



JAMES R. MARTEL

disappointing  
vision and  
the power of  
collective  
sight

# ANARCHIST PROPHETS

anarchist prophets

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Disappointing  
Vision and  
the Power of  
Collective Sight

James R. Martel

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x Acknowledgments

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introduction

## disappointing vision

Our ability to see means “forgetting” our inability to see the gaze. We see, when we start seeing, without being able to see from the blind spot; unlike the prisoners in the Panopticon, who are conscious of *being* seen from the blind spot, most of us forget that there is a point from which we are seen but which we cannot see. —Maria Aristodemou, *Law, Psychoanalysis, Society: Taking the Unconscious Seriously*

TWO PARABLES BY FRANZ KAFKA, taken in sequence, describe the creation and maintenance of what I call archism, that is, a form of politics based on rule and hierarchy, on phantasmal authority structures that supersede and replace any particular or horizontal and collective forms of politics that I refer to as anarchism.<sup>1</sup> The first parable is called “The City Coat of Arms.” In that parable, Kafka describes a circle-shaped city built around what is intended to be the foundations for the Tower of Babel, a “tower that will reach to heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Given that by definition this will be a multigenerational undertaking, Kafka tells us that the planners of the tower were never in any kind of hurry to build the tower itself but that in the end, this lack of urgency meant that it never even got started. Anxiety and conflict about

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how to build a perfect tower (given its exalted destination) proved fatal to the project. Kafka explains, “Such thoughts paralyzed people’s powers, and so they troubled less about the tower than the construction of a city for the workmen.”<sup>3</sup>

A circular-shaped city grew around the site of the proposed tower, never quite forgetting its collective and original purpose but not doing much of anything about it either. Kafka writes: “To this must be added that the second or third generation had already recognized the senselessness of building a heaven-reaching tower; but by that time everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city.”<sup>4</sup> Kafka ends the story with the following passage: “All the legends and songs that came to birth in that city are filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist. It is for that reason too that the city has a closed fist on its coat of arms.”<sup>5</sup>

In this parable, we see the power of collective phantasm and hence a possible origin story for archism. The nonexistent tower in the center of the city is the heart of the community, its veritable *raison d’être*. Without the tower, there would, it seems, be no city at all. In some sense, the dream (or perhaps desire) of the city to be annihilated by a giant fist represents a wish that the fictive basis of the city could be real. The community’s worship of nothingness—the nonexistent presence that anchors its collectivity—apparently extends to seeking its own nothingness, its own annihilation, by a force that exists only in its collective imagination. By wishing its own destruction, the community is looking for some evidence that the emptiness at its center is real and manifest, that this emptiness is truly “higher” and “better” than the community is. The fact that the giant fist would act so manifestly in contradiction to the community’s own desires for life and safety “proves” in a sense that this power is real and not just a figment of the imagination.

The second Kafkan parable to consider in this context is “The Refusal.” This parable can be considered to be an effective sequel to “The City Coat of Arms,” insofar as it shows not the birth of a city but its aftermath, the way that the archist authority represented by the blank center has moved elsewhere without ceasing to serve as an anchor for a political community based on an utter subservience to this invisible source.

The story that this parable relates takes place in a small unnamed town far from the center of power and authority. Most of the time this town is left to its own devices, but it remains in thrall to a capital city—perhaps Babel itself—whose existence is communicated purely through representatives

who claim to speak on its behalf. Critically, the gaping hole at the center of the city is no longer in evidence, so the ephemerality of the power it generates is of a different kind, both less evident and more amorphous, yet no less powerful and compelling.

The top official in the town is the chief tax collector, who is also a colonel, a man whose link to the capital is extremely tenuous even as it is also absolute and unquestionable. Kafka says that the colonel “commands the town. I don’t think he has ever produced a document entitling him to this position; very likely he does not possess such a thing.”<sup>6</sup>

Presented with a petition by a group of citizens for some form of tax relief, the colonel whispers something in the ear of another official, who then tells the petitioners, “The petition has been refused. . . . You may go.”<sup>7</sup> At that point, Kafka writes, “an undeniable sense of relief passed through the crowd, everyone surged out, hardly a soul paying any special attention to the colonel, who, as it were, had turned once more into a human being like the rest of us.”<sup>8</sup> He further explains: “In all important matters . . . the citizens can always count on a refusal. And now the strange fact is that without this refusal one simply cannot get along, yet at the same time, these official occasions designed to receive the refusal are by no means a formality. Time after time one goes there full of expectation and in all seriousness and then one returns, if not exactly strengthened or happy, nevertheless not disappointed [*enttäuscht*] or tired.”<sup>9</sup>

In this parable, as in “The City Coat of Arms,” there is a desire on the part of the community to be dominated, ruled, and controlled by some outside, external agency. Whether it lies in the dreams of destruction of the city dwellers surrounding the empty site of the Tower of Babel or the relief that the people of the community in “The Refusal” feel when anyone’s petition is denied, some anxiety is assuaged by the thought of a higher, archist authority that manifests itself precisely and only by going against whatever it is that the people in these communities might actually choose for themselves. In this way, there is a *need* for the townspeople to petition, to test the archist structure to make sure it is still intact, still willing and able to refuse what they ask for.

In part, the community’s anxiety seems to stem from the simple fact that the power in question, that which they are subordinating themselves to, has no actual basis in reality. The Tower of Babel never exists except as an idea, and the capital city in “The Refusal” seems infinitely far away (Kafka notes that “whereas we do get news of the frontier wars now and again, of the capital

we learn next to nothing—we civilians that is, for of course the government officials have very good connections with the capital; they can get news from there in as little as three months, so they claim at least”<sup>10</sup>).

In this way, we see that the citizens of both towns are deeply invested in making this invisible power as palpable as possible. With no actual physical object to see, nothing that *is* precisely that power or source of authority as opposed to its lieutenants and representatives, the citizens of these places “see” this power through those intermediaries. They understand in some sense how the thing they wish to see isn’t there, but they invest the symbols of that authority with a visual power that serves, as it were, to link ordinary sight to the special sight required to see and believe in this other, higher power or place (the Tower of Babel, heaven, the capital, or whatever other agent of power they seek to obey).

Thus, in “The Refusal,” Kafka writes that in fact “it does happen now and again that minor petitions are granted, but then it inevitably looks as though the colonel had done it as a powerful private person on his own responsibility, and it had to be kept all but a secret from the government—not explicitly of course, but that is what it feels like. No doubt in our little town the colonel’s eyes, so far as we know, are also the eyes of the government, and yet there is a difference which it is impossible to comprehend completely.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, when the colonel seems to return to his “human status” and actually grants an occasional petition, his edicts are understood as stemming from within the community itself, from the acts of a fellow, private individual (albeit a most powerful one). But wherever a petition is substantial enough to threaten the balance of power, it must be denied. On those times especially, the “colonel’s eyes . . . are also the eyes of the government.” He is not completely the same thing as that power itself (“there is a difference”), but he serves as the avatar, as it were, of that power, a tangible, audible, and perhaps above all visual—and visualizing—object that stands for a power that can’t otherwise be seen and may not even (actually does not) exist at all.<sup>12</sup>

Critically, as we see in the passage just quoted, the colonel lends his own eyes so that the townspeople can see, as it were, through them. This becomes a way to render something magical and external into something entirely and banally human. In this way, the colonel offers his own imagined access and insight to a community that is otherwise wholly shut out from and deprived of those viewpoints. It is from such a perspective, from an assumed perch of judgment and knowledge, that the people come to see themselves. They are taught how to “see” what the state or other forms of archist rule want them to see, ordering their lives and the entire world accordingly.

