

## The Patient Poetry and Poetics of Rob Halpern

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“If you love me and I’m weak, then weaker you must love me more...”

### Introduction: From Rumoured Place to Common Place

The bulk of Rob Halpern’s work of the last decade of publishing forms a tetralogy: *Rumored Place*, *Disaster Suites*, *Music for Porn*, and finally *Common Place*, which is forthcoming, and will incorporate the 2009 chapbook *Weak Link*.<sup>1</sup> This essay is a pre-emptive retrospective on a remarkable body of work, remarkable for the determination and consistency with which it has pulled at a number of thematic threads, and remarkable for the continued development of an inimitable poetry in which leftist commitments are developed in a poetics, a patient construction of, and experimentation with, some of the characteristics of behaviour that might foster forms of solidarity specific to our times.

We can place this body of work by looking at two major allusions that occur at the outset of the first and last books in the tetralogy. The title of the first book in the tetralogy, *Rumored Place*, gestures toward Robert Duncan’s 1960 “This Place Rumored to Have Been Sodom.” Duncan’s poem opens as though in mid-conversation:

might have been.  
Certainly these ashes might have been pleasures.  
Pilgrims on their way toward the Holy Places remark  
this place. Isn’t it plain to all  
that these mounds were palaces? This was once  
a city among men, a gathering together of spirit?  
It was measured by the Lord and found wanting.  
It was measured by the Lord and found wanting,  
destroyed by the angels that inhabit longing.<sup>2</sup>

Duncan’s poem connects the earthquake and subsequent fires that all but destroyed San Francisco in 1906 to the city’s period of homophilic coming out in the 1950s, in which Duncan played a crucial role. Halpern is not a native San Franciscan. His decision to move to there was linked to his sense of being compelled to become a writer. It is through the traditions of San Francisco and the Bay Area writing scene that we can gain perspective on some of his key influences. For example, on arriving in San Francisco in the late 1980s, Halpern wrote fan mail to Kathy Acker, Aaron Shurin and Robert Glück.<sup>3</sup> It was also in San Francisco that Halpern took workshops in the homes of both Dodie Bellamy and Glück and began a complex negotiation between the attitudes of New Narrative and those of Language writers (and, behind both, the spectre of Fredric Jameson).<sup>4</sup> Halpern has since written the preface to Bruce Boone’s *Century of Clouds*, and it is to “Bruce” he turns in the “Envoi” to *Music for Porn*. We can trace out from New Narrative the importance to Halpern of Dodie Bellamy, Kevin Killian, and kari edwards.<sup>5</sup>

The “place” which is “rumored to have been Sodom” in Duncan’s poem is also “this place”; it might be a lost time but remains a contemporary space circumscribed by the ambivalent features of gossip, innuendo, word-of-mouth, and rumour, which we can see when Duncan’s line-break turns a casual remark into the invitation to re-inscribe: “remark/this place.” Halpern’s use of this poem is not simply a nod from one poet to a significant precursor, but also understands the poem as a foretelling of its later disaster. The disaster of the San Francisco fire is the razing of the city, but the necessity to reassert that (in the words of Duncan’s poem above) the “the

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Images and Love of the friends never die” projects the fire onto the traumatic early years of HIV and AIDS. Halpern’s poetry is full of meaningful absences, and though these lacunae should not by any means be imagined as exclusively linked to AIDS-related grief, still the palpable loss caused by the epidemic, and the attempt to make that loss palpable, remain central to this work. Halpern’s epigraph from Duncan points to the transformation of the meaning of Duncan’s poem by a future he could not foretell; it is re-inscribed, re-marked, by the future.

The epigraph for the final work in the tetralogy is taken from George Oppen and is quoted thus in the opening pages of *Common Place*:

*‘common place,’ ‘that which we cannot not see,’ etc.*  
George Oppen

The quotation is taken from a letter from Oppen to Donald Davie, in which Oppen describes his anxiety at the possibly loose use of the epithet, “radical”; his concern derives from a philosophical critique, that consciousness “in itself, and of itself[...] establishes the fact of *actuality*.”<sup>6</sup> That is, Oppen’s refusal of “radical” is the refusal to overlook the actual on behalf of an exclusive, more fundamental root of experience. Oppen writes:

No, I don’t think I’m ‘radical’ in your sense. My ‘proofs’ are all images. My proof is the image. ‘The common place,’ ‘that which we cannot NOT see,’ etc, I don’t think I’ve proposed anything but that we commit ourselves to that mystery since in fact I think we must, I think we do - - ‘Surely infiniteness is the most obvious thing in the world’ the commonplace partly because it is common, still more because it is the major mystery. the most extensive miracle.<sup>7</sup>

Halpern’s poetic oeuvre, therefore, moves between the queer “rumored” place remarked upon by Robert Duncan, a place and a time largely hidden from view, the Sodom which offers itself as home to a community otherwise aggressed against, and the “common” place referred to by Oppen, the shared actuality that cannot be missed, and yet remains the most mysterious of subjects. Oppen’s commitment to that which is held in common was ideologically communist in its sympathies, and so making that which is shared—sociality—into that which is shared in common, was a constant crisis of ambition in his life as an activist and as a poet.<sup>8</sup> The argument I am making with these allusive book-ends from Duncan and Oppen is that Halpern’s work is in its way methodical, working through its preoccupations with the advancement of emancipatory politics, socialist commitments, the recovery of leftist conceptions of community and the commons. The progress of the tetralogy is not so much from margins to centre, from queer to commons, since the implicit argument of all Halpern’s work is that the commons, too, are under attack.<sup>9</sup> As we move through the tetralogy, from a place marked out by surreptitious language, the “rumored” place, toward the “extensive miracle” of the common place, via the recovery of the ambivalent possibilities of the disaster (*Disaster Suites*) and the utopian energies of pornography (*Music for Porn*), we see with what consistent and thoughtful energy Halpern seeks out the affective structures of places within which are embedded hopes for transformations along leftist lines.

Halpern’s work contends with prevalent affects of contemporary life, affects relating to profiteering on crisis, the rise of financial precariousness in the midst of the continuing war economy, a queer theory after the gay liberation of the 1970s, and the recognition of complicity in the military activity of neoconservative economies tied to alienation from that complicity.<sup>10</sup> His poetry is driven by a desire to foster alternative leftist affects in places made legible by a projection of grammar, by a future-anterior writing, by a dedicated attempt to write poetry which

will be transformed in its reading by the future that cannot, at the current time, be anticipated. One of the phrases that echoes through his work is “*Who will have been here to hear this?*”<sup>11</sup>

The arc of Halpern’s poetry plots out the hopeful transportation of the queer into the common; his work narrates a transformation to be undertaken, in its greatest expectations, by society in general. What then is the strategy of this work? What does it seek to do, or how does it seek to behave in a way that will foment such developments? The answer to that question is held in a complex, disparate but interwoven set of theories that share two common traits: first, the suspension of the strong or traditional sentiments or affects of leftist politics (and their double in fascistic and nationalist overdeterminations); and second, the commitment to rethinking social bonds in a socialist tradition. This mode of thinking includes the “inoperative community” of Jean-Luc Nancy, the “unavowable community” of Maurice Blanchot (the latter in part a response to Nancy’s earlier work, and both of which are developments of themes of community from the work of Georges Bataille), the “neutral” of Roland Barthes, Paolo Virno’s ambivalence of disenchantment, and, from each of these, Halpern’s own development of a poetics of “patency.”<sup>12</sup> The role of community—the potential for a reclamation of the commons (or even of communism)—requires an essay unto itself, which would be a necessary complement to what follows. Instead, this essay will focus on the related conceptions of weakness, patency, neutrality and ambivalence, all of which are affective orders Halpern takes to be in some way preparatory for the kinds of equitable sociality of the common places mentioned above. They are all reconfigurations of weakness, seeking some strategic or utopian possibility in moments or structures of incapacity, a loss of political efficacy, or social marginalisation. Halpern’s poetics models the condition and recuperation of ambivalence and weakness in order better to understand our distress at the overbearing contingency of our lives, and it exemplifies the practicing of a neutral, affective character ready for alternative possibilities for political efficacy. I want to pursue this argument by reading closely the relations between syntax and prosody in his poetry, paying attention to its self-reflexive, considerate, and patient thoroughness.

### **Ambivalent Poetry: *Weak Link***

In “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,” Paolo Virno assesses the “emotional situation” of the 1980s, by which he means the “modes of being and feeling so pervasive as to be common to the most diverse contexts of experience,” and ascribes these feelings to ambivalence.<sup>13</sup> Virno seeks to disclose within ambivalence the “degree zero” or “neutral kernel from which may arise both cheerful resignation, inexhaustible renunciation, and social assimilation on the one hand and new demands for the radical transformation of the status quo on the other.”<sup>14</sup> His dialectic of ambivalence is skewered between deep conservatism and radical possibility.

For Virno, there is an “*immediate coincidence*” [his emphasis] between the life of labour and of the sentiments, between the forces of production and the production of ethics. “Post-Fordist” production is marked out by what he calls the “*sentiments of disenchantment*.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, disenchantment is not the absence of sentimentality, but rather is itself a form of the sentimentality that attends fear, opportunism and cynicism. Virno’s analysis is based on an analysis of labour as it began to favour “habitual mobility,” “adaptability,” “omnilateral linguistic interaction, command of the flow of information, and the ability to navigate among limited possible alternatives.”<sup>16</sup> More and more it is an alienated sociability (the name for our “generically social talents”) that is for hire; this sociability is an ability to follow the conversation as prescribed.<sup>17</sup> As Virno writes, “these modes of ‘inauthentic life’ and stigmata of ‘impoverished experience’ have become autonomous and positive models of production.”<sup>18</sup> Possibilities for work-place solidarity dissolve in the half-smiling complicity of a generalized social benevolence required of the workplace. How do we forge solidarity when benign sociability itself is labour?

For Virno, a “singular sense of contingency, acceptance of alienation, and direct connection to a network of possibilities are transformed into professional qualifications, into a ‘toolbox.’”<sup>19</sup> As advertising reifies affect in its products, so the increasingly de-industrialised workplace reifies sociability. This is the abstraction of communications by the communications network.

