

# Reviews

## Strategic coldness

Henrike Kohpeiss, *Bourgeois Coldness*, trans. Grace Nissan (Brussels: Divided Publishing, 2025). 265pp., £17.00 pb., 978 1 73951 612 3

Nestled within Gilles Deleuze's *Presentation de Sacher-Masoch*, eventually translated under the title *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, lies a characteristically clever but relatively underappreciated reading of the evolution of classical law into its modern iteration. For Deleuze, this move is attended by contemporary formations of *masochism* and *sadism* as distinct political mechanisms of subversion against a law – *The Law* – marked today by indecipherability. Where sadism figures as excessive, re-iterative, apathetic, endless, ironic and cruel to a point of exposing the Law's internal contradictions, masochism marks a humorous practice of cold and contractual self-destruction.

Masochism thereby paves the way for a victim's re-birth, the Law having been disavowed in its paternal generality or repressive, castrating capacity, turned laughably on its head on behalf of a maternal Ideal. Deleuze writes that, in masochism: 'what is beaten, foresworn and sacrificed, what is ritually expiated, is the father's likeness, the genital sexuality inherited from the father.' Through contracted self-destruction, the self-made victim produces a fantasy of access to a fatherless, non-patriarchal excess: like cold (Mother) Nature, 'sentimental and supersensual.' Is this not the condition of post-War liberal democratic humanism, in general: that the recognition of our citizenry, our political cohesion, and our access to a community should take place only through the self-deprecating humour of a masochistic (social) contract that veils, with its aesthetics of self-destruction, the true pleasure of its founding exclusion?

If Henrike Kohpeiss's *Bourgeois Coldness* does not deal directly with Deleuze's early-career treatise, it no doubt abuts *Masochism* in ways that even Deleuze could not have anticipated, or, better, that implicate contemporary bourgeois humanism – including a certain strain of post-Deleuzian philosophy – in the mechanics of masochistic coldness that Deleuze describes. Across an In-

troduction and ten chapters divided into four sections, Kohpeiss explains:

Bourgeois coldness is an affective social technique. It is deployed at various levels, guiding and controlling affective dynamics to ensure the continued existence of given social conditions. Coldness can pacify interpersonal relationships or expand into a social programme. Coldness is an affective instrument for relating to a challenging or even unbearable reality. In this function, it provides help. Bourgeois coldness goes further, denoting the social convention that no other reference to the present is possible or necessary other than a cold one. In this form, coldness is a resource for promoting affective stasis in the particular interest of a bourgeois class.

In such terms, bourgeois coldness goes beyond the utilitarian brutality of biopolitical state racism or information-era datafication, though each are to some degree implicated in its affective reception. It involves, just as much, the often 'self-critical' reality of 'bourgeois attempts to make the boundaries of subject formation less violent through [neoliberal logics of] inclusion and participation.' Referencing and adeptly extending a range of theorists from Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas and Arendt, through Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, Graeber and Steyerl, on the way to Moten, Hartman and da Silva, Kohpeiss elaborates bourgeois coldness as a contemporary affect permanently entangled with histories of chattel slavery and colonial encounter.

Kohpeiss's theoretical genealogy additionally dovetails with an elucidation of how the institution of 'colonial reason' – a cornerstone of western philosophy and Enlightenment thought – conditions the bourgeois subject's cold, contemporary affect. By mapping the text's philosophical advancement onto a generative trans-littoral model consistent with the book's four aforementioned parts, Kohpeiss draws a line between 'the Aegean

of Odysseus', 'the Mediterranean of the present and its domination by the European Union', 'the Atlantic [as] a mass grave for the kidnapped people of Africa', and the purely *oceanic*, figured by the ungrounded (anti-)philosophies of Black fugitive study. This creative formal decision works to join the western philosophical uptake of Greek epic poetry to sea rescues of migrants on the Mediterranean and the global afterlives of slavery, and results in a clever intervention, posing coldness as the key to an evident paradox at 'the core of a European [and white] political self-conception':



*Bourgeois coldness* represents the European bourgeoisie's relationship to the world, in that it cultivates a moral self-image, as well as a disposition towards individualised sympathy. Europeans view the death of Black people on the Mediterranean through the self-image of innocence. Innocence prepares the affective ground to allow for coldness to prevail unhindered, in the form of ahistorical compassion.

Hence, the cold liberal humanism of western nations – effectively reproduced by their (white) citizenry – veils the anti-Blackness of western subjectivity, which for Kohpeiss demands the response of a theory of radical

otherness (specifically, Blackness) that runs through and beyond Adorno's negative dialectics: 'an at times desperate clinging to the unattainable negative, the non-identical.'

