

## 1. Commons sense and the resistance of the object

“The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its *object* has become a social, *human* object — an object made by man for man. The *senses* have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need or enjoyment have consequently lost their *egotistical* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* by use becoming *human* use.”

— Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism”

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from the poem “Where the Blues Began,” in *Hughson’s Tavern*

by Fred Moten

where the theoreticians will become senses in their practice

where the theoreticians will not be seeing, hearing where the theoreticians will sear, the theoretician is a seer where the theoreticians will be seen and heard in their practice

where the theoreticians will touch themselves where the theoreticians will become sensual in their practice

where the reverse will always be in excess where the sequence is for nono and maxine where reading and recite this scene to John Gwin, my daddy

where they go plot paradise, blue bolivar, boll and marvel where mask and boll and cut and fry and groove

where the senses will become theoreticians in their practice

— Fred Moten, “where the blues began,” in *Hughson’s Tavern*

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**ROCK THE PARTY, FUCK THE SMACKDOWN, from Hughson’s Tavern**

By Fred Moten

Poems below available at:

[http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/new\\_american\\_poets/fred\\_moten/](http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/new_american_poets/fred_moten/)

under Bill Brown's blue chicago there's |  
unrest in response to continued scolding.

thing object. matter ain't the same  
as one another. things don't represent  
they must be broke. they cannot pay attention  
to objects like objects so they stay mad  
all the goddamn time, broken glasses  
everywhere. but I sound better since you  
cut my throat. the checkerboard is also a  
chess board. it's also a cutting board and a  
sound board. it's also a winding sheet and a  
sound booth.

now you're bored with all these healthy choices  
and you don't want to sound as clean as this.  
shit smoothed out on me by accident too.  
how did I get here? I lost my ideological  
mama and her things. her thing's in storage  
in north las vegas but no matter, ain't no thing,

'cause when the morning breaks I'ma get my sound back  
and all my native weather will be mine.

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**There Is Religious Tattooing, from *Hughson's Tavern***

**Fred Moten**

**Audio available Here: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/239080>**

for a long time, the lotion stigma swirled  
on the man who clothes me with a broken

world. I came when they called me. that  
cotton rubbed me the wrong way all the

way inside over the course of time. way before  
cotton sewn into the coat of the one  
who clothes me. before I started clothing

them with paper. before cotton sewn into

their coats they curled up on flat boats  
all the way back up the country. the beaded

strips of leather and cotton made me come  
to myself when he called me and wrote me

on the one who clothes me. pour some water  
on me. make coming matter cut and twirl

on me. the law of emulsion is always broke  
on me. somebody pour some beautiful jute

on me. let her blow some horn on me. the man  
who clothes me in my skin is gonna write

on me. your writing moves to stop on me.

someday they're gonna curve this on a pearl

on me but now it's time to go and I can't wait  
to get up out from here. it's simple to stay furled

where you can't live. for a long, long time I've

been wearing this other planet like a scar on me.

--From *Hughson's Tavern*

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## TWO EXCERPTS FROM *THE UNDERCOMMONS: FUGITIVE PLANNING AND BLACK STUDY*

By Fred Moten

### INTRODUCTION TO *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

Introduction by Jack Halberstam

It ends with love, exchange, fellowship. It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging, and on the way to new economies of giving, taking, being with and for and it ends with a ride in a Buick Skylark on the way to another place altogether. Surprising, perhaps, after we have engaged dispossession, debt, dislocation and violence. But not surprising when you have understood that the projects of “fugitive planning and black study” are mostly about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness, I would venture to say, that is also blackness, that remains blackness, and will, despite all, remain broken because this book is not a prescription for repair.

If we do not seek to fix what has been broken, then what? How do we resolve to live with brokenness, with being broke...

If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the “we” who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after “the break” will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break...

