

## POETRY AND BONDAGE

*Poetry and Bondage* is a groundbreaking and comprehensive study of the history of poetic constraint. For millennia, poets have compared verse to bondage – chains, fetters, cells or slavery. Tracing this metaphor from Ovid through the present, Andrea Brady reveals the contributions to poetics of people who are actually in bondage. How, the book asks, does our understanding of the lyric – and the political freedoms and forms of human being it is supposed to epitomise – change, if we listen to the voices of enslaved and imprisoned poets? Bringing canonical and contemporary poets into dialogue, from Thomas Wyatt to Rob Halpern, Emily Dickinson to M. NourbeSe Philip and Phillis Wheatley to Lisa Robertson, the book also examines poetry that emerged from the plantation and the prison. This book is a major intervention in lyric studies and literary criticism, interrogating the whiteness of those disciplines and exploring the possibilities for committed poetry today.

ANDREA BRADY is Professor of Poetry in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary University of London. Her books include *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century* (2006), *Wildfire* (2010), *Mutability* (2012), *Cut from the Rushes* (2013), *The Strong Room* (2016) and *The Blue Split Compartments* (2021). She has held fellowships from the Leverhulme Trust and the National Humanities Center, and performed throughout Europe and in Canada, the United States, Lebanon and Chile.

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*A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint*

ANDREA BRADY

*Queen Mary University of London*



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to Ayla, Abel, Marlow and Matt  
and in memory of Sean Bonney

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*Invisibly, writing is called upon to undo the discourse in which, however unhappy we believe ourselves to be, we who have it at our disposal remain comfortably installed.*

– Maurice Blanchot

This is a book about how poets use figures of bondage to depict creative freedom or constraint, and how that figuration effaces the poetics of those who are actually in bondage. I began it in 2014 and finished it in 2020. As the readers' reports arrived, I was in 'lockdown' with my family in London. Our comfortable bourgeois life in a house with a garden was totally incommensurate with the metaphors of incarceration used by government to describe measures to slow the coronavirus pandemic. Stay home, save lives. For people in actual lockdown, in overcrowded prisons, immigrant detention centres, refugee camps, secure hospitals, or in private homes with abusers, home did not constitute refuge. Lockdown reproduced my advantages: secure employment, private property and a healthy nuclear family.

At the same time, the pandemic briefly opened a horizon on to other forms of relation based on solidarity and mutual aid. I am happy to begin with an acknowledgement of the gifts given to me in the course of the book's composition. The first, which was technically the last of these gifts, was the image for the cover by Donny Johnson. Donny is an extraordinary artist who fashions from everyday materials images of deep spiritual insight. Out of the brightly coloured commodities whose sugars are bound to the histories of slavery, candies that give us energy and pleasure and do us harm, Donny creates fields of movement, intensity and freedom. I can't think of a better image to gather together the concerns of this book. I'm grateful to Mike Dibb for putting us in touch, and for his continuing advocacy on behalf of Donny and all those who experience the torture of solitary confinement.

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It was a joy to sit at my desk in Chapel Hill, looking out at actual deer stalking in the garden as I wrote about Wyatt's hind. As I explored my neighbourhood, I found a sign commemorating the Barbee-Hargrave Cemetery, in use from 1790 to 1915, where the graves of fifty-three enslaved labourers had been found. This sign told me that the land on which I was living had been known as the 'Chappel Tract', 640 acres belonging to the Morgan family, a large portion of which was sold to establish the University of North Carolina. It offered a powerful reminder of the displacement of enslaved persons in the making of the modern university, as well as the Indigenous people for whom it is ancestral land: the Occaneechi, Saponi and Tuscarora.

Another premise of *Poetry and Bondage* is that the perception of lyric as fundamentally individuated obscures the collective nature of poetic practice. It is a deep honour to acknowledge the many intelligences moving through this book. David Colclough was the book's first reader, and his care and encouragement helped me to finish it. I hope it makes him happy, and that he's as glad as I am to be free of its constraints. Tom Jones pressed me on certain questions about idealism and the commons at a key moment. I am very lucky to have such a fine reader as a friend. The four anonymous readers engaged with this work with tremendous generosity. Their insights helped me to reshape the book's structure, and I am deeply moved by their affirmation of what I have tried to do.

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As I was finishing it, I learned that a dear friend and true poet – Sean Bonney – had passed on from this world. Sean’s work has been profoundly important to me since I was twenty years old. At times I imagined finishing this book with a chapter on his poetry, as the inheritor of the revolutionary and visionary traditions of Milton and Blake – an essay I began to write elsewhere. I wish he were still somewhere out there, ranting at the firmament and unravelling time in the company of Abiezer Coppe and John Coltrane. Maybe he is. Sean took very good care of the dead. Now it is up to us to take good care of him.

Finally, this book is full of thousands and thousands of words, but none of them in any combination is enough to express my love and gratitude to the people who are literally nearest to me as I write this: Matt ffytche, and our three amazing children, Ayla, Abel and Marlow. You inspire and delight and hold me together, every day. I’m sorry that I wrote this book for you instead of trying to fix the world. Now let’s go and play.

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