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# Legibility

## An Antifascist Poetics

John Kinsella

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a prosimetrum (but not a 'defence' of poetry)  
anarchist vegan pacifist feminist environmentalist pro-Indigenous rights

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ISSN 2634-6052                      ISSN 2634-6060 (electronic)  
Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics  
ISBN 978-3-030-85741-7              ISBN 978-3-030-85742-4 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85742-4>

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Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

## ODE TO DISARMAMENT

I am fairly sure that the leafhopper  
now on the bricks is not *au fait* with bullets,  
and likely never will be — small and still,  
mimicking the leaves it has hopped from —

if only because its life is relatively brief,  
but still, so much longer than the flight  
of a bullet, the rapid-fire power-trips  
of authorities-worshippers-hunters-militias.

Though the cuckoo-shrike branch-  
hopping nearby likely will know gunfire,  
even if not directed at them, the valley  
an echo chamber, a gatherer of cause

and effect. That violent delusion  
of revolution and humanity that fed  
Berkman's adjustments of purpose:  
a question of what can or can't

be reached by a bullet as if provenance  
of the bullet itself is at a remove  
from the body it rends. Those symbols  
that brings blood into the open,

that end breath. No. Violence  
expresses nothing other than violence.  
The accuracy of the wielder  
is like the skill of the wealthy

philanthropists revelling in their  
own largesse, their self-advertising  
goodness. They are never far away  
from the materials of armaments.

And the percussion of hammer  
on detonator is not uncommon here,  
reaching into a concept of weaponlessness,  
where even knives might be considered

tools that could never be used  
to inflict harm. But for some it's not poetry,  
is it, if it doesn't rouse deep out of the collective  
memory of death — that *killzone*?

And sheep come into peripheral  
envisioning like clues to the Golden rip-off,  
the idea of their slaughter to make  
harmonious interjections into warfare —

slaughterhouses don't stop any more  
than armed conflicts as pandemics make  
herds dead and noted by Worldometer. Death in death.  
The brazen stats of empire made divisible

and the gaming of the gunsmith is the cabinet  
of Dr. Caligari, the hypnotics of 'twitch' in the 'defence  
jobs' revolution of consumer rights, headiness  
of greenhouse downtime.

I am *fairly* sure that the leafhopper  
now on the bricks is not *au fait* with bullets,  
and hopefully never will be — its jaws testing  
air acrid with fumes, the recoil.

*for the biosphere and all it 'contains' and nurtures*



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## CHAPTER 1

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# An Antifa Pacifist Poetics

**Abstract** Introductory comments on activism and the possibility of a pacifist antifa poetics. The question of legibility of rights and liberties is stated as subtext of the work.

**Keywords** Rights · Liberties

This essay is of the now, and yet I interpolate into that now with rewrites, excisions and additions. Writing carries the impetus of its moment, but when is its moment? For me, it's in the cascading accumulation and dispersal of notes and drafts, of snippets and paragraphs that push for entry into a text as the text struggles to remain relevant. But relevant to what? It's as if the drillcore invasiveness of geological investigation that is watched closely by the mining industry is extending into the future we are making as we work, live, be. It's hubristic and presumptuous, yet it's also activist.

What is activism? For me, it's bringing generative change and halting injustices without using violence. It is a process in which the legible and illegible shift and are in flux—though our cause might be highly legible to us at a given moment, it will by necessity need to nuance itself as more 'factors' are brought to our attention. We operate from positions of certainty that are anything but; and what we pick up in a quick reading

of the scrawl of a situation, might change rapidly. I was discussing with a friend today my position as an anarchist who eschews property and supports Indigenous land rights causes (passionately and emphatically):

i am a total believer in Indigenous land rights — i can be that and also against all other forms of property and land ownership (anarchist position). it is a viable ‘position’, i think [and it should be noted that within these indigenous communities ‘property’ and ‘materials’ are held in common]. the very first protest in which i was involved in was a land rights protest — part of the noonkanbah protests in perth... i believe in non-violent tenets of anarchism of shared ‘property’/held in common, communalism, de-centralized living, consensus etc. and i always qualify my anarchism with ‘vegan anarchist pacifist’ because of the obvious need to nuance and also differentiate re belief.

Activism is about allowing that even the most committed position will need to grow in accordance with new understanding—most often entrenching commitment, but sometimes shifting the ‘position’ within an activism. This is especially true of protesting to support rights matters in which culpability is directly or indirectly connected with one’s own heritage, legacy or belonging (even when that belonging to, say, ‘settler’ white society, is rejected).

