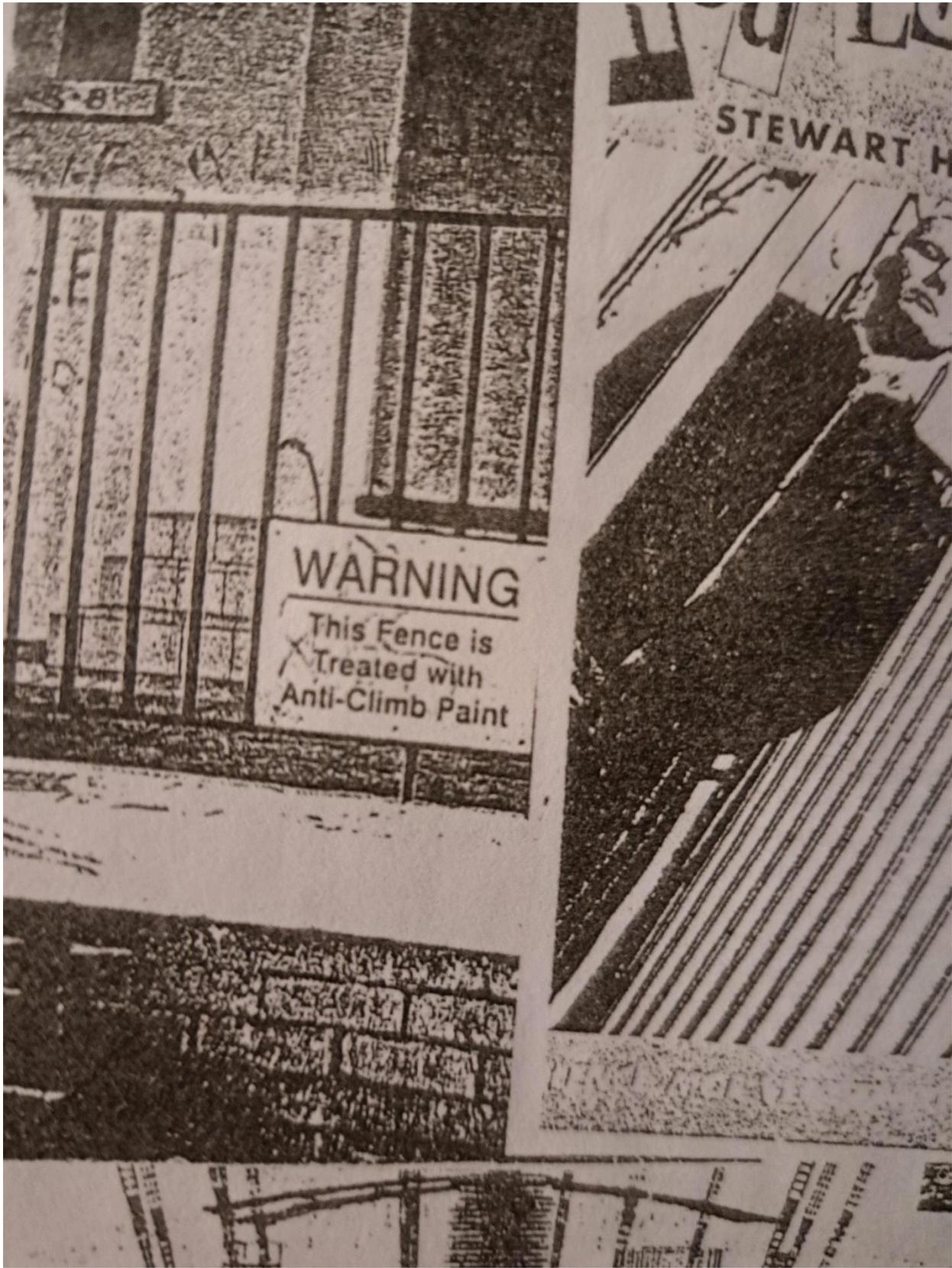


Alex Tretbar // *this unlyrical we*: notes against a poetics of cooperation



detail from *Savage Messiah #1* by Laura Grace Ford (Verso Books)

i .

The American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri states, "[y]ou have the right to remain silent and cannot be punished for refusing to answer questions. If you wish to remain silent, tell the officer out loud." [1]

When a police officer hails us, we are, in essence, forced to respond—forced to cooperate—even if all we wish to convey is the fact that we do not wish to respond, we do not wish to cooperate.

Silence is not necessarily equivalent to the wish to remain silent.

Silence is often deemed to be suspect, deceptive, hostile.

Why is silence itself not enough to convey our wish to remain silent?

Why must we break our silence in order to claim our right to it?

