CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art Close Encounters

FRED MOTEN with Jarrett Earnest

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Fred Moten is a poet and literary theorist, whose book *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) explored the sonic and aural lineages of the "black radical tradition." His new book of essays, *Black and Blur* (Duke, 2017) charts his sustained engagement with contemporary visual art. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013) written collaboratively with Stefano Harney, threw down the gauntlet for discussions of the fate of the university, and has become a key text in both art and pedagogy circles. Additionally, he can be seen as the protagonist of Wu Tsang's video installation currently up in *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and Weapon* exhibition at the New Museum, for which he was on the advisory committee, the discussions of which are archived in the show's catalog. He met with the Rail's Jarrett Earnest to discuss the evolution of his writing and thoughts on aesthetics.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): Maybe we should start with your early experiences of music and sound. When did they first enter your consciousness?

Fred Moten: In early childhood. My mom really loved music, and my father did too. They both loved it, thought about it, and made all kinds of interesting critical formulations about it. I just grew up in a house like that, in a neighborhood and a general social milieu where music was important. Kids have their own well developed musical tastes—we all bought records and talked about the music that we loved. I can't remember when it wasn't part of my consciousness.

Rail: Where was this?

Moten: Las Vegas.

Rail: What did your parents do?

Moten: My mom was a schoolteacher.

Rail: And your father?

Moten: When I was young, my father worked for the Las Vegas convention center—he was a laborer there, I guess he helped set up exhibits and cleaned. He always had two jobs. He was a really hard worker, worked as a bus driver and a porter in the casinos. My mom was the first of two people in her extended family to go to college. She became a school teacher, and I think she had a real calling for it, but it was also a sort of a limit, a horizon, for black women in the mid-fifties. There was no one with much formal education in my father's family—he went to the ninth grade. Because of the presence of the hotel-casinos and also Nellis Air Force Base and the Nevada Test Site, and because Las Vegas was a union town, people who were so-called "unskilled labor" could still get decent jobs, enough to buy a house—maybe a better way to put it is, enough to *lose* a house. There were a lot of people who were recent migrants from the South, so even though I grew up in Las Vegas, the part I grew up in was like a transplanted town from Arkansas.

Rail: At what point did your intellectual and creative relationship with language emerge?

Moten: I think skill with language was very important in the community I grew up in. There were guys who could play basketball, and they got a certain kind of respect. There were guys who were *cool* in some general way. And then there were guys who could just *talk,* in particular, talk *about* people—you know, playing the Dozens or whatever—and they got lots of respect. It was an extremely verbal youth culture. We would sit around and talk about each other all the time, make fun of each other, and mess with each other. That's not such an unusual thing, but I think what was particular to it was there was a recognition early on that some people were skilled at it, so in that sense recognizing linguistic skill was an early thing.

A lot of times I get annoyed at the way the term "privilege" is used in certain discourses, and part of it is because some take "privilege" to be an absolute term when it's a relative term. They usually just mean "money." I grew up in a working-class community—we didn't have a lot of money—but in terms of a preparation for a life of paying attention to language and music, it was extraordinarily privileged—there couldn't have been a better place to have grown up to prepare me to do the kind of work that I do.

Rail: What did you study in college?

Moten: It was 1980 when I went to Harvard. I really grew up in the seventies—the Black Arts Moment and the Black Liberation struggle was part of the milieu and felt immediate for me in an intense way, and I went to college thinking I was preparing myself to become a part of that. I think I actually declared a double major in sociology and economics. I had to take one of the big required courses called "Social Analysis 10," which was really just an introduction to macroeconomics, and it had a "radical section" where you'd read a little bit of Marx along with Malthus and Smith and Ricardo and Mill. I took a class in agricultural economics, and I had this not fully developed sense of trying to prepare myself to join third-world revolutionary struggle. But between playing football and all this other political stuff, I just didn't have time to go to class. So I flunked out, and I had to go home and work for a year, and that's when I got much more into literature. When I came back to school I decided I'd be an English major instead. One of the classes I flunked was an expository writing class, so I had to take it again in summer school. My teacher was a woman named Deborah Carlin. She was important for tipping me over the edge and into studying literature, because when I went back I didn't know quite what I was going to do.

