'natural' fact of race now is fundamentally altered through what Marx called, in the first volume of *Capital*, a transformation in the 'dramatis personae' into *non-identity*; that is, divisions based on social class between a nascent national bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and workers and peasants, on the other, come into view. Sekyi-Otu felicitously calls this the 'dialectical enlightenment' of the post-colonial world, one in which:

> Reason's triumph, the faculty of dialectical disclosure, is in Fanon achieved experientially through a corrosive destruction of the rigidity and simplicity to which a racialised apprehension of the world had reduced everything. Thanks to this 'bitter discovery' of exploitative relations and distributive injustice as intraracial facts, as human, all-too-human possibilities, the nascent postcolonial subject is ready for a veritable political and epistemic reorientation.

What is important to grasp is the centrality of a reified or static understanding of *experience* lying at the heart of identity politics. If contemporary identity politics can be understood as *neo-liberal*, it is because it internalises the logic of the value form at a particularly deep level. This becomes especially clear in the example of Hannah Black where we find precisely what Sekyi-Otu calls the 'rigidity and simplicity to which a racialised apprehension of the world reduced everything.' It is such a 'racialised apprehension' that grounds her demand for the destruction of an artwork.

If the work opens up a world, in Heidegger's sense, then, in demanding *work*-destruction, Black nihilistically demands *world*-destruction – the destruction of the structure of meaning and of sense which the work generates, but also the basis on which that very same work may itself be *criticised*, as exemplified by the oppositional response of Black painter Parker Bright to *Open Casket*. Such world destruction, at the same time, then, profoundly forecloses the possibility of the 'insurgent universality' that Haider champions. Indeed, it forecloses the very possibility of politics as such.

Samir Gandesha

Contemporary Agamben?

Giorgio Agamben, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). 114 pp., $55.00 hb., $18.95 pb., 978 1 50360 220 5 hb., 978 1 50360 221 2 pb.

Giorgio Agamben, *Taste*, trans. Cooper Francis (London and New York: Seagull Books, 2017). 90 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 0 85742 436 5

In seminars with Giorgio Agamben, he frequently expressed his admiration for Walter Benjamin's notion of 'citing without quotation marks'. Although part of a long-standing rhetorical and academic tradition, it is worth bearing this tactic in mind when we read the short preface that Agamben has composed for the five essays collected under the title *What Is Philosophy?* – the title itself already an act of 'citing without quotation marks', insofar as this titular inquiry is indelibly associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's final collaboration. In his preface, Agamben writes that these five texts 'contain an idea of philosophy' that becomes evident 'only to those who read them in a spirit of friendship'. It is this 'spirit of friendship' that is meant to guide our reading. And it demands we encounter what Agamben writes as much as what he alludes to by 'citing without quotation marks'.

What troubles me about this act of reading is that Agamben's primary focus in these texts is what he calls 'the original metaphysical problem of the fracture between the visible and the invisible, or appearance and being.' There is nothing unique in identifying this fracture or even situating it as 'the metaphysical problem' of Western philosophy. But Agamben argues as if this originary fracture – traversing as it does aesthetics, political theory and ethics – is exposed and reckoned with only through his own singular, undeniably erudite, form of philological close reading, which engages only with the founders of 'our' philosophical discourse itself: Plato, Aristotle, etc. Such a focus renders the work of nearly all of Agamben's philosophical peers silent. For instance, he simply ignores Alain Badiou's reconceptualisation of Platonic love in relation to his 'inaesthetics', or Jacques

Rancière's attempt to deal with this fracture through the 'distribution of the sensible'. (To be completely fair, Agamben does acknowledge and then dismiss – in all of a single sentence – Badiou's thesis that 'mathematics is ontology' as yet another misreading of what Plato meant as ontology.) Indeed, the list of contemporary philosophers whose work Agamben engages only through an act of 'citing without quotation marks' is lengthy; even his recourse to a 'spirit of friendship' alludes to Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*. This is curious because what Agamben discusses touches so directly on the work of other contemporary philosophers. So much so that it is as if one must keep a virtual set of arguments and positions articulated by these others present as one engages with what Agamben himself has written.