Just as important, Kafka explains that the town's citizens, after experiencing one of these denials, return to their homes, "if not exactly strengthened or happy, nevertheless not disappointed or tired." It would be disappointing indeed if the colonel were to grant an important petition because it would hint at the very thing that these citizens seem to fear most: the absence of a power to order and determine them. In other words, they fear an absence that acts like an absence, a nothingness that is actually, and evidently, nothing. In this sense, it behooves us to think about what it would mean if these citizens *were* to be disappointed and what form that disappointment would take.

This book begins with this question of disappointment because it demonstrates the way that power—the same power that the citizens of Kafka's two parables project onto blank and unavailable spaces and which they receive in turn in an alienated form—is seen, related to, and also how that power is potentially resisted and taken back by that community.

Disappointment, in this instance, can be taken in at least two senses. First, it would be disappointing, in the emotional sense, to find out that the archist power that these citizens count on, a power that promises so much—including safety, health, well-being, and maybe even eternal life (or a semblance of it anyway)—could turn out to be nothing at all. Such a state of events would imply that human actors are forced to rely on themselves and on one another instead of on these forces that seem so perfect, so much stronger, better, smarter, and wiser than they are. This realization leaves people sad and dejected, even if it means they are freed from lies they have come to believe and count on, as well as from the violence and hierarchies they have incorporated as necessary for some kind of order.

But there is also the possibility of disappointment in a second sense, as in dis-appointment, removing the appointment or power that the townspeople have been giving to these invisible powers (and their visible representatives) all along. To take away that appointment is, in effect, to disappoint, not themselves but their would-be rulers, and, in that second sense of the word, disappointment takes on a radical and anarchist character.

There is even a third sense of disappointment if we leave the English language behind for a moment. The German term that Kafka uses, *enttäuscht*, is perhaps even more helpful than its English equivalent of disappointment because it suggests the taking away of an illusion. The German verb *täuschen* means to deceive and the prefix suggests taking that away, meaning something like "undeceive." Accordingly, we can think of disappointing vision as a way of getting people to recognize that what they've been worshipping, what they've been basing their entire existence on, is purely ephemeral. Exposing

that ephemerality as such serves to ruin it as a fount of authority, to return it to its original nothingness, allowing the human actors who were in its thrall to see the world anew. More accurately they are able to return to their own ordinary forms of sight, to cease overwriting that sight, as the citizens in Kafka's parables do, with other sorts of vision.

Disappointment in this sense is not merely an emotional response but a political one as well. An archist form of vision is replaced by an anarchist one. Whereas the first form, one that is imposed by the colonel and the absent center of the city in Kafka's parables, is hierarchical and commanding, this other form is collective and open ended. This other vision, the power of collective seeing, what results from radical instances of disappointment, is what this book is all about.

Imagine if, for a moment, someone in the city of Babel said, "Did you all notice that the center of the city is absolutely empty, that there is no tower and never will be one? Why do we venerate an empty spot? Why do we obey those who claim to speak for that invisible power? Why do we wish that spot to materialize and actually destroy us?" Or if someone in the colonel's town said, "Why are we happy when our petitions are rejected? Why do we follow this person who is, after all, no different than any of us?" This person would not be speaking from any kind of divine inspiration or special sight. She would have no access to knowledge that anyone else didn't also have. She would not be "special" in any particular way, not predestined to save her community. And, because she was clearly embedded in the community, was "one of them," because she shared a language and vocabulary, a common and collective way of seeing, her fellow citizens would also tend to agree with her (even if they didn't want to).

Anyone could say this, and in fact it is far more likely that a random and average person would say this than anyone who had special powers or authority, since those figures tend to do very well under archist forms of politics and would have little incentive to ruin or expose the sources of that power and authority.

The main focus of this book is to recognize, recuperate, and foment this other kind of vision, the power of collective sight. As I will argue throughout this book, there is nothing special about collective forms of vision. They aren't "truer" than archist forms of vision per se; they aren't based on an obvious and absolute reality that archism ignores or hides. While it is the case, for example, that the center of Babel has no structures within it, the meaning of that space, even the determination that it is "empty," remains a collective decision. In this way, collective vision determines how a group decides to see

something, how it takes it in, how it responds. And this response may well not be (usually is not) unitary and uniform the way that archist forms of vision always are. It is always a work in progress, a conversation, an argument, and even sometimes (actually almost always) a fight.

Collective forms of sight go on all the time, even under the strictest of archist regimes. This is a kind of sight that archism itself cannot utterly suppress because it is what actually makes life and human relations possible in the first place, something that archism, which is entirely parasitical, can never do. If archism were to eliminate or supersede this form of sight entirely, then human life would be as empty and as nihilist as archism itself.<sup>13</sup>

We engage in collective forms of sight every day when we collectively determine what, for example, our words mean and how they relate to what we perceive as happening in the world around us. We engage in collective vision when we treat certain objects in certain ways and not in a myriad of other ways that we could treat them. We do so in terms of how we relate to and treat one another. Collective vision amounts to what Hannah Arendt calls “a world,” but this world is occupied territory, subject to a force—archism—that exploits and preys upon that world for its own purposes.<sup>14</sup> Even as it can never strip collective vision away from our eyes, archism superimposes itself over that form of vision, effectively transferring the concreteness or sedimentation of that vision to itself, as if it itself were part of or even the essence of that world. This is how archist vision manages to seem so “real” to us, actually becoming prior and superior to our own collective forms of sight.

The denizens of the city of Babel and the occupants of the unnamed village in “The Refusal” are neither unsighted nor crazy. They see the gaping hole in the center of power. They see the naked humanity of the colonel. But they also see something else. That something else is what archism commands them to see. It not only gets them to overwrite what they see together (that is, once again, what they collectively decide that they are seeing) with its own phantasms, but it further gets them to *want* that overwriting to occur, to the point where they become anxious that this overwriting may fail, that they might actually get what they want instead of what *it* (i.e., archism) wants them to want. Why does this happen? Why are the people in these narratives allowing, even facilitating, this transformation of vision?

Archism and archist forms of vision would not be as powerful and resilient as they are if they were based on fear and threat alone. Archism maintains itself by promising so much to so many people. Its promises include the promise of safety, of personal happiness, of success, and, perhaps most critically of all, the promise of eternal life, whether literally or symbolically. This



latter promise reflects the way that archism, at least in its modern, Western variant, is based on a form of metaphysics that is inherently against the bases of human life. It holds up a vision of life that is entirely false and nonexistent yet deemed superior to the life that people actually lead; it even teaches us to hate our own life, our bodies, and our mortality, in favor of this false other way of being. The promise of eternal life then is a promise to the subjects of archism that they will somehow connect to or become this other, “better,” and higher form of life, leaving their actual life behind. In this way, coming as it does out of nothing, actually being nothing itself, archism is not about life at all but about a form of death, one that is—unlike other understandings of death that are entirely compatible with collective sight—completely divorced from and implacably hostile to life. Consequently, even as it promises an exalted life for its subjects, it ceaselessly engages in causing death, in violence of both the physical and the metaphorical variety.