An appraisal of Kohpeiss's conceptualisation can be made with regard to besieged Gaza, which is not referred to directly in *Bourgeois Coldness* but which remains strikingly relevant. A recent 160-page report by Forensic Architecture and the World Peace Foundation positions Israel's successful August 2024 humanitarian response to potential polio outbreak in Gaza – the efficiency of the UN-backed vaccine campaign in Gaza almost certainly owed to health threats posed not to Palestinians but to Israelis, should polio have spread beyond Gaza – against Israel's ongoing (ab)use of food aid as cover for the state's genocidal agenda.

FA/WPF's report both exposes the lengths to which the Israeli state will go to secure Israel's population at the expense of Palestinian life and reveals something significant at the level of Israeli civilian affect: the Israeli citizenry's (dare we say: coldly masochistic) invocation of shared humanity (and availability to suffering) with Palestinians in the instance of polio threat remains conditional upon an interplay between the ease with which 'structural suffering' can be individualised or made the object of empathetic Self-soothing, and the bureaucratic dissolution of the individual constitutive of biopolitical governmentality. Put another way: in the former instance, Israel's population – including its media and intelligentsia – was quick to assert a universal humanity – or better, a shared existential threat *alluding* to a shared humanity – as the key to a successful humanitarian program conducted in tandem with the World Health Organisation (often otherwise the target of Israel's ire). In the latter instance, however, the Israeli population recognised – and continues to recognise – that to demand the state provide efficient and effective food aid to starving Palestinians would be, in the same breath, to admit the state's very culpability in manufacturing and covering up famine with the governmental consent of said population, and in a way that would no doubt open Israeli statehood to unwanted moral scrutiny. Indeed, for its citizenry, its bureaucracy and its ruling class to do so would ultimately result in exposing the liberal humanitarian apparatus for what it obfuscates: namely, bourgeois coldness, a careful social technique deriving from colonial

reason or a historically contingent affective response organising cohesive liberal selfhood in the face of historically contingent (i.e., racialised, gendered and classed) psychic and social threats.

It seems, then, that bourgeois coldness describes precisely the assemblage of affective contradictions that arise when the hyperindividualised bourgeois body – invented, borne out, by a legacy of colonial reason – comes (repeatedly, reiteratively) into contact with neoliberal governmentality. As neoliberalism itself vacillates undecidably between its many masks – post-racial market freedom; perfectly impartial bureaucratic efficiency; humanitarian efforts too Self-satisfying to be accused of neocolonialism; endless war, livestreamed, quantified and distant – its bourgeoisie responds in kind. Hence, the Self-preserving (and equally State-preserving) affect transmuted to and by an overwhelmingly white, ever-*whitening* bourgeois subject under the oxymoronic conditions of our present is essentially a *cold* one. What is one to do but beg for a beating self-critical absolution, in public and from no one in particular, as some last proof of one's Human-ness, one's distance from *inhumanness*?

Just as masochism, in Deleuze's formulation, allows a subject to live out the fantasy of being reborn beyond symbolism, bourgeois coldness and its affective appearance in the gears of self-criticism (self-flagellation?), sublimation and self-making ensures the disavowed hold of ruling class ideology on liberal subjects. Kohpeiss's rejoinder – which the author thinks especially through the work of Nietzsche, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Adrian Piper and Fred Moten – is twofold: on one hand lies a political *rage* that carefully unsettles an 'affective proximity to reason' and 'seek[s] to break [bourgeois society's] self-perpetuating dynamic'; on the other, *nonperformance* which, opposed to the 'cold empathy' of western philosophy, involves 'the suspension of participation in the dominant social rules and the renunciation of individual self-assertion.' Both paths follow Kohpeiss's supposition that 'social emancipation has an irreducibly affective aspect', and both appear as distinct but entwined modes of 'self-abandonment ... in the form of a "consent not to be a single being"', following Édouard Glissant.

Nevertheless, when Kohpeiss's two-part rejoinder is read from an ever so slightly different angle – say, according to a logic that recognises anti-Blackness as a World-forming project rather than as a matter of dehu-

manisation, degradation or exclusion after the fact of World formation – room is opened for a generative extension. To explain this, Kohpeiss's conceptualisation can be brought into further parallel with Deleuze's earlier thinking. Both the cold bourgeois subject and the cold masochist, regardless of their clear investments in (self-)critique and humorous, self-destructive subversion of moral Law, disavow the role played by critique in shoring up liberal selfhood in precisely the way that Kohpeiss exposes in *Bourgeois Coldness*. At the same time, however, these overlapping figures – bourgeois subject and masochist – remain tethered to a model of selfhood established in and by slavery as an originally inventive violation, *not* as a historical epoch. The difference, which appears minuscule but is indeed significant, reveals something troubling that might not be wholly explained via recourse to Black fugitive practice or Blackness as negative dialectics: to evade the reproductive gravitational pull of bourgeois coldness or the allure of masochistic self-destruction, whether through rage or nonperformance, is nevertheless to affirm the legitimacy of selfhood, albeit of another, abandoned, multiplicitous kind. Fugitivity is, in essence, reliant upon the perceived malleability of the political or moral subject, regardless of whether this subject's neoliberal coldness is exposed along the way for its value in laying and preserving the limits of the Human. The potential issue of this perception – which sees in Blackness something that goes beyond the preservative, sublimatory practice of even the most radical (self-)critique – is that it orients focus towards a failure to address what fails to be incapacitated in the mechanics of Black dehumanisation, rather than reckoning with how the Black body is always-already a figure of utter violability (per Patrice Douglass) in a way that makes humanisation and dehumanisation possible at all.