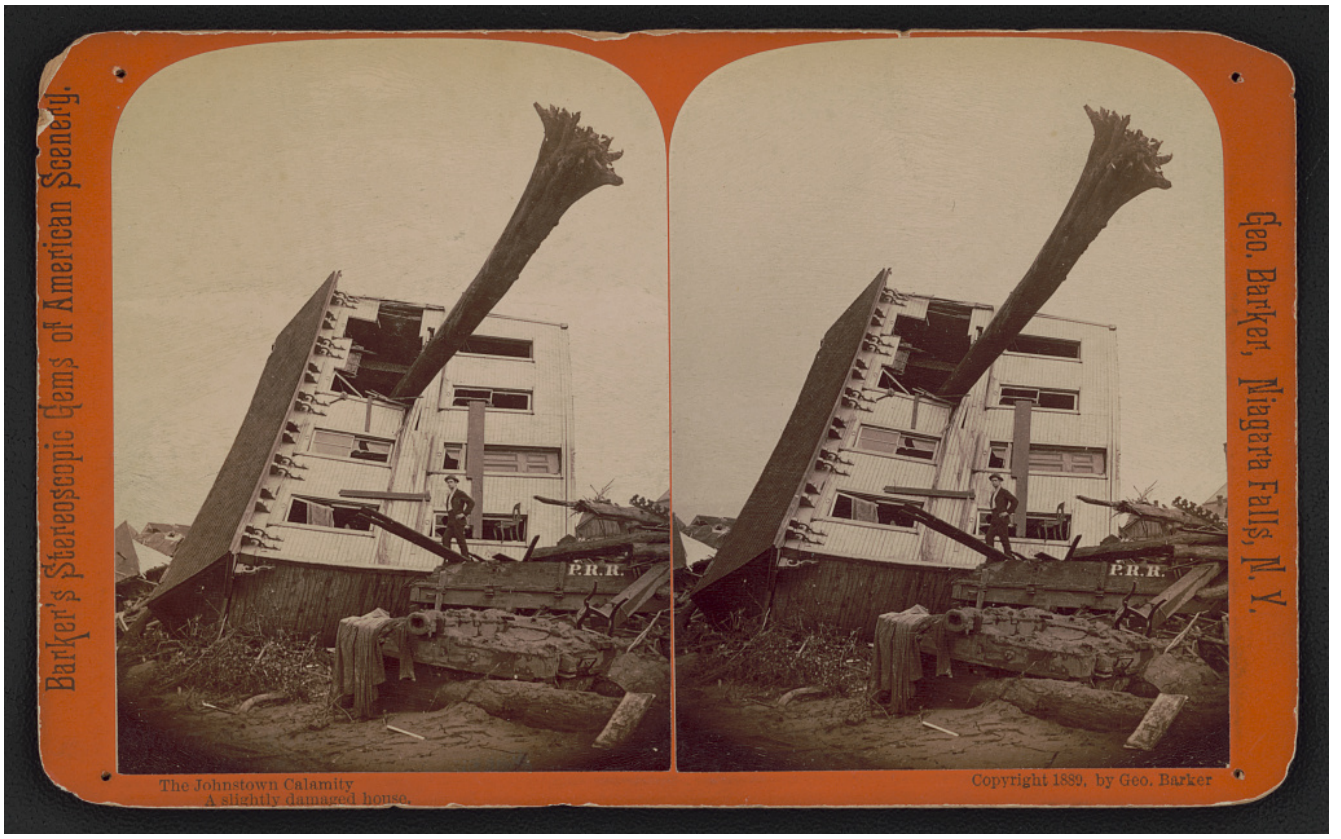
Perhaps Agamben's penchant for 'citing without quotation marks' is overindulged in these shorter texts? Perhaps it asks too much of a reader to engage these texts in such a 'spirit of friendship'? No doubt these issues are exacerbated by translators and publishers desiring to capitalise on Agamben's name by putting out old essays as if they are new publications. This is certainly the case with *Taste,* which was originally written in 1979, as well as the first essay '*Experimentum Vocis*' in *What Is Philosophy?*, which was originally conceived in the 1980s. Yet, even allowing for the belated appearance of these texts in English does not remove the problem created by Agamben's disregard of work by his contemporaries when redressing aesthetics and language. This is especially so when, as he claims, these issues 'extend to all the epistemological statutes of Western culture'. If such is the case, why not create a dialogue with one's 'friends' and not merely ask for an act of reading that would allow us 'to see his limits', a phrase he learned from Martin Heidegger at Le Thor? Of course, even Heidegger himself is rarely cited by Agamben because, as Walter Benjamin said of theology in his own work: 'the blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain.'

