picion of any predictable turn or *telos*, especially when the latter is couched in all-too-familiar leftist tropes of post-insurrectionary redemption. Nevertheless, key questions that are broached but not explicitly addressed require attention and – for those of us who are allies in this struggle – unfinished work to-be-done.

One such question pertains to the material unit of the couple-form and its relationship to the hetero-patriarchal, nationalist nexus of *oikonomia*. In articulating the centrality of household management in the constitution of the nation-state, Mitropoulos does not explicitly draw on the discursive formation of the couple-form. Rather, it is the institution of the (biological) family and (heterosexual) marriage that provide the ground for exposing all that is wrong with racialised, propertarian social relations. Although modes of queer kinning are mobilised, there remains a tacit assumption that the institutions of family and marriage are always already heterosexual, leaving little room for an analysis of the social reproduction of capitalism within gay marriage and, even more pressingly, for an *oikonomic* analysis of homonationalism. As stay-at-home measures have painfully exposed, mononormativity, too, is alive and well and it remains to be seen how far couples of reproductive capacity have made the most of the pandemic by making babies (and not kin).

Staying with this expanded *oikonomic* analysis, we might also consider two further vectors that would continue *Pandemonium*'s trajectory. This would place us in conversation with Mitropoulos' own interlocutors and fellow-travellers: the Out of the Woods collective. Out of the Woods share Mitropoulos' anti-nationalist, anti-racist political programme and have themselves offered astute critical responses to the Malthusian turn within contemporary environmental movements. Mitropoulos is eager to stress the etymological common root between 'economy' [*oikonomia*] and 'ecology' [*oikologia*] – arguably a curious move for someone so alert to the dangers of originary epistemologies. More pertinently though, Mitropoulos' *oikonomic* analysis demonstrates that it is at this very point of convergence between inherited property (land, housing, assets) and inherited properties (genes) where nature becomes naturalised. Lastly, if state regulation of privatised risk-management is to be eschewed as a strategy, it is worth probing what role communisation might play in either eliminating or radically altering the organisation of risk post-Covid. Parliamentary politics is rightly pronounced as limited but, beyond the fleeting mention of 'debt as an acknowledgment of the interdependent conditions of survival and care', Mitropoulos refrains from offering tactical toolkits or political prognoses. And yet *Pandemonium* remains resolute in its affect and convictions. The publication's very final words – 'that everything can be reckoned otherwise' – gracefully capture how the intersecting point where calculation, evaluation of worth and punishment currently resides could find a different source, one that does not stem from natural law but from a moral economy we have yet to practise.

Chrys Papaioannou

Between speculation and discipline

Christopher Tomlins, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). 376pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 69119 866 8

Christopher Tomlins is not the first historian to have focused on the Nat Turner rebellion. In 1831, the slave Nat Turner led a group of blacks in an insurrection in St. Luke's Parish, Southampton County, Virginia that resulted in the brutal killing of fifty-five white men, women and children. Although Turner was apprehended, tried and executed, the insurrection struck terror in the hearts of the South's slave-owning classes. It played a critical role in the hardening of pro- and anti-slavery positions that would, following many twists and turns, culminate in the American Civil War. Given the Turner rebellion's scale and seriousness, it is not surprising that many historians should have focused on it. Non-historians have been drawn to it as well. In 1967, the American novel-

ist William Styron published a celebrated fictionalised treatment – *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) – in which he attempted to give voice to Turner. In light of all this, one might well ask: What else might there be to learn about Nat Turner? What might Nat Turner teach us about ourselves?

As it turns out, a great deal. Christopher Tomlins' *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* offers new insights into the thinking of Nat Turner and then employs those insights to meditate upon the discipline of history itself. Through his searching study of the actors and events of 1831, Tomlins interrogates contemporary historians' own thinking and practice, their blind spots and erasures, their commitment to a disciplinary machine that yields often crushingly familiar answers. For these reasons, *In the Matter of Nat Turner* deserves a readership not only among historians of the antebellum South, but also among all interested in history as a modern knowledge form.

In the Matter of Nat Turner ends on an arresting note: 'We who are readers of texts, who are historians, if we are to read as true historians, we must always be ready to read what was never written. Always.' Coming from a contemporary historian, this is an intriguing exhortation. After all, the modern discipline of history traces its origins to the Rankean injunction that history be written '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' (as it really was), an injunction that accompanied the nineteenth-century opening of German state archives to the prying eyes of scholars. Historians have ever since been obsessed with talking and writing and judging in terms of what *was written*. The historian's craft is still all too often imagined as mastery of an archive. Historians frequently dazzle one another by displaying the range of sources they have consulted. Professional criticism takes the form of urging scholars to look at yet another source. Contextualising – that most unshakeable of the historian's disciplinary commitments – takes the form of joining bits of writing to one another to produce the ensemble effect (the thicker, the better) of the 'social', the 'political', the 'cultural', and so on. In light of this disciplinary leaning towards adding more and more of what was written, it is worth interrogating Tomlins' assertion that the 'true historian must always be ready to read what was *never* written.' How precisely does one read what was 'never written'? How does reading what was 'never written' make one a 'true historian'?