Silence is a wilderness.

ii .

Louis Althusser posits that "the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing." [2] In other words, when a police officer yells, "Hey! You, there!" (when they hail or interpellate us) and we turn around and look at them, it is not so much that ideology is being transmitted by way of the conduit of the police officer. Rather, the hailing *itself* is ideology.

The *deployment* of ideology *is* ideology. They are one and the same thing.

Ideology is nothing without concrete individuals that it can be actuated upon. It requires bodies.

iii.

So what happens when ideology is actuated upon us? What does it mean to be "hailed"?

Althusser again: "...ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing." [2]

When we are hailed we are recruited by ideology, transformed from concrete individuals into subjects (within that ideology).

By turning to the police officer and asking, "Yes?", we are confirming that it is, indeed, *us* whom the officer has hailed. A double recognition occurs, for we have deigned to respond, thereby authorizing this ridiculous power differential, and we join the police officer within their given ideology.

Perhaps the officer just wants to compliment us on our baseball cap. Perhaps we are suspected of having committed a crime. In any case, we are with them now in their ideology.

Even if we disregard their compliment.

Or suddenly run away.

iv.

In her essay "Bewilderment," Fanny Howe posits that when a text broadcasts a "signal" that seems to imply a story is being told, it "does not necessarily mean that [the author/the speaker/the lyrical 'I'] want[s] to be located or described" [3]. In fact, "[i]t can mean that you want to be known as Unlocatable and Hidden," a contradiction that "can drive the 'I' in the lyrical poem into a series of

techniques that are the reverse of the usual narrative movements around courage, discipline, conquest, and fame."

When the officer initially hails you, they are attempting to locate you within their given ideology. Often, what then follows this act of location is a series of questions aimed at assembling a description of you (now that you have been subsumed by them as a subject):

"What is your name?"

"Where are you coming from?"

"Where are you headed?"

The officer seeks to locate and describe you.

"I think we're going to need to see some identification."

Just because you are walking down a sidewalk does not mean that you wish to share your destination, nor do you necessarily wish to share your origin. You may not even be *able* to share such information.

The problem is that when the officer sees you walking down the sidewalk, they detect in this physical phenomenon a signal of narrative. They sense that a story is being told, and they want to know how it began and how it might end (and whether they may need to co-author it).

Surely someone doesn't just walk down the sidewalk without heading somewhere specific, without an objective, without meaning to accomplish something.

Such an accomplishment might simply be exercise or the purchase of a candy bar at the store.

Of course, it might also be the flight from a crime scene or the purchase of narcotics.

Whatever the person may be up to, the officer needs to get to the bottom of it.

It is no coincidence that in police interrogation rooms, detectives will often begin by asking:

"So, what's your story?"

v.

Where are you coming from? Where are you headed?

Like Howe, I am interested in a lyrical "I" ostensibly arriving from and heading nowhere.

A faceless and nameless and idiot "i" that refuses to—perhaps is even incapable of—answering any questions.

An "I/i" who represents themselves (as of an attorney) and yet refuses to cooperate.

Makes no argument.

"Talk to my attorney," such an idiot might say in the interrogation room. (Note that this is a directive, not an interrogative.)

"But you are representing yourself. You have already stated that you are your own attorney."

"[...]"

"Hello?"

vi .

I was recently on a train in central Missouri, heading east and staring out the window. For many miles there had been heavily wooded hills or rolling fields of corn. I was beginning to fall asleep

when I noticed that the hills I was looking at had become immaculately green, manicured lawns. They began to roll and undulate less wildly, in the manner of a country club golf course or the august property of a noble. I was baffled until, as thicker and thicker foliage began to choke out my view of the vast lawns, I saw complex geometries of chain-link and concertina wire glinting through the brush.

This was a prison, and in order to better survey the totality of their dominion, the prison's administrators had leveled and cleansed the land that surrounded the prison itself. They had *dewilded* it, and then they had planted great close-cropped expanses of green grass, likely nonnative.

If a prisoner were to escape, they would be like a mouse in a naked field with no cover, a hundred hawks wheeling up above them.

Bewilderment is untenable for repressive state apparatuses—our prisons, militaries, and law enforcement agencies—because such forces equate intelligence with transparency.

Vision comes at such a premium that nothing is exempt from destruction.

This is why (among other reasons) invaders bomb forests and flatten cities.

A clear line of sight is priceless.

Note, however, that as the degree of *dewilderment* increased in the train's approach to the prison, my *own* perspective became increasingly impeded by foliage. At the very moment when fragments of the

prison's physical complexes finally came into view within the intersecting lattices of leaf and branch, the fragments disappeared. My window was a dark green square.