Of course, for many communities of color and in particular for Black and Brown people, for many women, for poor and working-class communities, for the queer, the trans, the undocumented, for those with disabilities and so many other forms of identity that are not privileged, the failure to deliver on these promises is far more evident, perhaps too evident at times, for the overwriting function of archism to entirely succeed. As opposed to the white, the rich, the male, the heterosexual, the cis-gendered, the nondisabled, such communities are, in some sense, always disappointed.<sup>15</sup>

This helps explain in part why the rule of archism is not utter and why there are times when archist forms of sight falter and sometimes even collapse. I am writing this book at a time of heightened awareness of the racism of the police in the United States given the brutal killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among many, many other Black people. Those participating in the current and ongoing insurrection are already deeply disappointed, and yet these power systems (so far!) remain intact. Even so—and even if this movement doesn’t go any further than it already has—this moment represents something critical, namely a time when the lies and illusions of archist sight temporarily lose some of their grip, their overwriting power, not just on those who are directly targeted by archist power but also by others who do not face the same threat. Suddenly, the Minneapolis City Council considered abolishing its police department (although that did not actually come to pass). Suddenly, a many-decades-long stereotypical brand like Aunt Jemima pancake syrup—long recognized as racist by the Black community—became unthinkable by the (white) business community and was withdrawn. Suddenly, Black Lives Matter became extremely popular

and more people said that the burning of a police station in Minneapolis by protesters was either partially or fully justified (54 percent) than anyone preferred either Donald Trump or Joseph Biden as presidential candidates.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, at the same time, we also experienced what appears at first glance to be a different form of collective vision, namely that of the right-wing fascists who attacked the US capitol on January 6, 2021. While this form of insurrection may seem to be similar to that which animated the somewhat earlier George Floyd uprising, I would argue that they are exact opposites; the George Floyd uprising is an example of collective (and anarchist) vision, a refusal to keep seeing the authority that stands over the community as anything but a predator and a killer. The attack on the capitol shows the lengths to which some people—in this case almost entirely white people—may still hold onto archist forms of vision no matter what. The crazy paranoia of QAnon, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (masks are a plot to enslave us!), and the absolute conviction that the 2020 election was stolen show the extent to which archist vision and, more particularly, the *desire* for archist vision and what it promises (power! superiority! superhuman status!) can supersede not so much “reality,” because that is a thing that is itself always up for grabs, but a much larger sense of common vision.

Here, I am making a different argument than liberals do about the nature of this far-right-wing mob and their motivations. In the liberal claim, there is a clear-cut set of truths and the mob is either crazy or ignoring those truths in pursuit of its own agenda. In my understanding, even that original “truth” is itself a set of decisions that are often determined by archism itself. In my view, the very idea of truth is an endlessly political question, a site of contestation that is always in flux.

Furthermore, although it seems as if, yes, the ideas coming from Trump and “Q” are crazy, many ideas that are widely accepted are no less insane. For example, the idea that shareholders in a corporation should be privileged above all else even (or especially) to the extent that a corporation makes decisions that destroy human life, even causing the planet to become increasingly inhabitable, is just as crazy, just as pernicious (maybe even more so) than the idea that certain Democrats are pedophilic, cannibalistic Satan worshippers who congregate, among other places, in an underground chamber beneath a certain pizzeria in Washington, DC. The one idea (capitalist, certified, normative) strikes us—if we think about it at all—as objectionable maybe but not “crazy,” while the other (given without the stamp of approval of most experts and authorities) seems nothing but pure lunacy.

This is itself a function of archist sight. There are innumerable candidates for the kinds of “truth” that archism pedals. Some succeed and some fail. The jury is out on the QAnon conspiracy as well as the “truths” that Trump is pedaling. There is nothing to prevent us from sliding into a society where those kinds of truths are widely held and acted upon. Or rather there is nothing except our own resolve to come up with counternarratives, based not on a verifiable and uncontested reality but on a collective process of coming to terms with what we want our political and social lives to look like.

In fact, it is archism itself that is “crazy”; it involves, as Kafka shows, believing in things that aren’t there and holding them in higher regard than things that are. Contra Samuel Johnson, the mere fact of existence does not in and of itself amount to a firm sense of reality. Here again, the determination of reality is a collective and political project. What makes QAnon (and capitalism!) crazy is not that it is unrelated to reality but that it seeks to supplant a general, collective, and ever-changing way of thinking about the world with some specific, permanent, and hierarchical ordering, thereby curtailing or eliminating any kind of public engagement (except for the adoring, obedient sort).

For this reason, rather than seeing the events following the 2020 election in the United States as a question of truth versus lies as liberals do (and, for that matter, the right-wing mob as well), I see it as a matter of truths that come from the top versus truths that are determined from within the larger community. The fact that this right-wing and fascistic vision is always oriented outside itself (this is what Trump/God/Q told us to do) is a sign that we are not dealing with what is often misleadingly called “populism” but a crowd in search of a master (and, paraphrasing Jacques Lacan, this is a master that they can readily find).

For all the threat posed by fascist modes of archist vision, this moment in time shows that archist forms of vision are not fated or absolute and that archism itself is vulnerable (the frenzy of that mob may suggest as much). Sudden changes in vision as we are currently experiencing, when things that are previously inconceivable suddenly become very conceivable indeed, point to the ephemerality and vulnerability of archist forms of vision, despite its claims to the contrary. These archist forms of sight are present, seemingly forever, seemingly absolute and unquestionable and then, quite suddenly, they are gone or at least severely weakened. Even the mayhem on the right suggests this vulnerability because the mental gymnastics required to remain faithful to some perceived truth has become increasingly and legibly grotesque, contorted and incredible. Whether this present moment leads to further leftist

insurgency (as I certainly hope it will) or a fascist takeover (as I certainly hope it will not), it demonstrates that each moment is a chance for a radical rupture with archism as such.

Having said this, I must admit that the ways of seeing imposed by archism run deep and not just for those on the far right. Archist vision is hard to shake even to some extent for people who directly suffer from archism's inequities, its murderous violence. That's because, to quote Frantz Fanon, the realities produced by archism are "ontological." By this I do not mean, nor do I believe Fanon meant to suggest, that they are eternally and always true (although archism makes that claim) but that they are true to the point that they have a powerful, almost irresistible effect on what passes for reality itself.

Fanon tells us that "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man."<sup>17</sup> Here, he acknowledges the visual aspects of power, the way that seeing determines reality not just for the privileged white viewer but also for the Black person, the colonized subject or other particular targets of archist vision.<sup>18</sup>

For Fanon, there is no going back to an authentic past before the imposition of the white gaze; colonialism has taken up the past as one of its weapons, reshaping it to suit its own purposes. The only way to resist white ontology—or, as I would also put it, archist ontology, which makes whiteness one of its prime categories—is by resistance itself. He writes: "The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation."<sup>19</sup>

For Fanon, "discovering reality" does not mean finding the truth that colonialism has buried beneath its lies. For Fanon, there is no "authentic" truth that the collective is returning to. Colonialism has ensured that even the past of a given community is thoroughly saturated with lies and distortions: in other words, yet more archism. By looking to resistance itself as the only form of collective decision-making, Fanon is acknowledging that the content of those decisions comes from nothing other than the collective process itself, a process that has anarchist implications as well: "Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and even if they have been demobilized by rapid decolonization, the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and every one and no special merit should go to the leader. Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader. . . . When they have used violence to achieve national liberation, the masses allow nobody to come forward as a 'liberator.'<sup>20</sup> Whether you choose to read Fanon's call to violence literally (he says it can be "symbolic" but he surely was not a pacifist), any break with the ontological involves a reclamation of authority and agency.