Such characteristics are surely even more required, and devalued, in today’s labour-market, at least in “developed” nations, and are a measure of the ubiquity of computing. For Virno, the computer is not “a means to a univocal end” but rather “a premise for successive ‘opportunistic’ elaborations of work,” where work is “pervaded by diffuse ‘communicative action,’ when work is no longer identified as solitary, mute, ‘instrumental action.’”<sup>20</sup> For Virno opportunistic work patterns create a pervasive, low-lying fear and cynicism, the “stable instability that marks the internal articulations of the productive process itself.”<sup>21</sup> Virno finds nothing desirable in such opportunism and cynicism (the affects of disenchantment, with a “simplified and unelaborated,” “arrogant” and “puerile” sentimentalism as its leisured binary counterpart), but seeks within these modes of feeling the “neutral kernel” or “degree zero” out of which more radical possibilities might develop.<sup>22</sup>

Presented singly as a virtue, the openness of ambivalence to “radically conflicting developments” is reminiscent of a neutering of poetic practice by a bland recourse to linguistic indeterminacy, one still championed by much of the avant-garde.<sup>23</sup> Syntax is treated as an architecture of hierarchy and control, such that the transformation of syntax would itself transform the hierarchies of society, and therefore a poetry of play, ambivalence, indeterminacy or openness is considered the corollary of a more free, more equitable society. Such specious readerly freedom implies that it is more difficult to use syntax to model experiences of real contingency, the experience of being blocked off and closed down by the pressures of everyday life. For John Wilkinson the value of Halpern’s poetry is the manner in which it refuses the “programmatically” nature of the avant-garde’s predilection for generating “random networks.”<sup>24</sup> In Halpern’s writing,

the syntax resists the easy recourse to the paratactical that curses much contemporary avant-garde verse with portentousness. Parataxis can serve exact relations but rarely does; rather, it produces a nimbus of optional relationships, side-stepping contradictory force for a dream of freedom.<sup>25</sup>

The epigraph to Halpern’s *Weak Link* refers to “our conflicting tendencies,” between lyric poetry and actuality (as Oppen might put it) but also to the possibility of exacerbating conflict.<sup>26</sup> *Weak Link* asks how can we become a weak link in a structure we abhor, without merely becoming the victim of the contingencies of our weakness in that system? How can we situate resistance in weakness or foment resistance from it? One task of this poetry, as Wilkinson points out, is to “weaken the links,” to weaken the system at the points of its vulnerability. One response to the overbearing system of late capital would be the heroic mode, one that answers to the strength of the network with strategies of power, and that is mindful of the rhetorical pathos that energizes such power; the other response might be a weakening, an unwillingness to answer the will of the system with a promotion of will-power forged by the predatory sentiments of capitalist competition. Halpern’s insight, in *Weak Link* and elsewhere, is that weakness cannot be a singular strategy of resistance since it is always dialectically contested by the weakness of social relations desired by capital. Such weakness is not merely the untying of the practical possibilities for solidarity (breaking the unions, say) but a more general and pervasive etiolation. The acts of will created by a potentially radical ambivalence need to differentiate themselves from modes of industrialized power; the current capitalist network operates not only with industrial power and its concomitant violence, but also by weakening the links that otherwise offered some aspect of

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protection; in particular those links in a society with a sense of ethical responsibility guaranteed by the state. Capital's power is also, strategically, a weakening. Virno, proposes weakening, an ambivalence of possibility:

The ambivalence of which I am speaking cannot be examined exhaustively in its “virtuous” sense. To do so would be to misunderstand the practical character of ambivalence. It is not only a question of a new intellectual conception that reveals what already is, but of new phenomena, different forms of life, different material and cultural products. What we can do is broadly define the terms of a conceptual lexicon, circumscribe an absence, point out a chance, and indicate the “place” of something that may come.<sup>27</sup>

We might understand Halpern laying the groundwork for this “something that may come” in a twofold movement that operates firstly, to weaken networks of power, our complicity in institutionalized harm, and the forces of alienation, in order, secondly, to strengthen other possibilities for a dissident sociability. We can see this double movement in the syntax of his poetry. *Weak Link* provides a “Legend” with eleven accounts of what a weak link does not equal, symbolized in the text as “[ — ] ≠”:

### Legend

- [ — ] ≠ place of future action, being choked inside a tube, only the weakest
- [ — ] ≠ surviving scenes of this undoing, a blank, or common place, bodies wash up
- [ — ] ≠ inside my interior, being a question of waste, remains, and all that can't
- [ — ] ≠ survive environment, now subtracting a false irruption of birds, the buzz
- [ — ] ≠ a null expanse, or local undoing, undermining refuse, enhancing relations
- [ — ] ≠ no remnant, equaling waste, disseminating methods, eventuating seed
- [ — ] ≠ futures, markets recall the body to itself, having been this thing surviving
- [ — ] ≠ identity's dreamy excess, in thrall to message, achieving no place
- [ — ] ≠ a hut, a border, a line, a tree, a method, a dead boy in Gaza, or any residual
- [ — ] ≠ subject, an unstoppable irruption, or tailbone, poking thru environment, a skin
- [ — ] ≠ undoing what the war forces

— *weakening the links*.<sup>28</sup>

There is a painful ambivalence in each of these proposals, a refusal of the exchange of a strong link we despise for a strong link we desire. In the example of, “a null expanse, or local undoing, undermining refuse, enhancing relations,” here a weak link does not equal the null expanse or zero sum, rather it remains something—an “undoing” perhaps of the “enhancing relations”

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which are not relations of fraternity or love, but of the pseudo-filial commodified language of, perhaps, communications corporations. The ambivalence is held in the necessary critical partitioning off of sociability sold as waste—the “refuse”—from the possibility to at least begin to “refuse” the privatisation of all language.

The metaphor that underpins this collection is of our neoconservative era as a linked chain, and the possibility that the way to break that chain is not through a trial of strength, but by encouraging the power disparity of the links, to create a link weak enough to break the chain. These are weak links because what they equate, what is on either side of the link, are imbalanced. On the one hand we might wish to become a weak link in the war economy (“undoing what the war forces”), but becoming a weak link in that system does not by itself unduly damage the system. Becoming a weak link does not equal the “undoing” of military force. This is a defeatist interpretation of the text, one that implies that under current conditions we can neither answer the strength of a political and economic system with a greater, revolutionary strength, nor counter that strength by our own debilitation, about which the war economy can only be disinterested. The alternative to which Halpern’s syntax gestures, is to develop kinds of solidarity fostered by an affective and strategic weakness. We might therefore survive “scenes of this undoing,” where the “undoing” might be, for example, the responsibility of the state to care for the health of its population, and by taking on the character of patient, weak but enduring, forge from an alternative utopian space (a “blank”) a “common place.”

What does it mean for a weak link *not* to be equivalent? Is a link weak because it is imbalanced? Is it weak *because* it is not equivalent? Virno writes:

The principle of equivalence, which stands at the foundation of the most rigid hierarchies and the most ferocious inequalities, guarantees nonetheless a certain visibility of social connections, a commensurability, a system of proportionate convertibility.<sup>29</sup>

Equivalence, which entails a presumption of commensurability, and the possibility of exchange are symptomatic of economic thought that holds nothing back as incommensurable; not life, not liberty, not the environment, nothing. Halpern’s flattening out of syntactic hierarchies, and the development of a flattened prosody without a significantly dissonant soundscape, uses this principle of commensurability in capitalism (the ability to turn one thing into another via capital), in order to disclose the ambivalence that might foster alternative. In the “Legend” above we might think of the ambivalence of “futures,” the derivatives contracts in which the market speculates on the future (offset by hedging), as well as, in more hopeful estimations, the possibility that the future might hold out something more radically unknown.

The “general equivalent,”<sup>30</sup>—money, according to Marx—is the foundation of the “usual” subordination, but Virno finds in it a conceptual “commensurability,” an abstract “zero degree” of ambivalence which provides the ground for a re-imagining of commonality, “an absence[...] a chance[...] the “place” of something that may come.”<sup>31</sup> This is scary stuff from Virno and runs counter to the ethos of socialism as a sustained attack on the exchange of lives for profit, but the conceptual ambivalence at the heart of equivalence is proposed for a strategic purpose, in that it offers a kind of transparency, a visibility of the commensurability that already predates upon the lives of workers.

The balanced ambivalence of syntax in Halpern’s *Weak Link*, and its prosodic flatness arguably enacts an infinite subordination, a commonality of fungibility in which, since we can all be bought or sold, we might recognise a new consensus for social solidarity. An example. *Rumored Place* ends with an extended “blank” or “bar,” described in the later *Music for Porn* as a “placeholder

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for all we can't perceive haunting all we can," and which, as punctuation, appears throughout *Weak Link*.<sup>32</sup> We can take one of the connotations of the "[—]" to be a weakening of the links by de-scribing, holding open, a common place haunted by the latent, repressed, microscopic or otherwise overlooked leftist social processes which might, in some future, become available for use. The methodical nature of Halpern's work comes through again; these long dashes (closed by the square brackets in the "Legend" to *Weak Link*, open as the marker of a shift to an italicised coda in the majority of the other poems that succeed *Rumored Place*) are "placeholder[s]" for a rumored place in which will be found a commonality of social experience as yet unfathomed. Halpern describes one task in an explanatory text called "Pornotopias," a text begun when Halpern was asked to teach a workshop at Naropa, and which is a critical reflection on the material which made up *Music for Porn*: "What might it mean for a poem to be in the process of theorizing its predicament in a field of otherwise imperceptible relations?"<sup>33</sup> The poem below maps the struggle to become what Halpern calls an "articulate body—a body capable of relating to other bodies" which "means to be affected by other bodies and to perceive the relations that situate or position those bodies in social space" where the "relations are imperceptible" and therefore the body remains "inarticulate."<sup>34</sup> Inarticulate is a corollary of a sustained weakening. The poem itself is taken from *Weak Link*:

[—] pumping my disturbance with phonation  
Days go by, open vowels, not generating much future  
Sound [—] losses where all this will have happened