Since drafting this essay, the attack by far-right supporters of US President Donald Trump on the US Federal Capitol in Washington DC has shifted ‘Global North’ public discourse into direct confrontation with the realities of rightwingism, and the appropriateness of discussing ‘fascism’ with a variegating immediacy. The conservative strategy of rejecting the present surge of fascism throughout the world as being similar to the 1930s in Europe has, as a consequence of that attack, *in part* been consigned to the obfuscation that it is—a case of disturbing protectionism of historical division and excuse-making (for *the now*).

Fascism is real in micro- and macro-environments of state and societal construction, enhanced by social media to the point where, after the attack, Donald Trump’s social media accounts were suspended, and then cancelled. Astonishingly, but unsurprisingly, neoliberal/conservative/far-righter commentators (such as Sarah Palin) consistently called the populist right violence at the Capitol a ‘false flag’ event, looking to blame it on Antifa as a carefully planned manipulation by the left of ‘citizens’ for its own ends. Ludicrous as this has been proved to be, it remains part of the confusing of culpability. This issue of a legible event witnessed by

many non-participants, by victims, filmed by an often-threatened media, being made illegible through false flagging *as* false flagging, disturbs the actuality to the point where the far right (be they individual or groups of part of the right of the Republican Party... which is increasingly far right across its representation), attempt to own the act of recording, of making the record. Illegibility suits their new ‘legibility’, their new telling of something that seems confirmed otherwise by the plethora of evidence. In some ways—as a pacifist antifa poet activist—it is the work of refuting these *redefinings* of legibility that compels me.

To claim a complete legibility of the world is impossible, and even as I write down what I see, I realize people will not be able to decipher it until I type it up. But the words will still say what I intended them to. Specifically, the illegible is always legible if we attempt to look at it carefully and with different understandings of how to read. The far right, and their appendages and hyper-extensions such as QAnon, achieve their purpose of obfuscation, inducing fear and trepidation, and manipulation, via offering a false legibility out of the illegibility of a mass information that is also indicated as being secretive, ‘communal’, and bespoke—each participant is granted agency through eavesdropping, conspiring and possibly—ultimately—enacting. Untruths are made truths, and the capitalist-right’s version of ‘truth’ is a commodity, and as such a weapon which can be disseminated instantly. During the days after the Capitol attack, various far-right discussion boards were closed down on support platforms and the impetus of fragmented but overlapping violent right groups was blunted.

In the same way commentators note there is no specific or locatable/identifiable core to Antifa (and its purpose can never reside in centralized organization), we might ask, what is an antifa poetics? Well, for me, to be anti-fascist in the now is to be specifically opposed to an individualist exceptionalism that refutes or actively works to deny the rights of personal-collective cultural identity, that seeks to undermine collective autonomy. To be anti-fascist in the now is very often to oppose government and corporate-based control over the fabric of people’s lives inflected through a national identity that places itself above other identity formations. To be anti-fascist is to be anti-racist in both its personal and systemic forms, and more than this, to act against systemic racism. It is to be anti-bigotry, and to define liberty through notions and acts of communal and collective responsibility.

In this work, and in my activism, I attempt to make legible through the actions of protest the illegibilities of my poems: those points where response is nuanced and multifaceted and condensed and intensified to

immediate usage. A poem is spring-loaded, even at its most didactic, and certainly at its most figurative. And underpinning all this is my belief that positive and enduring change can only come via complete non-violence. The issue then becomes how we read passive-aggressive violence, micro-violence and tangential violence. The poem, when it is impacting, can be some of these ‘violences’ even when it is not intended, and especially when it is being written to stop an aggression, to thwart an oppression or exploitation.

What follows is an attempt to open a version of a discussion of these issues, and on how poetry might pragmatically and in praxis be part of that discussion (and action)—more by illustration than via the scaffolding of ‘*prac crit*’. If the pacifist far left does not constantly articulate moments of crisis and circumstance, then there is no question the far right will provide the tags of discourse to a social media-saturated agora to capture language through events and use such terms as ‘The Great Deplatforming’ (referring to a response), that seek to place the loss of social media access by people such as Donald Trump within a crisis of personal liberty (that is actually part of systemic racism and state-business enabling of hate) to offend, harm and damage.

