



MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY
POETRY AND POETICS

Communism
and
Poetry
Writing Against Capital

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The Other Minimal Demand

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Chris Nealon I thought I'd begin with some thoughts about our original proposal for this volume. I was thinking about our overlapping but non-identical points of entry to the question of poetry and politics. I mean I'm basically a humanist, and you're pretty committed to a version of anti-humanism. But when it comes to poetry, neither one of us really believes in an a priori politics of poetic form, where radical juxtaposition, or parataxis, or deliberately damaged fluency necessarily translates into solidarity or action. Neither one of us believes in a special leadership role for poets in the revolution or in the breakdown, though I hope it's true that we're both still moved enough by good poetry that we want to see it being written throughout whatever transition is upon us. And when it comes to understanding capitalism, neither one of us is persuaded by attempts to periodize the recent past by way of biopolitics or neoliberalism or affective or immaterial labor, or any of a number of other ontologically-driven accounts of what's specific about capital today. It seems we're both more attracted to accounts produced by historians and activists than by

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philosophers. More than that, it seems to me we're both persuaded by a description of "secular stagnation" in which the profitability of capitalist investment is not going to be able to reach mid-century peaks again, however violent its attempts to paywall and police us into making those rates of return. And with a small but growing number of friends and comrades and fellow travelers, it seems we're committed to foregrounding the ways in which exclusion from the wage, or expulsion from the wage relation, is at the center of the story of the struggles of the present. In particular, I feel like we're both pretty committed to developing a clear, shareable story about how racism and patriarchy and sexuality and colonial subjugation, for instance, are not parallel historical developments, but part of a single history. I can't speak for you, but I am deeply grateful to the scholars and revolutionaries who have helped me see this in the 1980s—and see it again, more clearly, in the last several years.

Recently, I've been trying to unpack the genealogy of the structures of feeling around negativity in academic literary criticism, how its version of militancy has come to feel sour, to me. I don't think of you as doing that, by the way—you're too lively and electric a writer, and your heart's too big. But there's another thing I mentioned in passing, which I think is interesting and vexing, and which we haven't had that many chances to discuss: something like, how can I square my interest in the histories of structures of feeling with a desire to learn how to let the data lead? That is, how can I start to read and understand and appreciate and critique and champion poems in a context shaped more fully by an understanding of, say, the shifting composition of the global labor pool, and the shifting composition of what's outside it? We both have partial answers to that, but it's an ongoing project.

Joshua Clover One great pleasure of writing together is the effort to see how our critical axes align. I would begin to frame the same set of questions around a politics of inequality/redistribution, and the limits thereto. I would propose that, as currently constructed in the west, the distinction between socialism and communism is found in the gap between redistributive politics on one side, and on the other a politics which breaks with the very measure of wealth in which "redistribution" has its present meaning. If this distinction between socialism and communism was not as clear for a long period such that they seemed often interchangeable, there is a reason for that. The great vision of a transitional program that oriented

socialist politics for a long century managed to conceive of a politically coordinated unfolding wherein redistribution would follow a relatively nonvolatile course organized by the party on behalf of the masses, managing the risk along the way, until some hypothetical later moment when communism would be able to survive on its own. This path, which set as its practical horizon the seizure of the economy by workers, is what Moishe Postone calls “traditional Marxism,” which effectively preserves capitalist production, preserves the value relation, while reconfiguring distribution of that production process. It could be successfully elided with communism because the trajectory from one to the next seemed *possible*. There were some suggestive examples to hand. Moreover, mass parties premised on orthodox “working-class” participation in production appeared to be the future. Economies were growing; their benefits wanted only reallocation to alleviate mass suffering.

This vision of trajectory and transition is what we have left behind, meaning to or not. Economic growth is over or, worse, implies the end of human survival on the planet. Meanwhile, the historical affordances of the class-mass party sequence are no longer with us. This is one of the real circumstances you designate in recognizing the significance of growing exclusion from the wage, as it was precisely control over wage labor that was to be the great lever of that transitional program. Now the largest and most persuasive socialist party in recent US history, almost 150 years after the first German socialist party, concedes that its quite limited Keynesian-socialist vision is no longer a transitional program but is itself the last stage—that communism is not its goal but its antithesis: a new End-of-History thesis, with social democracy in the place of Fukuyama’s liberalism.