Any common place [—] strung out on being still  
Produced disfigured gently now my ratcheted *dejecta*  
[—] his leg becomes my fluted stump, my lip

His anal spur [—] missing tongues insert the word  
Whose shock force grids resistant salvage, ours  
Being squandered in advance, we molt in network

Fibers, having traced the place of future action  
What can't be named in a field of roots, so come  
Inside my fjord of mannered stools [—] watch

•

— the eyes peel back, so pasted to the blazing.<sup>35</sup>

The poem describes a resistance to articulation; it wonders at the possibility of withholding strong articulation for a weaker voicing, which cannot readily calcify into an identity politics, or become dogmatic. Does the opening weak link "[—]" describe the "open vowels" of a scream, or the "vowals" of a performative utterance, making promises to the future, promises that are not fulfilled? Is its scream silenced, into lost sound? The "disturbance" of air from the lungs by the oscillation of the vocal folds becomes the voice, though not necessarily language. There is not "much future/Sound" might refer to sound or noise made about the future, in terms of a socially progressive politics. This doubt is then placed against the weak leak of the future anterior, the prospect of what will have been the present. And there's another direction here: the open mouth is unreproductively used for pleasure, and oral sex smothers the voice. Is this orality—pre-articulation and pro-pleasure—a "common place"? "Any common place" does not equal to, is not the same as, being "strung out" or "disfigured" into the increasingly torturous "*dejecta*," or that which is discarded. The "anal spur," the residue of legs on snakes after

their evolution, are likened to the amputation of a limb, as though an amputation were being reinscribed as an evolutionary advance. It's also a sexually charged expression, the "spur" of desire connecting orality and anality, though in this instance the pleasuring tongues are missing. Whatever voicings are being overwritten by the poem are open voweled and inarticulate due to trauma. Perhaps these tongues are missing because they have been cut out? And perhaps the erotics hiding within the poem are part of a narrative of torture, the shattering of the integrity of the self by sexualized violence. These images of damage, of wounded bodies, "strung out" on drugs or tortured, the tongue cut out, suggest two examples of exemplary suffering, the patient and the political prisoner. The poem reflects upon the tradition of speaking on behalf of others, problematizing its logic. There's some evidence, for example, that the third stanza provides an analogy for speech on behalf of a silenced other to neocolonialism, again putatively on behalf of powerless others We, in relating the "shock" and awe of the "advance" of the war in Iraq, and perhaps specifically the tortured inmates of Abu Ghraib, against the Iraqis whose tongues were cut out at the same prison under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Speaking on behalf of is aligned to the export of "democracy" by military invasion. The poem's "we" is therefore also ambivalent, since its casual solidarity might also be read as complicity. Toward the end of the poem we read: "we molt in network//Fibers." Perhaps "we" are shedding our animal skin and fur to become more like the metal of communications technology (into which we melt)? There is hope here, however, with the "place of future action" patiently waited for or attended to. In current times we cannot yet speak directly of that future, since the "radical" in the "field of roots" cannot "be named." The radical has been replaced by an uprooting. I find the reference to the "fjord" baffling, though it links back up to the "fluted stump," another material through which a cut has been traced. Perhaps the word "fjord" is chosen for standing outside available etymological histories; its roots cannot be uncovered. It marks a return of the anality of the poem, the ridiculous invitation to "come/Inside my fjord" leading to the appended "*the eyes peel back, so pasted to the blazing,*" either a description of sexual ecstasy or the peeling back of the eyes of the corpse, to check for death.

### **Dispersion and Disaster: *Disaster Suites***

There's a name for the "uprooting" related above: "dispersion." It's an ambivalent term that describes an unsettled existence which, again, Virno hopes can offer a radical opportunity. Virno argues that in a workplace "dominated by information thousands of signals are received without ever being distinctly and consciously perceived," which prevents concentration and generates dispersion:

We are crowded with impressions and images that never give rise to an "I." This surplus of unconscious perceptions is, in addition, the mark of every *uprooting* that we suffer.<sup>36</sup>

Virno offers exodus toward "an 'accustomed place' that never preexists the experience that determines its location, nor that, therefore, can reflect any former habit."<sup>37</sup> Such an exodus can "give body and shape to belonging as such" and might be the "form of struggle best suited to demands for a radical transformation of the status quo."<sup>38</sup> We have to reconceive "conflict and revolt" on the "*belonging to uprooting*" which otherwise is marked out "by resignation, servitude, and eager acquiescence."<sup>39</sup> This "ordinary condition" of uprooting is the "most immediate experience" of our day.<sup>40</sup> As a condition it is marked by the excess of "little perceptions" (the "individual hears more than he or she listens to, and perceives more than he or she apperceives"), which prevents the subject from ever gaining a perspective from outside the network.<sup>41</sup> Instead we adapt to these "little perceptions" and the "mobility" and "attenuation of memory" they afford.<sup>42</sup>

Halpern's *Disaster Suites* is written partly from the situation of this uprooting. According to Halpern's postscript ("Post – Disaster"), *Disaster Suites* "took shape around distraction."<sup>43</sup> Halpern writes: "Rather than lamenting the failure of my own absorption, I needed to know if it were still possible to hear anything beside myself. *Who will have been here to hear this?*"<sup>44</sup> Halpern attempts to turn distraction from a condition experienced as a constant interruption into a presentness of elsewhere and of other times (the experience of media saturation and communications technology) into a temporal disorientation, one that asks itself whether it is too distracted to recognise its own time as the seed for an alternative social order, from which time the present can be read retrospectively. The underlying condition of dispersion is a minor mode of the experience of time of more major events, disasters. Disasters are shared experiences in which the event itself is lacking as a condition of our survival. In "Post – Disaster," Halpern writes: "Unlike the death of any one, disaster is what we hold in common as a community, despite its not being here for us to share as a site for communion."<sup>45</sup> It is a post-structuralist construction, insofar as it describes in an integral way the absence of a subject. In this way, dispersion and disaster come to name two failures of immanence, two ways in which present experience is riven by memorial and/or prospective absence. Experience is never to be trusted in Halpern's work; it is insufficient to an explanation of our subjectivities, which depend on acts of exchange and the very violence that underpins those exchanges, elsewhere. Halpern makes of distraction an awareness of the conflict of alternative tenses, and imagines in that recognition the possibility of a future reading us.<sup>46</sup>

The dispersal described above by Virno is not strictly a new condition so much as it is an amplification of the condition of modernity. In his essay on Charles Baudelaire, for instance, Halpern points out the contradiction between lyric's "claim to sing the intensity of present experience, the fullness of time in song" and the "increasingly mediated social reality" of modernity.<sup>47</sup> Central to the reproduction of modernity in Baudelaire was the fragmentary form of the newspaper, with its collage of narratives; the internet and social media are mediations of a higher order. Halpern cites T.W. Adorno's claim in *Aesthetic Theory* that: "To survive reality, at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality."<sup>48</sup> Halpern comments that the artwork must produce "a 'negative imprint' of the world against which they protest. They must, in other words, find a way to make their own constitutive illegibility[...] legible, reflecting society while maintaining their irreducible difference, or non-identity, vis-à-vis the very thing they reflect."<sup>49</sup> (We'll return to this argument in the next section's discussion of "cruel optimism.") *Disaster Suites* replicates the temporal aporia of disaster, its belatedness, its having been missed if lived through, as a time of an odd futurity, a displaced present seen from the perspective of its survivors.

We can see the antagonism between attachment and disenchantment, the lurch between time lost to dispersal or disaster, in the following poem from *Disaster Suites* (which I have quoted in several sections below). It begins:

I swear there's no *corps propre* in here  
No real body in the bag the meanest  
Meat's a dumb ache hard muscle no  
Things softening yr globe no general

Good this one administered world  
Systems properly speaking I love  
Objects meaning the way equivalents  
Stand inside me now my lost original

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The first stanza replays childish cliché (“there’s nobody in here”) as phenomenological hide and seek, hunting the corpse in corporeality. The phrase “*corps propre*” is that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the difficulty of its translation (“one’s own body” or the “lived body”) is used by Halpern to replay the ownership, the property, of the object that is the body.<sup>50</sup> But what to swear on? To whom or to what to appeal if the reality on which we wish to draw is either a body dispersed in the elaboration of communication in the administered world, or the body in the bag of real “meat,” the corpse, that disaster which excludes us when we join it. The possibility of speaking “properly” is both from the reified world, and the desire to express what is until language “dumb experience,” what Merleau-Ponty describes as the “core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.”<sup>51</sup>

We can see similar themes to those of *Weak Link*: the equivalence afforded by capital ties in with a psychoanalytic reading of part-objects to offer a metonymic *mise-en-scene* of fetishistic love (the primary love object re-represented in smaller and finally disconnected parts). The ambivalent syntax includes objection to equivalence too. The “love/Objects” of part-objects and reified commodities replace a “lost original/Presence.” The hesitation plays out the growing differentiation of the infant from its cathected love object, but some flicker of “love” still *objects* to the “administered world.”<sup>52</sup> Such shifts between noun and verb (see also “true/Place names”), though hardly an invention of Halpern’s, are handled subtly to recall the described ambivalence, even if the line-breaks are frequently accompanied by what must be deliberately clanging ambiguities.