Confronting the ‘deplatforming’ issue in the context of far-right assertion of *its/their* ‘freedom of speech’, as an element of antifa poetics, is a way of critiquing the platforms themselves as much as what is said on them while maintaining a de-centred semi-spontaneous response to sites of hate and bigotry. And I’d note that boycott is an implicit right of protest. The right wing speakers who target places of learning as their platform also expect no resistance to their ‘right to free speech’, even when they are speaking against the rights of others. In the past, I also have tried to stop right wing speakers in tertiary settings, and failing that, articulated a protest and boycott. The poem, for all its formal constraints and mannerisms, is ultimately a decentred site of protest that might adapt to different conditions. So, in this way, it can remain relevant when a report on the event might seem to be ‘dated’. A poem can move rapidly and concurrently, and adapt in the way it is performed and experienced to meet the constant nature of crisis.

One of the concerns of *legibility* is to consider the hypocrisy of ‘liberty’ that manifests to the detriment of others, which to my mind is a false liberty. Legibilities of rights and liberties might also be considered a subtitle to this work.



## Handwriting Protest

**Abstract** The acts of writing and especially handwriting are considered in the light of this question: ‘Legibility is desirable for truth of interpretation, and illegibility obscures and denies access? Yes and no.’ Different aspects of ‘legibility’ are considered with regard to resisting fascism and colonialism. Texts by Murial Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks and Emily Brontë are mentioned. A binary of legibility and illegibility is refused; ‘Illegibility is not erasure, but it can be misused or deployed as erasure. Legibility can be a deception, a claim of authority through clarity.’

**Keywords** Handwriting · Fascism · Colonialism · Legibility · Illegibility · Deception

My handwriting is said to be illegible a lot of the time, which disappoints me. When I slow down, I tend to print-write, and maybe that helps. At school, my writing, whilst never ‘neat’, was certainly readable—many an exam paper attests to this. Taking lecture notes at university (before dropping out, and then going back), made my writing so rapid that I developed my own form of shorthand, and my writing ended up a hybrid. My mother was a very fast shorthand writer, and I reckon maybe she can still do it if necessary.

Legibility is desirable for truth of interpretation, and illegibility obscures and denies access? Yes and no. But the traces of writing are manifold and complex, and I feel that in my handwriting there are layers of access beyond me, and so I relish this on every re-encounter. But it's not with *myself*—it is with the hand that wrote, which has a mind of its own or is embodied beyond will. For I say what I want to say, yet my hand—especially when writing fast—somehow doesn't shape it on the page how I see it in my head.

\* \* \*

Silent corrections.

\* \* \*

Illegible fonts—the obscurities of the clearest print. The poorly cut wooden block, the lead type, the devil's box, the printery. Yet, I write with pens that spur and flare, that smudge, and I am as knowledgeable as I can be about the ink that flows, the ball that rolls the point to page, and the paper it illustrates, merges with, wicking. The difficulty is not in legibility, but in the fact that word meanings change quickly, and are lost to all but the scholarly, or, indeed, readers inclined to at least partially unravel a period. *Costume*.

But that's okay—a poem you write now is, in a hundred years, read against its intention, because the words are so overwhelmingly different in meaning on encounter; at face value. But graphologists are, with the handwritten text, unravelling the personality of *the writer*, and whatever *they* are writing there are consistencies within the quirks. A malign thought expressed shows the same open letters and sharp loops as the most generous; the most supportive of those outside the self. So, we unpick the crossover, and make a personality portrait against the contemporary meaning of what's said, of not what was written but is being read now; encountered.

The writer is nothing in this. In resisting fascism, the anti-fascist gives up personal regard, and certainly any need for approval, to disapprove of their own role in the privilege of expression should it elevate above that of another, and should it speak louder, say, than the dispossessed on whose behalf it intends to advocate, or the wreckage of environment by capital and consumerism it resists, it calls out. Its calling-out is done. William



Blake—himself an antifa poet in many ways (and yet not in others!)—is said to be ‘prophetic’ because he spoke ahead of his time (he spoke, like many others, against the oppressive tendencies of power in his times) but also because he self-declared this. Vision and visionary are not themselves activism, but rather allusion and illusion, and as such a glorious sidetracking of responsibility.

In writing their fears and conspiracy theories in social media, post after post, and entangling search engines of capital and power-centre influences, right wing schemers tap into the clarity of concentrations and secrecy of power, but exonerate themselves and abrogate personal responsibility and self-scrutiny. They blame, they divert, they rely on the rapid spread of stereotypes—an ‘us and them’ in which the ‘them’ is inferior as well as dangerous. In grouping across slight differences of localized opinion, they create a state—a nationalism—of rumour in which the internet is their country of rights, their zone draconian law enforcement, judgement, and their summary execution without evidence; even without knowledge.

