

h a u n t

Fred Moten in Conversation
with Amanda McGough

AM Going into this conversation with you, selfishly, I should say that it is predicated by my attempt to think about where we are as a journal, in our second volume, and of course, symptomatically, where I am as an artist and thinker and person right now because these are the conditions under I choose to make things. Your work for me is so much about opening up space, or emancipating it, to not only see problems but to deal with them. This in mind, I'd like to talk about two of your books: *The Little Edges*, and *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* which you co-authored with Stefano Harney.

My understanding is that many of the poems in *The Little Edges* are based on or are a result of other works of art or people. Can you speak a little about the connection from one work to another? I am thinking in particular about "The Gramsci Monument" and my personal favorite, "All up on that T-shirt."

FM I was invited to read at the artist Thomas Hirschhorn's, "Gramsci Monument" in the Bronx, NY. The Dia Art Foundation commissioned it and they set me up in a nice spot in Manhattan. I went to go visit the monument the day before my reading, and at the time, Mayor Bloomberg appealed the stop and frisk ruling which said the practice was unconstitutional. And actually, that day, I was walking on the sidewalk and was stopped by NYPD. And the very next day, the Dia sent me a limousine to come pick me up just to go to the South Bronx, which is totally crazy. So it was a series of anomalies I suppose you could say that are maybe indicative of where I'm at.

But, I started writing the poem, actually, in the limousine. And then when I got there (and I wanted to write something specifically for the event because I was reading poetry there), I was sitting in the little part of "Gramsci Monument" that was a kind of library where they had these sort of artifacts of Gramsci's life. They had his slippers, and a comb he used to wear which he used for combing his hair while he was in prison. And in a weird way it kind of reminded me of being in a prison in Angola, the prison block in Louisiana, where they have these amazing artifacts of prison life including these combs the prisoners had actually fashioned into keys, which they used in order to escape. Anyway, so all of that stuff was kind of resonating in my head in a certain way. And then when I saw one my friends, one of my best friends who passed away not very long after this, José Muñoz, it just made the day even better, you know. So it was this kind of weird combination of, you know, just a typical combination I suppose of beauty and bullshit (*laughing*) that makes up the black social life. And the poem was kind of trying to work through that I suppose. But I would say that on the more, whatever, critical or literary realm, that poem and a bunch of the other poems are occasional poems.

And "All Up On That T-shirt" is, well- here was a series of poems that kind of culminates within the book that are sort of centered, I suppose you could say, around the keyword "all." So there's a bunch of different places from where that comes from. There's a really amazing essay on Milton that the critic William Empson wrote in which he talks about the word "all" that I kind of got obsessed with some years ago. And there's this great song by Al Jarreau called, "After All," that I've probably listened to for five times a week for the last 12 years (*laughing*). And then there's this really amazing use of the term "all" in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents In A Life of A Slave Girl*. Also in Equiano - there's an interesting narrative. And I was kind of working through the permutations, you know, of those sorts of variations on the word "all" through these poems.

And then "All Up On That T-shirt", I guess, I was sort of, you know, I guess I was trying to bring it back to some more everyday kind of walking down the street looking at people kind of thing. I mean, that's one of the best things in the world walking down the street looking at folks. And in this instance, I was also thinking about this great little poem by Robert Herrick's that always loved called "Upon Julia's Clothes." I was thinking about that too. So there's maybe this kind of, maybe, erotic element to it as well, you know.

(*each laughing*)

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AM Wellll, "All Up on That T-Shirt" is my favorite to read aloud. It reminds me of my oral visual patterning. I feel that to make sense of most of the poems in this collection you need to read them aloud. You have to.

FM Yeah, I think so too. I have to read things aloud and I certainly have to read things aloud while I'm in the process of writing. That's a big big huge part of the process. For instance, when I read aloud over and over again I tape myself reading so that I can hear myself when I'm not speaking it. It's always the process of trying to figure out the proper, you know, the right alignment of your ear, and your eye, and your breath, and also your lips, and your tongue, and you know, your mouth. It's not to say you're trying to get them all absolutely in sync. But you're always trying to figure out what the right kind of calibration is.