I point this out not only because Agamben's philosophy relies so indelibly on Heidegger's 'way to language' and on the manner in which being as such always recedes, preserving itself, but because we must be attentive to the limitations of Agamben's position regarding what philosophy *is*. His argument that philosophy has no unique domain, but takes places across a variety of disciplines and discourses, is far from a revelation at this point. But his insistence that poetry and philosophy are privileged in relation to the ontological category of the 'sayable', the voice that defines the originary limits of ontology, must be closely examined. In the centrepiece of *What Is Philosophy?*, an essay entitled 'On the Sayable and the Idea', Agamben posits:

> It is not the unsayable but the sayable that constitutes the problem philosophy must at each turn confront again. The unsayable is in fact nothing else than a presupposition of language. As soon as there is language, the named thing is presupposed as the non-linguistic or the unrelated with which language has established its relation. This presupposing power is so strong that we imagine the non-linguistic as something unsayable and unrelated, which we somehow try to grasp as such, without realising that in this way we are simply trying to grasp the shadow of language … I shall try to show that … the sayable is a non-linguistic but genuinely ontological category. The elimination of the unsayable in language coincides with the exhibition of the sayable as a philosophical task … The truth that is expressed in language – and given that we do not have other ways of expressing it, the truth that is at stake for us as speaking humans – is neither a real fact not an exclusively mental entity, nor a 'world of meanings'; rather, it is an idea, something purely sayable, that radically neutralises the sterile oppositions mental/real, existent/nonexistent, signifier/signified. This – and nothing else – is the object of philosophy and thought.

As we can see from this definitive closing line, Agamben's conclusion is one that divides all of Western philosophy into how each iteration of it deals with language as such, which is for him inconceivable without privileging the human voice. 'Just as the natural life of man is included in politics through its very exclusion in the form of bare life', he writes, 'so human language (which, after all, according to Aristotle, founds the political community) takes place through an exclusion-inclusion of the "bare voice" in the *logos*.' This position motivates him to stage a brief critique of Derridean deconstruction ('founded on an insufficient reading of Aristotle') and Deleuze and vitalism ('the decisive element is clearly not life, but language'), among others. These critiques are not elaborated through any close reading of Derrida or Deleuze, however, but exist precisely as these pithy, dismissive one-liners.

Agamben's philosophy of language centres on



the being-in-language-of-the-non-linguistic, which he terms the *experimentum linguae*, an experience of humanity's opening to language as such. It is for this reason that Agamben hyphenates *onto-logy*, which, for him, signifies the essential link between human being (*onto-*) and language as such (*logos*, speech, reason). He arrives at this position, philosophically, through a rigorous reading of Plato's *Seventh Letter* and through Émile Benveniste's work on linguistics. These works on language and ontology allow Agamben to conclude that 'the semiotic and semantic in language represent two closed worlds between which there is no passage, so there is a hiatus between knowledge of the Other and knowledge of the subject that cannot clearly be bridged.' It is the task of philosophy to allow us to dwell within this 'hiatus', that is, between the semantic and the semiotic, knowledge and aesthetic pleasure. What is at stake politically in the concept of *experimentum linguae* is articulated best in his earlier text *The Coming Community*: 'the era in which we live is also that in which for the first time it is possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being – not this or that content of language, but language itself … the very fact that one speaks. Contemporary politics is this devastating *experimentum linguae*'. For Agamben, an experience of our very linguistic being is the only potentiality left to us.