But this is a way of knowing that socialism and communism have diverged. One no longer leads to the other. Not because either one was right or wrong, good or bad, but because the situation itself diverged, at once globally and within class structures. And that sets up an antagonism, whether we want it or not, between conventionally “humanist” feelings about makeable change or immediate amelioration of suffering, and an objective sense of what that can and cannot open onto. The irreconcilability of redistributionist and communist politics is a hard truth that some would prefer to wish away. But it’s also a historical outcome. The churning struggle to increase productivity in all quarters erased a trajectory that once seemed indelible.

But here, I have raised the question of mechanism, of causality. I have suggested that the reasons a managed and patient political transition is no longer on offer are intrinsic to the historical development of capitalism as the law of value, expressed over time, leads first to a growth of the formal labor force making one kind of transition possible, and then to an ongoing expulsion and intensified exclusion which obviates such a course. My causality does not begin in human ideation, and I admit that I am interested in grasping causality above all things. This too is a problem as much for poetry as for anything else.

I hope we can start to see what this implies, at the outset. I have not forsaken poetry, and never will. Nonetheless, I have nothing but skepticism for any account that endeavors, via increasingly subtle and erudite peregrinations, ever more larded with German philology, to discover for poetry some political-economic causality. If most of my thinking of late has been about forms of social antagonism that are not particularly cultural, that contemplate direct struggle with the real enemy—capital and its managerial state—I mean also to build a barricade against thinkers of poetry who want to grant it those powers. I don't think that helps my comrades.

So, what then? I like the language of “minimal demand.” Badiou uses it, though I mean something different.¹ Poetry is my minimal demand. I do not mean that poetry makes the demand. I mean that poetry is for me a good figure for all that might be emancipated after capital. For the things we have tried to do and, in doing, have discovered over and over that they cannot be done in the way we would like, that they are born damaged and the best we can do is stumble along with them, damaged ourselves. It's amazing how consistently our defenses of poetry feature the equilibration of damages: poetry's failure is its success, as failure is the truth of the human condition, et cetera. I don't really want to defend poetry or its failure. I want to demand that we find out what it is like on the other side. Does that seem minimal enough?

CN Minimal and maximal, I think—abolition of everything plus just finding out what that'd be like. If humanism is just redistribution given ethical dressing, I guess I'm an antihumanist too! But, you know, I'm with you on the ways that ignoring the value relation keeps us in an endless reformist loop. And I think you know that I want to understand how historical change happens, too, if that's what you mean by causality. And we've worked together to describe the ways in which the genre of the “defense

of poetry” partakes of languages of equilibrium that, translated into politics, feel like intra-class tinkering with privileges more than anything. So, I’m with you on the limits of “defending poetry,” too.

Anyway, I think that your language of a minimal demand is a good place to start. When we agreed to write for this volume, we made reference to Badiou’s use of that term, and we wrote:

Describing a wave of Communist poetry from the 1930s whose historical trigger was the Spanish Civil War, Alain Badiou names the “epic of the minimal demand”—the courageous, perilous demand for mere flourishing. It is a Trojan minimalism. Once placed within its proper context, the disciplining of life to the law of value, such a demand cannot help but be for something beyond capital. However, that “beyond” changes over time, as do the possible exit routes. Transformations in value production and global class composition have corresponded to changes in how we might imagine communities of revolution after the breaking and diminishment of the militant industrial proletariat. Working out of the suggestive but largely unmined intersections among new histories of capitalism, more sophisticated theories of the value form, and histories of the racialized, sexed, and colonial underpinnings of capitalist reproduction, we want to develop the status of the “minimal demand” for an era in which that demand’s context is neither industrial militancy nor a common-ness of linguistic ability, but declining profitability and capital’s desperate efforts to countervail it or delay it. For us, the poetry of the future is being written from within these dynamics, where ever-accelerating productivity can no longer provide a shared horizon for both capital and its antagonists.

