel' critical concept that activates a textual conjunction. The organism focuses both a genetic past and future as the 'through' point of their mediation. Just so, as a generic critical concept, lyric mediates both a poem's past and the future into which reading reflects it. Thinking 'through' poetry thus means reflecting on the thoroughness invoked – which means thinking of reading as a process of mediation and materialisation.

Reading activates the conjunctions of a given poetic field. Genre enables this by offering a form of conjuncture, a 'through point'. So in 'lyric' poems' suspension of 'closures', 'any and every structuring possibility remains alive. No feature becomes extra-systematic until its polysystematic possibilities have been exhausted (which is, never) (p279)'. Such a system 'is not a thing at all, but a dynamics for bringing forth thing-like ensembles from elaborately meshed environments' (p280). Reading is part of this dynamic process. Levinson describes how such reading would be something like a 'whirlpool': constituted only by the difference it makes with its environment,

which it nonetheless, systematically, as water, is. A poem is thus the difference it constitutes with its environment, which is also reading. The problem of context, of differentiating text from history, is thus sidestepped when 'the whirlpool suddenly emerges as a determinate form and in the same stroke brings into being its enabling context':

> we have a model of organized, evolving, productive, selective activity absent symbolization, absent any centring of causality as source, action, or location (such as inside or outside), and absent any teleological or normative endpoint. The self-organizing whirlpool thus offers a picture of an imminent, non-dualistic history of becoming (p276).

In its 'whirlpool' systematicity, 'the artwork not only materialises in a given context, it materialises that context' (p290). The differentiation of past from present which legitimised New Historicism is instead referred to the coproduction of literature with its experience, 'thinking' as a 'process of ecological self-assembly' (p282). The poem is the difference it makes with its material, which it also is. Neither a normative, regulative, or negative concept, form is instead a suspension of given matter and its present context, in which that context-matter takes shape. The poem's substance, in this sense, *is* the way its provisional present signals its possible transformation in reading, and *is* the way such transformation remains the provisional possibility of more reading.

Levinson describes reading's organisation with its object as this involution of historical and formal materialisation. Form and history do not organise their materials *vertically* but *medially*, just as poetry, a 'self-organizing system':

> produces the components that produce it – not as a once-and-for-all event but through the ongoing behaviour of the system. What makes such systems creative (and not just infinite regress machines) is that the production of components not only composes the system's environment, it ceaselessly renegotiates the boundaries of that environment (p248).

Criticism's work consists in repeatedly making the field of the poem visible as a conjuncture. Criticism is thus still motivated by history, but no longer as vertical system. Levinson's systematicity is not only compatible with lyric articulations – the somatic features of poetics – but immanent to them because it is the systematicity of materialisation. In such 'recursive' reading:

Form is an effect of the poem's behaviour within an environment that is not the world referenced by and also in the poem, but that exists in the exact same space as the poem […] the production of components not only composes the system's environment, it ceaselessly renegotiates the boundaries of that environment (p248).

The virtuality of form – a poem's dynamic nonidentity with its environment – is under 'ceaseless' negotiation. So is its life. This is the 'Still – ceaselessly

ongoing – life' (p250) implied by poetry. Poetry's provisional postulation of material identity in language is the form of life it organises, implies, and folds, as in a field, and reading is the animation of this field in an ecology which neither identifies its constituents, nor identifies their outcomes.

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New Narrative Maternity

Claire Finch

Hélène Cixous, *Mother Homer is Dead*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 136 pages; Hardback, £80.00.

It is past time to rethink the maternal in literature. Which means pulling writing about maternity and the figure of the mother out of biological essentialism-ridden aporias characterized by breast milk, docility, and the womb. French author Hélène Cixous's *Mother Homer is Dead*, which traces maternity through the end-of-life process of accompanying a dying parent, is a good ally in this project. As the book's publication in Edinburgh University Press's 'The Frontiers of Theory' series indicates, it is not only of interest to scholars of maternity in literature, but also for anyone interested in studying the hybrid fiction-theory works that are central to the aesthetics of contemporaneity. It is also an important book for those interested in experimental writing, pointing to the close ties between French texts and Anglophone avant-garde practices. Indeed, reading Cixous in English is not the same as reading her in French. Peggy Kamuf's translation of the 2014 *Homère est morte* ...,[1] like the best English translations of Cixous's work, dislocates her writing from the heavily coded and stereotyped radical feminism with which she is most often associated in France. We get an experimental prose that makes it easy to see the links between Cixous's work and experimental writing in an Anglophone tradition, suggesting that new readings of Cixous can work to reveal how she fits into a lineage with writers such as Lyn Hejinian, Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, and Dodie Bellamy. For these reasons, *Mother Homer is Dead* is a stimulating and necessarily addition to the existing English-language translations of the French author Hélène Cixous's massive body of work.

