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Everyday Dissent: Colonized Lifeworlds in Twentieth Century Poetry

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[forthcoming in *World Literature and Dissent*, ed. Lorna Burns and Katie Muth, Routledge 2019]

The terrain of the everyday doesn't lend itself, initially, to an analysis of the possibilities of dissent, literary or otherwise. Writing in 1983 on the occasion of the centenary of Marx's death, Henri Lefebvre, who did more than anyone to theorise and promote the concept, concludes that

the word *everyday* [*le quotidien*] designates the entry of [...] daily life into modernity: the everyday as an object of a programming [...] whose unfolding is imposed by the market, by the system of equivalences, by marketing and by advertisements. As to the concept of 'everydayness', it stresses the homogeneous, the repetitive, the fragmentary in everyday life. (Lefebvre 1988, 87)

Market-driven, homogeneous, repetitive, fragmentary. We are here a long way from the Lefebvre of 1945, the moment of the first volume of his career-long study of *la vie quotidienne*, with its robust defence of 'the elementary splendour of everyday life' (210) as counter to the extremes of capitalist and fascist modernization. In either case, though, 'the everyday,' like the notion of 'tradition,' itself must be read as an artefact of modernity – born in the split between workplace and home, public and private spheres, system and lifeworld.¹ In a 1965 encyclopaedia article, Lefebvre notes that the sectors of social life given over to the serial requirements of dailiness – commuting, working, shopping, cooking, cleaning, providing routine care and maintenance – while each distinct in their operations, share an underlying structure that unites them in their fragmentation: 'organized passivity' (Lefebvre 1987, 10). From such ground radical dissent seems unlikely to arise.

In what follows I want first to sketch a history of the passage in Lefebvre's thought between his theorisation of the everyday as a semi-autonomous realm within modernity and his growing attention to its status as occupied territory. Not because Lefebvre exists alone among thinkers who give us insights into the dissenting potential of the literary everyday – he is joined, at a minimum, by members of the Frankfurt School, ethnographers from the Mass Observation project, Edgar Morin, the pioneering feminist analyses of Simone de Beauvoir and Dorothy E. Smith, sociologists of culture such as Erving Goffman and critics such as Roland Barthes and Raymond Williams – but because Lefebvre's focus is drawn to a particular crux in the dynamic of modernity: namely, its adherence to a logic of uneven development. In construing the everyday as a product of modernity and at the same time a 'backward', lagging or resistant sphere within it, Lefebvre was able to grasp the constitutive unevenness of the concept at the moment when it achieves definition as a focused object of sociocultural analysis. And by adapting the analytic of uneven development to the situation of colonized lifeworlds in both metropole and periphery, he allows us to connect the experience of alienated deprivation in the colonial world with what is later experienced by those in the imperial centres of the world-system, themselves subject to unevenly imposed modernization and accelerating commodification alike. From his supposed discovery of the concept – it occurred to him, he wrote, when his wife walked into their apartment holding a box of detergent and remarked, 'This is an excellent product'² – to his later elaboration of the colonial logics operative in urban planning, Lefebvre's career shows a continuing, if itself unevenly and incompletely theorized attention to the world-systemic relations underpinning any experience of the everyday. For this reason his work constitutes a useful departure point for assessing the convergence of postwar attention to the quotidian and new forms of world-literary dissent.

Throughout his work on a critical sociology of *la vie quotidienne*, Lefebvre more than once cites Hegel's maxim, '[t]he familiar is not necessarily the known'.³ For him – and for a generation of ethnographers, sociologists and documentarians – the everyday initially presents itself as an undiscovered continent of the twentieth century. It is not only the realm of 'sustenance, clothing, furnishing, homes, lodging, neighborhoods, environment', but of the habitual, the recursive, the necessary but un- or under-acknowledged labour of subsistence that maintains continuity in daily life while adapting itself to changing circumstance and rationalizing imperatives. It is, in another key, what a later generation of Marxist feminists will term the sphere of social reproduction, that vast sea of activity on which the narrower domain of profit production depends, but whose costs form no part of capital's accounting books.⁴ As Lefebvre's encyclopaedia article is at pains to underscore, the 'generalized passivity' of this sphere

is moreover distributed unequally. It weighs more heavily on women, who are sentenced to everyday life, on the working class, on employees who are not technocrats, on youth – in short on the majority of people – yet never in the same way, at the same time, never all at once. (Lefebvre 1987, 10)