Rail: When did you start writing poetry?

Moten: I had this friend in grade school called Robert Shearing. We used to take popular songs and make sort of adolescent dirty lyrics out of them—this was when I was maybe twelve. We actually had notebooks where we would write them out. So that was probably the first time. I think I came to Harvard with some poetry I'd written in high school. I wrote a lot the year I was working when I flunked out too. When I got back my second year, I applied for the *Harvard Advocate*, which is a long-standing literary magazine, and I got on, and that was where I met Stefano Harney—he was on the magazine too. Also I took a class that year called "Modern American Poetry" from Helen Vendler. I disagree with a lot of what she says about poetry, but that was a very important class for me, because I saw that aside from the initial difficulty, I could read it and also because she set an example for what it is truly to love the poetry one loves. And then the other big thing is that Stefano, in his freshman year, had an expository writing teacher, named William Corbett—

Rail: The poet! Right, I noticed he gets thanked in all your books.

Moten: Bill is a dear friend and mentor. And not just for me. If anyone ever really writes a genuine authentic history of late twentieth century American poetry he would be at the center of it, not only because he's a great poet in his own right, but because he was at the center of the social world from which it emerged, both in New York and in Boston, where he lived for so long. I'm definitely one of his kids.

Rail: He published your book of poems *Arkansas* (2000) with his Pressed Wafer press. Did you also study with him?

Moten: I met him at a bar in Cambridge with Steve Harney. He gave me a copy of this wonderful book of his called *Columbus Square Journal*, which I still have. I never took a class with him, but I went to his house for dinner, a lot—like all the time. I met Michael Palmer at his house, and Lee Harwood—all these folks. All of a sudden this world of what they used to call "Postmodern American poetry" was not just in a book for me, it was at Bill's house, and I became a part of that world.

Rail: You articulate the relationship between Amiri Baraka and Frank O'Hara in your book *In the Break* which makes a lot more sense to me now, thinking of you emerging from that Bill Corbett context.

Moten: Well I knew Baraka from the bookshelves of my house growing up but I didn't know that he had such a fundamental and important place in this American experimental poetry tradition. I learned about that, and all of a sudden Baraka was this person that Bill knew and had stories about. So, it was like being introduced to him a second way, from a different perspective. Bill gave me my copy of *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*—a lot of stuff came back to me through Bill. So all these things started to converge and I experienced them as part of the same general phenomenon, as opposed to separate phenomena.

Rail: Baraka occupies a central place in *In The Break* and your explication of the "black radical aesthetic." What does he represent to you and how did you approach the discourse around his work?

Moten: My original approach to him was to somebody who was just a fundamental part of what I would come to call, by way of Cedric Robinson, the "black radical tradition"—that is how I knew him.

And then I became aware of how important Baraka was within the context of this experimental poetic tradition which had become important to me by way of Bill Corbett and under Stefano's influence—it was a slightly post-adolescent college thing, but we lined ourselves up with those poets. We were the "Creeley-Duncan-Olson" people, as opposed to the "Lowell" people, you know. I remember Vendler would give lectures about her contempt for Pound and the *Poundlings,* and we were the Poundlings—we made that move.

Rail: The Pound puppies!

Moten: And it was a move that Baraka tuned out to have made himself. There's an amazing moment in his *Autobiography* where he's in the air force reading *The New Yorker* and he starts crying—*What the fuck does any of this have to do with me?* It was not long after that he discovered Allen Ginsberg and they began to correspond—Ginsberg was from Newark too, and offered another way of thinking about art, that in certain ways was more akin to the kinds of political aspirations that were already there for Baraka.