1. Hélène Cixous, *Homère est morte* ..., Paris, Galilée, 2014.

Throughout *Mother Homer is Dead* the roles oscillate between mother and daughter, as Cixous accompanies her mother through the process of dying. She describes this accompaniment to death as midwifing, a deliberate reversal of her mother's long career as a midwife. The mother becomes both a baby to be delivered and a body that needs to deliver, while Cixous takes the roles of parent and guide, responding in the affirmative as her mother begins to refer to her as *Maman*. The mother-daughter dualism is further complicated through the close physical proximity that the two share, described as a physical love that denies the rigid behaviours of the nuclear family. This intimacy culminates in a final voracious scene of love: '… and then I covered her entirely with a fabric of kisses finally I could kiss her everywhere without her screaming with pain, it had been months that I had had this miserable hunger, I painted her whole envelope of spotted skin with very light touches from my tongue, I scattered an avid, immense love it's the first time I can…'

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(p121). Through its unconventional depiction of the mother-daughter relationship, *Mother Homer is Dead* gives us a powerful corrective to several of the less accurate readings of Cixous that circulate in both Anglophone and Francophone feminist contexts. Namely, that her writing is invested in an essential femininity, that her innovations are theoretical and not literary, that all of her work is animated by an outdated binary framework invested in biological sexual difference. These readings are largely based on interpretations of Cixous's work produced in the mid-1970s in France and translated into English in the 1980s, including *The Laugh of the Medusa*, her well-known essay in feminist and literary studies that that theorises 'écriture féminine'.[2]

In the French context, these readings of Cixous are the result of years of contentious divides within feminisms, both the activist and the university versions. These divides are heightened by a continuing lack of institutional support for feminist analysis that pits existing feminist writers, scholars, and activists against one another in a series of territorial debates. One effect has been that much feminist work from the 1970s has been categorized as essentialist, radical and reductive, the antithesis of more recent emerging work in queer and decolonial studies. Applying this interpretation to Cixous's work both overlooks the anti-humanist and anti-colonial project that animates even her earliest work, including her many collaborations with Jacques Derrida, and it overlooks all of her literary production between the mid-1970s and today. In an Anglophone context, Cixous was taken up, along with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, by feminist theorists striving to apply the period's post-structuralist French thought to Anglophone debates on the links between sex, subjectivity, and identity. Cixous offered Anglophone feminists a way to think about 'feminine writing' within an ongoing history of philosophical work striving to interrogate Western reason and its innately coded hierarchies and binaries. Yet her production was often analysed for its theoretical rather than literary experiments, and she remained firmly classed as someone who writes about women. This is in stark contrast to both her academic contemporaries such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Jacques Lacan, who were categorized as theorists interested in questions of modernity and power more generally, and to her literary contemporaries such as Monique Wittig or Chantal Chawaf, recognized as brilliant experimentalists.

As an alternative to these reductive ways in which we often read Cixous, *Mother Homer is Dead* gives us both an example of Cixous's literary writing that is not at all like the trippy, lyrical, James-Joyce-style mid-1970s work that she is often associated with, and a decidedly non-stereotypical theory of the maternal in literature. We end up with a hybrid poetics that challenges the categories of autobiographical and autofictional writing. We also get a theory of the maternal in literature that isn't dominated by the heavily connoted female fluids. Rather, maternity is depicted as a diffuse textual unity that offers relief to the aging and decomposing body. I would argue that this