Presence being a verbal tic in the true  
Place names we love to liberate selves  
Ours by abstraction means everything  
Equal immediate value anatomy dead-

Labor’s waging figures weight these  
Things arouse me so I come without  
Mediation rubbing in the terminal role-  
Play of pre-social reflections my friends

If we’re to avoid identity thinking, yet clamour for the self-presence on offer in phenomenology, perhaps the physical accompaniment to speech might be better suited to the task than is the linguistic. Is “Presence” a “verbal tic,” a sudden and nonrhythmic motor spasm, blinking, throat clearing, even a tensing of muscles in the feet or stomach? Is the pre-linguistic “lost original” a body made up of such tics? The “lost original” place is possibly the city of Ur, the first city, in what is now Iraq. Ur is the “place name” for the “original,” and a pre-linguistic utterance. Both Iraq wars have seen extensive damage to the city, most recently due to vandalism and looting by the US military; the security perimeter of the US Ali (formerly Tallil) air base includes Ur.<sup>53</sup>

The following stanza presents a mini-satire of masturbation while staring into the computer terminal, from original seed to terminus, the end, the end of the world by warcraft perhaps. The “pre-social reflections” suggests infantile existence prior to the recognition of alternate perspectives. The poem continues:

Can’t speak outside the things I mean I  
Mean surveillance missiles blown limbs  
Protect us as it all blows back the defiant  
Dead boys and their permanent disabili-

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Ties wrapped in oriental rugs old filthy  
Rags improper bodies theorize the new  
Ethics and politics being a contradiction  
In terms like the heart of another mass

Grave recyclage of bad investments organs  
Skinned IDs pelts profiles fail to correspond  
And erase the war's imaginary damage  
Inside each observing subject here we go

Tracing figures the spectacular events  
A total eclipse our referent went drifting  
Off now into oblivion brackets our world  
Persists as something else to love beyond

The present sings what will have been

— *this place has failed to read us.*

The poem offers a satire on phenomenology by presenting the bracketing off of the relation between “each observing subject” and the world dependent on the syntax implicit to the stanza. Does “oblivion” bracket “our world”? That is, is our world the sum of our memories of it? Or “oblivion brackets our world” in apocalyptic danger? Or does “our referent,” our world or our heart fallen into post-structuralist and economic discourse, still persist against oblivion, as the “love beyond,” the future state from which the present can be remembered.

### **Cruel Optimism: *Music for Porn***

*Music for Porn* is obsessed with a soldier, a figure of fantasy who is also an agent of the imperial and economic violence that underlies the poet's life in the west. The collection is one hundred and sixty five pages long, and includes both lyric poetry and prose poetry of a frequently self-reflexive and critical kind. Its central concern is intimacy and its reification, and the possibility of a latent utopianism in the pornography with which it is obsessed.<sup>54</sup> It's published with a plain brown cover, beneath which is hidden “Untitled porn collage,” a collage of gay pornography by Tanya Hollis and Halpern, which recalls Gay Poet's Press publication of John Wieners' seminal *Behind the State Capitol*.<sup>55</sup> Halpern's study of pornography and auto-affection, predominantly intensified in the erotic evocations of a soldier, is redolent of contemporary theories of affect, affect which he describes in conversation, with an echo of Levi-Strauss, as “a fuzzy concept[...] the raw social matter, the stuff of emotive sensation before it gets attached to cooked feelings.”<sup>56</sup> He imagines “affect circulating somewhere in the space between the physiological (pre-linguistic) and the properly social (discursive),” writing: “This has to do with the way I'm channeling rage, longing, sorrow, shame, and anxiety around the figure of the soldier[...], and it's why I think it's a crucial resource for a lyric mode that desires to sense the conditions of its own social attachments.”<sup>57</sup>

I want to think about *Music for Porn* in relation to a work of cultural and critical theory written and published nearly contemporaneously with it, namely, Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*.<sup>58</sup> There, Berlant describes a “relation of cruel optimism” as one in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,” whether the desired object is food, or a kind of love,” or the “fantasy of the good life.”<sup>59</sup> The optimistic attachments “become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.”<sup>60</sup> The book as a whole is about how we become attached to the objects and the life that restricts us,

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that causes our or others' suffering. I want to suggest two things: that the figure of the soldier in the collection is an example of cruel optimism, and that the masturbation which proliferates inside (and outside) *Music for Porn* is at least potentially also exemplary of cruel optimism. To do so is to argue that cruel optimism might be the dialectical opposite of the ambivalence of disenchantment, and might offer a description of kinds of strong attachment that, in their failure, might even contain the possibility of alternative, political endeavours.

Optimistic attachment is the "force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene."<sup>61</sup> Berlant develops this thought:

Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time profoundly confirming.<sup>62</sup>

It strikes me that such a diagnosis is well-gauged to the violence and lust of these poems, described self-reflexively in *Music for Porn* as these "*potent or impotent?*" poems; they are potent in their descriptions of sexual fantasy, made impotent by the origins of their libidinal desire in guilt and shame, and are, moreover, impotent in being poems, poems with a hopeful sense of political change at their core.<sup>63</sup> They are also impotent in their affection for non-procreative sex, masturbation, anal sex, and more elaborately staged acts of dissident behaviour, frequently sex with wounds. With potency traditionally tied to heterosexual procreative sex as a "natural" order, masturbation and queer sexual practices become "cultural" dependents. Halpern grasps the cruel optimism of the soldier as the figure of a patriotism he despises, but that he recognises is a national fantasy of economic and political dominance. Attachment to the soldier is a fantasy of the recuperation of his body, his life, itself charged by the counter-intuitive lust generated by guilty feeling, the pleasure of choosing the wrong love object.<sup>64</sup> Cruel optimism describes some of the transformations of negative affect, such as shame and guilt, into pleasure. The figure of the soldier is, therefore, an ambivalent figure who will save and/or punish the poet.

[The soldier] may be an allegory *mirror of ideology*, from which there's no remove a blank that arouses and frustrates my longing for a world in which it will be possible to live, at once portal and obstruction.<sup>65</sup>

The masturbatory fantasy combines longing, its fulfilment, and its cruel obstruction, the failure of its future reality.

*Music for Porn* shares with Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* a sense of ambivalence about optimism itself. Consider, for instance, the following prose-poem, which includes a reading of Oppen and also a significant reference to Baudelaire's poem "Le Cygne" ("The Swan"), which I will discuss below:

Occupier of my inner world, this swan, having escaped its cage on the banks of some uncomely flow, scouts my utopian longing like a military mimesis of the mind, which appropriates the world in whatever way it can. I think that's what Oppen means by

*viviparous*, being forever fucked by the thing we're wedged too deep inside to even posit as an object of its own sensation, there being no 'out there' anymore, determinate force having made this man of me.<sup>66</sup>

Cruel optimism produces an affective state that feels confining in its contingency, and yet refuses to become sufficiently an "object of its own sensation"; the impasse between affect and object, thus considered, is a cruel one. Affective life fails to become sufficiently exterior to us and is therefore impossible to confront sensibly. In his work on Baudelaire, Richard Terdiman (Halpern's doctoral supervisor), describes the "uncanny danger" of memory in the poem "Le Cygne":

For the exiles of "Le Cygne," for the dispossessed, memory stages not recovery but *deficiency*. Its representations make an absence present. Or rather, memory figures the inauthenticity of presentness, the traumatic persistence of an irreversible experience of loss. This is history under the sign of disaster.<sup>67</sup>

Memory in Baudelaire is the reminiscence of what has been lost, of the Paris that has been transformed. Terdiman's analysis of Baudelaire's use of the poor is fascinating to read in light of Halpern's soldier, and people are *used*, they do things for the poets: poets, according to Baudelaire, "feel themselves irresistibly attracted by whatever is weak, ruined, aggrieved, orphaned."<sup>68</sup> Terdiman describes the way the poor, for Baudelaire, "offered themselves as figures for his personal disenchantment and his sense of dispossession."<sup>69</sup> Halpern's negation of Baudelaire's modernity overturns value judgements. Instead of the petit bourgeoisie rage for strength, Halpern fosters forms of queer weakness. Halpern frequently positions the poet-figure's prostration before the soldier as figure of "personal disenchantment" but also irresistible attraction. Both Baudelaire's work and Halpern's are "pornography," Baudelaire's in the etymological sense of writing about prostitution, and Halpern's in its explicit content which is derived from pornography as an aestheticized incarnation of prostitution.

Terdiman describes Baudelaire's swan poem as one which "proclaims its own intense derivativeness":

"Le Cygne" cannot shake off memory of the melodramatic and endlessly retextualized fable of the swan song that flickers on its edge, even if it seems nowhere quite appropriate to the specific material of the text itself. But such apparent inappropriateness is no impediment to the most insistent referentiality. Memory regularly retrieves unsuitable material; the malapropos is its element.<sup>70</sup>

Where Baudelaire's swan is forever being dragged back into a textual, symbolic immateriality as a creature of previous representations, Halpern's collection works with pornography as a contested site of struggle between intimacy (as pornography's utopian promise) and genre (the plots, the characters, the locations, the routines).<sup>71</sup> Pornography's troubling of aesthetics is worth consideration. The autonomy of the swan is hindered by its intertextual resonances. Similarly, pornography is in a contradictory state, an intertextual genre defined by its legal status as real, insofar as the actions of its performers occur in reality and are not merely the result of an aesthetic representation. Again I want refer back to Adorno's contention, cited by Halpern: "To survive reality, at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality."<sup>72</sup> Pornography's problematisation of the boundaries between reality and representation make it paradoxically exemplary of the artwork as "negative imprint" of the intimacy it resembles, but remains nothing like.<sup>73</sup> Pornography is a

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consolatory art form of cruel optimism, and *Music for Porn* is its mimic. Halpern writes in “Whither Porn?, or the Soldier as Allegory,” a twelve-page prose text from *Music for Porn*:

My soldier thus becomes my swan, my muse, my washed-up whore. Like an allegory, he hardens around all our abstract relations *values* assuming a shape around history’s contusions and contradictions, a scar where my alienable form has been hygienically sutured to the loss he represents. Referring to something with which it no longer coincides *the signs that bloat his corpse* my apparition appears *by disappearing* while the soldier manifests a void *absence of what he stands for*. What would it feel like to rematerialize his body as my own *fate of all our proprietary claims* as if this hasn’t already occurred? His body entombs *sustains* the absence of its own referent, and so my soldier is a terminal melancholic *or is that me*.<sup>74</sup>

Where Baudelaire’s swan works as the sign of the sign, forever gliding amidst its endless precursors and its deferral into paratexts, its new allegorical twin the soldier becomes the sign of “an order of transcendent meaning *democracy, freedom, trade* while the ground of such meaning becomes the ground of our catastrophe.”<sup>75</sup> Terdiman argues that the swan’s allegorical slide reflects the “period’s confusions and crises concerning the mechanisms of credit [checks, paper money, discounted bills, loans on security, letters of credit] as a perplexity about signs.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps the soldier represents credit’s uncanny twin: debt. The soldier stands in “for a blank we can neither fill nor consume, the only thing we share being what isn’t here to share, and the promise of that commons.”<sup>77</sup> Halpern’s soldier, while being a technology of neoconservative violence, and subject to that violence, is also a generous body, a giving body, a body that can ultimately give the whole of itself. This is a figure of martyrdom, of the sacrifice that “deserves more compassion than I appear to offer.”<sup>78</sup> The sacrifice (and the real victims of that sacrifice, the civilians and military in Iraq or Afghanistan) are offered on behalf of the transcendent meanings of “*democracy, freedom, trade*” even while the soldier’s actions contradict those meanings: they are signs of fealty in debt to the truth. The signs of the soldier are not merely slippery, but contradictory.