There was another strain that I was interested in: my sophomore year at Harvard, Barbara Johnson, the great literary critic and theorist, came from Yale and was the person given the task of introducing literary theory, which had long been resisted in the English department at Harvard. There were other people doing theory there at the time, like Susan Suleiman, but Johnson had a certain force behind her because she worked so closely with Derrida and had translated *Dissemination*, and all of that. She taught a course called "Deconstruction" the second semester of my sophomore year, and that was a very important class for me. It was the first time I'd read Derrida, de Man, Saussure, a little bit of Heidegger. Of course, it turned out Baraka had been intensely reading Western philosophy in the mid-'60s, particularly Heidegger and Wittgenstein. So again, Baraka was at the convergence of all these things that I had been interested in: music, experimental literature, radical black politics, philosophy and literary theory — he was there for all of it, so he was the model for me. Also, what I admired about him was that he never stopped; he kept moving and changing and thinking through things. And then there were things that were problematic: anti-Semitic formulations, which he would later be the most critical reader of, the complications of his sexual politics, particularly around queer stuff—all of that for me was rich, interesting, and important. When I developed in my own thinking it always felt like wherever I'd gotten, he'd already been there first.

Rail: So you had a very long and deep relationship with Amiri Baraka through his work, which you wrote about in *In the Break*, but you also must have met and interacted with him a number of times. I'm interested in what it means to write not just out of the knowledge of what someone has done, but from an experience of who they are.

Moten: I don't think I could go so far as to call it a "personal" relationship, but it got to the point that he knew who I was. I wish it would have been that. And if it wasn't that, I'm sure it was more a function of my reticence about that kind of stuff — you know, I have certain heroes, but it takes me a while to muster enough courage to actually try and talk to them. But I think I see what you're getting at. When you read someone very closely and carefully, really immersing yourself in their work, it's more than just a relationship with a book. That is a personal relationship too. There are certain writers that if you read them enough you begin to feel a different kind of closeness. I never met Shakespeare or John Donne but my relationship with them is more than merely literary. With Baraka it was that, too, but at a higher level of intensity.

Rail: *In The Break* charts a specific path through the black radical tradition that terminates with Adrian Piper, but there is nothing really "visual" in the book—aside from a luminous moment where you talk about Beauford Delaney. It is really a "sonic" and "phonic" argument. With *Black and Blur,* there is a lot more engagement with visual art, especially contemporary art. In fact, you mention an early important experience that you had at the Fogg Museum with a Renoir. I'd like to understand the story of your relationship with visual art, and why that Renoir was important to you.

Moten: I mean, I love visual art. And I also really love art history, as a discipline—when I say that I mean to say, like any other discipline, one has a love-hate relationship to it, because it's got all kinds of blindnesses and exclusions and brutalities. What I love about reading art historians is that they have real talent for looking at stuff closely, and I like to read them talking about what they're looking at closely. It's not like I have those skills—I don't. Those are skills people learn, and you do develop your own way of looking over the course of time, and a lot of that just comes out of repeated looking. With the Renoir…I mean, Harvard is an evil place. Part of the way that evil manifests itself is that they just own a tremendous amount of shit. It's unfair. And it should be broken up. But you're there, and you take advantage of it—sometimes against your own inclinations, and sometimes just by accident—they've just go so much. I wandered into the Fogg one day. Like a lot of nerdily inclined undergraduates I had a period of being interested in van Gogh self-portraits, and they have a good one there. But what killed me was a Renoir [*Gabrielle en Robe Rouge*]. I just decided to go there two or three times a week to see that painting. I started reading about it, to understand how he did it, and the thing I was fascinated by was the way Renoir used color—it wasn't that the first impulse was a representational one, or an impulse toward "portraiture" *per se*, but that it was a way of experimenting with color, with how a shape or form might be composed out of color. Not only was it the painting that I loved—the particular tones of her skin and the relation between her skin and the dress—but I loved that it gave me insight into *how* artists make art—something deeper than just wanting to make a picture of somebody.

Rail: You talk about the "irreducible phonic substance" of Beauford Delaney's paintings; when I look at those paintings I'm pierced by the intensity of their color. It strikes me that a lot of what you describe as the "aurality" of these images, that part that exceeds language, correlates to color within the visual field. The essay you wrote on Chris Offili moves in that direction.