Of course, the concept of potentiality is central to Agamben's thought. Drawing on Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality, *dynamis* and *energeia*, he defines potentiality as 'not simply the potential to do this or that but potential to not-do, potentiality not to pass into actuality' (*Potentialities*). In *The Man Without Content* – his definitive statement about aesthetics – Agamben titles a chapter 'Privation Is Like a Face', a phrase from Aristotle's discussion of potentiality. He explains: 'What Aristotle wants to posit is the existence of potentiality: that there is a presence and a face of potentiality. He literally states as much in a passage in the *Physics*: "privation [*stere¯sis*] is like a face, a form [*eidos*]".' What Agamben proposes here is that potentiality 'creates its own ontology' by 'emancipating itself from Being and non-Being alike'; potentiality is not merely a matter of will or necessity, it is an experience of the 'hiatus' or 'threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing' which is 'not the colourless abyss of the Nothing but the luminous spiral of the possible' (*Potentialities*). Thus it is the potentiality of aesthetics (the visibility of the Idea, the

eidolon of being itself) to demarcate this threshold and, ultimately, it is philosophy's ontological-linguistic task to teach us how to dwell within it without regret, desire or hope.

It is this threshold that Agamben investigates throughout his philosophy, especially in his texts on aesthetics, including the short book *Taste*, newly translated for Seagull Books by Cooper Francis. Along with *The Man Without Content*, *Taste* is best read alongside Agamben's essays on the art historian Aby Warburg, his regrettably under-read text on Guy Debord's films, and the short piece 'Judgment Day', which deals with Daguerre and photography. Traversing all of these texts is an argument for 'taste' as 'the problem of the "enigmatic" relation between knowledge and pleasure'. This 'between' is the significant term since Agamben rethinks the potentiality of aesthetics and philosophy in symmetrical terms so as to offer us something beyond what he argues are the missteps of semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism – the three fates of critical theory as such. Hence he argues:

> It is perhaps at this point that we are able to grasp the sense of the Greek project for a *philo-sophia*, for a love of knowledge and a knowledge of love, that would be neither knowledge of the signifier nor knowledge of the signified, divination nor science, neither knowledge nor pleasure. So, too, may we now grasp that the concept of taste constitutes an extreme and late incarnation of this very project. For only a knowledge that does not belong either to the subject or the Other but instead is *situated in the fracture that divides them* can claim to have truly 'saved the phenomena' in their pure appearance, without either referring them back to being and an invisible truth or abandoning them to divination as an excessive signifier [emphasis added].

This is Agamben's signature gesture: to construct a philological reading of philosophical discourse in order to reveal our amnesiac relation to the intricacies of how and why these concepts were created; a revelation that is meant to intensify our thinking in the present. The assumption is that it is always a problem of our vantage point in the present that leads to a misreading of the 'foundation' or 'origin' of Western philosophy. Ideally, it is Agamben's aim to read discourse *anamorphically* in order to reveal to us precisely what we've become blind to despite remaining right before our eyes.

Yet the tone of his writing makes one more ready to argue with than to be convinced of his argument. Are we meant to accept that the insight here is unique to his philosophy: 'the fracture of knowledge that Plato leaves as an inheritance to Western culture is, therefore, also a fracture in pleasure … only by placing oneself upon such a foundation … will it be possible to formulate in adequate terms the aesthetic problem of taste'? Don't we all find ourselves within this fracture as inheritors of Western metaphysics and thereby of aesthetic discourse itself? Nevertheless, the issue remains that Agamben nowhere addresses the myriad iterations of how to reconcile and/or maintain this 'fracture' that occurs throughout modern and contemporary artistic practice and aesthetic thought. By only returning to some point of origin, and then quite early variations of it (Diderot, Kant), Agamben forecloses on contemporary aesthetic philosophy as such. While insightful in laying bare the opening moves of aesthetics in relation to an ideal of knowledge, Agamben's method is conservative and originalist in that the possible solutions to the problematics he foregrounds are only to be found within the voices of those who initiated it and, subsequently, our misunderstandings of them.