The prison's architects and/or caretakers had chosen *not* to bewilder the strip of land that separated the train tracks from the property of the prison. In fact, it is entirely possible that they planted *more* trees along the strip in order to maximize obfuscation.

Conservation and reforestation become possible at the intersection of subjugation and concealment.

This is controlled, weaponized bewilderment working in tandem with bewilderment. Such a controlled bewilderment (which is, of course, no bewilderment at all) can take many forms: classified documents, disappearances, bureaucratise, disinformation, black sites and mass graves.

Such unbridled agency and diversity of concealment is a privilege afforded only to hegemony.

vii.

When a police officer hails you, sometimes they will do so in the first-person plural:

"Where are we coming from?"

"Where are we headed?"

"I think we're going to need to see some identification."

Ironically, by employing this syntax the officer is unconsciously admitting to their own immanent bewilderment, for they are conjoining their lostness with that of the subject they are hailing.

(We do not know where we are coming from or where we are headed.)

(We do not know who we are.)

There is nothing lyrical about this syntactical formulation, this unlyrical "we."

When an officer deploys it, they simultaneously dissolve and multiply themselves—they become a blurred, plural force of invasion and occupation.

A potentiality of other officers enters the discourse.

The officer, a congealment of multiple authorities, casts shadows in many directions.

Every officer you meet is a composite of all possible officers.

This unlyrical "we" is an ingenious and insidious hailing mechanism, in that the interpellated individual is seamlessly and passively recruited by it. Or, more accurately, they are *conscripted* by it. The officer and the subject merge with one another, so that the subject is complicit in their own subjection.

The subject becomes one of the shadows cast by the officer.

They themselves become an officer.

Already they are cooperating.

Where are we coming from?

We are the subject and the officer both.

We see ourselves from across the street and yell:

"Hey! You, there!"

We cross the street and begin to question ourselves. We arrest.

Charge, arraign, try.

Convict ourselves.

We, a multi-celled organism.

Endlessly hail ourselves.

viii.

A robust and justified paranoia is an obvious side effect of this conscription.

When we are walking down the sidewalk and notice the globular cluster of black lenses affixed to the stoplight, we know that we are watched, and we involuntarily disembodify, we project our vision in order to imagine what the operators of those lenses might be seeing: a person walking down the sidewalk.

We simultaneously operate the cameras and comport ourselves to discourage suspicion.

A closed circuit.

ix.

You have the right to remain silent and cannot be punished for refusing to answer questions.

If you wish to remain silent, tell the officer out loud.

But when the unlyrical "we" is deployed, the silence of the subject is broken.

The officer speaks for them.

x .

At night, outside the Amtrak station in downtown St. Louis, a security guard is permanently installed.

They pace with a strobing flashlight that they will sometimes point at people's faces to keep them moving along, to keep them from loitering near the entrance to the station.

An open-air drug market quivers unabashedly just beyond the ever-shifting circumference of the pacing security guard.

A row of floodlights, lined up along and aimed at the walls of the station, shines at a roughly 80-degree angle, so that if you stand along the wall your face is illuminated and you are blinded.

It's kind of like you're a child again, holding a flashlight under your chin and telling a scary story.

Except the orientation of the flashlight is slightly off.

You can't see anything, and your eyes hurt.

This is the equivalent of a one-way mirror:

One party sees everything, and the other party sees nothing.

No one stands along the walls of the station.

People squat in the wings of the parking lot, among the trash and shadows.

Or they smoke cigarettes along the darkened perimeter of the security guard's trembling aura.

Moving when they must.

xi .

Some miles beyond the prison, heading back home from St. Louis, my train passed through Jefferson City, and, nodding off in the shadow of the capitol—

Kudzu carpeted the derelict colonials.

Disembarking, a person with a leather briefcase turned and oriented themselves in space and time.

They began to walk down the sidewalk.

xii .

I like to imagine that if (when) I am hailed again by an officer, I'll just keep walking down the sidewalk.

Until the officer gives chase and shouts with greater insistence.

But anyhow I'll keep walking.

When they finally seize me I'll keep walking.

Handcuffed in the back of the squad car, walking.

Walking, walking.

In jail for thirteen months. In court.

On the bus to prison, walking.

Walking.

Silent.

Not cooperating.

Works Cited

1. American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri, "Your Rights and Law Enforcement," <https://www.aclu-mo.org/en/know-your-rights/your-rights-law-enforcement>
2. Louis Althusser, "[Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses \(Notes Toward an Investigation\)](#)," 1970
3. Fanny Howe, "Bewilderment," *The Wedding Dress*, 2003