Moten and Harney want to gesture to another place, a wild place that is not simply the left over space that limns real and regulated zones of polite society; rather, it is a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness. The zone we enter through Moten and Harney is ongoing and exists in the present and, as Harney puts it, “some kind of demand was already being enacted, fulfilled in the call itself.” While describing the London Riots of 2011, Harney suggests that the riots and insurrections do not separate out “the request, the demand and the call” – rather, they enact the one in the other: “I think the call, in the way I would understand it, the call, as in the call and response, the response is already there before the call goes out. You’re already in something.” *You are already in it.* For Moten too, you are always already in the thing that you call for and that calls you. What’s more, the call is always a call to dis-order and this disorder or wildness shows up in many places: in jazz, in improvisation, in noise. The disordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as “extra-musical,” as Moten puts it, precisely because we hear something in them that reminds us that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible. Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us.

And when we are called to this other place, the wild beyond, “beyond the beyond” in Moten and Harney’s apt terminology, we have to give ourselves over to a certain kind of craziness. Moten reminds us that even as Fanon took an anti-colonial stance, he knew that it “looks crazy” but, Fanon, as a psychiatrist, also knew *not* to accept this organic division between the rational and the crazy and he knew that it would be crazy for him not to take that stance in a world that had assigned to him the role of the unreal, the primitive and the wild. Fanon, according to Moten, wants not the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense. In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism. Indeed, blackness, for Moten and Harney by way of Fanon, is the willingness to be in the space that has been abandoned by colonialism, by rule, by order. Moten takes us there, saying of Fanon finally: “Eventually, I believe, he comes to believe in the world, which is to say the other world, where we inhabit and maybe even cultivate this absence, this place which shows up here and now, in the sovereign’s space and time, as absence, darkness, death, things which are not (as John Donne would say).”

The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal. In *The Undercommons* if we begin anywhere, we begin with the right to refuse what has been refused to you. Citing Gayatri Spivak, Moten and Harney call this refusal the “first right” and it is a game-changing kind of refusal in that it signals the refusal of the choices as offered. We can understand this refusal in terms that Chandan Reddy lays out in *Freedom With Violence* (2011) – for Reddy, gay marriage is the option that cannot be opposed in the ballot box. While we can circulate multiple critiques of gay marriage in terms of its institutionalization of intimacy, when you arrive at the ballot box, pen in hand, you only get to check “yes” or “no” and the no, in this case, could be more

damning than the yes. And so, you must refuse the choice as offered.

Moten and Harney also study what it would mean to refuse what they term “the call to order.” And what would it mean, furthermore, to refuse to call others to order, to refuse interpellation and the reinstatement of the law. When we refuse, Moten and Harney suggest, we create dissonance and more importantly, we allow dissonance to continue – when we enter a classroom and we refuse to call it to order, we are allowing study to continue, dissonant study perhaps, disorganized study, but study that precedes our call and will continue after we have left the room. Or, when we listen to music, we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument; music is also the anticipation of the performance and the noises of appreciation it generates and the speaking that happens through and around it, making it and loving it, being in it while listening...

...The undercommons is a space and time which is always here. Our goal – and the “we” is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. Moten and Harney refuse the logic that stages refusal as inactivity, as the absence of a plan and as a mode of stalling real politics. Moten and Harney tell us to listen to the noise we make and to refuse the offers we receive to shape that noise into “music.”

Like all world-making and all world-shattering encounters, when you enter this book and learn how to be with and for, in coalition, and on the way to the place we are already making, you will also feel fear, trepidation, concern, and disorientation. The disorientation, Moten and Harney will tell you is not just unfortunate, it is necessary because you will no longer be in one location moving forward to another, instead you will already be part of “the “movement of things” and on the way to this “outlawed social life of nothing.” ...

...Moten and Harney call this mode a “being together in homelessness” which does not idealize homelessness nor merely metaphorize it. Homelessness is the state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace: “Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this uncommon oppositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?” ...

