

commitment and subsumption gestured to in my opening paragraph. For example, how might Daniel Spaulding's account of the avant-garde's entanglement with the fate of the programmatic workers' movement and the horizon of the value-form's socialisation (mis)translate into the terrain of counter-cinema? Indeed, if this belated cinematic avant-garde emerged at the moment of the workers' movement dissolution, of the breakdown of an older revolutionary horizon, and with the emergence of new forms of struggle, principally the women's movement, might it suggest an alternative pathway for the avant-garde beyond the programmatic impasse? Such a narrative would also have to think through the cinema's different relationship to the value-form and real subsumption as compared with the fine arts, in order to clarify the specificity of counter-cinema's avant-garde postures. Alternatively, perhaps there is a means of narrating the fate of counter-cinema's decline offered in the book's final section within and against broader narratives of 'post-modern' artistic subsumption and/or the becoming-speculative of the labour-capital relation. What capitalist conditions made counter-cinema ambitions possible and what undermined them? How might relating these narratives help us to clarify the relationships between cinema and political praxis today? While they often briefly frame Helm-Grovas' periodisation, deepening these directions could enrich the art-theoretical

debates with alternative histories and position counter-cinema within a broader social field, of class struggle and capitalist crisis, than the book's tendential focus on Mulvey and Wollen's problematics.

Nonetheless, *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen* is easily the most expansive, rigorous and clear-eyed account of this period of radical film production in Britain to date. In the book's conclusion, Helm-Grovas reflects on several 'avant-garde models for historiography' that might emerge from Mulvey and Wollen's work: resistance to closure, historical montage and defamiliarisation. With these closing frames, Helm-Grovas makes perceptible both the limited conditions for revolutionary art, the unending desires which sustain it and the possibility to – like counter-cinema's own excavation of the historic avant-garde – 'continue the earlier project under new conditions'. We may have left the counter-cinematic moment, but the desires and horizons it made perceptible stay with us as keys, lessons and, as yet, undetermined meanings. In a 1989 essay, Wollen described the Situationist International in like terms:

The wasteful luxury of utopian projects, however doomed, is no bad thing. We need not persist in seeking a unique condition for revolution, but neither need we forget the desire for liberation. We move from place to place and from time to time. This is true of art as well as politics.

Oliver Dixon

Possible music

Fumi Okiji, *Billie's Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy, and a Nonsensuous Standard* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025). 196pp., £19.99 pb., 978 1 50364 123 5

In Ron Mann's 1981 documentary on free jazz, *Imagine the Sound*, Cecil Taylor offers a theory of music as incessant creative act: 'It seems to me what music is', Taylor remarks, 'is everything that you do ... So to read or dance, to converse, is all a part of the making of music.' Fumi Okiji's new book, *Billie's Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy, and a Nonsensuous Standard*, is a study of this mode of music-making, in thought and in practice. Part exploration and part demonstration, it attends to interstices and overlaps, to the blurred edges of sound and theory.

Okiji grounds the work in a conjecture, that there exists an affinity between three geographically and temporally separated philosophical traditions: black studies, particularly the study of what Nahum Chandler calls blackness's 'exorbitance'; Yorùbá philosophy and aesthetics; and western critical theory in the mould of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. This affinity goes by the name 'nonsensuous', her term for a field in which relations between subjects and objects are constructed along more expansive lines than those

of identity or non-identity, joined in more (and less) than their difference. For Okiji, black studies, Yorùbá philosophy and critical theory are connected nonsensuously, sharing a subterranean intimacy rooted in a common though differentially articulated capacity for countenancing contradiction. From black studies, the un- or para-dialectical; from Yorùbá thought, the facility for an ontological doubleness or tolerance for ‘harmony in contradiction’; and from critical theory, dialectics proper.