Behind Marx's 'hidden abode of production' (273), an even more occulted space of ceaseless but undocumented phenomena lends its rhythms to a world against which the technologically advanced features of urban modernity stand out in sharp relief. The lines of division are gendered, racialized and class-indexed, but also differentiated geographically according to region, above and below the level of the nation-state. Lefebvre's childhood in the shadow of the Pyrenees, together with his experience of working in the Resistance during the war, likely made him especially sensitive to the discrepancy between the modalities of urban experience and those of the rural hinterlands, the latter still formally congruent with the rhythms and

processes of peasant life.⁵ But it was the triangulation of these forms of experience with the dramatic introduction of an Americanized surge of consumer goods in postwar France – the really great box of laundry detergent – that catalysed his thinking about the everyday as a specifically modern, rather than residual category.

In this light, ‘the everyday’ appears in Lefebvre’s analyses as something like a mirage, flashing up in the moment of its alienation within a decisively different register – an afterimage, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, of the blinding experience of the age of invasive commodification. As Kristin Ross writes in her cultural history of postwar France,

Contrasting the French experience to the slow, steady ‘rational’ modernisation of American society that transpired throughout the twentieth century, Lefebvre evoked the almost cargo-cult-like, sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan. Before the war, it seemed, no one had a refrigerator; after the war, it seemed, everyone did. (Ross 1996, 5)

Alongside the accelerated modernization of a domestic sphere now reorganized by imported commodities, the second development prompting a reconsideration of everyday life takes place overseas, in the drawn-out struggle of decolonization. Just as the everyday is indexed to the increasing commodification of ordinary life, so for Lefebvre the postwar conclusion of formal empire predicates the rise of informal imperialism or neocolonialism, extending the logic of capital into hitherto unpenetrated territory while at the same time installing the techniques of colonial administration back in the metropole. Writing in 1961 toward the close of the second volume of his *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, Lefebvre makes emphatic his assertion that ‘*critique of everyday life generalizes [the] experience of the “backward” or “underdeveloped” nations and extends it to the everyday in the highly developed industrial countries*’ (Lefebvre 2008b, 316). For Lefebvre, at this phase of his lifelong project, ‘the

everyday' arrives already riven and distorted by its constitution as the conflictual ground of forces working outside its field of vision; it is both object and subject of a process first tested and experienced in the colonies. With the example of the ongoing Algerian Revolution unavoidably in view, he writes in terms that echo Frantz Fanon:

We know that the underdeveloped sectors do not remain quietly held back like a troop of soldiers dragging their heels far from the front line. The sectors which are destined to suffer uneven development, be it temporary or long-lasting, soon realize that they are being occupied and brutally exploited. They must regain their freedom or win it back by combat. They remain subjected. (Lefebvre 2008b, 316)

With its call for a 'general upheaval in the name of everyday life', Volume 2 of Lefebvre's *Critique* ends on a note quite different from its precursor volume published fourteen years earlier. There, the 'critical and positive' analysis of a postwar lifeworld outside the sphere of systematized knowledge must lead to a 'humanism that believes in the human because it knows it' (252). At the turn of the 1960s, however, Lefebvre draws inspiration from the ferment of decolonization to recast the theory of the everyday on a world scale, in the process forecasting with some prescience the eruption of festivalized insurrection from within the quotidian that marks the events of May 1968.

How literally are we to take the thesis of the colonized everyday? Lefebvre insists that it is no mere metaphor. His defining focus on the problem of alienation in the first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life*, augmented with intervening ethnographic work on the underdevelopment of peripheral France, alters its compass when the new realities of the postwar global order become apparent over the course of the 1950s. Far from being metaphorical, the link between colonial exploitation and 'interior colonialism' is metonymic and structural: as Ross cites a city councillor remarking during the Parisian renovation debates of the early 1960s, 'France decolonized the Third World while colonizing Paris,

appointing as head of the commission charged with making decisions about the capital functionaries who had made their careers in Black Africa or in Asia' (Ross 1996, 8). If everyday life had for some time been recognized as on the receiving end of colonization by the commodity form, grasping the context of global commodity production leads to an understanding of the processes of uneven development not only on the colonial peripheries of the world-system but in the core as well. This was certainly how Lefebvre's one-time student and collaborator Guy Debord saw it: 'Henri Lefebvre,' he wrote, 'has extended the idea of uneven development so as to characterize everyday life as a lagging sector, out of joint with the historical but not completely cut off from it. I think that one could go so far as to term this level of everyday life as a colonized sector' (Highmore 2002, 240–1).