One thing this meant to me, when we drafted it, was that the coordinates we named might help us disentangle poetry from the burdens of being either pure (untainted by social relations) or revolutionary (abolishing them) in itself, and open it—the writing of it, the reading of it—onto something like what my former colleague Alex Zwerdling once called “the real world.”² I think, for both of us, this means breaking from primarily philosophical readings of poetry, which place it in that ancient equilibrium-dynamic *with* philosophy. I think that’s where we both differ from Badiou. And I think it also means taking seriously both a wider range of poetics—noncanonical poetry, especially—and developing a broader sense of what else looks like poetry to us: music, dance, popular humor. I think of some writing you’ve done with friends on the power of the work of the Oakland

dance collective Turf Feinz. I think of that cartoon we've never stopped laughing at, which seems to go by the name "Noblman, Swerve."³ I think of the maybe 500 songs we've loved together since we met. Each of these represents, for me, a minimalization of the philosophical and progressive-political demands on poetry, a minimalization I find entirely liberating.

JC How do you minimalize poetry without diminishing it? One place to look for an answer is in the division of labor. Everyone gets to make art, in the sense of imaginative doing, recombinations of knowledge, abstract making. But very few people get to do this in ways that allow them to meet their needs, their market dependency, and in ways that get disseminated through those overt and covert market mechanisms. These facts, and not "art" or "creativity," form the social basis for the *role* of the artist, just as more broadly they are the social basis for the division between intellectual and manual labor. And these divisions course through political debates around poetry, and raise problems that often land me on the far side of debates with poets who want to ennoble its political function.

I don't want to commend a politics of renunciation, where "poetry" stands for elite privilege and must be dismissed under the aegis of some contrived working-class populism. I think it's legitimate, sensible, and not merely self-interested for people who write and think about poetry to preserve it as something with a potentially revolutionary aspect. Why retain a commitment to it if it lacks that horizon? But I recoil from versions that end up affirming the division between manual and intellectual labor. You know the ones I mean: the ones that begin, explicitly or implicitly, "As a poet..." as if that is *who you are*, and as if who you are in that sense provides a determination or an alibi for what you feel compelled or enabled to do. From that position, you can only go on to reproduce a version of the vanguardist imaginary, even if whatever comes after that opening, "As a poet," claims to revile vanguards. Always these poets insist that "the workers" or some other popular figures are the real revolutionary subjects, that poets and theorists and so forth are just adjuncts and aides to "real struggle." It seems properly humble *if you buy the manifest content*, doesn't it? But the social form underlying such formulations is catastrophic. It presupposes the legitimate existence of an intellectual caste that does a special thing only it can do for the revolutionary working class. "As a poet" affirms the existence of the division, and—even when claiming to be in service to the rev—leaves to this privileged caste the task of

instrumentalizing that division. The only decent response is to be found in the cartoon you mentioned, probably the greatest artwork of our age: LIK U CAN EVEN TILL.⁴

But doesn't that swerve back toward the anti-intellectual populism I mistrust? I hope not. I hope this is overcome by the way I am locating the minimal demand elsewhere from Badiou (and, more importantly, I think, from Adorno, who exerts such a strong and unacknowledged sway over Badiou when the arid Maoist turns to poetry). The demand is not for poetry to do something now, but to persevere as we struggle for our emancipation, which is the only emancipation poetry can know. Not poetry in the service of revolution, but revolution in the service of poetry, as always.

I stayed for a while in a place which was fucked up every which way, but you paid for your drinks only if you wanted. Everyone took turns tending the bar. It took a little while for me to get it. There is this ceaseless pain of measuring everything you do against affordability. It is a pain known to all but the wealthy. One learns to call this pain "rationality," instrumental rationality, rational choice. It is one of the immanences of our world, along with racism and patriarchy and some others. These miseries fill every pore of social existence, and if you are subject to them, you are always in pain and you don't always know it. To have one of these pains ebb for a couple of days—it was the only feeling I know like the second minute of a perfect pop song, when you can imagine it might not end.