When describing the properties of attachment, Berlant offers a “poetics of misrecognition” that could operate as an apt description of Halpern’s wayward affection for the soldier. She writes:

Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfil our desire: its operation is central to the state of cruel optimism. To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities – which it might or might not have. A poetics of misrecognition may seem to risk collapsing the critical analysis of fantasy into fantasy itself. Maybe so, but such a risk is unavoidable. Fantasy is what manages the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment. It provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire’s unruly attentiveness. That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it.<sup>79</sup>

Halpern’s poetry works with Virno’s diagnosis of ambivalence, an ambivalence that has a certain potential, a “neutral” core that remains optimistic. The figure of the fantasy—in this case, the soldier—might then be the fantasy that “parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it.” The figure of the soldier is a figure of cruel optimism, the desired, violent figure of fantasy who represents efficacy, but an efficacy replayed as an obstacle to the future Halpern wishes to summon into existence. *Music for Porn* looks to hope for a more equitable future (that is it fails to be able to be more simply hopeful). That hope is inflected by utopian longings, in

conjunction with fantasy in its most unmistakable guise, sexual fantasy. The fantasy, whether embodying cruel optimism or not, is Halpern's attempt to make an affective struggle available to sensation, at least in the immediate and proximate sensations of masturbation.

Berlant warns that in "scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place."<sup>80</sup> Certainly Halpern's book is full of the self-analysis that seeks to understand the fantasy of the soldier, and the socio-political fantasy it harbours, as potentially a survival strategy recuperating desire from its commodification in late-capitalism, but by doing so projecting it into the very forces that sustain that system. Halpern has arguably predicted Berlant's caution, and therefore offers an alternative figure, a figure, an affect, a character, opposed, dialectically, to the soldier: the patient. The figure of the patient, including but not limited to the depiction of an actual, wounded or suffering patient, and the concept of patency, have been considerations of Halpern's throughout his poetry and his critical prose (which I will document below). In the final section I argue that Halpern's patency is a theory and a poetics. It is a theory of how we might necessarily be in a state of suffering, and how we need to take on the burden of that suffering as a patient does, seeking to understand, rigorously, the conditions and causes of that suffering. If we cannot simply call for radical social change imminently, then we need to be patient in the sense of critically attentive, and a patient preparation. It is a poetics in that patency has certain properties, characteristics, or ways of behaving, which can be practised in the making of poems. However, is the figure of the suspension of (in Berlant's construction), "ordinary notions of repair and flourishing," that is the figure of the patient, a healthy fantasy, a fantasy by which Halpern can discover some semblance of agency within the suffering of contingency, of those major and minor blows that restrict autonomous life? Or, is the fantasy of patency another cruel optimism, a fantasy of the failure of, or perpetual delay to, an agency that could realistically demand socialism?

### **A Poetics of Patency**

Berlant describes the need to know "how to assess what's unravelling" in a present moment which is "overwhelmingly present," that is, in a plenum of contingencies that removes the possibility of becoming one's own agent.<sup>81</sup> We are subject to the present rather than agents of it. Patency is an ambivalent version of agency. It is, according to Halpern's definition, "agency's inverse and complement: To actively become a patient of history is to will a suspension of an agency that has been already historically suspended."<sup>82</sup> That is, patency not only diagnoses a loss of agency to the restrictive contingencies of precarious lives, but fantasizes that loss in a way which allows the individual to attach to it, and therefore know the loss of agency: to feel it, and to live with it in an enlightened sense. It is the recovery or ownership of suffering from amidst the suffering enforced upon one's experience. By appropriating that suffering—by making it determinedly, consciously, held—patency wins victory amidst the ambivalence of disenchantment.

Patency is a way of describing a certain kind of patience, a sense of preparation for a historical moment more conducive to radical change, as well as a means of becoming a patient of history, that is one who suffers but also adjusts her bearing toward the world as a patient does toward her suffering. Patency describes a suspended form of attention, rather than the rush to opinion. Halpern uses the ambivalence of the term "common"—which signifies both that which is a potentially equitable, shared resource, and that which is repressive, or even degraded—to describe how, "[b]ecoming-patient renders one receptive to things unavailable to the false immediacies of commonsense."<sup>83</sup> We might think of the demand for immediate political efficacy as such a commonsense.<sup>84</sup>

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For Berlant (as for Halpern), the present is an “impasse.”<sup>85</sup> Impasse is, according to Berlant, both “a formal term for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies.”<sup>86</sup> Halpern’s patience hopes for an aporia within this impasse. We can discern the stark ambivalence of the term patience by comparing Halpern’s recuperation of its meaning to its use by Berlant in the following quotation, the opening of which fits my use of the term “contingency” throughout this essay:

My assumption is that the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world[...] are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and that the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the “technologies of patience” or lag that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now* (Berlant, 1997, 222). Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence.<sup>87</sup>

Halpern’s work with tenses arguably performs exactly this crisis, by playing an alternative (better) future (“*later*”) against the “cruelty of the *now*.” Where for Berlant patience is a kind of prevarication encouraged by the difficulties of current conditions, a way of putting off the desperation of current conditions by specious fantasizing about better futures, for Halpern patience is the bearing of the cruelty of now not as resignation, but as a recovery of some vestigial agency. In “Pornotopias,” Halpern describes patience as “less to do with the body as the sovereign scene of its own actions, and more to do with the body as the scene of disabused mastery.”<sup>88</sup> In perhaps his most succinct description of patience to date, “Becoming a Patient of History,” a lecture delivered as the 27<sup>th</sup> George Oppen Memorial Lecture on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010 in San Francisco says:

By patience, I mean a situation of suspended agency that is more than mere passivity, more than impotent privacy. Patience relies not on mastery but rather assumes the risks of failure. Patience’s mood is one of vulnerable openness: *to piercing, to touch*. Its grammatical mode is subjunctive—expressing contingency and desire: a perennial state of as-if-ness. “As if” creates a distance—and a pathos—an affective space of expectancy within the act of desiring to know, while registering conditionality—the hypothetical—wherein one allows what one doesn’t know to orient one’s attention as one approaches windows *as if to see what really was going on*.<sup>89</sup>

So Halpern’s model of patience is like Berlant’s description of the impasse, since it utilises a “suspended agency”; it is, however, a kind of recuperation of the impasse, a deliberative taking on of “suspended agency.” Its optimism is held in attachments to affects of vulnerability and to the patience that attends homoerotic fetishizations of the penetration of wounds.<sup>90</sup> In his review of David Wolach, Halpern confesses his attraction to the “open, vulnerable, patient, disarming” qualities of both Wolach and Wolach’s writing. Halpern adds that such qualities were “all the qualities a queer boy like myself longs for in other guys, whether there’s some amorous prospect to be realized or not.”<sup>91</sup> The temporality of patience therefore takes on the properties of the impasse but masochistically transforms its necessary contingency into a kind of conditionality, enlivened by hypothetical futures. This kind of conditional is of course what Berlant diagnoses as lacking in the lives of those ground down by overwhelming contingency, since the hypotheticals are fantasies that further condemn the fantasist. This is the whole point of her theorization of cruel optimism. Berlant comes to a relevant definition of vulnerability as a way of behaving in the contingencies of the present:

To be in crisis is not to have the privilege of the taken-for-granted: it is to bear an extended burden of vulnerability for an undetermined duration. To be in goes-without-saying ordinariness can only be an aspiration for those whose other option is to be overmastered by the moment of the event that began at a time that only retroactively leads one to diagnosis.<sup>92</sup>

Patience is an attempt to conceptualize a radical version of this crisis, a crisis which, as Berlant describes it, feels psychologically and affectively as anything but open. Halpern wants to make the duration of vulnerability operate as an openness to alternative models of selfhood. In “Pornotopias,” he writes:

Patience refers to the suspension of our proprietary relations to bodies and life processes (our own and others’), the affirmation of the corpus as open, disarmed, and vulnerable. I find in this figure of the patient not only passivity and submission, but the latent material – affective, erotic, and social – for movements (bodily and political) waiting to be aroused by uncoded sensation and unanticipated touch.<sup>93</sup>

The diagnosis of cruel optimism is shared by Berlant and by Halpern, and yet their attitudes toward and aspirations for the condition they describe, including the fantasies that underpin that condition as either cruel optimism or utopian promise, are diametrically opposed. For Berlant cruel optimism is a condition in which a “person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time profoundly confirming.” Halpern, on the other hand, takes on the condition of “profound threat” in the taking on of patience, in (to use the title of his lecture) “becoming the patient of history.” Its cruelty, suffering, is taken on as the “profoundly confirming” condition, and therefore its hope or optimism is grounded in a reality. By fantasizing about the soldier, Halpern takes on a fantasy known to be cruel as it is the figure of his own complicity in the war economy, and it is a figure of fantasy because there is, finally, pleasure to be had in power, in violence, and in the rewards of being on the side of empire. It is a cruel optimism that knows itself to be such.

A precursor to the desperation and hope in the concept of patience can be found in Maurice Blanchot’s development of “patience.” Blanchot understands the pull of political efficacy, the “active commitment (engagement)” of earlier decades (before the French intellectual left reckoned fully with the reality of the Stalinist USSR), and “the desire to proceed in a straightforward way toward the goal—the social transformation which it is in our power to affirm.”<sup>94</sup> Against such directness works “*indirection*, the infinite detour which we try to understand as writing’s being,” and the unhappiness concomitant in such an understanding of language’s perpetual deferral.<sup>95</sup> Writing, particularly “poetic” writing, must be patient with its “intransitivity, its necessarily indirect relation to the political.”<sup>96</sup> What does Blanchot advise?