Having laid out this theoretical schema, *Billie’s Bent Elbow* then proceeds in two directions at once, offering an argument for the triad’s nonsensuous connection and a demonstration of the aesthetic, critical and political capacities of this (non)relation. As Okiji writes of the book’s intervention, what results is an

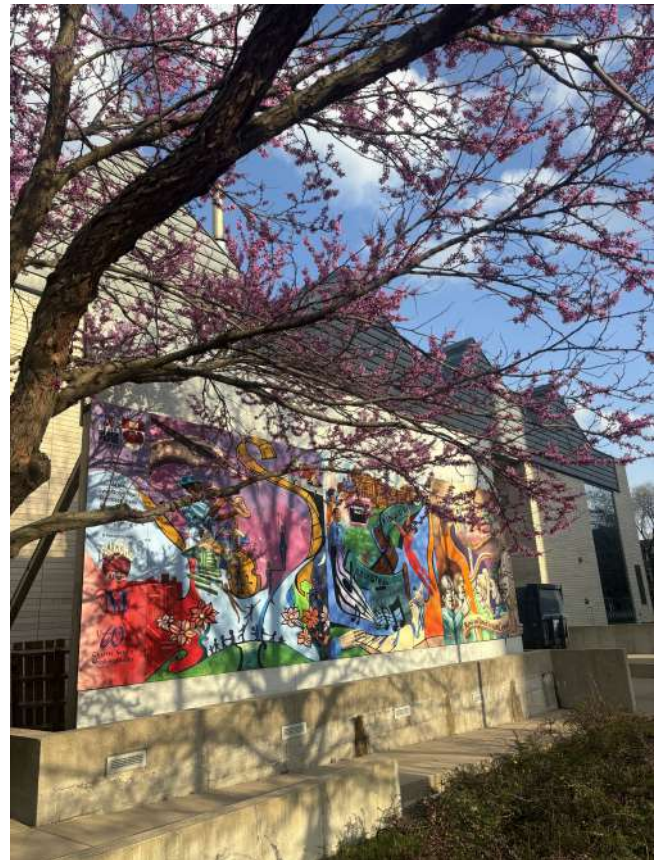
exploration of a way to world and thought that could be described, in its confluence of approaches, its overload/overlap of incongruous laws of historical movement, as incoherent and underdetermined – a way to world and thought encouraging of ill-fit, overlapping, at times contradictory, other times overdetermined deposits, one that writes gluttonous histories.

Okiji wants to have the dialectic and eat it too: to hold onto the critical theory in which she is schooled but only by subjecting it to the excessive force of black life and thought, an encounter which inevitably distorts and transforms it, perhaps beyond recognition. The book’s success must then be assessed sonically: when do these overlapping schemas create harmonious contradiction, and when do they generate feedback and incoherence?

To make the case for this new sound, Okiji travels from Africa to the diaspora and back, taking in the singing of ‘La Marseillaise’ by Haitian revolutionaries; Cecil Taylor’s 1977 performance with Mary Lou Williams; the (non)place of Africa in Hegel’s philosophy of history; and music and visual art by Don Cherry, Wadada Leo Smith and Julie Mehretu, among others. The prose mirrors the scale of this effort, unfolding in a digressive style that accumulates subclauses, poetic asides and word-play, tracking seemingly in real time the turning over of thought as it encounters these subterranean (non)relations across the depth and breadth of black expressive culture.

Unsurprisingly for a work that moves within and against the dialectic, the shadow of Hegel looms large, and it is the attempt at finding an outside to the Hegelian

dialectic that is at the heart of much of the writing here. Wrestling with the old man – and in particular his infamous account of Africa in the lectures on the philosophy of history – provides occasion for some of the book’s most generous prose, inviting the reader into Okiji’s misgivings as she pauses to question why she’s spent all this time rereading Hegel, and especially *this* Hegel.