CN Yes, that second minute. You know the chorus, probably haven't gotten to the bridge ...

Your description of the pain that bubbles up from within divisions of labor makes me think about queerness, oddly enough. I couldn't till! I remember, at 14 or 15, being so embarrassed that because I was a kind of sneezy allergic kid my parents decided to pay someone to mow the lawn, rather than have me do it. I remember watching those boys, probably 16 or 17, and feeling in real time the heat sealing of my attraction to them (they were of course lean and athletic and handsome) to my shame that they were doing work I had been spared. I had some sense that they were producing value that I couldn't but *needn't*. And the best route out of confronting what that meant, of course, was to imagine that somehow, reading the books I was reading, I was having an aesthetic experience that

might lead me to some future where I would do something, write something, *even more valuable*, and that I'd pay back my debt, so to speak. But of course, it wasn't about my debt; it was about their labor.

That illusion was woven into my adulthood. I believe in the "value" of the things I've tried to do since—teaching, writing, trying to help others learn to teach and write—but that's completely different than the shaky strut on which I intermittently find myself placing weight—*don't worry, you deserve your salary*. Which means others don't. So for me, the conversation in the 1990s about "shame" in queer theory—a conversation from my 20s—never really had much traction, though shame is so much about of my relationship to masculinity. In that conversation, shame was either an injury to do with having the wrong gender comportment or object-choice, or a prize wrested from that injury that could produce forms of self-undoing that would prevent the auto-critical queer subject from becoming a complacent bourgeois. I felt something a little different, like, I was placed outside the circuits of waged labor as a kid, and my queerness was a kind of tell. In other words, not only did I feel something amiss in my relation to physical and waged work, but so too did the young men who were performing it. I still think male homophobia is all bound up with ideas about value production. It'd take me a long time to work that out in detail; I'd like to.

Meanwhile, regarding poetry, this shifting relationship to the labor of others, seen and unseen, male or female, has made me more of a Whitman than a Wilde sort of gay, if you know what I mean. I've never quite been able to double down on my education and tell myself that poetry needs primarily to be *as smart as possible*. I think you and I know poetry like that. As a salaried member of a besieged or dying clerisy, I could certainly practice being smart as it all goes down. But what's being smart, anyway?

JC I think of political shame as one of the animating forces of contemporary theory, including much of the theory that has lingered over poetry (and often flattered it). I think a lot of intellectuals in the west, and especially in Western Europe, stayed with the various official communist parties and with Stalinism for too long—long after the Hungarian fall, some as late as the Prague spring. Some left the party; some who had never been joiners turned away from any fellow traveling. This turning away, this was the recognition of a shameful history, or a shame at being carried along by it, or at an optimism about the possibilities of official communism that had proved far more corrosive than any cynicism.

The breaks, when they came, were not just with party communism, but also with the entire method of historical materialism. With the dialectic, really. Perhaps the clearest statement is Derrida's famed *hauntology*⁵—premised on the discovery that Marx, ensnared by the dialectic, retains a metaphysics founded on an ontology of presence, the presence of the laborer in the workplace as the source of surplus value. Consequently, while Marx can name the ghosts of capitalism, he cannot name his own, cannot reckon the supplement which exceeds and undoes a unity of opposites—an undoing which allows for a new politics that leaves behind the shame of the repressive party, of a failed politics based in a simplified dialectic of class. This provides a synecdoche for much of European theory after its break, with its broadly and insistently non- and antidialectical character. We might call it *hontology*, “la honte” being French for shame.

A lot circulates in this story. There is the development of the ideas that insisted most on language as the orienting force of the world, that would provide for later accounts of language as productive of no small fraction of the knowable world—and in turn claim to link poetry to the circuits of surplus value production in ways that went beyond homology. There is the far greater loss of abandoning dialectical thought itself, that acme of shame-driven humility that renounced grasping the laws of motion of our world, and indeed, declared it hubris to notice that there were laws in the first place. These have been in small and great ways catastrophes for all of us.