The slipperiness of this distinction between addressing anti-Blackness as conditioning or as conditional – central to an ongoing debate in theoretical, activist and artist circles involving (Black) un/representability and (the uses of) negativity – is most evident in Kohpeiss's reading of Hannah Arendt's infamous 1957-1959 pieces, 'Reflections on Little Rock' and 'A Reply to My Critics'. In the latter, Arendt responds to backlash regarding her original reflections on an image of young Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine by asking: 'what would I do if I were a Negro mother?' For Kohpeiss, as well as for Moten,

this personal and public questioning – at its coldest, a sort of empathetic blackface – ‘devalues’ the affective infinitude of Eckford’s *nonperformance* at Little Rock, turning attention from the possibility of Eckford being recognised as embodying ‘an object that becomes a subject by refusing its own disclosure’, and towards Arendt’s more *reasonable*, humanistic political philosophy. What Kohpeiss’s reading potentially omits, however, is once again how the prospect of Blackness’ absolute violability, opposed to its incapacitation, troubles the possibility of especially *Black* insurgent non/performance. For instance, the sheer fact that Hannah Arendt can even utter the question – ‘what would I do if I were a Negro mother?’ – indicates a potential problem in focusing our thought on *what* bourgeois coldness might occlude (i.e., Black nonperformance), as opposed to questioning *how* coldness gains its whitening capacity for occlusion *and* appearance. Namely, this would involve something closer to an interrogation of how Blackness, in being nothing but the oscillation between white invention and (self-)destruction, is also the very means through which a certain criterion of de/humanisation – the affective preservation of humanity and its affectible others – may be measured at all. Ultimately, the concern must arise over what is so (whitely) desirable, so sensuously attractive,

about envisioning agency in the pure violability of the slave.

While it is of course necessary to imagine, through rage and nonperformance, that ‘a sociality could be discovered ... that consciously withholds itself from the political’, doing so also immediately draws us away from any overdue confrontation with a much more pessimistic truth: the ‘Door of No Return’ is birthplace not only to the devastations of African chattel slavery and its immediate afterlives, but to every ongoing atrocity *and* mode of resistance. Bourgeois coldness, which whitens *all* by effacing what *is not* [*n’est pas*, per David Marriott], appears the only affective means of reconciling this reality – overdetermined by, in Frantz Fanon’s words, a ‘racial distribution of guilt’ – that is often as horrifying as it is Self-affirming. If its circularity can be derailed, as Kohpeiss infectiously believes it can, doing so will entail going beyond Moten’s resistance of objects, beyond nonperformance, beyond self-disintegration, towards a questioning of how, and to what extent, the struggle has already been decided. As Moten himself says elsewhere, ‘we live in the nightmare of Eurofuturity’, and neither the cold accelerant of masochistic self-disintegration nor the warmth of a fugitive politics of care might finally, once and for all, awaken us from it.

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## Risks we cannot not run

Rahul Rao, *The Psychic Lives of Statues: Reckoning with the Rubble of Empire* (London: Pluto, 2025). 208pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 74535 076 9

In April 2004, an activist group called *De Stoeten Ostendenoare* (‘The Bold Ostenders’) vandalised a monument to King Leopold II (1835–1909) in the Belgian coastal city of Ostend. This statue of Leopold, astride his horse, has faced the North Sea on the Ostend beach promenade since 1931. To Leopold’s left, there is a group of admiring local fishermen and their families; on the King’s right, three Congolese adults and three children climb upwards towards their ‘*genialen beschermer*’ (brilliant protector), who, according to a plaque, liberated them from Arab slavery. They are guided by a white officer in a pith helmet.

Eager to puncture this illusion of benevolence, the Bold Ostenders sawed off the hand of one of the Congolese men – a reference to the notorious punishment meted out to labourers who did not meet their rubber quota in Leopold’s brutally administered colonial possession. But to the activists’ dismay, no one noticed. Days passed. It was not until the Ostenders sent a ransom letter to the city council, demanding the Belgian state issue an official apology to the Congo, that the missing hand was acknowledged. Then, finally, uproar. A manhunt for the culprits was initiated by a particularly belligerent judge. A journalist who had interviewed the