AM A little less than a year ago, you read from *The Little Edges* at the Underground Museum in Los Angeles. And before you began reading aloud, you introduced the work by saying your work comes from a space of sentimentality. I wonder if you could say a few words about this as a position of critique or as a resistance?

FM Soooo, I've thought about a couple different ways. I'm a black writer and in my tradition, one of the fundamental elements is a slave narrative. And slave narrative as a genre is kind of inextricably bound to the sort of sentimental tradition in American literature. And more than that, it's bound by -- even if you go back to someone like Olaudah Equiano (who in a lot of ways his work kind of is an analog to maybe someone like Laurence Sterne), Equiano's work is the work of a man of feeling. And this of course becomes a complicated phenomenon because so much of slave narrative is trying to articulate and instantiate the notion of the slave or of the African as capable of reason. So you are trying to make an argument for the capacity for reason, which is to say, the capacity for critical thinking or for a certain kind of critique. And the age of Kant kind of codifies that. You've got these texts, which are trying to establish the bonafides of African rationality, but with any kind of sentiment language.

So the interplay between reason and sentiment, between reason and feeling, is a kind of tension that animates the literature in often all of these ways. So part of what I was trying to do is to understand that kind of relationship and to understand that kind of calibration. And in the end what it meant for me was to try to make a plea for sentiment. To understand that sentimentality or that sentiment is a fundamental aspect of a certain kind of, lets say, experimental strain in writing in general, but in black writing in particular. The way of thinking about it, now, or I should say - the way that Stefano and I have been thinking about it together over the last 10 or 12 years - is that maybe the word that I will use more often than not,

instead of sentiment, is **feel**. And one way to think about it that its this intense sort of way of imagining a kind of rematerialization of sentiment. Often, sentiment gets quoted and used in sort of an abstract ways, and in ways that are detached, you know, from what we've been calling and thinking about under the rubric of hapticality. So there's intensity in the relationship between feel and flesh that we're trying to see through and work out. And of course that is already embedded in all of this important kind of theoretical work. So really trying to think and understand the interplay between feel and flesh as a way of thinking. And specifically, as a modality of social thought.

AM More toward what you just said, can you set up the social space or modality of your book, *The Undercommons*?

FM The book itself is a particular material form of hanging out. It is the material form of thoughtful and playful hanging out, which is another way of talking about friendship. That hanging out takes place in very particular material conditions, often under duress; under duress by forces, which have a murderous intent toward it. And that murderous intent toward hanging out is not precluded by the intention to exploit, or to emulate hanging out as a whole surplus. So, it's not as if it is all pretty like hanging out that day at the "Gramsci Monument." It is a fugitive kind of way. You gather together intermittently to try and figure out a way out and to overturn it. But you have to understand the condition under which it occurs and the difficulties that mark those conditions. But you have to know it. You have to know something about what you are, and who we are, and what's good and beautiful and disruptive and reconstructive about that. One way to put it would be, it's a way of mobilizing a way to feel; mobilizing sentiment over and against the kind of often self constructive forces of critique which manifests itself for us, now, often, as a mode of regulation. Even for the ones who think that they're trying to mobilize it as a way of insurgents.

AM Relatedly, in the *The Undercommons*, you take up the issue of study. And as I understand it, the activity of study is not to be understood as being contained by a university, but that it is of course possible to arrive at alternative and varied histories of thought. I can think of many different constellations of circumstances under duress, where I've studied and have been changed, maybe even in more meaningful and concentrated ways than are even possible for me at UCI, for instance. And yet I still go here. Very recently, there has been a prime example of a group of students who have found the university unfit for study and for and their participation as students because of issues dealing in funding, curriculum, and faculty structure.

Can you comment on the significance of the entire class of 2016 MFA candidates at USC's Roski School of Fine Arts collective decision to withdraw from the program? And, what is gained from this kind of distancing?

FM Well, that's a really good question, you know. And I'm happy to try think about it for a minute in precisely the way that you've made it possible to think. Last night, Stefano was in town and we were at this cultural studies Association conference at UC Riverside. The theme of the conference and of the sort of plenary session we were in was: another university is possible. So, Stefano kind of set off the plenary session by saying that maybe the question that we need to ask first is whether or not this university is possible.

AM Yes.

