

Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and
Stephen Shukaitis

Refusing Completion: A Conversation

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 [Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stephen Shukaitis](#)
[Refusing Completion: A Conversation](#)

01/14

*In 2012 I sat down to have a conversation with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney that was planned to be included in their proposed book project on academic labor. The publication that resulted, *The Undercommons*,¹ was indeed about academic labor, but also much more than that. Emerging from their longstanding friendship, it explored questions of blackness and aesthetics, logistics and fugitivity, and the dispersal sociality that theorized modes of study all throughout life. Our discussion ended up functioning as a sort of guide to the book, welcoming people into what could be a somewhat bewildering experience. Perhaps then it is not surprising that the way their work has been taken up is just as varied as the text itself.*

*Last August, in preparation for the publication of their follow-up book, *All Incomplete*, we decided to have another conversation. In the years since, much had happened: Fred had moved across the US and then to New York City, while Stefano worked in Singapore for several years before relocating to Brazil. Despite that, what resulted is more a continuation of a discussion, a set of ideas, and friendship, than a theoretical exegesis. But perhaps today that is what is more needed than anything else, to find and open spaces to sit and be together in our incompleteness, to abide together.*

– SS

Stephen Shukaitis: When we sat down to chat before, I started – somewhat mistakenly – with an almost social science–esque attempt to ask you to define your terms and concepts. This was entirely the wrong approach – as that’s not the way you two work or think together – but also ended up being a useful line of questions in that it created space for you to differentiate what you do, and how your writing lends itself to a different way of being understood and inhabited.

For this book, *All Complete*, I was thinking it would be good to find a different way in, another way to invite people into the space your joint thinking and writing creates – a way that gestures towards the sociality that developed with and through the text.

And that leads me to ask: What’s the tempo here? What’s the rhythm, the meter? Would you think readers might be better served by subvocalizing the text using Rakim’s sense of cadence? Or maybe something closer to Julius Eastman’s pulsing minimalism, but veering off in unexpected directions at times? I’m not asking this in a flippant or glib way, but more thinking of how your joint writing is as much informed by a poetic sense as a conceptual one, or maybe a conceptual sense that always starts from and develops out of a share shared rhythm, whether

02/14



Zun Lee, 2010-2015. All Rights Reserved. See <http://www.zunlee.com>.



Zun Lee, 2010-2015. All Rights Reserved.



Zun Lee, 2010-2015. All Rights Reserved.

musically, or of living together.

To give a bit more context, I remember the first time I read *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller. I didn't like it at all. I just didn't get it. And then I listened to some audio of him reading parts of it. And then when I read it, it was much different because I realized that cadence also shows you the points of emphasis. It's almost like you have to subvocalize Miller when you read the text. Otherwise, it just doesn't have anything like the same feel. To me, reading your work is similar; you need to find the feel to find a way into the text rather than just reading the words.

Fred Moten: Well, I guess I'll start this time just so I can remark on the fact that I like it better when Stefano starts. And maybe we've kind of fallen into that – I don't know if "rhythm" is the right word. I like when you start us off, man. I like when you count off.

Stefano Harney: When I start off talking at our talks, going first, so to speak, I'm really just continuing. I'm picking up where we never left off. The talks are an important moment in our ongoing rehearsal. So, in that sense you are right. I'm just picking up the beat. And Fred just comes in on top of that, and I remember Fred's great phrase, "improvisation is making nothing out of something." We have to do it this way – improvisationally – because we never left practice. Because practice is where you can be with everyone, where you can be with your friends.

And the other thing is everybody already knows this beat, and the hook. We don't travel and talk to bring something new. Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich called themselves "pilgrims of the obvious." And that's what we are bringing with our itinerant ways – the good news people already have, the obvious. Now, we aren't comparing ourselves to them, except insofar as like them we want to retain the emphasis on the obvious, and to avoid being confused with the message. It's not about us. We accept going down the road, travelling on, as a breath of the common wind, as Julius Scott would teach us. We're happy if our rehearsal, our rhythm as you call it, the strangeness of our dub, as Eddie George would say, comes through to people as a kind of insurgent information about the obvious, a cadence in that common wind.

FM: There's two things. There's a poetics to the writing. Our acquaintance began as a function of a shared interest in poetry. That shared interest is old and sort of ancestral, so to speak, because we get it from our parents. But

also, we got to know each other in terms of a certain kind of engagement with a tradition of experimental poetry in North America. Those poets remain really important and crucial for us – as poets but also as thinkers.

