

## KOSHKA DUFF

for “I love you” say fuck the police’

### Abolition in and through the poetry of Sean Bonney

*[E]verybody’s tuned into a particular frequency, and everyone’s experiencing a kind of enhancement of their capacities to be in the world... everybody’s slightly altered, permanently, in a good way by the experience...*

—#ACFM Trip 2: Collective Joy<sup>1</sup>

*My ideal audience already hates cops. I’m [...] trying to contribute to a discussion about why they’re bad and the best ways out of this situation.*

—Sean Bonney<sup>2</sup>

Sean Bonney’s poetry fights for the abolition of *police reality*.<sup>3</sup> By this he means not only the violent infrastructures of policing themselves, but the social order these *vicious and simplistic* institutions exist to enforce: the order of *Money. Sanctions. Etc. Of settler colonialism, of capital and slavery, of the seventy-nine royal bastards that block out the lights of Heaven*. The eight richest men in the world have as much

1 Nadia Idle, Keir Milburn, and Jeremy Gilbert, ‘#ACFM Trip 2: Collective Joy [Podcast]’, *Novara Media*, 7 May 2019, <https://novaramedia.com/2019/05/07/acfm-collective-joy/>.

2 ‘Their Own Pantheon: Sean Bonney Interviewed by Jeffrey Grunthaner’, *BOMB Magazine*, 11 December 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/>.

3 Quotations in italics are from these books by Sean: *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant Publishing, 2011); *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015); *Our Death* (Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2019).

4 Larry Elliott, ‘World’s eight richest people have same wealth as poorest 50%’, *The Guardian*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/16/worlds->

wealth as the poorest fifty percent of the global population.<sup>4</sup> This *status quo* depends on the violence of policing to prevent the ‘have-nots’ from taking what they need but don’t have, or changing, collectively, what it means to ‘have’ something at all. As Sean writes: *Cops invent Jails. Jails invent cities. Invent epochs*.

### This Really Happened

The epochs cops invent are overlaid by ideological mystifications. By dehumanising the targets of policing—*dole scroungers; the undeserving dead; their racial profiles and problem families*—and proffering colourful consolations to the faithful—*royal weddings; babies, flags, cupcakes; celebrity and crocodile tears*—they legitimise and obscure the everyday, normalised violences of policing, as well as its occasionally reported excesses.<sup>5</sup> Even speaking of an ‘order’ runs the risk of contributing to this mystification. It captures something of the tightly regulated, conformist nature of a social reality that holds *everything in its preordained place* with the force of a truncheon, but it misses the fact that how ‘orderly’ the world appears may depend precisely on your subject position with respect to the police and the structures of wealth and power they maintain. *Let none of us claim a difference [...] between nightmare and daily routine*. Against this *sinister [...] harmony*, Sean mobilises another reality, another constellation: what *really happened / inside Normal*.

eight-richest-people-have-same-wealth-as-poorest-50.

5 The anti-colonial philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon famously speaks of the ‘two cities’ of the coloniser and the colonised (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961). The former is clean, wealthy, shining white; it is built on the exploited labour and resources of the *other* city, the dirty, impoverished, chaotic and criminalised *casbah*. Sean speaks of a *city that is mostly uninhabitable desert, but its rich inhabitants never seem to notice this fact*.

The notion that the police, as an institution, exists for any more benign reason than ‘to reproduce and maintain economic inequality, usually along racialized lines’<sup>6</sup> is debunked by a look at its origins and subsequent track record. *In 1829 Robert Peel invented 1000 pigs to circle the city*. Right before he did that, Sir Peel was Chief Secretary to Ireland, presiding over the UK’s oldest white settler colony. There he was in charge of keeping down a native population constructed in colonial ideology as a racialized ‘other’ with a ‘natural predilection for outrage and a lawless life’, to use Peel’s own choice expression.<sup>7</sup> This is just one example of the ‘colonial boomerang effect’, in which methods of repression first developed in the Wild West of empire are ‘brought back to the imperial metropolis and deployed against the marginalised, subjugated and subaltern within’.<sup>8</sup>

Attention to history is equally important for thinking about what it *means* to abolish the police. It alerts us to the tendencies of oppressive institutions to evolve, outlive their official deaths, and re-form themselves into newly streamlined mechanisms of social control. Slavery reinvented as mass incarceration, for instance.<sup>9</sup> In 1600, there was no such thing as ‘the police’ in the modern sense. Yet Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for questioning the rulers’

6 Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017), 108.