To get at what was 'never written', it turns out, Tomlins turns his gaze precisely to what *was written*. In the first instance, *In the Matter of Nat Turner* is a book in which Tomlins shows historians how to take seriously what has been before them all along, how to attend scrupulously to an existing archive that they have averted their gaze from, how to read carefully. This involves multiple unearthings on Tomlins' part, each involving what was written, each mirroring the other.

Tomlins takes to task historians who have been suspicious of the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, the brief text (not to be confused with Styron's fictionalised account) that circulated in the immediate aftermath of Nat Turner's trial and execution. For many historians, the *Confessions* is a text too heavily compromised by the biases of the entrepreneurial white lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, who obtained access to Nat Turner in his prison cell, was present at Turner's trial, compiled an account of the events, and then profited from the text's publication. For others, Gray's *Confessions* is altogether too well-known: there is simply nothing more to be gained from it. Arranging the conventional dominos of social history in a familiar pattern around the text gives us better access to Turner, such historians might argue, than the text itself. But Tomlins categorically rejects this position. As he puts it: '[M]y own impression is that … we actually know very little about Turner and his motives, that throughout its long history the original *Confessions* has not so much been thoroughly drained of all possible knowledge as read without sufficient care or curiosity'. Here we have our first act of unearthing, the unearthing of the written text of Gray's *Confessions* from the disciplinary conventions of contemporary history that have failed to take the text seriously on its own terms.

This unearthing is followed by a second. Employing the devices of literary theory to reexamine Gray's *Confessions*, as a physical object and as a text, Tomlins seeks to extract Turner's voice from the numerous textual devices and conventions that frame it, obscure it, or overwhelm it. In so doing, Tomlins distinguishes between Gray's *Confessions*' account of Turner's experiences before the rebellion (which Tomlins reads as Turner's own voice) and – separated by a crucial break in the text – an account of the actual events of the rebellion (which Tomlins reads as Gray's voice).

This second unearthing is succeeded by a third: the revealing of Turner as a profoundly religious man. Upon isolating Turner's voice, Tomlins insists that we attend seriously to Turner's religiosity on its own terms. Too often, for scholars who write about religion, the religious scholar Robert Orsi (whom Tomlins quotes approvingly) states: 'Religious practice and imagination [are] about something other than what they are to practitioners. This something else may be human powerlessness, false consciousness, ignorance, hysteria, or neurosis. It may be the social group's shared identity of itself. Whatever it is, religion is not about itself.' In making Turner's religiosity 'about itself', which demands an excursus into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious texts, Tomlins gives us a picture of a man driven by God himself to do the religious work of killing whites. As Tomlins puts it: 'When the time came for [Turner] to explain what had happened, and why, he had resort not to a language of revenge, or revolution, or self-expiation, or guilt, but to an eschatological cosmology of revelation and judgement'.

Careful attention to what was written brings us face to face, then, with an individual driven by religious eschatology, by what was 'not written' in any sense the historian might grasp. How can the contemporary historian write about such a man? What does such a man have to tell the contemporary historian? The gift of Tomlins' book, for me, is its ability to force the contemporary historian to confront a subject (Nat Turner) who is profoundly alien (even destabilising) to him or her, a subject beset by divine visitation who understands the world, and work, and time in ways that resist our own disciplinary ways of making sense of the world, work and time. So what does Tomlins do with Turner once – through careful attention to what was written – Turner is retrieved from the rubble of close to two centuries of contextualisation?

Tomlins has recourse to the philosophy of history of Walter Benjamin. As he puts it: '[R]esort to one species of messianic philosophy of history to help unravel another may be worthwhile'. Indeed, it may be 'worthwhile', but this, to put it mildly, understates how Tomlins understands the import of the enterprise. Using Walter Benjamin to make sense of Turner, Tomlins reads Turner's refusal to admit guilt in the mass killing as a radical break from capitalism/reformed Protestantism's endless deferrals of guilt and debt, which is how Tomlins reads the Virginia debates over the political economy of slavery in the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion. Given the imbrication of slavery, debt and guilt that marks the Virginia debates, there is much to support Tomlins' reading of Turner's rebellion as an 'event' that breaks radically with (or that blasts open) the endlessly deferred progression of capitalist history. In his ability to take the plunge into divine violence, Tomlins suggests, Turner had taken a 'decision' – something to be distinguished from mere 'choice' – which, for Walter Benjamin, 'is an index of human freedom in the realm of faith'. Turner's turn to divine violence and his refusal to expiate his guilt forces a break in the endless cycle of debt and guilt in terms of which slavery/capitalism would have surrounded him.