Moten: This will be something of an impressionistic jumping around kind of answer: I remember watching a documentary on Elvin Jones, the drummer for John Coltrane's great quartet. It was later in his career, and at one point he's playing the drums and starts talking basically about his experience of synesthesia. He hits the ride cymbal and says, *See, for me that's yellow*. In the course of writing *In The Break* I was reading a lot of stuff on synesthesia—there was a way that what I wanted to do was link-up synesthetic experience with this other kind of cognitive experience I was fascinated with—what Wittgenstein calls "seeing aspects," when you see something and then it turns into something else. It's essentially just the "duck/rabbit" phenomenon. Of course, Wittgenstein would say that it doesn't turn into something else—it's the same thing, you just see a different aspect of it. So, I was thinking, *What if there was something within the general sensual field that operated in a similar way to this seeing aspects?* Instead of saying, *First it was a "duck" and then it was a "rabbit,"*you would say, *First it was a "duck" and then it was a sound*. The reason why I'm thinking of Elvin Jones in relation to Beauford Delaney, is that I'm thinking about a very particular abstract painting by Delaney which is a kind of study in yellow, and it's a very thick impastoed yellow—

Rail: He's the Patron Saint of Yellow!

Moten: For me, Beauford Delaney is always connected with the sound of Elvin Jones's ride cymbal. And if I were to think about describing that effect in terms of a particular word, not only at the level of meaning but also phonically, it would be "shimmer."There is *shimmer* in Beauford Delaney's painting in the way that there is *shimmer* in Elvin Jones's playing. And for me that shimmer is totally bound up with what Samuel R. Delany calls "the motion of light in water." When I hear that phrase, "motion of light in water," it's connected to a sound. And also, because it's a *motion*, it becomes a question about movement. In a way, I feel like what I'm doing is a kind of reverse engineering, so to speak, of what immediately shows up as a synesthetic experience. You know, it requires a linking together of all these folks.

There are some people who have written about sound and visual art and it usually manifests itself along two lines: as a representation of "sound" or representations of occasions in which sound is being made in some conscious way. Or they'll talk about it as a certain terminological overlap, with regard to questions about *tone*, etc. But what I was really trying to say is that when we experience something visually, the other senses are not turned off. And similarly, when we experience something aurally, the other senses are not turned off. That our experience is part of a general synesthetic—but I didn't want to call it synesthetic—I think I used the term *holosensual field*. One way to think about it is as an earlier version of what I now call "blur"—and that does come back to the piece I wrote on Chris Offili, in a way totally influenced by Glenn Ligon's writing about Chris Offili.

Rail: To make sure that I'm clear, when you use the term *holosensual field*—that refers to the intermeshing of all of our perceptual faculties?

Moten: What I was trying to say in the book, and what I'm still trying to say, is that it's impossible to try and make a separation between what I was calling the "ensemble of the sense" and the "ensemble of the social"—and that notion of the ensemble of the social is directly out of early Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*. I want to say that there's a sociality of the senses—which is a formulation Marx makes, *When the senses become theoreticians in their practice—*I was trying to talk about that, as something that is actually occurring in our encounters with art, and in particular with Black art. That goes against the grain of a whole lot of commonplace formulations people make about aesthetic experience, and about the place of aesthetic experience in the formation of the subject.

The other part is that this is within the context of my attempts to work through Derrida, particularly in relation to Saussure. I was working against the grain of this movement that can be traced back to Enlightenment discourses on language and music, and is present in a powerful way in Saussure, which is the notion that a "universal science of language" requires what Saussure calls "the reduction of the phonic substance." Now, if you're interested in Black art there is no reduction of the phonic substance. That is not necessary and it's not possible. Or J. L. Austin talking about the necessity of bracketing out what he calls "mere accompaniments of the utterance"—well I'm listening to James Brown, and the most interesting shit in James Brown is the *mere accompaniments of utterance* — and I want to be able to talk about them.

Rail: Bringing it back to contemporary art, you could have subtitled your recent book, in an almost Sontag-esque way, "Against Description." There is virtually no visual description, and I felt that carried an implicit critique of the ways art is ordinarily written about.