And yet, I really want to hold on to what is true in that moment. Not shame over the communist parties—let the dead bury the dead. Not shame over the dialectic or over the belief in knowable causality. But the intimation that a particular *version* of the dialectic had ceased to move—the version that could insist on the sovereign universality of class in a narrow sense that could be posed *against* race and gender and other purported particularisms—this was the real problem to which high theory's *hontology* was an imaginary solution. On or about August 1965, the dialectic's character changed.

Now perhaps I can summarize what is for me the most central question for thinking historically in the present, which includes thinking about communism and about poetry: *What does it mean to hold on to the dialectic, to materialist method, to class and to mode of production, while recognizing that something real happened in that brief passage?* How do we keep our analytical categories while recognizing and reckoning with a change in their contents? We can get a sense of this question's force in the present,

and its intractable character, by noting a contradiction of our moment. On the one hand, we are seeing fairly sophisticated attempts to confront this question, especially accounts that ground themselves in what you called early on “the data”: attempts to quantify a qualitative shift in the world, a growth in the scope and magnitude of survival via what capital doesn’t register as labor, a racialized and gendered expansion of nonlabor. On the other hand, we have seen the most flattened insistence on the old content, such that reputedly intelligent people will explain that “it’s not white nationalism that’s making poor people poorer; it’s capitalism,” as if their collaboration were not a central and obvious feature of reality, and one that only gains in salience as capitalism’s capacity to extract surplus value through exploiting productive labor wanes.

I can’t tell if this framework, which asks us to think about radical struggles around race and gender and the other divisions as primary to communism, has implications for poetry so obvious that they scarcely need to be drawn out, or whether they are so opaque that poetics seems to move along independently of such doings, having its own history, or none. I’ll pause over the moment when Black theorist-autoworker James Boggs concludes that “America is headed toward full unemployment, not full employment”⁶ and when Diane di Prima transmutes this fact into a politics in the form of a poem: “if what you want is jobs/for everyone, you are still the enemy,/you have not thought thru, clearly/what that means.”⁷ 1963, 1968. That’s my communism.

CN I think I’m still grappling with what or which my communism is, though I feel it every day, and it has deepened. I grapple with it by some awkward blend of keeping Marx’s concepts and categories in mind, brushing the day’s news and numbers against them, and trying to understand what I see in people’s faces, especially in the morning—on the street, on the bus, on the train. Sometimes that cashes out (so to speak) as the question of what will various kinds of people *do* if conditions become insuperably bad? This protocol is limited in its utility, to be gentle about it, since conditions are so unevenly distributed in their badness, and not transparent to even the most attentive gaze. But it’s what I’ve got.

This makes poetry most interesting to me when it functions as a kind of question, even when it’s making claims. Somewhere, Chaka Khan once said of Joni Mitchell that she liked performing Mitchell’s songs because “all her chords are questions.”⁸ I hear something in Kevin Davies’s poetry

a little like that. There's a great, hilarious, dismayed undercurrent in his poetry expressed via persona: the creature just come to consciousness and totally alarmed about being a presence at all, given the horrors of the algorithms and the retreat of the glaciers and the thoughtless rapaciousness of the sweet middle-class people in the neighborhood. It's like a wild elaboration of the moment when thunderstruck characters in Pynchon get transcribed as saying,

“Wha—?”

The funny thing about the francophone situation you describe above, in which the dialectic became a kind of whipping boy for all sorts of shame about failures of party and program, is that so many post- and para-Marxist theorists in that milieu chose to express their shame or scorn by pitting the dialectic against poetry—where “poetry” meant Mallarmé. His aleatory drifts are seen, in a remarkable range of thinkers from the last quarter of the twentieth century, as *the* corrective to the supposedly ironclad movement of a dialectic helmed by French party apparatchiks, or by Stalin. The flipside of the shame-poetics there is a version of “you're so arrogant,” but it tends to get rendered in epistemological terms: party know-it-alls whose fancy dialectic still can't allow them to predict the future, because it's unpredictable. A roll of the dice will never conquer chance!