Our friendship grew under the protection of our friend and mentor Bill Corbett, a poet who further immersed us in that tradition but who also lived that tradition. There is a poetics embedded in the criticism of poets who are in and extend that tradition – H.D., Zukofsky, Olson, Duncan, Mackey, Howe, Baraka. We grew up under the influence of their criticism, rather than under the influence of what people nowadays call critique. We were interested in the criticism that was being offered by poets more than in the various forms of literary or even theoretical critique. And to the extent that we were interested in theory or philosophy, we were always interested in folks who revel in their poetic sensibilities, whether that was James or Derrida or Glissant or Wynter or Spillers. And we gravitated towards the poetic or the literary sensibility that animates Marx's work. We were looking for poetry, or for the poetic, in everything we read, and the criticism that got us started helped us in that.

Marx, like Zukofsky, is a deep and playful reader of Shakespeare. There's a trace of Shakespeare in how he develops this interplay of critique and criticism in his work, and that was always something in which we were trying to be involved. And that goes back to something that was there for Stefano in his relation to his dad, and for me in my relation to my mom. It meant also being interested in the poetics of everyday speech, and the common tongues of the people that we grew up around. We're just fascinated by the rhythm and the music of their speech. You can talk about this as a kind of vernacular poetics, particularly with regard to the black tradition, but you could broaden that vernacular notion out in the ways that William Carlos Williams does as he tries to imagine a new American speech. When Baraka, say, takes up that charge he's trying to make it ante-American and, at the end of the day, anti-American, too.

So, there are some traditions that we're in. The best way to put it is the way Baraka put it – you have to sound like something. You know, there's writing that doesn't sound like anything. It's drone-ish. Rightly, Derrida teaches us not to think of writing as epiphenomenal to speech or parasitical on speech, and yet there is the kind of writing that appears to have no relation to speech whatsoever and to the way that speech is always irreducible to a single voice. We want to make sure our writing sounds like something

04/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Steyphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

where sounding like something is sounding like something broken or cracked or dubbed or overdubbed. And because we're overdubbed – because, as Stefano says, we're visitors, who are always visiting, and who are always being visited – we are always speaking names, always being spoken by them, always working in this un-naming and re-naming, maybe both in but also against the grain of how poetry bears naming as a kind of power. Maybe there was no way for us not to sound like something, given the various places where we're coming from. Maybe we can also tap into some kinda poetic force that sound bears against poetry's nominating power. Maybe we can just hang with how folks hold something back of what they hold out to the poet's lovingly extractive ear. We don't know. Anyway, there's that sense of a poetics in the writing that's also a phonics of the writing. But then there's this other question of rhythm that has to do with the fact that our writing is a form of correspondence. We like to think we're involved in a kind of musical correspondence, like we're trading fours. You know, Stefano takes four bars and I take four bars; or, probably it's more like he takes four bars and I take forty-four. But also, there's the problem that the normal rhythm of taking fours is predicated on proximate presence, on being there with the person with whom you're trading. And most of the time we're not there together in the same place and we're not playing at the same time. There's all these time lags and rhythmic irregularities that come into play – a sort of involuntary sync of patience. And for a while being in different places has meant being in different seasons. We've been learning how to negotiate that – not overcome it but actually ride it. We use the gaps and the pauses as ways to think more clearly and more effectively with one another and by way of one another and past the separation of one and another. There's a rhythm. Definitely. But it's an irregular rhythm. And not only irregular compared to some metronomic norm but irregular in being overpopulated. The beautiful thing about the polyrhythm is that even though it's just the two of us, as Bill Withers and Grover Washington Jr. would say, it's way more than that. Not only our parents, our families, our partners, and the various children in our lives, but also all these other people that we're always working with and talking with and thinking with and reading with. There's always a lot of sound in our head, and in our hands, too.

SS: To me it seems rather than sitting down and planning out a book, it's almost like things happen with you just having ongoing conversations and spending time together, and then every so often there's a congealment of what already happened. So rather than things being planned, they just emerge. Maybe it's like

the Brötzmann Tentet where they started with planned and written compositions before tearing them up and letting all the voices gathered find their own form.

SH: Well, this book, *All Incomplete*, is necessarily different. We had so many opportunities – as a direct result of *The Undercommons* – to travel, to turn up, and just to be with people who shared our passions and our commitments, and we found out that we shared and were shared with all these people because of *The Undercommons*, because of its being free and available and produced by this autonomous, militant press. In other words, because of you, Stevphen. And as a result of this rich experience coming out of *The Undercommons*, we knew we were going to put together another book of writing because we wanted to stay afloat and adrift in this common wind. So, this book, *All Incomplete*, is a peripatetic book of influences and circumstances, and sharedness.