The advantages of the optic provided by uneven development, for Lefebvre, went beyond its challenge to the complacencies of modernization theory and related assumptions concerning *les trente glorieuses*. In its sharpened attention to the production of inequality *by means of* a subsuming homogenization, the theory of uneven development offered ways to explore the postwar remaking of urban space, the racialized variegation of districts, zones and regions, the transformative impact of advertising on language use in public and the recurrence of cycles of programmed abundance and planned obsolescence, among other aspects of the social geography of city and countryside alike. The contradictions, anomalies and juxtapositions routinely thrown up by these processes at street-level could no longer be written off as accidentals on the road to progress, or signs of the 'not here/not yet' of modernity's deferred promise. This was, rather, modernity itself, an uneven combination of imposed development and lag, in line with Doreen Massey's observation: 'Much of life for many people, even in the heart of the First World, still consists of waiting in a bus shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes' (Massey 1994, 8). Or, as Lefebvre notes,

‘[t]he situation of everyday life strikes us (unfortunately) as being a prime example of the law of uneven development’ (Lefebvre 2008b, 316).

In parsing the implications of Lefebvre’s attempt to unite his colonization thesis with the theory of uneven development, we can note parallel contributions to an understanding of the radical implications of full commodification in postwar society. Lefebvre’s productive if conflict-ridden collaboration with the younger Situationists during the late 1950s to early 1960s is well known, marking a high point in pre-1968 theorizing of the irruptive possibilities of creative revolution. At the same time, the Frankfurt School’s development of their critique of the wholly administered society via the mechanisms of the culture industry finds an answering chord in Lefebvre’s and Debord’s insistence on the takeover of everyday life by an increasingly spectaclized leisure economy. For Adorno, indeed, the distinction between the spheres of production and consumption had come under decisive pressure: time off from work, suggested the author of ‘Free Time’, is time structured and encased by the imperatives of the working day, not simply as necessary refuelling for the demands of wage labour but more insidiously as a continuation of labour in other channels and by other means: ‘Free time is shackled to its opposite’ (162).

What Lefebvre brings to this nexus of concerns is an explicit attempt to articulate the specific parameters of postwar consumer society in dialectical relation with the moment of decolonization (for France, a relatively brief window extending from the defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to the completion of the Algerian independence accords in 1962). In a sympathetic yet critical reading of the colonization thesis, Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena note:

With this world-wide conception of ‘colonisation’, Lefebvre establishes a

connection between various socio-spatial ‘peripheries’ – underdeveloped countries, displaced peasants, slum dwellers, immigrant workers, inhabitants of suburbs, women, youth, homosexuals, drug addicts – that nourish revolt. It allows us to connect ‘far’ and ‘near’ peripheries that are subject to forms of territorial control in (ex-)colonies and metropolitan centres. It offers a way of tying geopolitical aspects of imperialism and colonisation to the relations of centre and periphery within metropolitan regions themselves. (Kipfer and Goonewardena 2013, 97)

Kipfer and Goonewardena argue that it is only when Lefebvre moves beyond his abstract theorization of a colonized everyday into the concrete analysis in his later work on urbanism, spatial practices and the role of the state that the relative vagueness of his initial proposition begins to be overcome. But if we shift from matters of theory to writing practice, a different set of questions arises, having more to do with the nature of the connection that Lefebvre proposes between ‘far’ and ‘near’ in grasping the contours of the everyday, and the expressive forms – models of attention, embodied cognition, inhabitation – that might emerge in the attempt to actualize this connection in language. Can dissent be both pre- and proto-political within this frame, the frame of mundane existence?

Perhaps the most indelible example of such dissent contemporary with Lefebvre’s work emerges not in France, but in the colonized Caribbean. Here is the opening of the first, less familiar version of Aimé Césaire’s ‘Notebook of a Return to the Native Land’ published in the journal *Volontés*:

At the end of first light burgeoning with frail coves the hungry Antilles, the Antilles pitted with smallpox, the Antilles dynamited by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sinisterly stranded.