FM In other words, while we seek out an alternative to the already existing university, we simply assume the existence of the already existing university. Maybe it doesn't exist. That institution itself is under such duress and maybe it really doesn't exist anymore in the way that we think that it does. And I think that is true. It's falling apart. It's falling apart under the weight of its own voraciousness and there's nothing that we can do about that falling apart. I don't know that it is anything we can do to accelerate it, and I don't know there's anything we can do to stop it. But, with that said, Stefano started thinking that the university is a kind of corpse. It is dead. It's a dead institutional body. And what we live in right now is the university's decay. We are embedded in its decay. And for a long time we thought of this decay is a kind of refuge. And just now when you were talking it kind of reminded me of this amazing thing -- in Louise Erdrich's novel, "The Plague of Doves," these characters up in the North Dakota or Minnesota plains and it's winter, and it's freezing, and they find this dead buffalo. It's a recently killed Buffalo -- a mother buffalo who's decaying body is literally used as a refuge to warm themselves and to keep themselves alive. And I feel like, for certain amount of time, the university has been this dead decaying body that a certain kind of intellectual life has had to find or seek refuge in. But, you can't stay in a dead decaying body forever. You can't.

So for me, the 2016 class leaving is a necessary moment of Exodus. They can no longer survive in the decaying body of that program. And that program can no longer survive in the decaying body of USC. And that decay takes the form of a sort of transfiguration. The university as a place for thought or as a refuge for study - it just doesn't exist anymore and it's kind of crazy to keep acting like it does.

I think some of these decaying bodies are further along in their decay than others. I think USC is much further along in its decay than maybe UCI and certainly maybe than UCR. And there are reasons for that which are hard to discern or possible to understand but I don't think it's a mystery why this is the case. I think a whole hell of a lot of it has to do -- you know, the condition of the university as a decaying institutional body is in large part, almost completely as a matter of fact, a function of the students in the university. I mean the undergraduates. And they are a specific set of undergraduates who continue to give what appears to be a kind of life to that decaying institutional body in a way that is more intense than other groups of students. Another way to put it will be, I feel like my students at UCR are more capable of animating at least on a certain kind of level that decaying institutional body, then say, my students at USC were when I taught there and certainly, more than my students at Duke were when I taught there. And there are reasons for that. Just ask who these students are and where they come from. With all that said, the main point is, yeah, the 2016 class had to leave. There was no sustenance for them there. And there's just a practical matter of can they live into their work there? Answer: no.

Now the question becomes, from when -- and we can look at that movement, that moment of Exodus as the discursive moment; it is a statement they are making about university as such and not just their own specific relationship to that university. And we can move by way of that statement and enjoy and think through its implications. And I think that's an important aspect of it to, but, the more important aspect of it is that in so far as they had to leave, how, well, let's say, let's call it -- how will our already existing university of study in our area where we are now, how are we going to sustain them? That's the real question now. Because they want to live and also do the work and they want to think, you know.

So for me I'm interested in not only understanding the discursive content of what they did, but I'm interested in the practical question of, what do we do now to sustain them? And in sustaining them, how is that going to infuse with what we tried to do with some new life. That's what I'm trying to get involved in as much as I can. Like, seriously, do they have places to stay? Are we going to set up some kind of programs or a place of study for them so that they can live and do their work? And will that be the occasion to really making some new stuff, you know? And to the extent that I can say that I find it kind of refuge and a certain kind of sustenance in the sort of decaying institutional body in which an i work, I need to figure out ways to transfer some of that sustenance to folks who can no longer stay.

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AM Well, as a gesture of giving sustenance to others, I have one last question: What are you reading right now?

FM Ha ha! oh man, aaaahhhhh... Well, let's see. I just got a new book, John Keane called *Counter Narratives* and I just got it in the mail server really excited about reading that. I just read the first couple pages and I'm already hooked into it. And in general in terms of, like a kind of, maybe, you know... the two books over the last year that I've been really immersed in and keep going back to again and again are: Oscar Zeta's, *The Revolt of The Cockroach People*. And there's a group called Design Art Architecture Residency that's based in the west bank based in Bethlehem, and they have a book called *Architecture after Revolution*. And i've been kind of, just, living in those two books over the last year. And just been situating myself in the implications of those books.

AM Thank you for living in those books, Fred.

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