Moten: It might seem like a contradiction, but I don't think it is. What I said before is true: I love art historians' capacity to describe, which for me is inseparable from their capacity to look closely. That's

not something that I want to denigrate or disavow, but it's like that thing where if you get up closely enough on something it starts to *blur*. Now, our tendency would be to back off a little bit to refocus, and what I'm saying is let's ride with the blur for a little while. That's within the frame, so to speak, of the so-called individual art work, but it also exists more generally within the structure of the kinds of aesthetic experiences galleries can produce, in which the works cannot maintain their separation from one another. What I experience is artworks reflecting other artworks within the space, and what I realize is that that phenomenon of blur happens all the time whenever I see a show. Riding with the blur goes against the commitment people have to the strict individuation of the work, which is a mirror, so to speak, of the strict individuation of the artist and, also, of the beholder, in so far as there is a kind of relay in those three things that are all meant, at the end of the day, to somehow buttress or enshrine a common, already-given notion of individual subjectivity. What I am interested in is how all of this is constantly being messed up, even while we're constantly pretending that it isn't.

Rail: Is the blur not just between the works physically in the room, but also the existence of other artworks and objects that come to mind but are not physically present?

Moten: Oh, yeah.

Rail: So, it's a time-space blur?

Moten: Yeah. Everything is going on. There is an enigmatic line I always wondered about that Coltrane has in the poem that he wrote to accompany the third part of *A Love Supreme,* something like, *It all has to do with it.*

Rail: In the chapter on Adrian Piper at the end of *In The Break,* you say, "Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism has repressed."

Moten: When you think that all you're doing is *seeing* something, you're not even really seeing. That is the thing. You attempt to reduce all the other sensual registers, it can't help but limit or restrain the sensual register that you want to be dominant or exclusive.

Rail: Do you think that, when one is writing about art there are ways to signify the limitations or the partiality of those descriptions? Often in criticism the experience of looking can be presented as a narrative: the eye does *this*, then *this*, and *that,* which is a roadmap for how the object functions visually. That kind of "narrative" in your work is constantly resisted and undermined. But could we write a story that resists narrative?

Moten: The problem is just *how*. I don't want to be fundamentalist about it, like disavowing narrative as such, but I think what is important is imagining the possibility of a detachment of narrative from the individual subject to which narrative has traditionally been submitted. It's not that there is no story, it's just that there are *more* stories.

I'm both enamored of art historical description and at the same time concerned with its limitations, and most of those limitations have to do with the commitment that art historians have to the absolute singularity of the individual work, the individual artist, and the individual viewer—that what is at stake for them is the relay between those individual things. And in this respect it's very much a kind of Kantian project, as it emerges in Greenberg and his great students Krauss and Fried, but even the

people who think of themselves violently disagreeing with those folks still agree on those basic fundaments.

Rail: So, music becomes a model of art where a group of people are listening and a group of people are making.

Moten: It's the ensemble. And it's the recognition that the solo is an emanation of the ensemble.

Rail: You often write poems about subjects that you also write essays on; I'm interested in what those two different forms offer you?

Moten: Poetry just lets you put stuff together in a different kind of way; in a way that does not immediately tie you down with certain kinds of diegetic or argumentational responsibilities. The criticism is the same thing, it's just that maybe you have to show more of the connective tissue that allows you to put these things together. In a poem I can just put Thornton Dial together with with Sleater-Kinney, and I don't have to explain it. The other stuff, it's not just that you *have* to explain it, but you *want* to explain it—*how do these things connect?* You show the conduits through which there is commerce between these seemingly different things.

Rail: You reference a broad range of philosophers from Adorno to Glissant to Deleuze, which positions your writing within a specialized academic context. How have you seen these things coming together with your other widely varied interests?