At the end of first light, the extreme, deceptive desolate eschar on the wound of
the waters; the martyrs who do not bear witness; the flowers of blood that fade
and scatter in the empty wind like the cries of babbling parrots; an aged life
mendaciously smiling, its lips opened by vacated agonies; an aged poverty rotting
under the sun, silently; an aged silence bursting with tepid pustules

the dreadful inanity of our *raison d'être*.

At the end of first light ...

(Césaire 2013, 3)

We might notice in relation to Lefebvre's later concern with 'rhythmanalysis', or the cadences of everyday life, how Césaire's anaphoric iterations of the dawn of a new dead day signal not just repetition without advancement, but something closer to the nightmarish 'inanity' of colonial parrots mimicking their masters, a form of recurrence that underscores the essential struggle in the poem to break from a prevailing stasis. Where later fellow Caribbean writers will theorize an archipelagic thought whose rhythms of drift and recurrence disavow any easy assumptions of linear progress (Édouard Glissant), or argue for a region-specific 'tidelectics' rather than a dialectics (Kamau Brathwaite), Césaire's repetitions carry no redemptive charge. 'In this inert town' where Christmas is celebrated in a parodistic imitation of French custom, the colonial 'umbilical cord [is] restored to its ephemeral splendor' and the essential rhythms of island life are driven by the demands of survival, the speaker paying oblique homage to

my mother whose legs pedal, pedal, day and night, for our tireless hunger, I am
even awakened at night by these tireless legs pedaling by night and the bitter bite

in the soft flesh of the night by a Singer that my mother pedals, pedals for our
hunger both day and night. (Césaire 2013, 15)

It may seem perverse to cite ‘Notebook,’ even in its original form, as exemplar of a poetry of everyday dissent. This is, after all, the paradigmatic anticolonial outcry, a work that summons not only the oppressive minutiae of contemporary Antillean existence but also the weight of slave history, somaticizing the landscape as a diseased manifestation of collective self-loathing and abandonment, giving voice to a centuries-long internalization of colonial racism and expelling it with the force of an island volcano. Arnold and Eshleman suggest in the introduction to their translation that the first version of the poem reveals a less politicized, more spiritual preoccupation on the poet’s part with the materials of his alienated homeland.⁶ This may be so, but it’s the powerful, sense-upending estrangement of everyday details of Caribbean life, an estrangement that is only partly accounted for by reference to Césaire’s engagements with surrealism, that forms the basis of the anticolonial politics later given a more explicit edge in his postwar work, including the poetic essay-indictment *Discourse on Colonialism*. In the *Volontés* version of ‘Notebook,’ rather than a ‘purer’ investigation of the poet’s spiritual crisis, Césaire concentrates to a greater extent on the mundane particulars of underdeveloped colonial existence, especially as these manifest a potentially explosive arrest of colonial temporality. On these terms, the poem can be said to join in Lefebvre’s call for a critique of everyday life that ‘*lays down the principle that the great upheaval which calls on the consciousness of those nations engaged in the drama of uneven development to emancipate themselves should reverberate through “modernity” via an upheaval of everyday life and a general upheaval in the name of everyday life, given that it is a backward sector which is exploited and oppressed by so-called “modern” society*’ (Lefebvre 2008b, 316).

The historical frames for understanding this ‘great upheaval’ in Black francophone poetics

are, notoriously, two: (1) the introduction to the second printing of 'Notebook' by surrealist majordomo André Breton, titled 'Un Grand Poète Noir'; and (2) Sartre's 'Orphée Noir,' the preface to Léopold Senghor's 1948 anthology of francophone Afro-diasporic poetry published first in English in the journal *Présence Africaine*. It was less Sartre's appropriation of the concept of Négritude than the poetry he excerpted from the anthology that drew an enthusiastic response from Frank O'Hara, the poet whose work most flamboyantly embodies the mid-century everyday in American writing. In 'Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets', O'Hara implicitly responds to Sartre's disavowal of any connection to a white readership in the work of Césaire, Senghor and Damas by directly addressing his fellow poets across boundaries of race, nation and language – 'From near the sea, like Whitman my great predecessor, I call/to the spirits of other lands ...' (305) – and makes explicit his solidarity with anticolonial and civil rights movements. But his series of rhetorically elevated odes are an exception to the rule of O'Hara's poetry, which otherwise tends to remain determinedly at the level of the particular and casual. To gauge the everyday as resistance in his work requires a different set of optics than those applicable to Césaire.