So, whereas the “illegible” script is disregarded as unreadable, the crystal-clear screen font is readable, absorbable, and its meaning is the one forced upon/in/by/through the new fascist state of virtual convergence and criss-crossing: the kickback against intersectionality, in which the nodal point is subjected to harassment and bullying, especially flaking off from a ‘strongman’—sometimes strong woman—but a figure of polarized values, in which difference is only useful to vary the consumer market of hate, the tools available to exclusion, even elimination. The right wing armed patriot groups out of America—the Proud Boys and others—look for the signals from their symbolic commander-in-chief.<sup>1</sup> The fragmented cellular nature of right wing ‘resistance’ relies on big symbolic ‘heads’ (many in the world at present) to justify the spread of their propaganda in legible and available ways.

So, does poetry rely on legibility to counter fascism or does illegibility refuse a pinning down? Rudyard Kipling remains ‘useful’ as a source text of imperialism, especially his anodyne poetry, but is it only when he declares himself clearly (in almost basic English) that it lasts longer across time and ‘avoids’ entanglements of terminology under pressure. In other words, when he states an opinion or makes a declaration rather than

<sup>1</sup> When I wrote this, that ‘CINC’ was Donald Trump as President, and now, it remains Donald Trump as their imagined President...

entangling it in imagery and allusion, does the literary act undo the right wing political will to some extent, or is that will always legible? As a writer, especially as a poet of the left, I frequently ask myself how much I gain and lose in an ethical-political act in making the poem which inevitably works through illegibility of expression to suggest and question its own role, the act of making and its rights of being. The poem that is not purely discursive and especially not only didactic surely has its own agency and so there is increased likelihood of evading the right wing censorships, and infiltrating (and hopefully thwarting) right wing thought and behaviour?

Is the 'ordinary speech' (often of an imposed colonial or imperial monolingualism of nation, or if an officially multilingual country, ensuring a baseline consistency of expression and intent across languages) as constructed and mediated by media, government, business and other nodes of power—the language of populism—more vulnerable to fascist take-over? Yes and no. *No*, because the language that people develop to communicate the needs and protection of their rights is never more or less than it is, and circumvents the nodes of power as much as being caught up in them, even in non-articulation; but *yes*, because that 'speech' is at least in part a product of interference and control, and is adjusted in discourse to suit the anguishes of the times to turn opinion into zeitgeist and dilute its impact as a tool of social challenge and change. Speech is our legibility, and yet power-centres super-enhance that legibility to suits their own agendas.

Antifascism, to my mind, relies on language escaping the imprisonment and control of the demagogues and influencers, of the 'representatives' and the salespeople—language, and especially figurative language, avoids constraint... but it will also suffer irrelevancy over time and need reinventing, or invigorating. What I write as a poet now against militarism, capitalism, racism, bigotry, consumerism and ecological destruction, will have little meaning when it has failed to help protect the rights it is working for. When the forest is gone, the poem is gone; when the next death in custody comes, the next police beating, the next act of racist bastardry, the poem I have written in an attempt to prevent has failed and is irrelevant—and time will reduce its purpose and readability than any loss of meaning through shifting language and lost referentiality: that is, the loss is the issue, not the irrelevancy of the poem. New poems will need to be spoken by others—and they might succeed where I have failed.

This is the paradox of legibility: where rhetoric and lyric fuse to resist fascism: to speak clearly and delineate, but not to fall to phraseology and word-usage that is really just a mirror of the populist manipulation of clear speech to buy into suffering as if with sharing and pathos. No, illegibility is often where the poem can go further than its moment. Was all of Blake<sup>2</sup> legible to the fine engraver? Did he always understand what he wrote (or was being delivered through him)? Hopefully not.

And that's where Blake has antifa meaning now—in the illegibility to the author, where clear or blurred script segues with future language usage and is utilized by the antifascist for the need of the moment, and not because it is a revered prophetic text of social (or ecological) purpose. Blake deserves no credit outside his time, but the protester of now who might use the text in liberating and antifa ways, is giving the paradox of the legible/illegible a purpose, an evasive strength that will undo the language of the tyrants.