Moten: A lot of time people just go by their first impressions. When I read Derrida the first time it wasn't like I knew what was going on, it was just that I knew I wanted to read more. So I kept reading. It seemed clear to me that it had something to do with what I was interested in. What could be seen as a broad intellectual context is, for me, narrow but winding. One of my best friends from college is still one of my best friends, a guy named Alan Jackson, who's a cardiologist in Chicago, and another friend named Errol Louis who's on New York One in New York—he's a journalist and political commentator. We were all reading Kropotkin together—we were interested in anarchism and we picked that up from Noam Chomsky. It was part of our politics. We were black nationalist nerds. Al studied the history of science and I'd go to his classes and listen to Everett Mendelsohn lecture. There was a group between Harvard and MIT called "Science for the People"; E.L. Wilson was inventing socio-biology, and James Q. Wilson was writing this evil book with Richard Herrnstein called *Crime and Human Nature,* which was basically an argument for preventive detention—one of the origins of so-called "super-predator theory"—all that shit was going on and we all took it personally as a fundamental assault on our lives. And we were very much influenced by an older student named Eugene Rivers who was a brilliant autodidact, a working-class black Philadelphian, who was deeply embedded in these politics and in the notion of black working-class liberation and struggle; but he was very religious and embedded in the black Pentecostal church. I'm pretty much a heathen, but I still have an intense relationship with black liberation theology as espoused by James Cone and others—liberation theology was totally important to us. We were reading Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff, because for us it was all connected to what we were doing. We would go hear Stephen Jay Gould lecture. We carried *The Mismeasure of Man* around like it was the *Bible*. We had another friend named Abner Mason and he was the founding president of this group the "Karl Popper Society for the History and Philosophy of Science"—and he carried around *Conjectures and Refutations* like a bible. That was a very strange and particular group, my friends in school. But, everything I'm doing goes through that, in the same way it goes through the neighborhood that I grew up in.

You know, my grandmother used to wake me up in the morning when I would visit her in Arkansas reciting Paul Laurence Dunbar and John Keats—she loved poetry—and she cleaned up this white woman's house. If she were born today she'd be who knows, but she was born in 1913 so she cleaned up white women's houses. This is where you come through; this is where you come from. It seems *broad* because it's all over the place, but it's really just *winding*. You know, it's like a river that winds through all these different terrains, and part of it winds through the history of science, and part of it winds through category theory and general topology, and part of it winds through Russian cinema—I'm just *interested*. Some people are like, *I don't want to read that!*—I've always wanted to read everything! People got all these reasons for not reading stuff now. Shit *triggers* them. I always wanted to be triggered.

Rail: That clarifies so elegantly and simply your discussion of "study" in *Undercommons,* which is just that people want to know stuff, and then they find it out—That *is* "study." Sometimes universities are good for that, but most of the time it happens someplace else.

Moten: The university is job training, but without teaching you how to do the job. It's where they teach you how to suffer in order to do a job. That is what it's for. And at the same time they're teaching you that, they're tantalizing you with all these amazing intellectual resources, like, *Here's some superficial relationship to this thing*. Not a deep one. *We're not going to give you time to actually think about a fucking thing, we're just going to give you time enough so when you're at a cocktail party at your law firm you can act like you've read an Edith Wharton novel.* People want to know shit, man. Just like you said: people do. You have to go to school to learn how to not want to know shit, and they do a really good job of that.

Rail: In New York I helped run a free and open art school and every night of the week people came from all over to talk about art—it was really poignant, seeing people dragging themselves there after work to be together and talk about something they love. I don't want to be overly dramatic, but I think we all should be having serious doubts about the continuation of the university in its current form.

Moten: I remember one time me and Stefano were invited to talk at a conference at UC Riverside by the cultural studies association, and the theme of the conference was "another university is possible." I remember Stefano was like, *This university is not possible!* People got so mad. It was interesting, because I think what people were basically saying is we're being cavalier with what still constitutes a fundamental conduit for upward mobility, and how could we say that from our positions as well-paid college professors. I love the university. Just like I love my mom. But you know, five or six years before she died I had to come to grips with the realization that she wasn't going to live forever. And she wasn't meant to live forever.

My favorite movie is called *Shoes of the Fisherman*. It's made in 1968. It has Anthony Quinn, Vittorio Di Sica, Leo McKern, John Gielgud, and Lawrence Olivier in it. It's about this Russian political prisoner who also happens to be a priest. At the beginning of the month he's in the Gulag and through a series of incidents and accidents, by the end of the month, he becomes the Pope. The big theological argument in the film has to do with the place and the function of a personal God. Oskar Werner plays a character named Father Telemond, basically modeled on Teilhard de Chardin. Eventually Telemond is called before an inquisition and they say, *We just need one clear statement of what you believe.* And he's like, *I believe in a personal god. I believe in the resurrection, but in the final analysis, what I believe in is the world. I believe in the goodness of the world. I believe in the values of the world. And in my final hour, mastering all doubts, this will be the faith that I return to.* And there is this