This conservative aspect of Agamben's method also leads to dissatisfaction with the endgame of his philosophy: the 'fracture', 'threshold' or 'hiatus' in which he always desires to place us. While he doesn't address it fully in either *What is Philosophy?* or *Taste*, he has been quite clear elsewhere about the relationship he presupposes between images, history and knowledge as such. 'Historical experience', Agamben writes in the essay 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', 'is obtained by the image, and the images themselves are charged with history'. He then asks: 'But what is the history involved? Here it must be stressed that it is not a matter of chronological history in the strict sense, but of a messianic history'. It is this concept of messianic time that Agamben appropriates from Benjamin's philosophy of history via a reading of St. Paul that defines the experience of the 'hiatus' he places us in. His essays on aesthetics are unimaginable apart from this messianic perspective. Indeed, Agamben insists that the 'original structure of the work of art' is empty without this messianic endgame wherein 'something must be completed, judged' because 'it must happen here, but in another time; it must leave chronology behind, but without entering some other world'. It is here that his attempt to re-

concile Benjamin and Heidegger becomes insupportable. As the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman explains in his remarkable recent book *Survival of the Fireflies*: 'as a reader of Heidegger, Agamben seeks the horizon behind every image … and that horizon inevitably shapes the metaphysical cosmos, the philosophical system, the juridical corpus or theological dogma'. Hence the 'kingdom's glory' that Agamben discusses in his most recent texts on Judeo-Christian themes. Didi-Huberman is absolutely correct in his claim that Agamben's reliance on the Heideggerean concept of the 'limit' – the very messianic, eschatological limit Derrida never hesitated to remind us to avoid – renders him blind to the subtleties and promise of Benjamin as a philosopher of images and induces him to present a conservative, 'hopeless' vision of contemporary experience.

It is clear that the most insightful and advanced work on aesthetic philosophy is not to be found within Agamben's work (including the forthcoming English translation of *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*). Yet he must remain our contemporary, if only for the fact that he remains so untimely. As Agamben puts it in his essay 'What is the Contemporary?', a contemporary is one who 'perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it into relation with other times. He is able to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond.' Perhaps it is Agamben's tragic flaw that while giving such poetic voice to the definition of the 'contemporary', he is unable to embody that concept himself. As he imagined, he was unable to see his limit. But we can.

Jae Emerling

The minimus poems

Nathan Brown, *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). 296pp., £32.00 hb., 978 0 82327 299 0

As its starting point, Nathan Brown's excellent new book *The Limits of Fabrication* asks disarmingly simple questions: how are poems made, and what are poems made of? He takes these questions in the most literal way imaginable: as his subtitle 'Materials Science, Materialist Poetics' implies, he is interested in the nano-particles that constitute the ink of the print, the paper of the page, as well as, conversely, in nano-technology as a form of writing, which Brown shows that it manifestly is. But Brown is also able to scale up, and to work 'literally' in an even more literal manner. A bravura close reading of an Emily Dickinson poem in which Brown shows how the poem semiotically mobilises the diverse pen strokes by which its letters are formed shows just how seriously he takes the substance of the letter, or, as he puts it, the 'subgraphemic dimension of writing operating prior to signification'. Throughout, his study makes salutary use of the path-breaking work on proto-semantics notably pioneered by Steve McCaffery. The two approaches are coherent – just as materials science examines how matter is put together on the nano-scale, so Brown examines how poetry is put together on a scale smaller than the sentence, the word, or even the letter. But that coherence both gives the game away and leads Brown to his most interesting questions of all, because to liken nanotechnology to proto-semantic enquiry is to operate by analogy, and therefore not materialistically at all.

Brown is well aware of this, and of its necessity. One of the book's most fascinating aspects is its understanding not only of the ideological weight that 'materialism' is often made to carry, but even more importantly, that 'materialism' itself is not empirically defined. Which is to say that matter cannot dispense with the idea. And therefore, it cannot dispense with poetry.

As Derrida definitively demonstrated, the 'letter' itself is as much an ideality as a material mark, and without this ideality on which the grapheme depends, there can be no 'subgraphemic dimension' at all. This is part of the stakes of one of Brown's most important contentions: that a 'materialist poetics' must do more than simply attend to the well-worn notion of the 'materiality of the signifier', but beyond this, must strive to address the 'man-