“Be patient.” A simple motto, very demanding. Patience has already withdrawn me not only from the will in me, but from my power to be patient: if I *can* be patient, then patience has not worn out in me that me to which I cling for self-preservation. Patience opens me entirely, all the way to a passivity which is the *pas* [“not”] in the utterly passive, and which has therefore abandoned the level of life where *passive* would simply be the opposite of *active*. In this way we fall outside inertia; the inert thing which submits without reacting, becomes as foreign as its corollary, vital spontaneity, purely autonomous activity. “Be patient.” Who says this? No one who can say it, and no one who can hear it. Patience can neither be advised nor commanded: it is the passivity of dying whereby an I that is no longer I, answers to the limitlessness of the disaster, to what which no present remembers.<sup>97</sup>

Patience in Blanchot's formulation is not here a patience of strength, that is an enactment of patience which demonstrates the will of the person seeking to be patient. Instead patience "opens me entirely" to become the neutral, neither active nor passive as its opposite but "outside inertia," neither a model of agency ("autonomous activity") nor craven to its domination ("submits without reacting"). Passivity is described as the condition of those suffering the "crushing force of the totalitarian state" or the "servitude of the slave bereft of a master, fallen beneath need."<sup>98</sup> Within such passivity, the total absence of agency, we find something outside the dialectic of agency/passivity; we discover the neutral patience that Halpern describes not as agency but "disabused mastery."<sup>99</sup>

The gesture of patience is that of the suppliant. Supplication is common to *Music for Porn* and is described by Blanchot in another of his works, "Measure, the Suppliant," from *The Infinite Conversation*.<sup>100</sup> For Blanchot, the suppliant, properly translated as "he who comes," kneeling before the god or the master exalts the one being supplicated, who possesses "authority, force, the power of decision, freedom."<sup>101</sup> There is a depiction of this supplication in *Music for Porn*:

I can't get hard enough for intercourse when the moment is sweet, but as soon as he asserts the fundamental right to liberty and happiness, being what my soldier has sworn to protect, I fall on my knees, take his member in my mouth and beg him to discharge.<sup>102</sup>

The dynamic between the two figures, in a kind of parodic version of a Levinasian face to face, guarantees incommensurability, by definition "no common measure." That is, the difference in power between the two figures is too great for them to be compared. Blanchot describes how the measure which is justice is only to be invoked when there is a near equilibrium of power; the "perverse but legitimate use of the law of equilibrium" is the rule that, when the disparity between weak and strong is too great, it is dishonest to appeal to justice.<sup>103</sup> In other words, the imbalance is so great in the act of supplication that it cannot be treated even as imbalance. What is the result of this incommensurability? For Blanchot the compromise of equilibrium, the failure not just of balance, but of the relative balance sufficient even for imbalance, ends up reversing "the situation of power in favor of the man without means," in favour of the suppliant who is "outside-the law" because the law can only balance relative power. Where measure is a form of the divine, "unmeasure is for the Greeks human; it expresses the audacity of the man who trusts to his own forces."<sup>104</sup> Patience is, then, the taking on of incommensurability, the act of supplication, the weakening sufficient to undo relative power as an expression of audacity, of daring. Blanchot writes:

Through his humiliation, the suppliant carries out a psychological manoeuvre of appeasement, but at the same time lets it be understood (and often proclaims) that being thus separated from all force, he escapes power's jurisdiction and answers to another law: a law affirmed by his truth as a stranger, and that the god's close presence in his invisibility renders manifest.<sup>105</sup>

How is this patience not merely endless suffering? The individual suffers a painful "anonymity, loss of self" but in the "loss of all sovereignty" the individual also loses "subordination."<sup>106</sup> His condition is "utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion (separation)."<sup>107</sup> Rather than the "spirit" which is "always active," patience "is already nonspirit: the body in its suffering passivity – cadaverous, exposed, flattened, sheer surface."<sup>108</sup> There are two moves to make here. The first is to suggest some commonality of living at the extreme of such disastrous suffering; the second is to interpret the loss of self in terms of the other: "When thus I am wrested from myself, there remains a passivity bereft of self (sheer alterity, the other without

## *world picture 8*

unity). There remains the unsubjected, or the patient.”<sup>109</sup> Patience is therefore a recognition of some core, neutral resistance to domination, to subjecthood, and the estrangement of relating to oneself as one relates to the strangeness of the Other.

If I, bereft of selfhood, withstand (not that I could be said even to have experienced it) this passive passivity when the other crushes me into radical alienation, is my relation still a relation to the other? Is it not rather a relation to the “I” of the master, to absolute egotistical force, to the dominator who predominates and ultimately wields the force of inquisitorial persecution? In other words, I must answer for the persecution that opens me to the longest patience and which is in me the anonymous passion, not only by taking it upon myself regardless of my own consent; I must also answer to it with refusal, resistance, and combat. I must come back to knowledge; I must return (if possible – for it may be that there is no return) to the I that knows and that knows it is exposed, not to the Other, but to the adverse I, to egotistical Omnipotence, to murderous Will. Naturally, this Will draws me thereby into its game and makes me its accomplice, but that is why there must always be at least two languages, or two requirements: one dialectical, the other not; one where negativity is the task, the other where the neutral remains apart, cut off both from being and from not-being. In the same way each of us ought both to be a free and speaking subject, and to disappear as passive, patient – the patient whom dying traverses and who does not show himself.<sup>110</sup>

Blanchot shares, here, the desire is for a leftist politics resistant to the strength of will endemic to trenchant and dogmatic political discourse. Blanchot argues for a politics (efficacy born of the struggle with dialectical contradictions) and something else, a patience, a neutral.<sup>111</sup> There is a dialectical conflict and a neutral other, which is neither synthesis nor negation; the neutral seeks to avoid the conflictual, or at least to avoid the way the Western tradition, which, according to Roland Barthes, (who is working with Blanchot's theory of the patient) “transforms conflict into a nature and a value (or, another version of the same refusal: making a value out of nature).”<sup>112</sup> The neutral is not a “space of indifferent sterility,”<sup>113</sup> but rather holds certain characteristics, namely: abstention from correcting; indifference to contamination; absence of ranking; a relation to the present which is “attentive and not arrogant”; a promotion of banality; weakness; the strength which is only the strength to draw out and exhaust the strength of an opponent; restraint; stupidity.<sup>114</sup> These traits run in parallel with Halpern's stated preference for an “open, vulnerable, patient, disarming” affect, for “receptivity, vulnerability, penetrability.”<sup>115</sup>

The suppliant is “beyond reach,” beyond merely relative weakness, “separate, sacred.”<sup>116</sup> What, then, is to be gained by this eminent strangeness, this human quality outside of justice? According to Blanchot, it is “that he speaks”:

Through speech, he, the very low, is in relation to the very high and, without breaking down the distance, makes his powerful interlocutor enter into a space they do not yet have in common but that is between them. This between-two (empty and sacred) is the very space of the middle, the mysterious “median thing.”[...] The stranger, lacking all common language, is paradoxically the one who is present solely through his speech; just as it is when everything is lacking that the man engulfed in misfortune has the means to speak, for therein is his true measure.<sup>117</sup>

The stranger who supplicates himself, who gives up power when he suffers the injustice of power, gains speech, gains a “true measure” autonomous from the injustice in which he is being condemned. Of course, prosody is concerned with measure. Halpern's prosody, either the

continuity of his prose, or the weakened syntax of his poetry, offers formal analogues of the patency to which he aspires.

### **Conclusion**

The concerns of Halpern's work are social, but the work's methodology owes much to a therapeutic model that generates itself by stating its convictions, reflecting on and critiquing its assumptions, returning to sites of emotional harm, and seeking out insights into its own blindnesses. This is not therapy as the diagnosis of Halpern's own interior conflicts (though it can hardly be free from such analysis), but a talking cure to comprehend the affective and intellectual aporias of our times. When I began this essay I hoped to find points where the work does not know itself as well as it might, or to tell it something about itself it might not wish to know. With work as self-reflexive and deliberative as Halpern's, this is not a simple task. To conclude, I want to turn to a term I find myself surprised to be using: moral.

Something about the normative pressure of morality should sit at odds with the dissident, explicit truth-telling of Halpern's decade-long project. Baudelaire's Satanism is a moral condition, even if it as a rejection of morality *tout court*. Halpern's morality is apparent in his poetry's thoughtfulness, care, tenderness, and vulnerability, in its qualities of patency. My concern is therefore developed out of counter-intuitive therapeutic logic: the more determined Halpern's writing is to disclose with great candour its fantasy-life, including a fantasy life gripped by guilt and shame, and the more it supports the affects of openness, vulnerability, and weakness, the more we might speculate on its underlying motives, those unknown even to itself. Even while describing tortuous scenes there is an implicit reassurance that these scenes are represented to us for virtuous reasons. Evidence of care abounds in the texts, and therefore we can discern an evident (and admirable) care for the reader, too. But what is it hiding? Why does it wish to be good? What does its *goodness* not wish us to know? Does this poetry wish us to see its poet in the best light, even whilst committed to a patient exploration of difficult truths? What does this poetry think we the readers cannot handle? When in "À Celle Qui Est Trop Gaie," Baudelaire describes breaking into the home of the happy woman of the title, stabbing her, and the rapture of penetrating the new lips of the open wound, its fantasy of evil has the decency of not reflecting well on the fantasist.<sup>118</sup> When in *Music for Porn* Halpern writes "my cock hardens in a soldier's wound," though the fantasy as fantasy is not to be doubted, it may reflect *too well* on the poet. Its harm is staged as good, as care, in comparison to Baudelaire's misogynist evil. This is a virtue of Halpern's poetry. But is its desire to be understood as vulnerable and tender, even in a poetry that restrains itself from seeking cheap thrills for the reader, a hope it does not wish to acknowledge?