What ultimately propels her through Hegel’s distorted image of Africa and blackness, an image which undergirds western thought, both radical and conservative, is the collective endeavour of ‘a *communitas* out in the nonway’: a group of friends known as Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective. This collective gathers in a number of bars – including the titular ‘Billie’s Bent Elbow’, an imaginary pub – to discuss and ‘make music’ in Taylor-like fashion, a music that sounds like ‘*Verwandtschaft*: relationship, affinity’. In these zones, a kind of moveable auditory situation, the perversity of the encounter with blackness as critical theory’s unthought is set up as an enabling constraint, a shared object that can be profaned, torqued and inverted, revealing sonic vistas that thrive in their situation outside and beneath.

It is in this positing of the communal as a means

to manipulate the European radical tradition that Okiji differentiates herself from the more Afropessimistic currents dominant in contemporary black studies, a distinction she lays out in a footnote discussing Stephen Best's *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*. As she notes, both her and Best's projects are concerned with 'bringing to light comportment and correspondence that go against the general tide of recognitive relations'. The difference between their two projects, as Okiji sees it, is that she seeks to retain contact with the communitarian, an impulse with which Best would disagree. One can see why Okiji would make this move. Her objects – jazz and free music in the lineage of the 60s 'new thing' – continually venture from and return to the community, whether that community is located in Chicago, in the case of the pathbreaking AACM, or orbits London's Cafe OTO or Cape Town's Chimurenga Factory. Necessarily, the critic's relation to these forms cannot be uni-directional, as it is a situation as much as a sound that is being apprehended.

So Okiji is pushed by that aesthetic sociality to generate an interpretative method that fosters an intimacy between critic and object, one that privileges description and elaboration, even to the point where it overpowers the traditional critical posture of disinterested distance. To aid her in this work, she turns to the practice of mimesis, eschewing the term's more common usage and instead understanding it as '*anschmiegen* – nestling against, snuggling up, or molding to', an interpretation she takes from Adorno. Mimesis-as-snuggling offers Okiji a means to read for moments of harmonious contradiction, or 'nonsensuous correspondence' in the Okijian idiom, allowing her to approach cultural works structured by dissonance or incompleteness, like the Taylor-Williams performance, the subject of the third chapter. That performance, a clash of styles and philosophies, was understood to be an aesthetic failure by contemporary critics. But through the lens of nonsensuous correspondence it becomes instead a working through of frictional communality, as the jagged meshing of Taylor and Williams' playing points to a form of sociality without or beyond recognition, performing what Okiji terms 'a failure to be disturbed by nonrelation'.

Like the Taylor-Williams performance, Okiji's thought moulds itself around these moments of nonrelation, seeking to exfoliate their excesses and antinomies.

As such, it is a thought that refuses to settle, its concepts kept in motion lest their meanings and application ossify. But in making conceptual lability the work's primary motive force, and devising a style that can accommodate it, Okiji sets up a schema in which the book's strongest qualities are liable to become, from another angle, their weakest. Recall Okiji's account of the book's intervention, which includes the admission that it explores a 'way to world and thought that could be described ... as incoherent and underdetermined'. The danger here is that critique is replaced by description, theoretical openness turns over into vagueness, and the staking out of oblique connections becomes the contingency of personal preference. Depending on the quality of the argumentation (and there is some variance here, particularly in the final chapter), this reader found himself more or less willing to follow Okiji as she plotted her way through the nonsensuous, with the accumulation of digressions and connections resulting, at times, in underdetermination rather than felicitous nonrelation.

That slide into the underdetermined is most apparent in the work's theorisation of the political. In the introduction, Okiji follows a line that cuts through Benjamin, Fanon and David Marriott to argue for a conception of political action constituted through 'impossible moments of embodied insurrection'. By definition, these moments cannot be prepared for, and so the task at hand is to cultivate practices and spaces of communal experimentation from which they might arise. Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective offers an example of this sociality in action, the objects of their listening and music-making mimeticising the collective body that emerges in the insurrection: spontaneous and precarious, liable to dissolve as quickly as it arises. Constituted as it is from a blackened mode of being, this body elides the certainties of existing political forms, as Okiji writes, the party or the union is frustrated by 'our inevitable, unreliable revolt', a political form that 'is not necessarily organized opposition', but which nevertheless troubles the certainties of western political thought.