2. Hélène Cixous (trans) Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1976, pp875-893.

Cixousian imaginary, characterized by both a strange self-oriented poetics and a version of maternity based on the end as opposed to the beginning of life is emblematic of our actual moment. I say this reading the 'now' in line with Jacob Lund and Geoff Cox's 'The Contemporary Condition' book series, published with Sternberg Press, which defines contemporaneity as attached 'clusters' of material and temporality.[3]

In their 1985 text 'Sexual Linguistics', a key document in feminist literary studies, Sander Gilbert and Susan Gubar run through the fluids associated with the most visible French feminist thinkers at the time. While they read Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray as advancing an incorporated writing that blends multiple female sex organs and writing instruments, they describe Cixous's version of incorporated writing as something between vomit and blood.[4] This reading is entirely different to the stereotypical version that we often get of fluids that signal 'female' writing: milk, menstrual blood. Cixous's combination blood-vomit is much more about mutation, a disorganized transformation of the body guided by intersecting flows. *Mother Homer is Dead* explicitly continues this motif, as Cixous repeatedly puts her mother's drawn-out hospice practice in parallel with Edgar Allan Poe's gore classic 'The Fact of the Case of M. Valdmar'. In Poe's story, a man dies under hypnosis and finds himself in a kind of suspended animation. He begs to be released, and when he is finally liberated from the hypnosis he immediately liquefies, leaving a mass of putrid matter on the bed in one of Poe's more descriptive abject moments. Cixous's meticulous recording of the dying process is meant as an antidote to Poe's putrefaction. The book as a whole works to gather memories of the mother, both grieving them and saving them from disintegration into forgetfulness. 'Remain with me, remains of Maman,' writes Cixous (p2). When the final moment does come, it is experienced not as the dreaded rush of degraded material in Poe's story, but an 'exsanguination' or gushing of blood that's textured by deep love, years of companionship, shared experience, and textual flows. 'It's Maman who is flowing out of me. I exsanguinate' (p121). In line with Gilbert and Gubar's reading of feminism and fluids in 'Sexual Linguistics', this final mother-daughter connection is not mappable onto an assigned female anatomy. Instead, it is blood, memory, a unifying texture more than a shared material, and non-gendered.

Thinking of the maternal in *Mother Homer is Dead* as a unifying literary force, as a texture instead of a gendered fluid, allows us to put Cixous's version of a bloody, unifying textual flow in parallel with New Narrative and its affiliated experimental writing, in this case, Eileen Myles and Dodie Bellamy. Specifically, the parallel that the poet Myles makes between barf and her writing process in the prose poem 'Everyday Barf',[5] taken up again by experimental New Narrative writer Dodie Bellamy in her *Barf Manifesto*.[6] In both texts, the authors theorise experimental writing as a texture that is made up of multiple sources and flows of information, united by their common (in) digestion. Because we're talking about vomit, the image of digestion remains

3. The collection, which currently includes thirteen titles, began in 2016 with the publication of essays by Terry Smith, Jussi Parikka, and Geoff Cox & Jacob Lund. Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition*, Berlin, 2016; Jussi Parikka, *A Slow, Contemporary Violence*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016; Geoff Cox & Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016.

4. Sandra M Gibert and Susan Gubar, 'Sexual linguistics: gender, language, sexuality', *The New Literary History*, 1985, pp515-543, p518.

5. Eileen Myles, 'Everyday barf', *Sorry, Tree*, Seattle, Wave, 2007.

6. Dodie Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, Brooklyn, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2008.

messy, the external material of literature does not fully assimilate into the body. There is always a wrench in the machine. From this spew come the unruly collages and pairings that make up our sense of self in the world, as Myles and Bellamy intimate, in a continuation of Cixous's ongoing literary and philosophical project. For all three authors it is a messy but singular self for which we attempt to find a form, casting and recasting this form in experimental text. *Mother Homer is Dead* gives us a vibrant example of hybrid form. It hauls Hélène Cixous's writing out of the trap of the essential 'feminine' and into a key position as a central driving force in avant-garde writing. Placing Cixous in this legacy is productive because it works against a common practice in literary theory: that of placing writers coded as feminist in the no-exit zone of 'female' or 'maternal' writing, obscuring the enormous impact that these writers had and continue to have on avant-garde and experimental writing more generally.