\* \* \*

The protester who gives everything they can give to resist oppression in the now will be found wanting in the future. They will likely be scrutinized and possibly damned by those with whom they would empathize if they were also of that future. And the protester will have to accept this outcome in order to be effective in the now, because the language and 'movements' they have as tools in the now will be offensive to the future as it moves harder and deeper against oppressions, against dissimulations of knowledge via the gaming of social media, and the false 'depth' of the internet. The poet writing *the now* writes against their own reputation, against their being valued. But any poet writing to be valued by the future, and not to *give* to the future, is making artefacts, and not genuine art of resistance.

\* \* \*

I want to make handwritten books: not because it's *my* writing, but because it challenges ideas of legibility. The printing press was liberty, yet also oppression. It was the basis for sharing radical ideas, and then overwriting them. But in the notes written in hand, reprinted (mass

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Edited by David. V. Erdman with Commentary by Harold Bloom, Anchor Books, New York, 1988).

produced) in various forms, if we remove capital from the process (impressions on handmade paper; the stubble of organic fields), we have an elision, and an answer to the paradox. And that's why together, even from isolation and distanced, our speaking and writing a language of now, a language legible in its antifascism and also illegible/unusable/'non-appropriate-able' to fascists (also, to basic capitalists yet to find personal gain in fascism) will give to the peaceful, determined resistance in astonishing ways. And none of us will get recognition. There will be no copyright, no ownership of acts of liberty, or of making.

\* \* \*

Gwendolyn Brooks said: 'Your effort should be in preventing the *formation* of a firing squad.'<sup>3</sup> And to peacefully prevent such formations, the oppressors need to be denied everything. The state and its attachments and feeders, its controllers and directors, need to be denied our willingness—a deep anti-patriotism that is the liberation of peoples, communities, individuals. The poem is utterance of legibility to those who are willing to listen to its presentation of knowledges of speech, of language and illegibility to those who deny the liberties it works towards. The state-corporation reverses this: it makes its instructions of control legible and the scope of any inherent freedoms illegible, and easily revoked under obscure and elusive 'data'.

\* \* \*

Dante and legibility—the poet who let go so we could inhabit his spaces to liberate ecologies, to resist injustices. He was so legible, and yet, his letters were more than themselves. They fall away, they indicate, they are part of the machine of justice, punishment and award. But we overturn this in the now, and remake it to serve liberation. Dante will always be many things he could never have intended, and yet in making such a work he can only have intended interpretation, reworkings of his legibilities, his public and also very private and obscured purposes.

\* \* \*

<sup>3</sup> 'About the Author' (quoted by Hal Hager in end-material) *Selected Poems: Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 9 (HarperCollins, NY, 2006).

My handwriting began as illegible, became more legible under corporal punishment by early schoolteachers, then, when more humane teachers looked after me, regained illegibility, and became freer. But I wanted it to be free and still be legible to myself, at least—it is, mostly; and my mother and my partner can read it. Can I expect others to read it? Does the illegibility reduce its activist prospects or allow room for the activism of others engaging with the text? Does its general illegibility limit or even thwart dialogue? Or, does the illegibility actually create more room for interaction, more scope for interpretation and reinvention?

Outside the records office is it resistant to control? In print, a poem ‘sells’ in small numbers, and from that I extract ‘a living’. And yet I am against monetary economies. I am for the poet as act of exchange, gift or action. So, what is done with that ‘living’? How is it shared or dispersed? It must feed others, be used to restore habitat against the monetary economy, against its own provisions for its continuance. Room is always to be made for others to come into the text, into their future, and not for one’s own script as a ‘permanent object’, surely? We write to forget what we’ve written, so we can write afresh to engage with the imminent crisis. If the writing is failed, it is lost—it is a fragment of collective knowledge to me remade in more useful, less serving of capital and nation-state forms; increments.

\* \* \*

When I am distressed, my handwriting becomes less legible, so I try to slow down and control my responses and hand movements, to coordinate against that feeling. At protests, I have in the distant past been arrested for vocality... and now I try to say more, but in a less aggressive but equally remorseless manner. So it is with writing in my journal: I try to let the words describe a situation, then ‘lose control’ entirely of my handwriting. I become aware of this loss of control, and try to slow down and make it clearer; not to protect legibility, but rather to create a gap between cause and effect, one in which to enter and consider, one in which to depart from my inclination, to modulate... I then race on again after the pause, and later revert to rapid scrawl. Handwriting—that guide to personality, graphologists suggest—can tell us little more than the words. But the act of reproduction of thought in relationship to the writing’s ‘audibility’ can be a potent activist tool—the handwritten sign of protest is always, to my mind, more self-implicating than the printed