Also, with this book we've moved on to what we often call the General Baker stance in our talks. General Baker and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers – and again this is an inspiration not a comparison – did not worry about whether the Ford plant was a good or bad institution or about their complicity with the Ford Motor Company. And we don't worry about the university anymore. For the League, the Ford plant or the Dodge plant was a job that sustained them as they attempted to abolish Ford or Dodge or take them over in such a way that it amounted to their abolition. Of course, this is a contradiction, to draw a check from the place you want to destroy, for us as it was for the League. But as Cedric Robinson was fond of saying, the task then is to heighten the contradiction. And that is what we have to try to do, rather than worry about governance or the sharpness of our critique of the university or our complicity with it. The university has to go, and until the day it goes I want some money out of it, and I say that as someone who has been out of a wage from the university for two years now.

Okay, so under the guidance of General Baker's stance, we could stop all the critique and we could start to write about what we loved, the ongoing red and black abolition, and this could take the form of criticism instead of critique, criticism like what collectives do because they want more collectivity. In other words, this kind of love I am talking about is not liberal, individuated love. It's the love made up of joy and pain. All incomplete. And you can't love something or someone by yourself. To do that is really to abandon that someone or something to

05/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 | Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stevphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

the subject/object relation, to purity, to separation. We have to love commonly, collectively, entangled in what we are doing. That's why this book has all these voices: Denise [da Silva], Zun [Lee], me and Fred, and all those who made us possible, too. Beyond that this book is a book by the band, assembled with Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, with the Center for Convivial Research and Autonomy, with the Institute for Physical Sociology to name a few. I heard Marquis Bey talk about how useful he found the prefix "non-" and I am going to borrow it from him. These collectives strive not to be collections of the interpersonal. What we are trying to make is a nonpersonal band, nonpersonal families.

SS: There are certain images you use several times. One of them is the phrase "a conference of birds." Is that referring to the literal birds behind you there in Brasilia, Steve, or is it the poem by that Sufi mystic whose name I can never remember?

FM: There's Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, and then there's Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*, which echoes and transmutes it. And eventually there's a great Dave Holland album called *Conference of the Birds*. We think a lot about murmur, what Du Bois calls "the murmur of ages," and we think about murmuration, that amazing shift of social formation that birds do in the air.

SS: Like over Brighton pier.

FM: "Murmuration" is a cool word because it bears the trace of the sound. It's beautiful when you watch those movements, but it's even more beautiful when you hear them. The internal differentiation of the swarm is absolute wealth.

SS: But you can get on Julius Eastman's album *Feminine* where at the beginning of the album you can hear the sounds of setting up the equipment and there's the sounds of Eastman serving soup. And that's the first part of the album, just him walking around serving soup. Eventually they start playing. But it's like the serving of the soup and the sounds of setting up are just as integral to the music they play. There's a sleigh bell used to set the rhythm, but you could also say that the sociality expressed in those sounds fit it as well.

FM: Definitely. Eastman is like this amazing intra-action of Fluxus and disco. So, the serving of food, and of the sounds that emerge in service, are what he shares with Benjamin Patterson. The banquet. The rent party. The symposium. The food of love. Play on! And it's cool that there's a

backbeat in so much of Eastman's music. That's the sociality of the club, that social sound that you get in his and Arthur Russell's music. It was all part of that same ferment, that mid-to-late seventies New York thing, or swarm, where the lines got so blurry between disco and punk and free jazz. They're all hanging out in the neighborhood, moving, sounding, like birds.

SS: That's the same context that Autonomedia emerges from, that period when in the early issues of *Semiotext(e)* you have things like the "Schizo-Culture" issue where Deleuze is paired with the Ramones.

FM: And beyond that, as my partner, Laura, shows in her book on James and Hélio Oiticica, who was in New York in the seventies. One of the people Oiticica hangs out with is the photographer Martine Barrat, who came over for the "Schizo-Culture" conference with Deleuze and Guattari and who remains in New York, at one point living and working with the great drummer Charles "Bobo" Shaw, who was a stalwart in the free jazz loft scene at that time, a member of the Black Artists Group and the Human Arts Ensemble. So, all of these overlaps, and obviously at that same moment hip-hop is emerging in the South Bronx and there's all this relay between the South Bronx and Soho, like the relay between Harlem and the Village that Baldwin and Delany and Adrian Piper all live and talk about. Oiticica's loft was right down Canal Street from Cecil Taylor's and George Maciunas's. All that stuff going on right there in the midst of all kinds of legitimate and illegitimate and semi-legitimate economic activity. It was the street of knockoffs, but the market became a shopping mall. Anyway, all that is part of our tradition, our poetics, too.