7 Tanzil Chowdhury, ‘From the Colony to the Metropole: Race, Policing and the Colonial Boomerang’, in *Abolishing the Police*, ed. Koshka Duff (London: Dog Section Press, 2021), 85–94.

8 Connor Woodman, ‘The Imperial Boomerang: How Colonial Methods of Repression Migrate Back to the Metropolis’, *Verso*, 22 July 2019, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4383-the-imperial-boomerang-how-colonial-methods-of-repression-migrate-back-to-the-metropolis>.

9 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2011).

cosmology<sup>10</sup>—*his tongue imprisoned because of his wicked words*—and so were thousands of too-powerful, too-knowledgeable women who dared exist outside of the congealing form of the bourgeois family.<sup>11</sup> Newgate as a technology of class domination was already built *and* burnt *before* Robert Peel built his thousand automata from the ashes.

*Inside Normal atoms and electrons* we discover the violence of policing that produces what counts as normality; but we also find countless counter-energies—alternative lives imagined and enacted, fugitive solidarities and refusals to collaborate that official narratives demonise and erase. Sean’s poetry is a repository for these long histories of domination and resistance.

### Care Not Cages

The core of the policing function is the use of violence and the threat of violence to control a population: to enforce social hierarchies and norms by punishing non-conformity. It may be carried out directly by agents of the state (police and prison officers, border guards, military personnel, intelligence officers) or outsourced to private

10 As Charlotte Thießen writes in a pamphlet distributed at the exhibition of these poems in the Klosterruine, Berlin: ‘Bonney ventriloquizes the Italian philosopher, mathematician and poet Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake on 17 February 1600. Bruno had embraced the Copernican theory not least because he saw it as proving an eternal movement of forms, in itself the proof that every order is of a temporary nature. In the face of momentary defeat, [...] the task of a militant poetics is to gather the components of revolutionary imagination, as Bonney does here by speaking an abolitionist alchemy through the language of Bruno: *for water say plague i.e. the language of judges, the infinite vowel / for water say fire i.e. pulsars and mace [etc.]*’.

11 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

‘security’ forces (bailiffs, corporate surveillance apparatuses, G4S, Serco, etc.). The public at large are also co-opted into policing. The UK’s Hostile Environment policies, for example, put the onus on medical staff, teachers, employers and landlords, among others, to act as border police by monitoring the documents and whereabouts of perceived ‘foreigners’:<sup>12</sup> *the music of the law—we are their songs—complicity / we the imperial teeth.*

An abolitionist perspective is one that asks: what needs to change about society in order that this level of normalised violence is no longer necessary to maintain it? As Sarah Lambie explains:

we cannot simply do away with the police—we need to address the conditions in which people feel that police are the only or best option for responding to harm in their lives. [...] This] requires us to engage in strategies that dismantle the structures, institutions and systems that underpin and sustain prisons and police while at the same time building up systems of care, well-being, and support that fulfil human needs and enable communities to flourish.<sup>13</sup>

The shift from cages to care and community, which abolitionists both advocate and practise, can provide *the beginnings of a counterlight to see by.*

12 Arianne Shahvisi, ‘We Are All Police Now: Resisting Everyday Bordering and the Hostile Environment’, in *Abolishing the Police*, ed. Koshka Duff (London: Dog Section Press, 2021), 39–51.

13 ‘Practising Everyday Abolition’, in *Abolishing the Police*, ed. Koshka Duff (London: Dog Section Press, 2021), 148.

But what it illuminates is far from simple. The stratifying and normalising functions of policing are spread through social work, psychiatric institutions, the ‘benefits’ system and patriarchal forms of family, often under the rubric of ‘care’.<sup>14</sup> That ‘community’ is not an innocent concept is evident in the phenomenon of social policing, which often works in tacit concert with formal police forces and replicates their punitive character. *He was a big freak / transformed into normality / all the night through.* Even where deviations from community standards are not technically illegal, the social police, as champions of the ‘normal’ and ‘respectable’—or, as Sean puts it, that *monstrous excrescence / a reasonable point of view*—will tend to have law on their side.

*This is the meaning of policing. Tiny choked syllables a blockade on whatever is left of our memories. Sirens everywhere.* Collective memory is our inoculation against policing’s continual rebranding exercises.