Virno, Barthes, and Blanchot diagnose similar conditions within disenchantment. Their theories place the conflict of the dialectic either within (Virno) or beyond (Barthes, Blanchot) a neutral core from which speech is to be reclaimed. Their hope for this neutral, patient supplication asks not only for radical change, but also for affection. The neutral person must take on the desired characteristics in the heart of an ambivalent space in the current social conflict of late capital. Solidarity might well require affection, but is this affect for affection of patency a terminal weakness?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Rumored Place* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2004); *Disaster Suites* (Long Beach, CA: Palm Press, 2009), *Music for Porn* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2012); *Weak Link* (Cincinnati: Slack Buddha Press, 2009). For a comprehensive bibliography see *Damn the Caesars: "Crisis Inquiry: A Special Volume of damn the caesars with Attention to the Work of Rob Halpern and Keston Sutherland,"* (2012), 141-143. A version of this paper was presented to the Research Seminar at the University of Sheffield School of English in February 2012; many thanks to the incredibly patient audience on that occasion, especially the sustained attention of my undergraduates. I am grateful to Rich Owens, Neil Pattison, Sara Crangle, Michael Kindellan, and John Wilkinson for their shared interest in Rob Halpern's poetry, and to Rob Halpern himself for his admirable openness with manuscripts. I am also grateful to J.D. Rhodes for pulling apart the essay and advising on how best it might be put back together. All italics are consistent with the original quotation, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> *New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 44-5; the poem is also published in *The Opening of the Field* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 22-3. It was Duncan who published the seminal "The Homosexual in Society," in *Politics* (1944): 209-210.

<sup>3</sup> See "Rob Halpern with Andy Fitch," in *The Conversant*, unpaginated, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2013, <http://theconversant.org/?p=3429>

<sup>4</sup> On which see Halpern's "Restoring 'China'," *Jacket* 39 (2010), unpaginated, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2013, <http://jacketmagazine.com/39/perelman-halpern.shtml>; "Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 41.1 (2011). Bruce Boone's *Century of Clouds* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2009), to which Halpern provides the preface, includes Boone's emancipatory and confessional narrative of 1977-8, including his attendance, and conflict with, participants in the Marxist Reading Group annual conference, which included Jameson.

<sup>5</sup> On the HIV and AIDS crisis see Kevin Killian's "Activism, Gay Poetry, AIDS in the 1980s: Excerpts from an address given at the National Poetry Foundation's 'Poetries of the 1980s' conference," available on *Everyday Genius*, unpaginated, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July 2013, <http://www.everyday-genius.com/2012/07/kevin-killian.html> Beyond the Bay Area the dynamics are as messy as they are in any era of literary activity, but Halpern has collaborated with Taylor Brady on *Snow Sensitive Skin*, and either commended, or received critical attention from, poets such as Michael Cross, Thom Donovan, Tyrone Williams, David Brazier, Richard Owens, and Brenda Iijima. His work is also well regarded, and read, in poetry circles in the UK, particularly amongst generations with a shared sense of endeavour across the Atlantic, with important review-essays forthcoming from Neil Pattison and Joe Luna, to add to John Wilkinson's "Contemporary Lyric and Epic Constraints: A Reading of Rob Halpern's *Weak Link*," *Chicago Review* 55.2 (2010): 83-96.

<sup>6</sup> *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 257-8, footnote 15, 412.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-8 Punctuation and spacing are Oppen's. Compare the following in Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*: " "Radical change" might be conveyed if it were specified in the following manner: from what comes to pass, the present is excluded. Radical change would itself come in the mode of the un-present which it causes to come, without thereby either consigning itself to the future (foreseeable or not), withdrawing into a past (transmitted or not)." (*The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 114).

<sup>8</sup> On George Oppen, see Halpern's lecture "Becoming a Patient of History: George Oppen's Domesticity and the Relocation of Politics" Lecture delivered 12/11/10, transcript 14; also "Of Truthful 'I's," *tripwire* "Gender" 3 (Summer 1999), 75-90.

<sup>9</sup> On the commons see the ongoing development of the *Nonsite Collective*, an online forum and flesh-world collaboration, the title of which stems from the site/non-site dialectics of Robert Smithson. See, in particular, the "Nonsite Collective: A Draft Proposal, ed. 1.0," accessed 12th

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November, 2010, [http://www.nonsitecollective.org/draft\\_proposal](http://www.nonsitecollective.org/draft_proposal), and Halpern, "Sensing the Common Place: Taylor Brady's Dialectical Lyric," *On: Contemporary Practice* 1, unpaginated, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July 2013, [www.oncontemporaries.org/](http://www.oncontemporaries.org/). The commons are on the minds of British poets too; see Evocations of the commons are clearly on the minds of poets in both the UK and US; see Sean Bonney's *The Commons* (London: Opened Press, 2011), and Jeff Hilson's *In the Assarts* (London: Veer, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Halpern writes: "In an effort to perceive what a body can do, we might want to conceive a multiplication of its links in a perverse articulation of bodies that would allow otherwise inaudible social material – intimate relations whose intimacies go unnoticed, say, between my body and the body of a woman in Indonesia who makes my shirts, or the body of a dead boy in Afghanistan, and the body of the soldier who killed him – to become audible as something other than a scream." (Rob Halpern, "Pornotopias" *Damn the Caesars: "Crisis Inquiry: A Special Volume of Damn the Caesars with Attention to the Work of Rob Halpern and Keston Sutherland"* pp. 97-114 108). On complicity in distant harm see my "Problems for Lyric Poetry," in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), 271-323.

<sup>11</sup> See *Disaster Suites*, 80, and repeated in *Music for Porn*, 101. Halpern develops a theory of the "future anterior" to describe this possibility, wishing to be open to the possibility that his poetry will be "remark[ed]" (in Duncan's term) by the future which we cannot know. An alternative framing structure for this introduction and Halpern's development of a temporality of hope can be seen by comparing Halpern's "Theses on the Remembrance of Things to Come," which begins in *Rumored Place* (pp. 99-105, theses numbered 1 – 27) and concludes in *Common Place* (theses numbered 28-54). Since there is no language for current events, the "theses" take up the retrospective nostalgia of assuming a future from which vantage we can read the present as history, a history which is itself in some sense ruptured or succeeded. The Proustian title reframes remembrance of things past as projective nostalgia, a desire to know how this period will be understood in the light of future societies, and how this time, now, is therefore the putative "lost time." Neil Pattison describes Halpern's hope in terms of the Marxist possibilists. The draft of his review-essay, "Possibilist Lyric and Militant Eros (unpublished, with thanks to the author) reads: "Throughout the 1870s and 80s, the possibilists, a socialist faction led by Paul Brousse and Benôit Malon, survivors of the Commune, opposed both the authoritarianism of that period's Marxists in French politics, and the insurrectionary utopianists of the anarchist movement. They were denounced as bourgeois reformists by the authoritarian vanguard, and as statists by the anarchists. The progressive 'integrated' socialism they propagated in theory, its reconciliation of elements of utopian and pragmatic socialist thought comparable to a degree with the ideological compromises embodied in the early programmes of the British Labour movement, or even the Soviet 'Workers Opposition', offered a way of overcoming the fatalism implicit with the revolutionary commitments of impossibilist left radicalism."

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor and trans. Peter Connor et al., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 2009); Roland Barthes, *The Neutral* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2008); on Virno and "patency" see later in this essay. On the connection to Bataille, see the translator's introduction to Blanchot's *Unavowable Community*, xiv-xx.

<sup>13</sup> Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, M. Hardt and P. Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996):12-36 (12). Halpern's doctoral dissertation relates the work of Virno to contemporary affect; see *The Politics of Autonomy: Social Engagement and Aesthetic Value from the Romantic Fragment to the Poème en Prose*. University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006 (unpublished dissertation), 166.

<sup>14</sup> Virno, "Ambivalence of Disenchantment,"12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson, "Contemporary Lyric and Epic Constraints," 85.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 91. Wilkinson comments: "Lenin himself was inordinately fond of the image of the weak link, using it in at least four different ways, of which the best known was his historically confirmed contention that Russia was the weak link in the capitalist world, destined for Bolshevism." (91).

<sup>26</sup> Halpern, *Weak Link*, unpaginated.

<sup>27</sup> Virno, "Ambivalence of Disenchantment," 26.

<sup>28</sup> Halpern, *Weak Link*, unpaginated.

<sup>29</sup> Virno, "Ambivalence of Disenchantment," 22.

<sup>30</sup> "Because money is the general equivalent, the general power of purchasing, everything can be bought, everything may be transformed into money." (Karl Marx, "Notebook VII." *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: 1974), 838).

<sup>31</sup> Virno, "Ambivalence of Disenchantment," 26.

<sup>32</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Halpern, "Pornotopias," 107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Halpern, *Weak Link*, unpaginated.

<sup>36</sup> Virno, "Ambivalence of Disenchantment," 29.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>43</sup> Halpern, *Disaster Suites*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>46</sup> In an essay on Taylor Brady, Halpern writes:

As the globe achieves the image of an "unfenced region," everything *from real populations to imaginary signs* appears to be floating freely in an orgy of exchange, despite hardening borders and narrowing channels of circulation. This has irreversible implications for a contemporary lyric, whose own temporality *never its own* can't escape the irreconcilable antagonism between the fettered time of wage-labor and the "free-time" of finance capital. Lyric's material *language, emotion, body* can't avoid this antagonism *time's false identity, the social contradiction thru which a poem moves*. Lyric potentializes the audibility of this antagonism, even as its potential for critical judgement contends with an uncritical and narcissistic logic internal to its utterance.

(Halpern, "Sensing the Common Place" unpaginated). In their collaboration *Snow Sensitive Skin* (Buffalo: Atticus/Finch 2007; reprinted Boston, Chicago, Olympia: Displaced Press, 2011), Taylor Brady and Halpern write the following, which sheds some light on their notion of ambivalence:

We saw the poem through to its provisional end with the sense that this very impropriety our common desires, pleasures, cares, and commitments all suspect might make the ambivalence of “nothing” audible, and with it the ambivalence of the commons itself, its potential, like that of the general intellect, either to abet or antagonize a dominant militarism.