Violence—as well as resistance more generally—serves Fanon as both a strategy and a dramatization of the fact that collective life now recognizes only itself. Fanon shows us that the outcome of such acts of resistance does not readily allow for yet more hierarchy; collective forms of resistance enable and produce collective forms of judgment as well. The hallmarks of archism are abandoned only when that collective form of judgment is allowed its full expression.

If many communities are already disappointed by the violence and lies of archism, they are not, however, always disappointing, that is, they have not always learned to translate their perspective into a form that truly threatens archism in the way Fanon suggests. My claim in this book is that the disappointment of living under archism can only be fully achieved if those communities that live under it can better learn to decide for themselves what it is that they are seeing (and not seeing), seeking to transfer their disappointment from themselves to their archist oppressors. In other words, they might trade one form of disappointment, the disappointment of having their lives falsely determined by externalities (ones that don't even exist), for another, a disappointment in and of archism itself.

### **Archist and Anarchist Forms of Prophecy**

This is a book about vision and prophecy, about organizing our experience of what we see in the world. The archist mode of seeing itself derives from a form of prophecy, what I would call an appointing form of vision, that has a long theological (and eventually secularized but no less theological) history. Such vision appoints not just the individuals who will stand in the name of the people they rule over but also the very foundations for that transfer of power and authority, the visual and effectively real bases of an illicit and ultimately empty—but no less powerful for being empty—form of control.

Appointing vision leads to the hierarchies and taxonomies that are the stuff of archist power. This is a way of seeing that gives archism a form of existence that appears to be greater than the actual life it rules over. We live in a world structured by such prophetic acts, whether they are theological or secular in nature (and, thanks to European colonialism and imperialism, very much including people who come from parts of the world where prophecy per se, as well as Abrahamic models of authority more generally that are connected to such prophetic origins, have no original purchase). Through this imposition of a globalized ontology (taking that word once again in its Fanonian sense), people “see” the power and authority of God, of nature,

of reason, of the state, and of law even though at their origins these things have no empirical or material basis.<sup>21</sup> Like the colonel in Kafka's parables, we assume that the "eyes" of the representatives of that power are also the eyes of that power itself and so people, in turn, "see" the way they are told to see, always at their own expense and never in ways that accord with their own separate and collective understandings and experiences.

In discussing these forms of perspective, in some sense I am arguing for something different from what Michel Foucault talked about when he described the panopticon. In his telling, the panopticon is a guard tower with slender windows so that the person being viewed (initially a prisoner but later just about everyone) must always assume that the guard is watching them to the point where that guard is internalized and each person effectively watches (and controls) themselves.<sup>22</sup>

What I am talking about in this book is not quite the same thing. Here, the fear is not that you are being watched but the opposite; the fear is that at any given point, no one might be watching you. Falling out of the gaze of the ruler implies a kind of abyss of meaninglessness, the threat of which is a key part of how archism manages to maintain a hold on its subjects, how it gets them to desire their own submission to its ruling logics. Perhaps even more accurately, this fear is based on having adopted for oneself the view from that tower; people see themselves, as it were, through the guard's eyes, through what they imagine to be the perspective from inside the tower. The desire to be viewed then corresponds to a desire to *be* that guard, to be viewing from that perspective, taking it on as one's own.<sup>23</sup>

Because archism transfers the tangibility of human life to itself, our actual life begins to seem empty and shapeless and so we begin to project onto that life the very ephemeral nature of archism that now appears to us to be firm and utterly real, effectively swapping our life and agency for its deathliness and nihilism. This is a key way by which archism comes to dominate over anarchist life. Yet the fact that this transfer is not actual means that archism can never fully replace anarchist life because its own sense of tangibility is only generated from the transfer of that sense of reality from anarchist life itself. This is a transfer that is never complete but always ongoing and therefore reversible.

As a result of this, in the face of the desires that archism creates in its subjects, there is an answering anarchist form of desire as well: not so much a desire to be seen but to *see together* with others in one's own community. This other desire helps prevent archism from becoming totalizing. The desire to see together, to determine collectively what it is that is being looked

at, what it all means, and what to do about it—even if a community doesn't end up producing some harmonious consensus (which is itself a phantasm of archism)—allows people to engage in anarchist politics even under conditions of archist power. This other desire, this other way of seeing, is always present but largely unrecognized because the mechanism of recognition is itself so deeply bound up with archism. In this book, I try to change the focus from the spectacularity of archism to the collectivity of anarchism as a way to trace this other way of seeing and wanting.

Accordingly, in what follows, I will try to think about a resistant and anarchist form of prophecy, one that has no special sight, that only sees what the community (also) decides that it sees. Such a form of seeing is messy; it does not have the top-down unity of archist forms of sight. It is never harmonious or fully coherent. For this reason, the insights of such a form of vision tend to be quieter and more subsumed than archist forms of sight. Anarchist vision is always present but usually overwritten by the spectacle and pomp of archist vision.

Collective sight is itself a form—really *the* form—of anarchist prophecy, but for much of this book I will focus on a transitional figure, not the anarchist prophecy of the community per se but of a specific individual within that community. The role of the individual anarchist prophet is to hold the form of collective sight when the community does not recognize it itself, much like the intrepid citizen of Babel that I previously envisioned. Her job is to spread disappointment, to ruin archist forms of vision, and to return the power of collective sight back to the community. This anarchist prophet brings such sight from the background to the foreground, so that it competes with and even displaces its archist rival and predator.

Yet I want to be clear from the outset that, although much of this book will focus on individual anarchist prophets, figures that I will draw from actual history as well as from literature and philosophy, they are not actually what lies at the heart of this book. For me, these prophets are only meant to counter the false, archist prophecy that has structured our sight for so very long. They are meant, like Moses, to get us to the promised land but cannot join us there themselves. They are a transitional figure. In fact, they *must* be transitional. To be effective, anarchist prophets often look very much like archist ones; they may even share some elements of archism itself. This gives them a critical advantage in that they (therefore) have the same access to the subjects of archism as their fully archist counterparts. Working from within the confines of archist authority, they can usurp that authority for anarchist purposes. Their form of vision seems to come from the same exalted heights

as that of archist vision itself. In a sense, these prophets serve to betray and undermine archism from within and by its very own devices.

This ability, while critical, also poses a threat to the very collective vision that they serve to promote. For one thing, it is a very easy thing for an anarchist prophet to cease her subversion of archist vision and join the ranks of those who promote and perpetuate archism as such. I will provide a few examples of this happening in later chapters in this book. But even if she does not do this, even if she remains true to her original and subversive purpose, an anarchist prophet always poses a threat to her community. This is because if an anarchist prophet was always required for a community to see for itself, that would in effect make her an archist prophet after all. The community would effectively be seeing with her eyes instead of its own. For an anarchist prophet to really succeed, she must make herself entirely redundant. She holds collective sight for a community at a time when it fails to realize the way that it is itself continually engaged in such a form of vision, but she does not—nor could she—form that vision by or for herself. Insofar as anarchist prophetic sight is always collective, one person cannot by definition constitute that collective on her own. The anarchist prophet's role is to disappoint the community from the false sight, the lies and violence of archism, and, by that act, permit that vision to return to the people from whom it was stolen.