## Collective Joy

‘Giddy friends, our fun begins’ wrote ASBO<sup>15</sup> kid Arthur Rimbaud of the Paris Commune, describing a kind of connection, an

14 Anne Boyer: ‘As it happens / the state has no monopoly on violence / just a silent partnership / with the family’. *MONEY CITY SICK AS FUCK* (London: Materials, 2019), 25. See e.g. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: 2019, Serpents Tail); Loic Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Shatema Threadcraft, ‘Intimate Injustice, Political Obligation, and the Dark Ghetto’, *Signs* 39, no. 3 (2014): 735–60. And, of course, the ever-relevant Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

15 Anti-Social Behaviour Order: Blair-era legislation that targeted working class young people. See Mark Wilding, ‘The Age of the ASBO: How Britain Became a Police State’, *Vice*, 10

experiment in togetherness and love, that made the moment worth communicating even—perhaps especially—after the massacre of those friends by the forces of the state. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, right now, discussions of abolishing the police and discussions of collective joy are taking off at the same time. Collective joy is the *ecstasy and acid and free parties* cracked down on by *the Criminal Justice Bill* and *the insipid immolation of Britpop*; it is the ‘productive connectedness to lots of other people, ideas’ that can occur at a protest, in conversation amongst friends or chance encounters with the yet unknown (‘my heart is sure, there are brothers in shadowed strangers’).<sup>16</sup> The generalisation of the possibility of collective joy is the horizon that Sean fought towards. It describes the *glimpses of improbable harmony* on whose reality he most wanted to insist.

The pamphleteers of the revolutionary seventeenth century saw their writings as Arrow[s] Against All Tyrants and Tyranny, apocalyptic visitations bringing glad tidings of the imminent abolition of private property To All the Inhabitants of the Earth. Specially to the Rich Ones.<sup>17</sup> They ‘viewed print not merely as an extension of speech, furnishing an ‘afterlife’ for the spoken word [...] but as a form of speech act itself, whether preaching or prophesying, remonstrating or inciting’.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Sean’s are not simply writings *about* politics. They do not merely recommend or describe certain political positions or actions, such as abolishing the police. His writings are speech *as* political action.

October 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gv594q/the-age-of-the-asbo-how-britain-became-a-police-state>.

16 Arthur Rimbaud, ‘What’s It to Us, My Heart? (1872)’, trans. Simon Bull (London: Distributed as a pamphlet at the Bloomsbury Social Centre, 2011).

17 From titles of pamphlets by the ‘Leveller’ Richard Overton and the ‘Ranter’ Abiezzer Coppe.

18 Helen Lynch, *Milton and the Politics of Public Speech* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 11.

In fact, I want to say that the poems printed here are not really directed at an audience at all, in the sense of a well-behaved collection of auditors, those who sit and listen. The words live when they are shouted to a raucous body that shouts back. They address not an audience but a crowd—a moving, tumultuous mass. Explaining ‘the general effervescence characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs’, sociologist Emile Durkheim writes of the orator: ‘The passionate energies that he [sic] arouses re-echo in turn within him, and they increase his dynamism. It is then no longer a mere individual who speaks but a group incarnated and personified.’<sup>19</sup> Durkheim’s point is that the collective is the power that lives in the words, a power often attributed to the divine or the demonic. Speech can act only as part of a shared project.

Sean’s poetry electrified picket lines. As we huddled in the snow around temperamental sound-systems, with placards demanding JUSTICE FOR CLEANERS and banners offering FREE EDUCATION HERE & NOW (RRP £9,000), assembled crowds would spontaneously begin shouting along to that memorable refrain—*say fuck the police*—as if to a punk song chorus. The crowd in Sean’s work is a coming together, an always potentially joyful disorder or disorderly joy. It is what policing exists to *contain*—kettle, arrest, incarcerate—and *disperse*—break up with batons, break down into isolated and controllable units, to demoralise, demobilise and database, infiltrate to paranoid breakdown.<sup>20</sup>

19 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (London: The Free Press, 1995), 212–13.

20 See e.g. Connor Woodman, *Spycops in Context (2): Counter-Subversion, Deep Dissent, and the Logic of Political Policing* (London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2018). Available at <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/spycops-in-context>.

Like the radical tradition he celebrated, from the free-loving Ranters of the 1640s to (please enjoy the segue) the illegal Ravers of the 1990s, Sean's words have their life in moments of contestation and unsanctioned collective expression.

### No One Is Disposable

A less exciting cultural phenomenon of the 90s was the POLITE NOTICE sticker standardly displayed in taxis. As a child, I repeatedly misread this as POLICE NOTICE and wondered what the police would do to me if I didn't wear my seatbelt. This was, I'm sure, intended by the designers and indeed there is a non-accidental connection between the two concepts. The notion of *politesse*—the mores of bourgeois conventionality—and the modern bureaucratic *police state* emerged concurrently.<sup>21</sup> An explicit and primary function of the latter was to enforce the former on recalcitrant elements within the social body. The new forces of order were fought as a 'plague of blue locusts' by the working-class communities whose licentious leisure activities and dangerous trade union-forming tendencies they were sent in to eradicate.<sup>22</sup>

Sean's poems enact and envision forms of love and care that are (near-)impossible in police reality. But they are not nice. *I am not a garden*, he writes. *there are no orchids*. And they are certainly not polite: *the rest of this letter / has been returned to you, / it is offensive and*

21 See e.g. Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2009). First published in 1961 as *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la Folie à l'Âge Classique*.