SS: Let me follow that up with a sort of slightly different angle. Can you tell me more about the photographs used in the book? I'm not just asking about the images themselves, but also how you start working with Zun Lee. How did that come about? And I'm asking that because it seems clear to me that these aren't just images added with the thought that it would make the book look a bit nicer or something like that. They're not superficial. Rather it seems more like there's a more fundamental process going on where the work being done by those images seems to be extending and deepening the same thing that is happening in the words as well. In that sense the images are just as fundamental a part of the book as the text.

FM: First of all, and most importantly, Zun is a friend. Not just our friend. He practices

06/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Steyphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation



Zun Lee, 2010-2015. All Rights Reserved.



Zun Lee, 2010-2015. All Rights Reserved.

friendship. That's his work. If he's also an artist and a photographer, and if he's also been a doctor and a musician, that has been an extension of the friendship he practices. And we wanted to practice with him, and to document that practice with him. Another thing, which goes with some of the ways we're trying to deepen our understanding of logistics and management and improvement in *All Incomplete*, is that Zun is familiar with the techniques and protocols and concepts of business. There are certain elements of the vocabulary of business and business theory that Stefano works with that Zun knows in a way that's much more intimate and thorough than how I know them. He'd been involved in work that was emerging from the same impulse to think through that vocabulary. So, the duo becomes a trio, but we were always playing the same music. Our concerns were already entangled, which ratchets up and intensifies the differences that were already animating the work Stefano and I had been doing and that we never wanted to suppress. We only wanted to accentuate those differences. Zun adds to and complicates those differences, which are also affinities. They are differences that we share; they're not differences that come between us.

At the same time, Zun *is* our friend. Maybe some of it is just luck, the luck of meeting this or that particular person. Sometimes you meet people and you just know – that's my friend. I just met him, but I can tell already he's my friend. That's certainly how it was with Zun. We recognized in each other that we had already been friends, that we had been working on stuff together already. And so, I remember really vividly when Tonika Sealy-Thompson and my kids and I went up to see a show of Zun's work at the Bronx Documentary Center, where he was working, close to where he had been living, in study, with people in the neighborhood, particularly with fathers in the South Bronx. He was interested in photographing, let's call it, the rich impossibility of black fatherhood, as it converges and diverges with black motherhood, the question of which Spillers takes up with such force. It felt like Zun was exploring black fatherhood as an extension of the black maternal function. The fatherhood he was concerned with had been touched, handed, by the mother. And that's the fatherhood I've been trying and faithfully failing to perform. Anyway, it just felt like we'd been working together, and that's what we immediately saw in Zun's work. We realized that we had been friends, that a friendship had existed since before we met. That's the way to put it. We feel like that friendship is expressed in the book. It's really cool. And we feel the same with Denise's preface. That's a longer-standing

friendship. It's almost like this thing where you realize friendship is what survives knowing one another. Friendship comes before knowing one another and it survives knowing one another. It survives the rules of individuation that incarcerates the differences that actually make friendship possible. It both anticipates and survives individuation. It survives individuation by giving the lie to the idea that difference comes in individual units, that it comes as a function of particles, rather than forces.

SS: That reminds me of the discussion in the beginning of the book about property and dispossession. There you flip the usual narrative to say that rather than talking about how to make things common, it's more the case that that's their default state, that sharing is the default. Rather it's the default sharing which needs to be broken down and individuated. To me that changes a few things in that it gestures less towards needing to find ways to collaborate and more towards the necessity of blocking and stopping the processes which have stopped us from collaborating and sharing.

SH: Yes. You know it's a Mario Tronti formulation, "the workers first, then capital." Sharing first, then individuation, locates the energy source correctly. Collective resistance, even when practiced in singular acts, is the engine. But this is also a George Jackson and a Gilles Deleuze formulation. That is to say it is an ontological formulation even when it is not necessarily a temporal formulation. The riot precedes the police. Love precedes its regulation into "love" and hate. Cedric Robinson calls this the preservation of the ontological totality, the proliferation of life before, after, and in-excess-of its historically brutal regulation and/as individuation. And it is because life (and nonlife) proliferate even as death. That repeating flash in/out of time, the flash of sharing, of love, of riot, and then the coming into being of an already latent regulation is everything. Because that's where the nonlocal is, that's black quantum life, that's the fugitive wormhole, the whole physical sociality that Denise teaches us. That's where the order of one and the other, resistance and regulation, gets disordered, continually, where symmetry slips, and in a flash there's a party going on. We work under the assumption that we are shared even if it only comes to us in the flash of a match, of a smile, or a touch. We work under the assumption that we have what we need though it is constantly stolen from us because we must give it away, as Fumi Okiji reminds us. We have what we need and, now, what we need to do is to want what we have. We work under the assumption that we are constantly being driven