<sup>47</sup> Rob Halpern, “Baudelaire’s ‘Dark Zone’: The Poème en Prose As Social Hieroglyph; or The Beginning and the End of Commodity Aesthetics,” *Modernist Cultures* 4 (2009): 1-23 (2).

Baudelaire was also the central subject of Halpern’s dissertation *The Politics of Autonomy*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For a description see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 105-6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>52</sup> See Matthew ffytche, “Objects and How to Survive Them: Several Views of John Wilkinson’s ‘Saccades,’” *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 2.1 (2010), 7-34.

<sup>53</sup> Compare to one section of “This Evolve, Bearing No Resemblance To Love” from *Music for Porn*: “you come from the land of Ur, forgotten zone of oil and steal” (16).

<sup>54</sup> See my article on *Music for Porn* (forthcoming).

<sup>55</sup> “Into this Suspended Vacuum,” in *Music for Porn* is “for John Wieners” (70).

<sup>56</sup> Halpern in conversation with Thom Donovan in “Rob Halpern: on ‘Somatics,’” *Harriet: a poetry blog*, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2013, unpaginated, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/rob-halpern-on-somatics/>.

<sup>57</sup> Halpern in Donovan, “Somatics,” unpaginated. In “Notes on Affection and War” from *Music for Porn* we read: “Longing, shame, fear, tenderness, rage, sorrow: the affections Whitman arouses in *Drum-Taps* require a battlefield for their full expression, a site where one’s tenderness for a fallen soldier – “my comrade I wrapped in his blanket, enveloped well his form,” etc. etc. – may be the most powerful affection of all.” (106).

<sup>58</sup> Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Berlant provides one of the blurbs for *Music for Porn*, though *Cruel Optimism* does not cite Halpern, and nor am I aware that Halpern knew of Berlant’s theory whilst composing *Music for Porn*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1-2. In an online post Halpern reflects on his lust for the soldier (Halpern in Donovan, “Somatics,” unpaginated):

We’re all longing to find a way beyond the current crisis, as if our sense of normality were not itself a state of crisis, and we encounter nothing but blockages and impasses: both [sic] materially, politically, and affectively. The obsessively recurrent figure of the masculine soldier in my recent work marks an obstruction in sense as the poems struggle to imagine what a demilitarized world might feel like. The most despairing result of my investigation has been that *this can’t even be imagined*, and my soldier’s hard muscle concentrates and allegorizes one of the obstacles. But there’s also a hazy eros permeating the soldier’s appearance. My body channels so many contradictory feelings and affects around this eros—rage, longing, sorrow, shame, anxiety—as the soldier becomes an object of violence and lust. *I’m hung-up on him*. The poem wants to kill that soldier for standing in the way of a demilitarized future; but the poem also wants to be fucked by him because the repressive sublimation of whatever eros clinging to his body has become unbearable *just as the realization that I, too, stand in the way of that other future has become unbearable*. These may be amplifications of subcutaneous feelings that the writing senses beneath our social skin. But for me what’s important is the way the poem is able to make these contradictory affects audible, as if for the first time. *Are they potent or impotent?* My

poems seem to want to arouse this affective material—*what can it do?*—at a moment before it hardens around familiar social feelings that can be made useful in ways that lubricate the reproduction of our stupid militarized machine.

<sup>62</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 150.

<sup>64</sup> It is not clear that potency is the preferred outcome, since potency replays the proliferative making of capital. Neil Pattison describes, with the examples of Swinburne and Malcolm Cowley the way “radical aspiration is identified with phallic potency: their radical eros is fixated on virile hardness as the condition for the consummation of struggle.” For Halpern, however, in the words of Pattison: “radical eros not fixated upon the potent phallus, but on the penetrable mouth and anus, on sensitive skin and on the open heart, argues against the impossibility of development beyond the sublime event in American democracy that Whitman’s poetry faultily proclaims.” (Pattison, “Possibilist Lyric and Militant Eros” forthcoming.)

<sup>65</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 118.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Terdiman, “Baudelaire’s ‘Le cygne’: Memory, History, and the Sign,” *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 106-147 (108). I pay particular attention to Terdiman’s reading not only because of its intrinsic value, but because Terdiman supervised Halpern’s doctoral research on Baudelaire.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Terdiman, *Present Past*, 118.

<sup>69</sup> Terdiman, *Present Past*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>71</sup> On the utopian promise of pornography see Halpern’s “Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative.”

<sup>72</sup> Halpern, “Baudelaire,” 2.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 156.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Terdiman, *Present Past*, 131.

<sup>77</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 7.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 122.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History, transcript, 14. In the same lecture, Halpern offers the following connotations: “According to the OED, *patience* denotes “the quality of being acted on. Chiefly in contrast with *agency*. One attestation of the word from 1949 has it that “Perception is certainly not a mechanical *patience* of the mind.” Moreover, “Its etymon derives from classical Latin *patientia*: endurance of pain, forbearance, tolerance, persistence and it shares the same Indo-European base as ancient Greek suffering, or *pathos*. Then, there is also: **PATIENT b.** *Grammar*. Designating or relating to a grammatical patient being the subject of an intransitive verb” (14).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Rich Owens, in conversation with Andrew Rippeon, says:

If agency is recourse to strategies capable of determining common sense – the sites to which we are commonly called – then in Rob’s formulation the most useful strategy seems to lie in negotiating the space altogether outside agency, a dialectical inversion of agency that considers the productive possibilities in being a patient being patient, a giving up or into, a wilful suspension *toward* others: “The patient paradoxically submits to the material conditions of mistreatment (conditioned material), in the interest of receiving

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unanticipated care” – a scene of “suspended action” or “interrupted agency” (<http://www.nonsitecollective.org/node/666>). A moment of *active* pause that leaves one open to signals of distraction and invites the intervention of others.

(Richard Owens and Andrew Rippeon, “Becoming Unmoored: Rob Halpern’s *Disaster Suites*,” *The Poetic Front* 3 (2010), accessed 13<sup>th</sup> July 2013,

<http://journals.sfu.ca/poeticfront/index.php/pf/article/view/37> (2)).

<sup>85</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 200. According to Berlant, the present is “perceived, first, affectively,” not as an “object” but “a mediated affect,” a “thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did “the present” begin?) are also always there for debate.” (4)

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>88</sup> Halpern, “Pornotopias,” 105-6.

<sup>89</sup> Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History,” transcript, 12. To piercing and to touch are references to Oppen from the *Daybooks*: “Herein somehow is our purpose of purposes: *pierced and touched*,” quoted in “Becoming a Patient of History,” 26.

<sup>90</sup> On which see Jonathan Sawday’s *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 186. On the feminine coded styles of behaviour in the self-confessedly queer affection of Halpern see the discussion of domesticity in “Becoming a Patient of History.”

<sup>91</sup> Halpern, “Militant Bodies, Common Bodies: Some Notes on David Wolach’s Poetry,” *Philly Sound*, unpaginated, available on [http://phillysound.blogspot.com/2010\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://phillysound.blogspot.com/2010_08_01_archive.html), accessed 6th November 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 62.

<sup>93</sup> Halpern, “Pornotopias,” 106.

<sup>94</sup> Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 78.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, *Writing the Disaster*, 18.

<sup>99</sup> Halpern, “Pornotopias,” 105-6.

<sup>100</sup> Blanchot, “Measure, the Suppliant,” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 93-5.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Halpern, *Music for Porn*, 119. See also “*and y’re not even hard* you say when down on my knees, exposed before the others, unbearable repetition, a piece of mortar shell, a bone. history’s limit, my lost marine” (16); “Under the dead weight a carcass had come rising/When he saw me on my knees his dick in my mouth/Creaming him crushed beneath the weight of nations/Lost thinking what will this joy do to my tongue how” (80).

<sup>103</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 94.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. The turn is to reverse the relations of self to Other such that “the Other relates to me as if I were the Other and thus causes me to take leave of my identity” (Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, 18). Halpern’s term *patency* owes a great deal to the philosophical recuperation of

passivity in Blanchot and Levinas, on which see, Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>110</sup> Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> The “neutral” position is taken up by Roland Barthes in *The Neutral*. Barthes’ “Neutral” is “a manner—a free manner—to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time.” (8) He defines the Neutral as “that which outplays [*déjoue*] the paradigm, or [...] everything that baffles the paradigm” (6), where the paradigm is the “opposition of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning.” (7) Barthes’ takes a Saussurean model of meaning as contest, as conflict, and offers the Neutral as that which resists the resolution of such conflict into a unified meaning. The Neutral instead borrows from a phenomenological tradition and seeks to suspend the conflict. The Neutral is not, therefore, “grayness,” “indifference” or “neutrality,” but can be “intense, strong, unprecedented[...] an ardent, burning activity.” (7). The desire for the neutral involves two stages, firstly the “suspension (*époche*) of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, the will-to-possess” (12), followed by a “deepening,” a “refusal of pure discourse of opposition” (12).

<sup>112</sup> Halpern writes: “My idea of the patient body finds an echo in Barthes’ idea of the neutral, the body susceptible to being affected, multiply and perversely. This is the body released from all predication, *untagged* the body resists being identified, the body that can’t be surveiled.” (“Pornotopias,” 106).

<sup>113</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 81.

<sup>114</sup> Enumerated in Barthes, *The Neutral*, 82-4.

<sup>115</sup> The first quotation previously cited from Halpern, “Militant Bodies,” the second from Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History,” transcript, 10. In Barthes’ terms, the Neutral therefore:

cannot be satisfied with the modes (modalities) that officially code the attenuation of the affirmative within language: negation, dubitation, the conditional, interrogation, wish, subjectivity, etc. Ideally, discourse in the Neutral shouldn’t even be a discourse in the subjunctive: for the modes are still a dimension of being. The (linguistic) problem would be to suspend all categories, to put what comes to language beyond mode, whether constative or subjunctive: or, better, to be more precise, to speak in implying, in making understood that every paradigm is badly put, which by itself would pervert the very structure of meaning: each word would become non-pertinent, im-pertinent. (Barthes, *The Neutral*, 45-6)

<sup>116</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 95.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Complete Verse*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil, 1986), 280.