Unsurprisingly, everyday life in American postwar poetry often presents itself as a series of stress tests related to shopping. Randall Jarrell's aging female shopper, pausing over laundry detergent:

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All,
I take a box
And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.
The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical
Food-gathering flocks
Are selves I overlook.

(Jarrell 1981, 279)

And Allen Ginsberg, also in the supermarket:

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit
supermarket ...

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the
meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

(Ginsberg 2009, 144-145)

And O'Hara, shopping for friends in midtown Manhattan:

in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

(O'Hara 1995, 325)

Perhaps the locus classicus of the everyday as ordinary activity, however, is O'Hara's 1956 lunch poem 'A Step Away from Them'. The extensive commentary on the poem varies on several points, but it has reached consensus on two: the poem is exemplary of O'Hara's 'I do this, I do that' mode of recorded first-hand experience, taking in sights that are 'palpable, real, and closely observed', in the words of Marjorie Perloff;⁷ and its evident pleasure in these sights is heightened or italicized by a pervasive awareness of mortality. "It's my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored / cabs," the poem begins, before moving on

to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A

Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating. ...
There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. ...
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they'll soon tear down. ...
A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is *Poems* by Pierre Reverdy.

(O'Hara 1995, 257-258)

So at home in this metropolitan world does the poem appear, so insouciantly accepting of its daily variety, that any question of conflictual unevenness, not to mention colonization, might appear literally out of place.⁸ In a quest for signs of tension beneath the poem's surface, a materialist reading can all too easily be reduced to grasping at short straws: the imminent demolition of the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, signalling O'Hara's offhand revision of Baudelaire's lament over the Hausmannization of Paris; or the apparently lazy agitation of the black man in the doorway hinting at the threshold of a new phase in the civil rights struggle (1956!); or the class markers dividing a 'lady in foxes' from half-naked construction workers, capturing the disjunction in dress codes prior to the revolution of 1960s informality in street wear; or the presence of Puerto Rican immigrants alongside Caribbean commodity-imports such as papaya juice. All the elements of US mid-century consumerist dominance,

abundance shading into sheer redundancy (furs on a hot day, lightbulbs in daylight), are laid out for casual inspection. The poem blows its smoke lightly over its readers.

Rather than flip through the playbook of a hermeneutics of suspicion, then, the critic of O'Hara's work might look not for tension 'below' the surface of the poem, but instead for surface tension itself, the meniscus curve of its attention to detail and resistance to symbolic significance, embodied above all in its corner-turning line-breaks. (Hollis Frampton's 1968 film *Surface Tension*, a radically accelerated single dolly-shot tour of Manhattan from Brooklyn Bridge to Central Park, offers a resonant filmic counterpart to O'Hara's midtown peregrinations.) Here everydayness reveals another of its aspects. For if they are scrutinized long enough, the poem's details come to seem less and less the direct transcriptions of daily witness, 'palpable, real, and closely observed', and more like a carefully assembled montage drawn from Hollywood movies: the skirt blown over the subway grate, the smartly clicking chorus girl, the loitering black man breaking into a smile, the society woman with her poodle in a taxi – these gradually acquire definition not as first-hand observations but as filmic quotations. If colonization of the everyday is an issue in 'A Step Away from Them', it has more to do with the way experience and perception are framed according to the tropes and conventions of the culture industry than with any overt reference in the poem itself. O'Hara, as much at home with the products of Hollywood as with European art-house cinema such as Fellini's, maintained an ironic but appreciative stance on the inevitable alienations attendant on colonized experience, a structure of feeling widely analysed as camp. Yet the question of the commodity's installation at the heart of metropolitan ways of seeing here takes an additional turn, ironically reversing the mandate to see afresh so central to a modernist poetics of attention: make it new. To see instead at second-hand, through the filmic conventions of the studio system, may offer its own ambivalent Pop pleasures, but these

testify to a different set of conditions for a poetry of the everyday than those faced by, for example, Reverdy. O'Hara's world is ultimately closer to what Debord will diagnose as the society of spectacle, even as memories of the poet's dead friends in its closing section preserve a counterweight to the spectacle's seductive command of attention.