But in her admission that this form cannot be counted as 'organised opposition', Okiji demonstrates the limits of this notion of the political. By construing the latter as a zone of rehearsal, Okiji refuses to countenance the mediations that join sociality to articulated political practice. Absent from consideration, in other words, are the

thorny questions of ideological alignment, disagreement and education through which collectivities reproduce themselves after their initial efflorescence. Absent, too, is a consideration of political struggle, whose vicissitudes must necessarily be located outside the work's ambit. In retaining the theoretical openness of nonsensuous correspondence, the work then risks relegation to the realm of the minor, as epistemic agility ticks over into tactical stasis. What from one angle looks like a holding open of space for anarchic rupture looks from another like a retreat into endless preparation, the revolt coded as transcendent event rather than buildable form.

In our era of emergent fascist hegemony, to construe the political in this way would be a mistake. Contesting fascism's deadening of social life requires mobilisation, the construction of mass organised opposition – an anti-fascism that integrates the levels of the social, the aesthetic and the political. We need mediating steps that

allow for the spontaneity of the revolt to be prolonged and escalated.

One wishes, then, for a more developed account of how we get from the aesthetic sociality of rehearsal and improvisation found at Billie's to a more deeply political one. How are we to bring these practices with us from the bar to the workplace or the community hall? How do we place the branch meeting into nonsensuous correspondence with the club? How do we foster the capacity to 'fail to be disturbed by non-relation' in our unions and mutual aid groups, as limited as these forms may be? If it is not ultimately for *Billie's Bent Elbow* to provide us with a political strategy, it is a mark of the book's generosity that it holds open the possibility that some provisional moves in that direction may be made. For those of us who see the meeting of Black Studies and Marxism as a political necessity as much as a theoretical one, this cannot be underestimated.

Rafael Lubner

The impossibility of the 'chattel proletariat'

David McNally, *Slavery and Capitalism: A New Marxist History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025). 368pp., £28.00 pb., 978 052041 5973

It is nowadays difficult to contest the claim that Atlantic slavery is 'surely among the greatest repressed moments of capitalist civilization.' The nature of this repression is largely brought to attention by interventions in black studies that seek to re-centre an analysis of slavery in relation to capitalism's social forms. Marxism has had to take this demand seriously in order to recover its merit against proponents who, even when contending slavery to be integral to capitalism's development, either reduce the connection to crude financial histories of 'banks, trades and credit markets' to write a story of 'capitalism born without blood', or provide an analysis 'disabled by the superficial treatment of Marxism' (Eugene Genovese and Walter Johnson are cited as exemplary in this regard). This is the fraught context to which David McNally's *Slavery and Capitalism* responds, suggesting that such attempts have converged on the terrain of methods that 'favor description over theoretical analysis', thus 'evad[ing] the reciprocities of system and entity'. This results in

overly historicist endeavours that have abandoned the insights of critical theory to suggest instead that "the facts" can speak for themselves'.

The rejection of vulgar empiricism is an insight that might align McNally with Hegel, whose notorious adage proclaims any contradiction between theory and empiricism to always stage a losing battle for the latter: 'so much the worse for the facts!' Nonetheless, *Slavery and Capitalism* is a study that relies heavily on historiography to frame convergences between its titular referents. 'Part One: The Planter, the President, and the Political Economist' considers the 'foundations of capitalist slavery' through three sites of plantation development that correspond to three key figures: Richard Ligon, whose account of plantation life in Barbados records the early distinctions between servants and slaves, and the 'political arithmetic of plantation profit'; George Washington, whose letters and ledgers as a Virginian plantation owner evidence slavery's 'exercise in abstrac-