08/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stephen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

apart but that this is always ultimately unsuccessful at every level because we're not apart. Not only do we fail, even the most exalted of us, at individuation, but also this attempt to destroy our sharing destroys the earth. We work under the assumption that the making of the world – which is none other than the grandest and most grotesque project of separating us – is genocidal and geocidal. And we work under the assumption that in the face of all this carnage, if we will have black study it has us.

FM: Maybe what we always also want to be doing is operating under the assumption that when it comes to thought, rigor and generosity are not separate from one another. That “intra-action,” to use Karen Barad’s term, is intra-active with another: that of black study and black studies. That’s where it’s at, as the Godfather would say. That’s what we’re interested in. And that’s also where we’re at in our lives, in our intellectual life together, and in our social life together as friends. It’s just that the syntax and the semantics that we have been given in order to try to understand that double intra-action is inadequate for the most part. We ask ourselves, how do we understand the relation between black study and black studies, and then we have to take two months to try to overcome the fact that “relation” ain’t the right word. In other words, the intra-action of black study and black studies requires something like what Barad calls “experimental metaphysics.” Or, maybe another way to put it is that what’s required are some experiments in anti-metaphysics. Maybe black study is just this continual experiment in anti-metaphysics.

SH: *All Incomplete* is also about the next town, about what we heard about the next town, about the next experiment already going on, continually as Fred says. And so, for instance, I’m very grateful to the current generation of Guyanese feminist, activist scholars such as Kamala Kempadoo and Alissa Trotz who have made more available the work of the great Guyanese feminist activist intellectual Andaiye.

We’ve been studying and teaching with Andaiye’s *The Point Is to Change the World*, and also with *Lessons from the Damned by the Damned*, the latter a collectively written book about a freedom school set up by black women in the late 1960s and early ’70s in Newark. Now, Andaiye talks about the research she did as part of Red Thread, an independent cross-racial organization of women in Guyana. She talks about how the poor and working class women who are keeping diaries on their social reproductive labor were doing research that she,

Andaiye, could never do as well as them. Then, from the *Damned*, we hear the story of a key turning point in the freedom school. The women running the school have met some middle-class, teacher-qualified black women at a Vietnam protest and invited them back to the school. Much is gained by the encounter, but after a few weeks the women who run the school say something to the effect of, we loved them, but we had to send them away because they could not believe that we – in our position as black working-class women – were better placed to theorize this world. If we take these lessons from Andaiye and the *Damned* seriously, maybe we can get out of some of the metaphysical assumptions of our positions and roles. What Andaiye and the *Damned* are saying is that poor people, poor black and Indian and indigenous women, in these most vital instances were *better* researchers and *better* theorists than those of us who are traditionally and institutionally trained as such and rise through the “meritocracy.”

So, we have to find some other reason for doing what we are doing – cause it is not because we are the best at it – and so we have to find some other way, beyond this metaphysics of meritocracy we inhabit. And from there it becomes clear that we are not the ones to sit in judgment, and this means *we can practice nothing but* open admissions and open promotion in the places where we teach, whether elementary schools, universities, or art academies. And what we would do is support the primary theorists and researchers as they come through, should they wish to come through, and should they wish to stay.

And isn’t this serving the people? After all, serving the people never meant serving them breakfast. It meant being at the service of the people, because the people held what we all need, precariously, with only partial access sometimes themselves to this wealth, knowledge, and practice of how to learn about society and how to analyze it because it needs to be changed. That is why it was called a party of self-defense: to defend all this, not to imagine that the party was going to generate the wealth itself. Service becomes the answer to all the anxieties about allyship and class. And service is debt, partiality, incompleteness in action.

SS: Your use of incompleteness reminds me in certain ways of how before you talked about debt not as this crushing condition but as something that, in being unpayable, is the very principle of sociality. So debt not as IMF-backed austerity measures, but debt as all those things we owe to each other. The way you talk about

09/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Steyphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

incompleteness strikes me as similar in that it's not incompleteness as a problem – like there's something lacking in myself which is fulfilled through another person – but rather as a permanent state which is more of a blessing, or something to be preserved. It's not something that needs to be dealt with as a problem. Is that a fair reading?