The question of everyday occupation, tension and the lyric registration of unevenness is cast in a different light in another example of the postwar quotidian, this one also titled 'A Step Away from Them':

There's a poem called that
by Frank O'Hara, the American,
it begins: It's my lunch hour so I go
for a walk ... I like the poem, sometime
I'll write it out complete, but just for now
I've got this OK Bazaars plastic packet
in my left hand, and my right
hand's in my pocket (out of sight),
how else to walk lunch hour
summertime Cape Town with
one gloved hand? ...

A cop van's
at the corner. On a bench
3 black building workers eat
from a can of Lucky
Star pilchards. They're
in various shapes & sizes. It's a fact.

Though you'd think
post boxes'd be all
just one size. I'm sweating a bit ...

but now

I've only
eyes for postboxes and
my heart's in my packet: it's
one thousand
illegal pamphlets to be mailed.

(Cronin 1999, 77-78)

This poem by South African writer and political activist Jeremy Cronin first appeared in the collection *Inside* (1983), a gathering of work written primarily while Cronin was serving a seven-year sentence for crimes against the apartheid state during the late 1970s and early 80s. Like O'Hara's apparent distance from Césaire, the angle of vision Cronin brings to this détournement of O'Hara's poem appears a world away from that of its model, but what is striking is the vernacular ease with which Cronin adapts O'Hara's lightness of tone and subject matter to his mid-1970s Cape Town setting. As with the original, the South African 'A Step Away from Them' proceeds by cataloguing the sights of a city lunch hour, but like the speaker's pocketed hand kept out of sight, its secret context – the mission of distributing illegal political communiqués – is withheld until the final lines. En route to that reveal, the details Cronin includes continually translate between the two contexts, while pointing up shared features common to each – the presence of commercial signage, brand names for food, landmarks of the neighbourhood, bodies classified by race and nationality, above all a preoccupation with time, whose retardation signals at once the relative 'backwardness' of Cape Town in the 1970s and the slowing of perception made vivid during a moment of

personal danger. If Cronin's observations, like O'Hara's, are shadowed by a looming anxiety, its source here is less the contrast between a mundane surface vitality and premature death than the overarching context of apartheid South Africa itself, which asserts itself in ways both overt (the rare 'unsegregated toilets' of the city centre) and subterranean (the speaker's obsessive focus on 'post boxes', also a term for mouths, indicates they are all one size, contravening the logic of legally mandated inequality under apartheid). Everywhere, in fact, the backlighting provided by the omnipresence of state repression and the poet's own Communist commitment contrives to pick out the significance of a string of seemingly casual details, details that together fix a moment both personal and historical; the poem documents the very activity that will lead to his imprisonment, 'inside' versus the outside of this poem's public encounters. A poem like Cronin's both indexes and embodies the connection between core and periphery underscoring even the most seemingly mundane details of everyday life – here within an unavoidably political frame.

It could be argued that Lefebvre's understanding of the colonization of everyday life as an artifact of uneven development misses a crucial component, central to the latter's theoretical elaboration in the Marxist tradition – namely, the addition of *combination* between unlike elements within a given social conjuncture.⁹ Uneven and combined: the peculiar conjunction of so-called backward (pre- or incompletely 'modern') and advanced (capitalist) social forms is what Trotsky originally drew attention to in his image of peasants 'thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plow', an instance of 'the amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' (432). Combination in this sense heightens the objective surrealism characterising encounters between radically disparate modes of existence, including the juxtapositions of commodity proliferation and its relative absence, in a postwar world that continued to be marked by drastic asymmetries in the experience of modernity. Cronin's

poem foregrounds this manifestation of the everyday surreal with reference to the specific conditions pertaining to apartheid South Africa, but its legacy extends across the map of the modernizing world during the second half of the twentieth century, from the era of the Long Boom to its crisis-ridden aftermath. In each case, the linkage between combined unevenness and the advance of colonization's logic, extending to the structures of consciousness itself, registers in poetic responses to an ongoing and seemingly inexorable process, in forms that testify at once to the particularity of individual location and a comparability of situation.

