

Writing & Society Research Centre Seminar Program
'Writing by the River'

**The Politics of Possibility and the Potential Not To:
Bartleby, Amoore and Bachelard's 'No'**
Norma Lam-Saw



"for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall",
— Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853)

Image generated in Adobe Firefly (Gemini 3.1) by Norma Lam-Saw from her photograph of a window in Ajaccio, Corsica.

In her 2013 book, *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability*, political geographer Louise Amoore asked "what forms of subjectivity, what types of population, are brought into being and made amenable to governing" (5) when algorithms calculate decisions about people in post-9/11 border and homeland security. Tracing how association rules written for retail data migrated into the risk algorithms of the UK's e-Borders programme and the US Automated Targeting System, Amoore argued that these early systems shift security from calculating the probability of a threat to algorithmically arraying the possibilities of risk so that they can be pre-emptively acted upon. Algorithmic associations in data thus project possible futures, and decisions to detain, to question or to refuse a person's entry, and pre-empt those futures before any event occurs. In such a mode of governing, every subject must carry a referent in data; no one appears or disappears without reference to risk.

Against such a "politics of possibility", Amoore asks what critique can do when security actualises the unknown "in material forms—risk scores, visualized networks, decision trees, protocols". "The question for critique becomes how to sustain potentiality itself", which Amoore poses through Deleuze and Agamben: "under what conditions is there the potentiality not to write, not to inscribe the line, not to act, not to judge?" (156–57). Drawing on Deleuze's "a life", she argues for a potential politics in which a life "otherwise—evasive, slippery, unknowable" is "always already present" wherever security writes the subject through data (174). As in Deleuze, her figures for this life are literary. Melville's *Bartleby*, read via Deleuze and Agamben, is "a man without references" whose "I would prefer not to" "evades the referent point and defies actualization", and the characters of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, "connected by lines untraceable, unrepeatable, indefinite", are what "Bartleby-inspired stories between the lines" might look like.

This paper asks whether Amoore's potential politics inherits the *Bartleby* politics of withdrawal that Deleuze, Agamben and Negri proposed in the 1990s, and with it, the critiques of their limit for collective political praxis. Drawing on my doctoral work and forthcoming book on *Bartleby*'s passive resistance (Edinburgh University Press), a brief reading of Egan, and Bachelard's *La philosophie du non* (1940), (in which a "no" takes up and generalises the knowledge it revises while keeping it recoverable), the paper interrogates the analogy Amoore draws between literary figures of withdrawal and algorithmic governmentality, and asks whether it still holds for the machine learning systems in use today.

DATE: Friday 30 October

TIME: 11:00am - 12:30pm

VENUE: Western Sydney Uni, Parramatta City Campus (169 Macquarie St, Parramatta), Level 7, Room PC.1.7.39A, AND online on zoom.

RSVP: for F2F attendance [rsvp via Humanitix](#). For online attendance [register through zoom](#) and a link will be sent to you.

ALL WELCOME!

NORMA LAM-SAW is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Arts (Politics, History and Philosophy) at Western Sydney University, where she teaches across literature, philosophy and visual culture. She is a member of the Writing and Society Research Centre and co-convenor of the Environment and Technology program at the Institute for Culture and Society. Her research examines the political praxis of radical passivity at the intersection of literature and philosophy, and the interdisciplinary relationships between language, technology and agency. She recently edited the *Journal of Continental Philosophy* special issue on technology (5.1, 2024), and has a monograph, *Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"* forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

Writing and Society Research Centre

EQ.G.40 Parramatta South Campus

P: (02) 9685 9377

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