### **Layout of the Rest of the Book**

In the chapters that follow, I describe the nature of anarchist prophecy, what it is, how it functions, and how it might be enhanced. Each chapter adds something distinct to the argument and, as the book develops, so does the overall argument about the nature and possibility of anarchist prophecy.

The following four chapters of the book form part I. In each of these chapters, I look at an anarchist response to and undermining of the theological and philosophical functions of archism.

Chapter 1 details archist prophecy, its connection to the Hebrew and Greek prophetic tradition, and the corresponding form of anarchist prophecy that arises in response to that tradition.

Chapter 2 is about how Thomas Hobbes—ordinarily considered one of the key architects of modern sovereignty and therefore the contemporary face of archism as well—demonstrates that language and theology, which are two main foundations for archism, are themselves actually anarchist and



prophetic functions, reflecting the ferment of life itself in all its variety. In this way, Hobbes undermines his own archist tendencies. Hobbes also offers us one of the purest forms of anarchist prophecy in his understanding of the figure of the Holy Spirit, a figure that is wholly and only about interpretation and the refusal of one central and organizing truth.

In chapter 3, I argue that Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a prophet who has all the appearances of being an archist prophet (and sometimes *is* an archist prophet) and who thereby manages to ruin that position from within, causing maximum damage. I also claim that the overman is a figure of ultimate disappointment in that so much is promised with this figure but we come to see that this is a messiah who will never actually arrive, depriving the would-be subject of their salvation of any hope and thereby throwing them to their own devices.

In chapter 4, I look at the way Walter Benjamin offers us both a disappointing prophet, the angel of history, and an understanding of a God who is herself anarchist so that the very origins of appointing vision become a basis for anarchist resistance. Benjamin's focus is always on what he calls "the living," that is, that vast ferment of anarchist life that is deeply connected to the material world around us.

In Part II of the book, chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate how the central promises that archism makes are undermined and disappointed by a series of real-life as well as literary (including television) prophetic figures.

Chapter 5 engages with the question of how anarchism can fight with and thrive under ongoing archist conditions, how anarchist prophecy deals with its own entanglements with archism. I look at four "case studies," as it were, to do this: anarcho-syndicalism during the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s; the contemporary Rojavan Revolution in northeastern Syria; and then, turning to literature, José Saramago's two-novel sequence, *Blindness* and *Seeing*; and Octavia Butler's two-novel Earthseed series. The two pairings, one political and one literary, are meant to contrast an ideal, or near ideal, case (Spanish anarchism; Saramago's *Seeing*, which describes a "plague" of anarchism) with a more compromised and problematic case (Rojava and the Earthseed series), demonstrating varying methods of resistance, with varying results as well.

In chapter 6, I also look at four case studies, this time focusing on the question of whether archism can be defeated and eliminated, at least for a time. Here again, albeit in reverse order, I pair more and less perfect examples of anarchism, focusing on how they reduce or eliminate archism entirely. I

begin with a reading of Baruch Spinoza, who offers a homegrown Western form of resistance to archism via a doctrine of radical immanentism. I then look at the case of Yali, a prophet from the Rai Coast of New Guinea who lived in the first half of the twentieth century and whose culture had no sense of the transcendent, making the usual lies of archism difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. I then turn to two literary readings, first Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which steals from archism its greatest conceit, that it can offer (and control) eternal life; and then the television show (and novel) *The Leftovers*, which imagines a complete breakdown of archism and what might possibly result from that loss. Here too, the somewhat more problematic or entangled case (Spinoza and *Frankenstein*) is paired with a more successful, "purer" example (Yali and *The Leftovers*).

In the conclusion, I argue that anarchism is the only possible source of political authority (archism merely steals or "borrows" from it) and then look at a few more real-life anarchist prophets who are, in each case, connected to some specific community or set of communities: José Carlos Mariátegui's notion of Inca communism, Emma Goldman and her connection to the US anarchist movement(s), and Frantz Fanon and his connection to the Black Power movement in the United States in the 1960s and today. Finally, I end the book by further considering the connection between anarchism and life as well as archism and death.

The anarchist prophets that I describe in these chapters are as different from one another as could be. Some of them are works of pure fiction, while others are very real, figures from anarchism's own long history. The mixture of philosophy, political theology, literature, and real-life analysis allows me to get at the phenomenon of anarchist prophecy from a variety of angles. The philosophical and theological readings allow me to get to the conceptual roots of archism and challenge it at that level. The real-life examples show us what is actually possible, how anarchism works and how archism can be, and has been, defeated, as well as what obstacles and limitations anarchism faces in its confrontation with archist power. The literary examples show how we can think differently about the nature and lastingness of archism, including imagining the death of archism, something that otherwise seems unthinkable from our own current position. Collectively, these chapters are intended to serve as a kind of map of the struggle with archism, the way that its seeming absolute grip on collective life may be thwarted, and also some of the dangers and pitfalls inherent to that struggle.

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## Seeing like an Anarchist

In order to set up the chapters that follow, some basic points must first be explained in greater detail. The first point has to do with modes of seeing and how anarchist sight actually works, what it “looks like.” In *Seeing like a State*, James C. Scott shows how the state requires vast modes of enforced homogenization, to make the citizens, lands, and objects of the state uniform and thereby taxonomizable. In this way, the state can “see” all that it surveys; those homogenized bodies become legible to the state on its own terms and thereby more subject to its control.

I want to be clear from the outset that I do not consider the state to be the only or even the prime mode of anarchist expression. There are myriad forms that Western-style anarchism takes, ranging from capitalism and white supremacy to more amorphous things like particular forms of culture and ideology. But, at least for the time being, the state is a key example of anarchism and so its form of sight is important to understand and counter.

In this book, I will consider how to “see like an anarchist,” that is, to see and engage with the messy, competing, contingent, and episodic moments of action, decision, and collective forms of vision that constitute the very same communities that anarchism seeks to control. In a sense, anarchist sight organizes just as much as anarchist sight does, but it organizes horizontally, among and between the community rather than from above. Rather than seek to homogenize all that it surveys, anarchist sight seeks to allow and incorporate the messiness of life, the complexity and heterogeneity of selves, to assert their own forms of mutuality and their own complexity (unlike anarchist vision, anarchist vision is never one but always many).

The good news about this point is that anarchist vision happens all the time; as Hobbes will show, communities are always engaged in collective, and prophetic, acts of seeing whether they want to do so or not. But with the overarching spectacle of anarchist authority eclipsing those forms of vision and sight, communities lose a sense of their own power to judge and see and defer to those anarchist modes of sight that always seek to replace and overwrite them.