A special case among such instances of postwar unevenness concerns not the 'developing' or Third World of the world-system's capitalist periphery, but the Second World of ostensibly socialist societies during and after the Cold War. These societies come to experience the saturated spaces of advanced commodification in ways that both echo and diverge from the patterns of response associated with colonial and postcolonial areas.¹⁰ In Cuban poet Reina María Rodríguez's 'first time,' for example, a speaker again enters the testing ground of shopping, this time from the perspective of a visitor unfamiliar with the *norteamericano* culture of display:

we went into a market – they call it a *grocery* – and you can't imagine. fruit
brilliant as magazine photos. all kinds of different oranges, grapefruits,
mandarins, some tiny clementines with a blue sticker – *Morocco* – they've come
so far ... i felt dizzy, the gulf between myself and this place seemed insuperable.
tears welled up in my eyes, i wanted desperately to flee, to get outside so i could
breathe. i wanted to explain to Phillis, the North American who had invited me,
what was happening to me. i tried, but she couldn't understand: you have to have
felt it yourself: the first time. (Rodríguez 2011)

In this testament of travel from post-revolutionary Cuba during the mid-1980s, a vision of American abundance triggers not the sexually inflected anomie of Jarrell's 'Next Day' or Ginsberg's 'Supermarket in California', but instead a specific form of vertigo, associated with the collision between two versions of the everyday. The speaker's dissent from this world, if that is what it is, expresses itself somatically and affectively, registering as a peculiar desire for escape that is at the same time bound up with the induction into a new order of knowledge. In this sense, she involuntarily undergoes something like a Global Southern version of the cognitive mapping that Fredric Jameson regarded as increasingly difficult, if not impossible, under conditions where commodity consciousness had long since become second nature.

for the first time my mind had crossed over five hundred years of development at jet speed and arrived in the future, a cold future ... i felt like someone from the stone age, and realized most people on the planet never know the era they're living in ... i knew i couldn't stand this avalanche, this brilliant swarm, for long, these rows on rows of distant faces staring out at me from cardboard boxes.

(Rodríguez 2011)

What is captured by the poem's title, then, is less an intimation of the continuity between consumer and sexual experience (a 'first time' narrative), than a kind of panic at the dissolution between these modalities – indeed, the ability to distinguish between them betrays a consciousness not (yet) fully subsumed by the logic of the commodity. This lack of subsumption, grounded in the combined unevenness of the globalized everyday, certainly speaks to Lefebvre's concern with the resistant potential of alienated awareness.¹¹ At the same time, the passage across 'five hundred years of development' so dizzying to the speaker compresses not simply the distance separating Cuba from the United States (the insuperable 'gulf' bridged in a state of jet-lag), but a history of colonial appropriation and market

expansion – a history whose spatialized form, appearing in the guise of imported foodstuffs, Lefebvre would presumably recognize as an image of the colonized *vie quotidienne*.

For a last example of the postwar everyday, we might turn to the capital-shocked precincts of Russia in the early 2000s:

In the Smolensky supermarket
at the corner of the Garden Ring
and Arbat
among the piles
of expensive
luxurious
foods
I found a sprat paté
for seven rubles ...
I took two
figuring
this must be a special delivery
for neighborhood residents
who go to the store
every day
(Medvedev 2012, 63)

‘Incursion’, by contemporary Russian poet Kirill Medvedev, details the encounter with consumerist spectacle from a different angle than in ‘first time’. Here the lavish shelves of a Moscow food emporium counter the image of Soviet-era penury with such hyperbolic luxury that the speaker, self-consciously playing a variant of the socially estranged fool-naif, is

moved to a curious form of pity – not for the ordinary locals unable to afford commodities like these, but for the commodities themselves (‘I was very sorry / for these fish / this wine / several hundred types of wine / and all the cookies’, 65). This feeling in turn prompts critical reflection: ‘I thought of the fact / that the suffocating pity I feel / for these products / is also / a form of fetishism / and also a symptom / of reification’ (66). Not least of the effects of the Russian transition to plutocracy in the 1990s was the recovery, among the younger generation of dissident artists and intellectuals, of the sources of capital’s critique in such thinkers as Marx, Lukács and Lefebvre himself – this despite the institutionalised forgetting endemic under oligarchic rule.¹² For Medvedev’s speaker, intentionally lost in the supermarket, an encounter with ‘paté for the poor’ leads to a dialectical unzipping of the perversity underwriting supermarket displays in general, in which, as he notes, ‘in my confrontations / with the face / of the society of consumption / sentimentality replaces disgust’ (66).