SS: Yes, I think that's right.

FM: Have you ever seen the film *Jerry Maguire*? The title character is this brutal drone of individuation whose whole life ends up depending upon his exploitation of a black football player, which he accomplishes with the help of a female assistant whom he later marries. The movie begins with Jerry Maguire being a successfully individuated man who's complete, or thinks he is, until he gets stripped of all that. In order to find himself he's got to attach himself in a more or less straight Hegelian mode to one who's not quite really one, this player who shows out on and off the playing field while also modeling an authentic and loving family life, all of which reveals him never to have been the kind of free subject Jerry used to be. They call this a romantic comedy.

It's the story of the man who at the end of his personal (re)development – after having the biggest night of his life because the black football player literally endangers his own health in order to make a catch that will make him a superstar so that Jerry MaFuckingGuire can exploit him and attract other superstars who he can also exploit – finds that he can't enjoy it without the woman who has made it all possible but whom he has exploited and demeaned and overlooked. That's when this motherfucker breaks into a feminist consciousness-raising group in order to reclaim his wife. How does he get her back? Just by saying, "Hello," according to her, but he gets to finish his speech by saying to her, "You complete me." Like, he was at 87 percent and she was the final 13 percent. Now, he's fucking complete when he gets her back. Well, fuck completeness. Not only that, fuck completeness as a way of understanding anything about what love actually is. What they call romantic comedy is really anti-romantic tragedy.

It's amazing that something like *Jerry Maguire* is offered as a representation of what it's like to fall in love. If you've ever fallen you know that the other person or persons don't complete you. They incomplete you. They fuck you the fuck up. It doesn't leave you intact. It plays you, undermines you. It disturbs and

disrupts your individuation. It obliterates not only the possibility of but the desire for individuation. If you think about it in those terms, incompleteness is a consummation devoutly to be wished. The entire genre of the romantic comedy is usually some white dude who's being dragged against his will into the condition of incompleteness. When, finally, he submits to it, you know that the sequel of that movie will be all about the breakup, which follows the idea of individuation having had a chance to rally, which the regular miseries of monogamous heterosexuality – which Samuel R. Delany teaches us is the deepest perversion – are happy to provide. The idea of completeness is ridiculous and genocidal. There's just no end to the ways it continually seeks to destroy our shared capacity to breathe and ground. It predicates and requires the constantly asserted revision of what Robinson calls "the terms of order." It predicates and necessitates the constant brutalization of all the people in the world who resist those terms of order and who practice modalities of social existence that are not predicated on those terms of order, as Robinson shows in his beautifully radical use of ethnographic and anthropological work in *The Terms of Order*. We advocate for incompleteness. We think such advocacy is part of what it is "to preserve," as he says, "the ontological totality." To preserve the totality is to refuse its completion. That's our ongoing ante- and anti-metaphysical experiment.

SS: To stay with the absurd then, that reminds me of when I was on my honeymoon in India and I ended up randomly watching this interview with Jeff Bridges where they're asking him about how he's ended up married so long and how that's very unusual for a lot of successful Hollywood actors ... that kind of crap. And his response to that is excellent. He says that he loves being married not because when things go bad his wife can magically fix things. There's no expectation of completeness. Rather he says that when things go bad for either of them the other will be able to feel and understand that pain deeper and more fully than anyone else could. It's not that the other is the solution to a problem but rather that the relationship makes it possible to feel in ways that would not be possible by oneself. You could make the same points about other emotions as well. He talks about how that develops through spending and sharing years together with someone. That really struck me as a better, non-idealized version of a relationship. It's not that anything gets fixed, it's that the everything is felt more deeply ... like when Spinoza talks about affect both in terms of developing greater capacities to affect and be

10/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stevphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

affected by the world.

SH: When my partner Tonika and I found each other in Singapore, the first gift she ever gave me was a book called *The Dude and the Zen Master*. I read this book from cover to cover. In the book, Jeff Bridges has a series of conversations with a Zen master. They're trying to lose themselves together. Getting lost together where the loss of self does not lead to selflessness alone but to a new state of being lost together, a shared state of (non)self. So, when I say Tonika and I found each other I also mean this: that we got lost together not in each other, but instead of each other.