22 Robert D. Storch, 'The Plague of the Blue Locusts: Police Reform and Popular Resistance in Northern England, 1840-57', *International Review of Social History* 20, no. 1 (1975): 61-90.

*inappropriate*. To care and to be careful are not equivalent, he insists. Against every imperative to occupy the ground of respectability, he

throws in his lot with the socially detested—the *perverts*, the *drug addicts*, and *the motherfucking broken-hearted*.

That is why, although Sean is without doubt an abolitionist poet, I suspect that some people intellectually identified with abolitionism will still find his work uncomfortable. As radical critiques of policing make inroads into academia, NGOs, the social media mainstream and middle-class dinner party conversations, there is an understandable tendency to craft a sanitised version of abolitionism that is less threatening to the protocols and sensibilities dominant in these spaces. In making the case for abolition to audiences who do not already 'hate cops', it can help to emphasise care, nurturing, community bonds, harm reduction, to foreground anti-violence in contrast to the violence of the criminal punishment system. Infographics with teapots showing how resources could be reallocated from police budgets to fund education, housing, and mental health services can open up important conversations about what's really needed to keep people safe. In the context of an abolitionist conference with a safer spaces policy longer than its keynote speech, Sean's *reinvent time. reinvent violence. then / listen, go at those bastards like the furies; as sexual research we / shit in your fucking guts / hello* might seem a little off-message.

## Victory to Dole Scroungers!

Tempting as it might be to imagine, though, an abolitionist politics that wholly disavows confrontation and militancy is not going to get very far.<sup>23</sup> Sean expresses this thought right after the anti-police uprisings of August 2011. *Under such extreme conditions, hydrogen behaves like liquid metal, conducting electricity as well as heat. If none of that happens, it's a waste of time. Perhaps you think that doesn't apply to you.* Of course, you might have good reasons for not getting stuck into a riot. But the question of who will take the risks of militancy—who will face ‘the wrath of lawmen’, as a participant-journalist of the First Quarter Storm insurrection in the Philippines puts it<sup>24</sup>—remains, always, a political one. Sean had the courage not to leave the risks to others. The writers he admired shared this quality. Diane di Prima helped smuggle draft dodgers to Canada. Amiri Baraka was prosecuted for his role in the 1967 Newark rebellions. John Milton took part in a regicide.

Sean’s ‘pantheon’ is one alert to the pitfalls of writing in general, and poetry in particular, as a self-deceiving substitute for action.

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<sup>23</sup> The *choice* to insert distance between oneself and the disreputable is in any case available only to those whose very survival is not perceived as an affront to (ableist, racist, classed, heteronormative, neurotypical etc.) decency. See e.g. Adam Elliott-Cooper, ‘“Our Life Is a Struggle”: Respectable Gender Norms and Black Resistance to Policing’, *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 51, no. 2 (2019): 539–57; Vanessa E. Thompson, ‘Beyond Policing, For A Politics of Breathing’, in *Abolishing the Police*, ed. Koshka Duff (London: Dog Section Press, 2021), 179–92.

<sup>24</sup> Jose F. Lacaba, ‘The January 26 Confrontation: A Highly Personal Account’, in *Days of Disquiet, Nights of Rage: The First Quarter Storm & Related Events*, Revised Edition (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2017), 47.

Addressing the Greek anarchist poet Katerina Gogou, Sean writes: *the cops are twitching, baleful shadows [...] aeons away from the music that defines them, music they have never known how to hear while, for us, we have loved it so much it has smashed our lives into countless fragments.* The risk that your life will be smashed into countless fragments is, he suggests, a risk worth taking. This is not to say that everyone must live out their commitment to abolitionist politics in precisely the ways Sean did. Libertarian communist that he was, he had great respect for the principle of diversity of tactics, and neither he nor I is in the business of banning teapots. Still, what his work troubles—rightly, in my view—is the idea that you can fight for the abolition of police reality while living a nice, normal life in which you offend nobody and never get into trouble. *Poetry, what's it for / Comes from 'doing' / Means 'Do It'.*

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