The problem with conventional lyric poetry, Medvedev has commented in an interview, is that the public/private divide on which it depends works to screen off the mundane questions of ‘what you do for a living’, erecting instead an architecture of personal response divorced from its material foundations. The everyday, in this scenario, becomes the site of active mystification; in its expression it is ‘never able to rise to the level of saying something about society as a whole’ (Medvedev 2013). Where once the terrain of dailiness offered exceptions to the rule of capitalist modernity, footholds for critique, it is now, in this reading, coterminous with it – despite the continuing and deepening unevenness of its manifestations. Colonization of the everyday, *qua* everyday, is complete.

*

If poetic dissent in the postwar period takes a variety of forms in meeting, on the one hand,

the challenge of decolonization, and on the other, the rise of the spectacle, it has to be acknowledged that twenty-first century writers face challenges of a different order. This is so neither because the work of decolonization is completed, nor because the infiltration of commodity logic has slowed its pace. In a situation where the distinction between the quotidian world of consumption and the hidden abode of production has long since been effaced, verifying Adorno's prescient analysis; where 24/7 culture has restructured the politics of time through the rise of passive work, crowdsourced labour and accelerating automation¹³; where crises of social reproduction have caught up with and outstripped the crises in capitalist growth, it is inevitable that Lefebvre's everyday no longer contains the countervailing or resistant potential that he once identified within it. The long crisis of a global regime of accumulation that now appears, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, to have reached an epochal juncture, together with a wholesale transformation of the media ecology within which writing competes to find its place, means instead that both the imperative and the scope for dissenting interventions have drastically altered. 'i just wanted to be nice, and live a normal life... but events kept forcing me to figure out ways to survive... smart enough to know whats going on, but helpless to do anything' reads the epigraph, by 'bradass87,' to Anne Boyer's 2011 book *My Common Heart*, which opens with an address to 'my vital demystified art' (Boyer 2011, n. pag). If dissent is not only possible but mandatory for survival under these conditions, the question can only turn – as it has in previous moments of crisis – not to what writing, or indeed any one activity, can do in isolation from social ferment, but rather to the forms of articulation available in organizational as well as expressive terms; that is, to the coordinated activities essential to political praxis.

basements

rampant in Cincinnati occupying San Francisco of Iceland

mostly in there's Brooklyn rioting in the basements of

Oklahoma also in Kansas the rental houses and universities in the
city and not the city Australia hello Texas Maine for hundreds of
thousands or millions of dollars loans that will never be paid
(Boyer 2011, n. pag)

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Notes

¹ Lefebvre distinguishes between everyday life [*la vie quotidienne*] and the everyday [*le quotidien*] according to the transition of the mythic register of the former into the assimilated modernity of the latter, but it can be argued that in either case ‘everyday’ is produced as a conceptual back-formation of self-conscious modernity (see Lefebvre 1988, 87).

² The anecdote, from the collection of interviews in *Le Temps des Méprises*, is cited in Ross 1996, 58.

³ Its first appearance within the context of his work on the everyday is in Lefebvre 2008a, 132.

⁴ See the fine introduction to social reproduction theory in Battacharya 2017, 22–72.

⁵ Stuart Elden discusses the importance of Lefebvre’s childhood and later fieldwork in the Pyrenees in Elden 2004, 127–68.

⁶ This interpretation is given in their ‘Introduction’ to Césaire 2013, xix.

⁷ See Perloff 1998, 107.

⁸ Friedlander 2000 and Lawrence 2006 offer further examinations of the complexities of race and colonialism in O'Hara's work.

⁹ See Davidson 2017 and WReC 2015 for discussion of the historical concept of uneven and combined development, as well as of its later applications.

¹⁰ For a consideration of the formerly communist societies of the Eastern Bloc as 'postcolonial', see Lazarus 2012.

¹¹ Compare Jameson on the defamiliarising effect, for First World readers during the Cold War period, of speculative fiction from the Soviet orbit: '[It conveys] the radical strangeness and freshness of human existence and of its object-world in a non-commodity atmosphere, in a space from which that prodigious saturation of messages, advertisements, and packaged libidinal fantasies of all kinds, which characterizes our own daily experience, is suddenly and unexpectedly stilled. We receive this culture with all the perplexed exasperation of the city-dweller condemned to insomnia by the oppressive silence of the countryside at night' (Jameson 1982, 155).

¹² For more on the intellectual context of contemporary Russian dissident movements, see Keith Gessen's introduction to Medvedev 2012. Naomi Klein discusses the applicability of 'disaster capitalism' to post-1991 Russia in Klein 2008, 218–262.

¹³ See Crary 2013.