It might be 'worthwhile', to borrow Tomlins' understated tone, to wonder what all of this might mean for the contemporary historian. As stated above, for all his labour in reading what was written, Tomlins urges the 'true historian' to look beyond, to 'read what was never written'. While the more conventional Benjaminian understanding of this urging might be the exhortation that the historian realise his present moment in the past, one wonders whether reading what was 'never written' is not precisely what Nat Turner himself did as he violently broke free from the overdetermined world of capitalism/reformed Protestantism that threatened to engulf him. Is Turner our 'true historian'? Is Turner the model that Tomlins (via Benjamin) wants us to set for ourselves? Is Tomlins' retrieval of the religious Turner from the endless disciplinary contextualisation of contemporary history – precisely through a breaking of the text of Gray's *Confessions* through tools of literary criticism foreign to most historians – a Turnerian rebellion of sorts?

Tomlins is much too careful a historian to rely entirely upon a Benjaminian Turner as a model for his own professional and disciplinary practice. At various critical moments in Tomlins' book, the confrontation with what was 'never written' becomes not the pretext for a 'decision' to break free of context, but a more sober reflection on the limits of historical knowledge. Here, Tomlins suggests, what cannot be read simply cannot be known. I want to attend to two such instances, both of which suggest that Turner's eschatology might not in fact 'explain' the rebellion.

As suggested earlier, Tomlins argues that Gray's *Confessions* contains a crucial break. There is Turner's account of his own religiosity (which Tomlins takes to be

Turner's own voice) and then an account of the killings (which Tomlins takes to be Gray's voice). A break, then, between Turner's 'decision' and the actual killings, which involved not just Turner but a growing group of mostly enslaved blacks in the community who joined the rebellion. How does one lead to another? Turner might have been (in Tomlins' rendering) a Kierkegaardian 'lonely knight of faith', but how did he enter the secular world to mobilise others to join him? How did Turner cross, as it were, that break? Here, Tomlins confesses: we simply do not know. As Tomlins puts it: 'We cannot know the precise content of the politics [Turner] invented for that moment, but we do know that Turner's politics enabled their collective, violent defiance'. Here is a break in meaning caused by an absence of writing, one that brings us to the limits of our (and Tomlins') knowledge, the edge of our ability to produce meaning.

We confront the same limit to knowledge caused by a lack of writing when we talk about the actual killings. Tomlins rejects the historian Eugene Genovese's view that the Turner rebellion was 'mindless slaughter'. The killings make sense, Tomlins insists. But at the same time that Tomlins insists on the possibility of meaning, his own text reveals that that meaning dissolves into a series of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. We might perhaps know what drove Turner, but we have absolutely no way of knowing what drove the other rebels. As Tomlins puts it: 'The killings were not indiscriminate, but purposeful. They followed a logic. But what was their logic? Was it instrumental – revenge? Was killing incidental to some overriding purpose, such as flight or revolution? Or was it in in itself a central and essential redemptive act?'

In Tomlins' book, then, we confront two different ways of responding to 'what was never written'. On the one hand, Nat Turner emerges as a model for the 'true historian' who reads 'what was never written' to blast open 'self-contained facticity'. Tomlins himself adopts this model when he forces disciplinary history to confront a Turner that it cannot contain. On the other hand, at various crucial points in Tomlins' account, in what is a very different model for a 'true historian', Tomlins also reads 'what was never written' – the nitty gritty of winning others over to join the rebellion, the hidden logics of the real work of killing – in terms of the limits of our abilities as historians, the realisation that we simply do not and cannot know. The former points to a surfeit of meaning, the latter to its breakdown. How do we decide? What is the relationship between the two? In Tomlins' reaching beyond and yet cleaving to his disciplinary training as a historian, the answers reside.

Kunal Parker

Moribund elegance

Philipp Ekardt, *Benjamin on Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 256pp., £74.59 hb., 978 1 35007 599 3

In Daniel Mourenza's *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film* (2020), we learn that Walter Benjamin, in the summer of 1938, went to see a Katharine Hepburn film at the cinema – it might have been *Holiday*, it might have been *Bringing Up Baby*. In Philipp Ekardt's *Benjamin on Fashion* (also published last year) we learn of the 'hardly acknowledged if not entirely ignored fact that in his Parisian exile during the 1930s, Walter Benjamin must have visited fashion shows.' This is evidenced in a letter written in July 1935 to Gretel Karplus, wife of Adorno and one-time manager of a family leather business (something I also learnt from the Ekardt's book). 'If all goes well', Benjamin writes, 'I will be able to treat myself again with one or two fashion shows.' This anecdote frames Ekardt's monograph on Benjamin's work on fashion – only the second on such a topic, since Ulrich Lehmann's *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000) – which functions not just to reconstruct Benjamin's esoteric and unsynthesised writings on fashion, but to do so through the textures, cuts and silhouettes of the time, as if to reassemble a 1935 runway show as the runway might have been viewed at that time. In this vast Warburgian panorama, history finds new patterns and transformations.

Benjamin on Fashion is divided into two parts. The