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An Indomitable Humanism

Elliot Ross

Gopal, Priyamvada, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonialism and the Making of British Dissent*. London, Verso, 2019, 624pp; Hardback, £25.00.

This is an essential contribution to the study of anticolonial thought. Priyamvada Gopal, a formidable voice of the British left today, draws together a meticulous (though inevitably not exhaustive) anthology of anticolonial agitation and aspiration as expressed, circulated, contested and refined within the ambit of British imperial expansion since the mid-nineteenth century. The rebels and revolutionaries of *Insurgent Empire* are found fomenting the Indian 'mutiny' of 1857, rising up in Jamaica at Morant Bay in 1865, and waging guerilla war in the cause of land and freedom in 1950s Kenya. They are also to be found organising, forming alliances and theorising in London, where much of the second half of the book unfolds in its account of the work and thought of organisations such as the League Against Imperialism and the British Labour Party and individuals such as Shapurji Saklatvala, Claude McKay, George Padmore, and C.L.R. James. There are also detailed accounts of the radicalisation of white liberal figures such as Wilfried Blunt, Fenner Brockway and Margery Perham. Blunt's exposure to anticolonial Egyptian thought of the late 19th Century leads him to the feeling 'that in all my thought of freeing and reforming the East I had begun at the wrong end' (p137). In this way, Gopal works through the historic proof on the basic humanist insight that people learn, rearrange their ideas, change their minds. There is much here for other scholars to build on, as well as an exemplary application of literary critical tools to historical problems.

The book's most important finding is that colonised peoples have made an indispensable contribution to how radical modes of freedom have been imagined across a transnational dissident tradition routed through London by the fact of British imperial expansion. 'It was black insurgency,' Gopal writes, 'that made space for a radical "us" that crossed both racial lines and the boundary between colony and metropole' (p89). Gopal shows that theories of freedom have been worked out in context and shaped by specific local contingencies, but that the force of anticolonial movements has been strongest where dissent at specific national or regional injustices has connected with international freedom struggles. Gopal's study counters the popular chauvinistic story of freedom in its modern form as an idea whose intellectual development took place in Europe before being conferred upon non-European peoples gradually through the offices of colonial rule and the expansion of capitalist economic and social relations through which the 'native' was to be disciplined first as a worker labouring within a period of

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colonial tutelage and only later – at an always unspecified future date – to gain membership in what Martin Carter once called aspirationally 'a free community of valid persons'. The book also demolishes a commonplace argument made by British imperial apologists that moral and political criticism of Empire is anachronistic because such critique doesn't adequately correspond with the putatively monolithic 'standards of the time'. *Insurgent Empire* proves that, at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century (and surely much further still), British colonial domination has been subject to sustained dissent, however marginalised that tradition has frequently found itself to be in relation to Britain's most powerful political and cultural institutions. Colonialism's ostensible beneficiaries were able to learn from this oppositional tradition, and many did so.

There are very few works by contemporary scholars that can stand beside Gopal's book in terms of depth and quality of scholarship across so wide a range of contexts and traditions. One thinks of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), and of Brent Hayes Edwards' study of black internationalism, *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), but one also looks further back to parts of C.L.R. James' ouevre, such as *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938), for companion volumes that reproduce for their readers an archive of anticolonial thought as rich and diverse as the primary material to be found in the pages of *Insurgent Empire*. The British Empire provides her overarching framework, rather than a more elastic transnational concept such as diaspora or an area studies approach, and the book will surely be regarded as a classic within Anglophone and especially British postcolonial studies, which has after all tended to find its strongest contributions when working through difficult juxtapositions between modes of thought arising from distant political and cultural contexts, as Gopal's study does so adroitly.

Gopal writes that her project emerged as a response to the experience of being pressed into service as a presumptive sparring partner for the kind of Empire apologia that BBC Radio 4 indulges with some regularity. Perhaps because of her position as a Reader in English at Cambridge – exalted among universities – Gopal has become the special obsession of a predictable cadre of well-watered, right-wing white male academics and journalists. Within British higher education, no other scholar that has been subjected to an equivalent level of personal attacks in high-profile media outlets over the past decade. This book is a most generous reply, shaped by an indomitable humanism.

Elliot Ross holds a PhD from Columbia University. His writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and the *Washington Post*.