SS: That book is great. I'm quite fond of it myself. I really like how Bernie Glassman, who's the Zen master and a long-time friend of Jeff Bridges, talks about that for him dharma practice is a way that undercuts or escapes from the subject-object relationship. In some ways the way that book comes together through a long-standing friendship and series of ongoing conversations is similar to the dynamic between you two. And since Stefano is the Dude, Fred, that makes you the Zen master ... Another thing that comes up in their conversation is the idea that *The Big Lebowski* is formed around a series of Zen koans. Maybe I'm stretching the comparison too far, but I might even suggest that *The Undercommons* is likewise formed around a series of paradoxical observations, like the university being the place you cannot study. It's those things that are strange ideas when you first hear them, and their value is as much in what it produces as you engage with it, preferably with other people, even more so than the value of the literal statement itself. It's something you need to sit with.

FM: It makes you want to think about what the relationship is between the dialectic, the antinomy, and the koan. We want – and then imagine that as we get older and have a chance to read more books that we will receive – other terms in other languages from other places that also correspond to this. Let's stay with the work of paradox and the way paradox constitutes a motive force or an engine for thinking. Stefano, you're saying that you get lost with others. Generally, our experience of being lost is not described like that. Man, one of my earliest memories is of being lost in a grocery store in Las Vegas called Vegas Village. I remember going to Vegas Village, when I was maybe three or four years old, and getting separated from my mom. At a certain moment, you're wandering, looking at toys, and all of a sudden, where's mama? And I got all upset and I was crying, and it wasn't my

mother who found me. It was some other person who found me and helped me then to reunite with my mom. But I remember that very vividly now because I was found by someone else. It's as if being found is that moment when, having realized one is alone, one finds that one is not alone. It was as if I had been found by a principle; that principle, Stefano, of being lost with others.

There are these famous lines from *The Faerie Queene*: “What though the sea with waves continuall / Doe eate the earth, it is no more at all; / Ne is the earth the lesse, or loseth ought: / For whatsoever from one place doth fall / Is with the tyde unto another brought: / For there is nothing lost, that may be found if sought.” Edmund Spenser is ruminating on this intra-action of the lost and found. He elaborates this relation between loss and finding and seeking that ends up being something like an early version of Newton's law of conservation of matter and energy. There's a physics, or an anti-metaphysics, to this shit, and a question concerning the no-thing, the non-singularity of the lost and found and sought. My relation, to the extent that I have one, to Zen was initiated through a book by Gary Zukav called *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. It was an extension of the interesting work in physics that this group in the Bay Area, the Fundamental Fysiks Group, was doing again in the mid-seventies. They were really interested in the philosophical foundations and implications of quantum mechanics and in what they saw as these absolute affinities between quantum mechanics and Zen Buddhism. Our old friend, Alan Jackson, is the one who gave me this book. I've been trying to read this book for thirty years now and not quite getting there.

Let's use the word “sharing” to describe what Jeff Bridges is talking about with his partner even though maybe the obvious word that would come to mind is “empathy.” Let's use the word “sharing” in order to take into account the righteous and legitimate critique of a certain kind of racialized and highly gendered and brutal empathy that Saidiya Hartman gives us in *Scenes of Subjection*. Or, if we move by way of a certain radical recovery of empathy that Hortense Spillers gives us in Arthur Jafa's *Dreams Are Colder than Death*, then we can move from that recovery of empathy towards something like sharing. But if we try to understand this notion of sharing, which we've tried to talk about under the rubric of debt, this implies that we're not trying to establish or to justify the metaphysical foundations of politics, which are predicated on brutalities including those that Hartman delineates. Rather, what we're interested in is a

11/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stevphen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation

social physics of sharing that is intra-active and which is predicated on this interplay of losing and finding and seeking that Stefano is talking about under the general rubric of subtle selflessness. This is something to which we can't simply declare our allegiance; we have to practice it. That practice bears a revolutionary imperative. It's fucking communism.

There's an interview with John Coltrane about one of the last albums he did with Miles Davis. It's a recording of a concert in Stockholm in 1960, right before Trane left the band. And this sort of hipster Swedish DJ interviews Trane. He loves Trane but he's trying to perform a kind of critical antagonism to Trane's music in order to give Trane a chance to explain himself. And he was like, your playing has been called unbeautiful and unlyrical, and since the playing mirrors the personality, you must have some thoughts of that kind to share. And Trane says, let me follow you again: my playing is unwhat? And the interviewer replies, I'm not saying that, that's what the critics are saying. And Trane says, the critics seem to think it's an angry kind of thing, that I'm angry. And the guy goes, are you angry? And Trane says – and I swear that the sound that comes out of his mouth, the sound of his voice, is as beautiful as any sound that ever came out of his horn; the tone is soft, as in a morning sunrise – “No, I'm not.” He says that shit so beautifully. And it's not that it's a lie, it's just that it can't be true, so that when Ravi Shankar famously heard anger in Trane's playing, he wasn't making it up, he just wasn't hearing it all, wasn't registering the anti-metaphysical anger that operates, finally, so piercingly through its object that it moves in the absence of that object and of the subject, which negation of the object will have brought online. Am I angry? I'm so fucking angry I can't breathe. Fuck you, motherfucker, for asking. I want to kill you and everybody like you. Am I angry? No, I'm not. That's the new koan.