## The Naked Emperor

A second point to stress at the outset has to do with what, exactly, the individual anarchist prophet does through her act of seeing. As will become clearer in the subsequent chapters, the role of the anarchist prophet,

the one who brings disappointment, is very challenging. It might seem as though her job is merely to point out that the “emperor has no clothes,” but this is an overly simplified and misleading rendition of what she does. In fact, the point is not that the emperor has no clothes; it’s that there is no emperor without their clothes. In his work on German *trauerspiel* (mourning plays), Benjamin tells us that when it comes to kings and other leaders, “the purple must cover it.”<sup>24</sup> It is not their self or their body but the color purple in this case—a color associated with royalty—that makes the king or emperor an authority figure; it is their endowment with the transitive elements of authority and power that lets us know this person has been marked as special and “better” than the rest of us (just like the colonel in Kafka’s parable is marked as superior in ways that are both visible and invisible).

There is therefore no “truth” revealed in the notion that the emperor has no clothes because in shedding his clothes, the emperor has also shed this marker. In some sense, a naked emperor is not an emperor at all, so that the king’s authority is not actually about his body—all two of them!—after all but about the signs and markers by which that body is deemed to be kingly.

Here again, we see that the role of the anarchist prophet is therefore not to tell the truth (“the emperor is naked!”) but to show how untruths are constructed around human bodies, architectural symbols, and other objects that become sites of archist projection. By identifying and exposing that projection, the anarchist prophet seeks to ruin or subvert the archist effect, canceling out its projective power with a counterprojective form of sight. Hers is less a power of seeing and more a matter of unseeing and teaching others how to unsee as well. Everything that follows, all the responses, decisions, and so forth—that is, the effects of disappointment—must occur at the level of the community as a whole and not, once again, at the level of the anarchist prophet herself.<sup>25</sup>

### The Master Sense

One related point that I want to make concerns treating vision as the archon of human senses. As with all things archist, this form of sight does not involve the physicality of vision so much as a false sense that it superimposes over that and all other senses.<sup>26</sup> Here, as with all aspects of archism, a real thing (in this case, vision and seeing) becomes associated with an unreal thing so that the unreal steals its tangibility from the real, superseding it in the process. Hostile to and alien from all manners of human

life, anarchism teaches us that sight is the most important and privileged of the senses even as it robs us of our own collective forms of sight in the process.

My focus on anarchist sight as a way to combat archist vision serves to get the master “sense” to be turned against itself. Since it is in fact no sight at all, archist forms of vision readily return to the nothingness from which they issue. But this nothingness is not easily achieved since we are all invested in it as the way that we “really” see (albeit not all to the same degree), and hence sense the world around us. Insofar as we are taught that sight organizes the world—“seeing like a state,” among other variations—anarchist forms of vision, which we are never without, must nevertheless be made legible to us.

The difficulty here stems in part from the fact that anarchism as such never privileges one sense over the others. The anarchist alternative to archism is never as uniform or coherent as the archist model, and this means that, just as with everything else, sight is not dominant. Thus a spectacular and uniform mode of vision (archism) must be superseded by a medley of senses (anarchism) that does not possess this kind of character. Not unlike a former heroin addict who finds ordinary life to be without character compared to what their addiction supplies and must relearn to appreciate and respond to the world as such and how they might experience it, the archist subject too must learn to recognize and appreciate the sensorium itself, the material context within which human life is always suspended even as it does not always recognize it. More precisely, this subject must (re)learn to “see” in concert with others, not in a harmonious and transcendent way but in a way that recognizes human plurality and collective acts of interpretation (and prophecy). This transition is a key role for the anarchist prophet who both “sees both ways” (as we all do) and is in a position to do something about it (as we generally are not).

With the unmaking or at least diminishment of sight as the key sense, other senses and other ways of being political come to the fore. Peter Goodrich speaks of “proboscations,” wherein smell gets its turn as a form of judgment and decision (he tells us, for example, that “the genius of the law is in its nose”).<sup>27</sup> Kafka’s work (as Benjamin points out) is full of vapors and stench that strongly affect his characters and are key anchors of plot.<sup>28</sup> Other thinkers point to the power of sound and taste and touch; all form part of the human sensorium and are part of the ferment of anarchist life and exist (as Kafka ably shows) even amid the rule of archist vision and sight. In the pages that follow, I will pay attention to these other senses, including the actual, as opposed to the phantasmic, visual, as they come to the fore.

## Archism and the Question of Blame

Another important point has to do with the question of whether communities are to be blamed for their own complicity with, or desire for, archism, something that may be suggested by Kafka's parables in particular. I think it would be a grave mistake to draw this conclusion. It is true that we are all in various and differing ways invested in archism even if we hate its effects and the power it has over us. Even Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, women, the poor, queer, trans, and disabled people, those who most suffer from the effects of archist lies, often participate to some extent in archist forms of vision (although I also think the overlay of that vision onto their own collective forms of sight is less convincing and far less alluring). It is precisely this double form of vision that Fanon sought to address and alter.

All of this is only to say that people are produced as subjects through a relationship to archism and so they come to want what it tells them to want, at least to a certain extent. In my view, it is not people's desires per se that are the problem insofar as what archism promises; safety, health, happiness, tranquility, fulfillment, and maybe even eternal life are not in and of themselves bad things. I think instead that the problem we have with anarchism is one of trust. Simply put, people do not trust in their own ways of doing things; their own judgments and powers and acts are not deemed to be valid in and of themselves. This is because people are taught that the only guarantor in the world comes from the externalities, phantom (but "higher, better") sources of authority and expertise, that serve as the basis for archist authority. Given the supersession of our own forms of collective judgment, interpretation, and vision by archist phantasms, those forms lose their own luster, diminished by the vampiric transfer of tangibility that is the basis for archism.

Archism perpetually reproduces itself by insisting that, were it not for the law, the state, and other archist institutions, we would all be stabbing each other within five minutes. In other words, our tendency toward peaceableness is taken as a sign of the success of archism in controlling us rather than something that people are capable of on their own.

There is no corresponding anarchist guarantor to counter archist promises of life, riches, and happiness. Anarchism offers no guarantees at all and in fact the very concept of a guarantee is itself a marker of archism as a system that is based on deception and illusion. I argue both in chapter 2 (on Hobbes) and in the conclusion that the anarchist answer to the problem of trust is not to offer more false guarantees but to recognize that the community is itself the

only possible source of authority and that archism has stolen that authority and claimed it as its own. Thus, what we are “trusting” when we turn to the state and other archist structures is in fact only our own, now alienated, collective power, robbing ourselves of our ability to relocate that trust back where it belongs in the process.

The job of the anarchist prophet is to steal this authority back and return it to the community from which it was taken. The anarchist prophets that I will be describing are no less compromised than the rest of us when it comes to desiring what archism tells them to desire. These prophets must engage in the mechanisms of archism in order to be able to ruin it from within, but even as they do so, they feel and are drawn to its seductive power. For this reason, rather than show a series of perfect examples of anarchist prophecy, I will show a series of flawed and inconstant characters (especially in chapter 5). Some of the figures I will treat are ever on the verge of succumbing to archism themselves and some actually do succumb. None of them perfectly and purely manage the confluences of archist and anarchist forms of prophecy. Yet these characters, in all their complexity, show us that archism can be beaten at its own game. What issues from that defeat is not a perfect world free from archist temptation but just an opening, a moment when archism is not such a sure thing that it doesn't even need to have a name.

### **Why Talk of God (and Prophets)?**

Another point I wish to consider here has to do with the question of theology and what kind of claims this book is making about the role of God and of Abrahamic understandings of God more specifically. In my view, this book is actually about what Maria Aristodemou calls “atheism,” not the false secularity of liberalism—and of contemporary forms of archism more generally—but a form of politics that turns to human communities rather than external powers for the source of and inspiration for political life.<sup>29</sup> To the faux void that archism uses for its own purposes, I would counterpoise a different kind of void, a negation of the (false) negation, if you will. The anarchist readings of God that I am putting forth here offer two options: that God does not exist at all and the void is just that, an empty space that has no content whatsoever (Nietzsche's notion that God is dead may also suggest this way of thinking, although this is a complicated claim); or that God is herself an anarchist.

If the former is the case, then it becomes a matter of systematically finding all the places where a concept of God lurks (just about everywhere!) and

negating them. If the latter is the case, God herself is seen as doing everything possible to prevent divine emanations from becoming hijacked by archist projections, an idea captured well by Benjamin's concept of divine violence. In either case, just as Benjamin offers a "real state of emergency" to counter the false emergencies that are the bases of archist forms of power, I would like to counterpoise a "real void," a true negation, to the faux negative that archism requires in order to seem to stand outside itself and give itself a privileged perch from which to judge and rule the world.<sup>30</sup> The radical emptiness of the real void shows up the false emptiness of the archist version.

This book then takes a firmly agnostic stance on the existence of God, but I argue that in the end, it doesn't actually matter.<sup>31</sup> So long as the position that God is said to hold is seen as being utterly empty and without content, it serves to unmake the ultimate source of archism, regardless of the ways that we understand that emptiness. Insofar as God is taken as the ultimate archon, the heart of the emanations of archist projection, to radically void that space is to do an end run around the entire operation of archism, including its falsely secular models.

For this reason, we cannot leave a discussion of God out of the equation entirely because modern secularity, wherein any concept of God is simply dismissed, smuggles within itself an occult archist theology. Secularism therefore is not the correct model for a real atheology or atheism. As Aristodemou describes atheism, it consists in a form of "freedom from symbolic links, where the empty place is acknowledged and confronted in all its abyssal emptiness rather than being filled with idolatrous gods from laws to goods."<sup>32</sup> Some theological work must be done, some direct confrontation with the concept of God is required, in order to give us space from the mythic violence that is ceaselessly attributed to God (whether openly or stealthily).

The ubiquity of Abrahamic forms of understanding God and the divine more generally is a related issue of concern. I recognize that sticking to a language of prophecy, especially in terms of the way that I am approaching it, limits us to a largely Jewish or Christian approach to thinking about these issues. It involves Muslim viewpoints too, although the authors I engage with do not specifically evoke Islam. I do not think that the Western traditions I am drawing upon have any monopoly by any means on the nature and understanding of theology. My focus on the West and particularly its notions of prophecy, messianism, and God are a response to the fact that the West has spread itself via imperialism and globalism to false claims of universality, along with a concomitantly dominant form of Western archism. It



is precisely this false Western universe that I would like to challenge, and so I go after its origins (its *arche*) in my response. Insofar as an Abrahamic God and, in particular, an Abrahamic understanding of prophecy, has become so widely globalized, it behooves us to look at the institutions of such prophecy to think further about how such worldwide hegemony can be beaten back (and by its own—prophetic—devices).

Furthermore, I do not mean to imply that Judaism and Christianity, the two main forms of Western theology I consider here, are inherently and only archist as such. Indeed, the authors I look to often find ways to subvert archism from within theological vocabularies that come from both traditions. Instead, I am trying to argue that these religions in particular have become the basis for contemporary archism through the process of translating from a religion to a particular political program and through the historical sedimentation of the historical relationships and effects of these religions on larger political communities.

We live in a time when so many of the world's religions are producing martial—and archist—forms of themselves. We see this in militant forms of Christian nationalism visible in Trump's United States, Vladimir Putin's Russia, Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, and countless other examples. We see it too in Narendra Modi's promulgation of an intolerant and aggressive Hindutva; in militant Buddhism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka; in Benjamin Netanyahu's toxic form of Jewish nationalism; in militant forms of Islam, both associated with the state (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and without (Al Qaeda); and even in hybrid forms (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]). We even see the aggressive promulgation of a kind of theocratic nationalism that has no formal religion associated with it, as in Xi Jinping's China.

I think it would be a grave mistake to lump all these forms together as simply variants of Western archism. Each religious tradition has its own trajectory and history and its own reception of and encounter with such archist forms. Yet the shared features—militant nationalism, extreme forms of racism, attacks on minority religions and communities, intense chauvinism—all point to a globalized phenomenon and are indications (as if we needed one!) that the theological is not yet done with us even if many of us are done with it.

As I read it, these various movements share a sense of threat wherein their own forms and degrees of archism are under assault. It makes sense to me that, as that sense of threat deepens—that is, after decades of neoliberalism, as the grave inequalities that untrammled archism produces become more of a threat to its main functions in terms of capitalism and various modes of

racial supremacy—the more its original and underlying theological nature comes to the fore. The disguise of secularism was always thin, but it may be especially so in our own time. For this reason, to avoid the language of God and prophets is, in some sense, to avoid the elephant in the room, the theological bases of our current dilemmas, and to miss an opportunity to think about what a true atheism (and corresponding anarchism) would look like.<sup>33</sup>

### What Kind of Anarchism?

A final point has to do with terminology. In terms of making larger claims about anarchism per se, I am making no grand statement about anarchism in general, which has a long and variegated history. When I use that term, I will almost always be referring to Western anarchism. The anarchism that I am addressing here, with its roots in ancient Greece and Israel, is the anarchism of liberal capitalist universalism, the anarchism of contemporary modes of neoliberalism, state-sponsored racism, and other mechanisms that make up the contemporary world, recognizing that that world is changing and that other players like China, India, and Russia are working to alter that equation. I don't think this is the final and ultimate form of anarchism so much as the present and most pernicious form of anarchism in the world today.

The same is true for the anarchism that I am describing here, although in quite the opposite way. That is, even as use of the term *anarchism* seeks to locate and reduce the Western variant to its origins, my use of the term *anarchism* exceeds the normal use of that to become a kind of planetary, if not universal, point of reference. I recognize that my use of the term *anarchism* in this book may seem surprising to many readers as I associate it not just with the trappings of a particular political form connected to Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin and on through Emma Goldman and into the contemporary moment of the antifa but with life itself. In doing so, I seek to unshackle the term *anarchism* from its narrow meaning (without, however, abandoning that connection entirely) and its entirely Western associations. In *Decolonizing Anarchism*, Maia Ramnath makes an important distinction between “the concept of anarchism and the Circle-A brand.”<sup>34</sup> While the latter is specific to the Western left tradition, she explains that “with a small *a*, the word anarchism implies a set of assumptions and principles, a recurrent tendency or orientation—with the stress on movement in a direction, not a perfected condition—toward more dispersed and less concentrated power; less top-down hierarchy and more self-determination through bottom-up participation; liberty and equality seen as directly rather than inversely proportional;

the nurturance of individuality and diversity within a matrix of interconnectivity, mutuality, and accountability; and an expansive recognition of the various forms that power relations can take, and correspondingly, the various dimensions of emancipation.”<sup>35</sup>

Using this other description, Ramnath can associate the term *anarchism* with movements and politics that have little to do with the West and in fact are often diametrically opposed to it (in her case, she describes a great deal of anarchist politics with regard to South Asia). I argue that this other, broader, “small *a*” anarchism is a condition that all of us on this planet share, that it is a matter of life itself and how that life is lived in all its messy and beautiful variety.