#### References

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## FROM THE UNDERCOMMONS: FUGITIVE PLANNING AND BLACK STUDY

By Fred Moten and Stephano Harney

### Chapter 1: “Politics Surrounded”

In Michael Parenti’s classic anti-imperial analysis of Hollywood movies, he points to the ‘upside down’ way that the ‘make-believe media’ portrays colonial settlement. In films like *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) or *Shaka Zulu* (1987), the settler is portrayed as surrounded by ‘natives,’ inverting, in Parenti’s view, the role of aggressor so that colonialism is made to look like self-defense. Indeed, aggression and self-defense are reversed in these movies, but the image of a surrounded fort is not false. Instead, the false image is what emerges when a critique of militarised life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it. The

fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure. The surround antagonises the laager in its midst while disturbing that facts on the ground with some outlaw planning.

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround.

Consider the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, first theorists of the revolution of the surround, the black before and before, the already and the forthcoming. Their twinned commitment to revolution and self-defense emerged from the recognition that the preservation of black social life is articulated in and with the violence of innovation. This is not a contradiction if the new thing, always calling for itself, already lives around and below the forts, the police stations, the patrolled highways and the prison towers. The Panthers theorized revolution without politics, which is to say revolution with neither a subject nor a principle of decision. Against the law because they were generating law, they practiced an ongoing planning to be possessed, hopelessly and optimistically and incessantly indebted, given to unfinished, contrapuntal study of, and in, the common wealth, poverty and the blackness of the surround.

The self-defense of revolution is confronted not only by the brutalities but also by the false image of enclosure. The hard materiality of the unreal convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, correct ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons. But in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone in the movement to and of the common that surrounds it and its enclosure. What's left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common. And even when the election that was won turns out to have been lost, and the bomb detonates and/or fails to detonate, the common perseveres as if a kind of elsewhere, here, around, on the ground, surrounding hallucinogenic facts. Meanwhile, politics soldiers on, claiming to defend what it has not enclosed, enclosing what it cannot defend but only endanger.

The settler, having settled for politics, arms himself in the name of civilisation while critique initiates the self-defense of those of us who see hostility in the civil union of settlement and enclosure. We say, rightly, if our critical eyes are sharp enough, that it's evil and uncool to have a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this atmosphere; that house the sheriff was building is in the heart of a fallout zone. And if our eyes carry sharpness farther out we trail the police so we can put them on trial. Having looked for politics in order to avoid it, we move next to each other, so we can be beside ourselves, because we like the nightlife which ain't no good life. Critique lets us know that politics is radioactive, but politics is the radiation of critique. So it matters how long we have to do it, how long we have to be exposed to the lethal effects of its anti-social energy. Critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend, not because it might turn inward to damage politics but because it would turn to politics and then turn outward, from the fort to the surround, were it not for preservation, which is given in celebration of what we defend, the sociopoetic force we wrap tightly round us, since we are poor. Taking down our critique, our own positions, our fortifications, is self-defense alloyed with self-preservation. That takedown comes in movement, as a shawl, the armor of flight. We run looking for a weapon and keep running looking to drop it. And we can drop it, because however armed, however hard, the enemy we face is also illusory.

Uncut devotion to the critique of this illusion makes us delusional. In the trick of politics we are insufficient, scarce, waiting in pockets of resistance, in stairwells, in alleys, in vain. The false image and its

critique threaten the common with democracy, which is only ever to come, so that one day, which is only never to come, we will be more than what we are. But we already are. We're already here, moving. We've been around. We're more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we're undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we're unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we're gone (because we're already here, moving). We ask and we tell and we cast the spell that we are under, which tells us what to do and how we shall be moved, here, where we dance the war of apposition. We're in a trance that's under and around us. We move through it and it moves with us, out beyond the settlements, out beyond the redevelopment, where black night is falling, where we hate to be alone, back inside to sleep till morning, drink till morning, plan till morning, as the common embrace, right inside, and around, in the surround.

In the clear, critical light of day, illusory administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good. We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything.

An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of selfgovernance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented.