



*the committee for the study of
desert alchemy*

THE UNDERCOMMONS

FUGITIVE PLANNING & BLACK STUDY

STEFANO HARNEY & FRED MOTEN

0. THE WILD BEYOND: WITH AND FOR THE UNDERCOMMONS

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unimaginable: we must, on behalf of this alignment, refuse that which was first refused to us and in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility and do so separate from the fantasies nestled into rights and respectability. Instead, our fantasies must come from what Moten and Harney citing Frank B. Wilderson III call “the hold”: “And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it.” The hold here is the hold in the slave ship but it is also the hold that we have on reality and fantasy, the hold they have on us and the hold we decide to forego on the other, preferring instead to touch, to be with, to love. If there is no church in the wild, if there is study rather than knowledge production, if there is a way of being together in brokenness, if there is an undercommons, then we must all find our way to it. And it will not be there where the wild things are, it will be a place where refuge is not necessary and you will find that you were already in it all along.

Love,
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REFERENCES

The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (NY: Semiotexte, 2009).

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– not as a masculinist surge or an armed confrontation. Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine. Moten and Harney propose that we prepare now for what will come by entering into *study*. Study, a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you, prepares us to be embedded in what Harney calls “the with and for” and allows you to spend less time antagonized and antagonizing.

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.” The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape, “exit” as Paolo Virno might put it, or “exodus” in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is a being in motion that has learned that “organizations are obstacles to organising ourselves” (The Invisible Committee in *The Coming Insurrection*) and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned. 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 undercommon appositionality, 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?” I think this is what Jay-Z and Kanye West (another collaborative unit of study) call “no church in the wild.”

For Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, we must make common cause with those desires and (non) positions that seem crazy and



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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, which is also what Moten and Harney call “debt.” Well, given that debt is sometimes a history of giving, at other times a history of taking, at all times a history of capitalism and given that debt also signifies a promise of ownership but never delivers on that promise, we have to understand that debt is something that cannot be paid off. Debt, as Harney puts it, presumes a kind of individualized relation to a naturalized economy that is predicated upon exploitation. Can we have, he asks, another sense of what is owed that does not presume a nexus of activities like recognition and acknowledgment, payment and gratitude. Can debt “become a principle of elaboration”?

gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.” The subversive intellectual, we learn, is unprofessional, uncollegial, passionate and disloyal. The subversive intellectual is neither trying to extend the university nor change the university, the subversive intellectual is not toiling in misery and from this place of misery articulating a “general antagonism.” In fact, the subversive intellectual enjoys the ride and wants it to be faster and wilder; she does not want a room of his or her own, she wants to be in the world, in the world with others and making the world anew. Moten insists: “Like Deleuze. I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*. And I plan to stay a believer, like Curtis Mayfield. But that’s beyond me, and even beyond me and Stefano, and out into the world, the other thing, the other world, the joyful noise of the scattered, scatted eschaton, the undercommon refusal of the academy of misery.”

The mission then for the denizens of the undercommons is to recognize that when you seek to make things better, you are not just doing it for the Other, you must also be doing it for yourself. While men may think they are being “sensitive” by turning to feminism, while white people may think they are being right on by opposing racism, no one will really be able to embrace the mission of tearing “this shit down” until they realize that the structures they oppose are not only bad for some of us, they are bad for all of us. Gender hierarchies are bad for men as well as women and they are really bad for the rest of us. Racial hierarchies are not rational and ordered, they are chaotic and nonsensical and must be opposed by precisely all those who benefit in any way from them. Or, as Moten puts it: “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?”

The coalition unites us in the recognition that we must change things or die. All of us. We must all change the things that are fucked up and change cannot come in the form that we think of as “revolutionary”

to refuse to call others to order, to refuse interpellation and the re-instantiation 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. And so, when we refuse the call to order – the teacher picking up the book, the conductor raising his baton, the speaker asking for silence, the torturer tightening the noose – we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth.

These kinds of examples get to the heart of Moten and Harney’s world of the undercommons – the undercommons is not a realm where we rebel and we create critique; it is not a place where we “take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them.” 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.”

In the essay that many people already know best from this volume, “The University and the Undercommons,” Moten and Harney come closest to explaining their mission. Refusing to be for or against the university and in fact marking the critical academic as the player who holds the “for and against” logic in place, Moten and Harney lead us to the “Undercommons of the Enlightenment” where subversive intellectuals engage both the university and fugitivity: “where the work

Moten links economic debt to the brokenness of being in the interview with Stephen Shukaitis; he acknowledges that some debts should be paid, and that much is owed especially to black people by white people, and yet, he says: “I also know that what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can’t be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new.” The undercommons do not come to pay their debts, to repair what has been broken, to fix what has come undone.

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.

Let’s come at this by another path. In the melancholic and visionary 2009 film version of Maurice Sandak’s *Where The Wild Things Are* (1963), Max, the small seeker who leaves his room, his home, his family to find the wild beyond, finds a world of lost and lonely beasts and they promptly make him their king. Max is the first king the wild things have had whom they did not eat and who did not, in turn, try to eat them; and the beasts are the first grown things that Max has met who want his opinion, his judgment, his rule. Max’s power is that he is small while they are big; he promises the beasts that he has no plans to eat them and this is more than anyone has ever promised them. He promises that he will find ways through and around and

will “slip through cracks” and re-crack the cracks if they fill up. He promises to keep sadness at bay and to make a world with the wild creatures that “roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws.” That Max fails to make the wild things happy or to save them or to make a world with them is less important than the fact that he found them and he recognized in them the end of something and potentially the path to an alternative to his world. The wild things were not the utopian creatures of fairy tales, they were the rejected and lost subjects of the world Max had left behind and, because he shuttles between the Oedipal land where his mother rules and the ruined world of the wild, he knows the parameters of the real – he sees what is included and what is left out and he is now able to set sail for another place, a place that is neither the home he left nor the home to which he wants to return.

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,