drum beat, and the inquisitions guys are like, *No, man*. He really doesn't believe in a personal god—he says he believes in it, but he believes more in something else and they know it. And the inquisition condemns him to silence. It's all great. I watch it like every three weeks. There is a moment where Telemond is like, *I love the church, but I hate her. I can't live within her but still I can't leave her*. That is one possible way of describing my relation to the university. Look. It's *dying*. You know, there was a moment in which the university might have made a stand against online learning, against these for-profit models, but they decided to not go against them, but to emulate them. That, what these places were doing was not against their most fundamental tenets, but that they were, in fact, doing their jobs better than they were. Still, there are a lot resources still collected in the university and we should try to get as much of it as we can.

Rail: When you start mapping out the people who've made substantive impact on "art discourse," far more than the race of the artists discussed or exhibited, the racial homogeneity of the people writing about art is shocking. I wonder if there is a connection between that and the way you've framed the black radical tradition as pitched in a distinctly non-visual direction. Comparing black art history with immensely important scholarship and thought on black music and poetry?

Moten: I mean, certainly in my house, growing up, music—and on a secondary level literature—were the dominant art forms. Then after that it would be dance and sports. But visual art wasn't a big deal. I remember reading this great essay by Baraka called "The Myth of a Negro Literature" where he's actually saying, *There is nothing in this literary tradition that approaches the music, in terms of its complexity and depth*. This was a commonplace formulation that seemed empirically true though there's a great new book by Brent Edwards called *Epistrophies: Jazz and The Literary Imagination* (Harvard, 2017) which calls that so-called empirical truth into severe question. Still, for many, the music is at the top. In a way, it's actually analogous to a similar hierarchization that happens in Western philosophical thinking, where music is conceived of as the highest art because in some ways it's the most abstract and therefore the most generalizable, and thus the most capable of transcending its own sensual base. Also, in so far as racism and race have generally been conceived of as primarily visual pathologies, that exacerbates this formulation.

But one of the artists whose work really opened up for me a whole new set of questions with regard to this is Thornton Dial. It's not just Thornton Dial but particularly how his work was collected and exhibited by the Arnett family. The most important thing for me is basically what Arnett has been saying, and it's the kind of thing that once you hear someone say it, it feels like it must be true: that there is in fact a powerful black visual tradition that was as intense and widespread as the music, and disruptive of normative conceptions of visual value, in the same way that the music is disruptive of normative conceptions of musical value—but it's really the yard art and bottle-trees and things that are so beyond the pale of what people thought of as visual art that nobody looked at it that way. I remember driving through places in Arkansas with my Grandfather—I wish I could go back in time as myself now and say, *look at all that art*. But back then it was just, *So-and-so is crazy*. Or, *So-and-so likes to do shit like that*. You know, Rauschenberg was driving around the South, he saw all that stuff.

The bottom line is there *is* a powerful and intense and rich tradition of Black visual art that is analogous to the music, just as there is a rich and intense tradition of black movement, that has its own relation to what some scholars more narrowly define as dance. And a black "verbal art" that harkens back to the way that Jakobson and the Russian Formalists used that term—*verbal art*—in a way that they didn't use the term "literature." Sometimes my old mentor at Berkeley, Roy Thomas, would use the term *orature* to describe it. That stuff was always there. So, I think that on the one

hand it is possible and necessary to critique ocular-centrism, and on the other hand it's also necessary and possible to recognize this rich tradition of black visual activity that has the same level of richness and complexity as everything else in black artistic and social life.

Rail: Do you think that the tools for properly approaching that tradition exists within the field of art criticism or history, or that it needs new language? Where will that come from?

Moten: Everything always needs new language. We constantly have to renew the language of any mode of inquiry. Some of the tools for that are in art history and some are in other places. If you've really got to do something, and it's really important, you don't give a shit where the tools come from. You get the tools wherever you can find them and then you deal with the consequences that attend those tools as you work with them. You don't reject tools out of hand just because they come from this or that place. To me, that means you aren't serious about getting the job done—you're serious about something else, maybe about some bullshit notion of purity, but you're not serious about getting the job done.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jarrett Earnest

JARRETT EARNEST is a writer who lives in New York.

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