But of course, this misses much. It's true that we can read Mallarmé as a kind of apotheosis of a very old poetics of unknowing (though he's often read as though he invented it), and it's true that we can't know what will happen next in some abstractly philosophical way, but there's a bait-and-switch here. The lived problem of trying to understand plays of force becomes the highly abstract one of what one—usually one—can know, in general.

To swing back to music for a moment, it has its own ways of thinking about plays of forces, and about what can and can't be known. Or remembered: unlike modern poetry, songs worm their way into our heads without much effort on our part. I've had occasion recently to return to an amazing 1985 song by the Black women's *a capella* group Sweet Honey In The Rock called “Are My Hands Clean?” Over the course of the song, the vocalists trace the pathways of transport, technology, and labor—generally the labor of Third-World women—by which a blouse whose construction spans Central America, the Caribbean basin, and the American South comes to be available at a local Sears department store. The song begins,

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world
 35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America
 In the cotton fields of El Salvador
 In a province soaked in blood,
 Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun
 Pulling cotton for two dollars a day.
 Then we move on up to another rung—*Cargill* ...⁹

Bernice Johnson Reagon's lyrics move like this for another five verses, wending "up the eastern seaboard" from the Burlington Mills to a facility owned by Dupont, where the cotton meets polyester that began its production cycle in oil rigs of the coast of Venezuela; the blended fabric goes to Haiti—"may she one day soon be free"—before emerging as a finished product: wrapped in plastic, landing at the local Sears, and prompting the singers to ask, at last, the song's titular question.

I bring up the piece in this context for several reasons. One is because its attention to, not just exploited labor, but of the relations among exploited laborers, means that any answer to its question has to be in the form of a totality of those relations. Another is because its tracking the supply chain like this, in 1985, give the lie to the narratives of multiculturalism and identity politics that describe them as not sufficiently anticapitalist, or not anticapitalist at all. Another is that its particular play of forces acts out what we were trying to pick up and rework in that phrase, "minimal demand": to find out, as you said, what it's like on the other side of capital.

Plays of forces: the simplicity of a certain kind of song—melodically bare, instrumentally bare—pitted against the vast complexity of that supply chain. Narration's unveilings pitted against the well-kept secrets of "hidden abode of production." And, internal to the song itself, speech played off of song. The barely sung-ness of the women's song does not diminish the sheer vocal beauty of their harmonizing; instead, it seems to argue that *this is how little it takes to make music*. There's a David and Goliath aspect to it, but there are other currents, too, present in the droll inflection of words like "Cargill," "Dupont," and "South Carolina," which signal a knowingness about such ... *concerns* that can't be erased. It's like the song not only says, this is how little it takes to make music, but invites you to plant your feet, as it were, and fight with your bare hands.

JC The most moving aspect of that song for me, perhaps perversely, is the insistence on the supply chain. Or it's the maximalism of global logistics and the minimalism of the vocal affect. These are two aspects of one insistence, one refusal.

By now, the idea that “we are all complicit”—which once seemed like such a challenge to liberal individualism—has become itself a liberal commonplace, the thing you say to be a knowing subject, to reflexively declare your own privilege, and so on. It has the virtue of being true. But without an understanding of the apparatus by which it *becomes true*, the claim collapses into a kind of moralizing. And, per the song, that apparatus is the supply chain. It is the series of transfers that the supply chain engenders which allow my value as a human to be compared to another human's value, in a world where capital sets the terms of value and seizes upon race and gender and nation to produce differential valuations, in turn to produce more opportunities for advantageous leveraging of these differentials. There are constraints which push me to buy one shirt rather than another, and that purchase mobilizes exploitation in Haiti because there's a global supply chain designed to do a single thing, which is to allow wage arbitrage between the Bay Area and Haiti so as to generate maximum profit for...Cargill. And others.

And that goes with the vocal. The song's content is the objectivity of our relations, and their knowability. It's an object lesson in a real sense. But it doesn't insist on this objectivity via some mimetic sound-of-data. It recognizes the scale at which the grain of the voice is part of the play of forces, and does what seems possible without cheating this measure. A grand emotive attack would undo the whole thing, would shift the song's register toward the aesthetic supposition that *soliciting the right feeling*, the adequate subjectivity, is the task at hand. The big vocal would be, that is to say, itself a kind of moralizing: a demand on character, just like the unmoored offering of “we are all complicit.” The song doesn't think that complicity is character. It thinks that it is abstract labor.

So the song condenses abstract labor, subjectivity and its limit as standpoint, the supply chain as the material basis of structural complicity, and comparative racialization. There is no name for this condensation aside from history.

All of this is by way of agreeing with you about a claim we have been edging around, one that bases itself in the poetries that came out of this moment to which we keep returning, 1965–85. It is easy enough to take

a side in the debate between the poetry of the new social movements and the new experimentalisms. Or take a side in the earlier debates about realism and expressionism from the thirties. There have been and will be many such opportunities to elect the right kind of art for revolution or communism. Taking sides is compulsory, whether one wants to or not (this is why life is at present a tragedy and not a comedy). Looking at that period, I will always choose di Prima and Baraka and Rich. But the goal is to be on the side of history. That's one thing I mean when I say poetry is the name for what might be emancipated by communism. And a way of glossing why poetry can only be, in the present, a question.

The question that poetry asks us is not the banality of deciding between experimental versus mainstream, nor even deducing what is "properly" communist about poetry. The question is, *what will be adequate to its moment?* There can be a lot of answers to this question and they do not begin in theories of poetics, but in given conditions. When we think about that period 1965–85, for example, the task that presents itself is not to decipher some lesson about poetry's nature, one that works just as well in 1890 and 2017. Rather, what was it that we were more in need of, just then? Was it a theory of language as an ideological circuit that needs to be broken, or ways to grasp the emergence of a transformed apparatus of immiseration that was busily redistricting the terrain of the exploited and the excluded at a global level? One can always say "both," and with hindsight imagine such a thing was within reach. We can insist that each of those trajectories was really quite heterogeneous, and that they were both necessarily ways of thinking the moment. And again, I do not mean to argue for a correct kind of poetry, much less some idea of what poetry can do for people. It is simply that when I look at our present, my sense is that a primary question is, "What does a poetics of surplus populations look like?" Because that is also the question for communism: How do we rethink class struggle in the shadow of stagnant surplus populations? So perhaps all I am suggesting is this: I am less interested in the question of what is communist about poetry, or what is poetic about communism, than in getting them to ask the same questions. *What is the present, how is it moving, how might it move next?*

If poetry offers any particular claim on this question of the present—more of a claim than the novel or "theory"—well, I'm not sure it does. That would be ok. But perhaps it is its capacity to transform more quickly. The novel and the essay still look more or less like they did at the time of Jane Austen and James Mill. Poetry, we don't really know what it looks

like. This may be why it has so thoroughly eluded Lukács and Jameson. Perhaps they didn't know what it is, or in thinking that they did know, they became trapped in some moment's amber and missed the crux. Poetry does not have a privileged relation to language on its side; it has mercuriality. This should not be confused with formal experimentation; it's not some purportedly counterhegemonic relation to norms, some relation to innovation. It's a relation to conditions.

NOTES

1. Alain Badiou writes about the "epic of the minimal demand" in *The Age of the Poets: And Other Writings on Twentieth-Century Poetry and Prose*, ed. and trans. Bruno Bosteels (London & New York: Verso, 2014), 108. [Eds.]
2. See Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986). [Eds.]
3. Accessible at: <http://i.imgur.com/iMP3Az1.jpg> [Eds.]
4. Op. cit. [Eds.]
5. In Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1993). [Eds.]
6. James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, New Ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 58. [c.1963. Eds.]
7. Diane di Prima, 'Revolutionary Letter #19', in *Revolutionary Letters* (San Francisco: Last Gap of San Francisco Press, 2007), 31. [Eds.]
8. "Chaka Khan once told me all my chords were like questions." Joni Mitchell in interview, quoted in Lloyd Whitesell, *The Music of Joni Mitchell* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119. [Eds.]
9. Sweet Honey and the Rock, "Are My Hands Clean?" from *Still on the Journey: The Twentieth-Anniversary Album* (Earthbeat, October 5, 1993). [Eds.]