If the name *anarchism* can be used without necessarily invoking all the specific baggage of Western anarchist traditions, it helps draw our attention to our life as such in ways that do not automatically condemn us to just more archism. This kind of anarchism may go under different names and have very different forms. Some of the examples that I associate with this larger form of anarchism may raise some eyebrows in that their own authors use other terms (like communism in the case of Mariátegui and Benjamin) to describe themselves and their belief systems. And it might seem peculiar or even perverse to speak of Yali as an “anarchist prophet” when he has nothing to do with the tradition coming from Bakunin (nor Abraham, for that matter). But I think that the kind of collective behaviors I am talking about are, if not universal (because that is a claim that is too fraught with anarchist pieties, although I think Butler, among others, does some good work in challenging that universe on its own terms), then, once again, at least planetary.<sup>36</sup>

In speaking of anarchism in this way, I am talking about a phenomenon that comes directly out of life itself and, as such, goes by many names but which shares the quality of both being ruled by and resisting, by its very existence, archist predations. It is this life that anarchist prophecy addresses. To the extent that such prophecy melds into that life, it succeeds, whereas to the extent that it holds itself aloof from that life, it just becomes another iteration of archist predation, setting up the central challenge that this book proposes to address.

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## notes

### Introduction

- 1 In this way, liberal capitalist parliamentary systems, fascist and authoritarian systems, and any other system with a top-down hierarchy is an example of archism. Political systems that are predominantly anarchist are much rarer, especially in the contemporary world. At the same time, as I will argue further in this book, every polity has a huge array of anarchist aspects insofar as anarchism corresponds to human life itself, to that body of interactions, mutuality, and decision that archism preys upon.
- 2 Kafka, "The City Coat of Arms," in Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, 37.
- 3 Kafka, "The City Coat of Arms," 39.
- 4 Kafka, "The City Coat of Arms," 39.
- 5 Kafka, "The City Coat of Arms," 39.
- 6 Kafka, "The Refusal," in Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, 165.
- 7 Kafka, "The Refusal," 171.
- 8 Kafka, "The Refusal," 171.
- 9 Kafka, "The Refusal," 173–74.
- 10 Kafka, "The Refusal," 161.
- 11 Kafka, "The Refusal," 173.
- 12 In *Textual Conspiracies*, I discuss at length "The City Coat of Arms" as well as *The Castle*. In these Kafka works, and especially in *The Castle*, the possibility of the nonexistence of the power that the villagers obey and desire is constantly dangled before us (and them).

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- 13 However, as I will argue throughout this book, this could never happen. Being a parasite, archism requires some form of collective sight to prey upon and draw from.
- 14 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.
- 15 Cedric J. Robinson, quoting Otis Madison, notes that “the purpose of racism is to control the behavior of white people, not Black people. For Blacks, guns and tanks are sufficient.” Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, 82. I think this is a fundamental insight that explains a lot of the working mechanisms of archism. I first encountered this quote when it was cited by Robin Kelley in a talk that he gave at the American Political Science Association’s annual conference on September 1, 2017.
- 16 Monmouth University Polling Institute, “Protestors’ Anger Justified Even if Actions May Not Be.”
- 17 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.
- 18 Here I recognize that Fanon himself did not use the term archism.
- 19 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 21.
- 20 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 51.
- 21 Later in this book, I will show how the anarchist prophets I am interested in use these founts of archist authority to ruin and expose these very same forms of power.
- 22 See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- 23 In fact, I’m not so sure that this reading of the gaze is so discordant with Foucault’s model. After all, he recognizes the way that people internalize the guard tower into their own minds so that they are in effect guarding themselves. The next step, to see themselves from that tower, doesn’t seem such a stretch.
- 24 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 70. In the original German, it is “Der purpur muss es decken.” Slavoj Žižek cites Lacan, who talks about something similar when it comes to the idea of the “emperor’s new clothes.” See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29.
- 25 In practice, this distinction is not always so neat. The doctor’s wife in Saramago’s two novels is both an anarchist prophet and a member of her community. This is true of the other figures that I look at as well, although in the case of the doctor’s wife, the special markers that make her seem to stand out from the community are entirely absent.
- 26 In speaking of vision in the sense of having eyesight, it may seem that I am saying that only sighted people can participate in either archist or anarchist vision, but as I’ll argue when speaking of Saramago’s *Blindness*, blind people are just as susceptible to archism and are just as capable of anarchist sight as the sighted. The visuality that I am talking about is not strictly speaking in accordance with the possibility of visual sight per se but is more a matter of organizing and composing reality as a lived experience and read through a visual metaphor, something that can be conveyed to the sighted and the blind alike.

- 27 Goodrich, “Proboscations,” 361. I am indebted to Jonas Rosenbrück for pointing out the dominance of vision in the concept of archist prophecy and the possibility of alternatives to thinking/seeing in that way.
- 28 In *The Trial*, for example, K. gets overcome by an overheated and stinking court of law that doubles as a lived-in attic space. A woman says to him, “You’re a little dizzy, aren’t you? . . . Don’t worry, . . . there’s nothing unusual about that here, almost everyone here has an attack like this the first time. . . . The sun beats down on the attic beams and the hot wood makes the air terribly thick and stifling. . . . Then if you take into consideration that a great deal of wash is hung out here to dry as well—the tenants can’t be entirely forbidden from doing so—it will come as no surprise that you feel a little sick. But in the end people get quite used to the air.” This is K.’s real initiation into the law. Kafka, *The Trial*, 73–74.
- 29 See the chapter on atheism in Aristodemou’s *Law, Psychoanalysis, Society*.
- 30 W. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392. For an excellent investigation of the various sorts of negativity that are out there, see Kramer, *Excluded Within*.
- 31 A more accurate term might be anti-gnostic since the anarchism that I am describing here is always and positively oriented toward human life as such. I am indebted to Andrew Benjamin for the way he connects this attitude in Walter Benjamin to anti-gnosticism.
- 32 Aristodemou, *Law, Psychoanalysis, Society*, 108.
- 33 It should be added that the Abrahamic religions do not have a monopoly on the institution of prophecy.
- 34 Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism*, 6. I am grateful to Simmy Makhijani for referring me to Ramnath’s work.
- 35 Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism*, 7.
- 36 Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* helps me think of an anarchist universe as well.

## Chapter One. Appointing Prophets

An earlier version of part of chapter 1 appeared as “Why Does the State Keep Coming Back? Neoliberalism, the State and the Archeon,” *Law and Critique* 29, no. 3 (November 2018): 359–75.

- 1 Machiavelli, “*The Discourses*,” 147. Machiavelli offers a countering image of an archist prophecy in the form of Appius Pulcher. In describing a Roman ritual where sacred poultrymen threw grain to a group of chickens as an augury to predict victory in battle—if the chickens pecked at the grain, the battle would be won; if they didn’t, it would be lost—Machiavelli contrasts two consuls, Papirius and Appius Pulcher. In Papirius’s case, the chickens didn’t peck, but Papirius lied and said they had (and had the head poultryman killed by “friendly fire” to silence him). Pulcher’s chickens also didn’t peck, and Pulcher said, “Then let us see whether they will drink,” having them thrown

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