SS: Just to go back for a second, I think there's also maybe different kinds of affinities that are perhaps all the more effective because they aren't necessarily recognized or seen at first. You know the cover of *Nation Time* by Joe McPhee? He's standing in a Zen garden. And what's interesting is that he's standing in that garden because the photographer he was working with suggested it. McPhee says he hadn't thought about it much at the time, other than it made a good photograph, but it seemed much more meaningful looking back on later, as if the photographer had understood an aspect of his music that he hadn't appreciated himself at that time. There are these other layers of interaction, or maybe intra-action, that are at

work. And they aren't necessarily recognized but still have their effects. And those effects are not immediate but are maybe only seen later. It's the irregular rhythm again. Even in conversations like this, by the time I say something I'm responding less to the present moment and more to something said five minutes ago.

FM: That happens when shit happened yesterday and you just can't be mad about it until today. That's the black vernacular update and anticipation of Spenser – look for you yesterday, here you come today – and it works just as well for objects of revulsion as it does for objects of desire. You know what happened, but you couldn't notice it enough; you have to move through the rest of a day that now, like every other day, can't ever really be yours. It takes another couple of days for you to realize that the rest of that day has faded, or been shaded by that little bit of bullshit that caught your eye or pulled your coat or kept you down or locked you out. You finally get mad about it and you keep getting more and more mad about it. A young scholar I know once wrote to me, “Why can't my anger at what they've done to us be a legitimate intellectual position? Why must I filter my anger in order to be?” I think they were talking about a general economy of anger, which no individual body can bear and which, in spite of that, individual bodies are made to bear, along with the responsibility of containing it. That this has become their responsibility is an absolute unfairness. But what if self-destruction is the purpose of the anger? What if all it's about is what and that the individual cannot bear? Now, when I think of that interview with Trane I'm thinking that maybe the way that DJ understood Trane's music is an echo of, say, Nat Hentoff's understanding of it, that it was always this deep search for self, which is kind of unfortunate when one considers a discography that includes an album called *Selflessness*. So, when Trane's doing those gliding, tidal runs, and going off on his harmonic wandering, his calculated modal drifting, through “All Blues,” or when Joe McPhee is talking and moving all out of sync through *Nation Time*, maybe they are doing exactly what Baraka said the music is supposed to be doing. “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it.” That's Trane. That's McPhee. That's what Baraka recognizes in Baldwin. Now, how do we cultivate that self-destructive anger?

One way to think about the United States of America is that it is both the expression and the preserve of righteous, selfish anger. You see it all the time. You have to see this shit every day, as in the form, for instance, of a devil in Costco in a red T-shirt, the shirt decorated with an outline of

the United States map, on top of which are the words “USA: Running the world since 1776.” And he’s in fucking Costco with no fucking mask on and this little old lady asks him to put on a mask and he charges her, screaming, accusing *her* of aggression. He is the literal embodiment of The Man whose anger is given in and as the very making, the very expression, and the very protection of himself. This is absolute self-fashioning held in a claim not simply of ownership but, deeper still, of the ownership of the right to own. But then there’s this other kind of anger, which works and works through Trane or Abbey Lincoln – but also just as surely moves and moves through Aretha or Pops (Fanon’s dismissal of what he hears as the unfortunate negro’s hiccups notwithstanding), where it’s not about self-expression. It’s about self-obliteration. It’s not suicide, although it kind of corresponds with what Newton and Cabral thought of in different ways as revolutionary suicide. Or, if it’s the suicide of a class and not a person it is because it was always so much more than merely personal. It’s a common social refusal of self-possession. So maybe there’s anger and then there’s anger. There’s self-expressive anger and then there’s self-consumptive anger, the anger of the poor in spirit. The anger of a common love.

SH: Yes, the anger of a common love. Maybe that’s what we’re bringing in this book – “the obvious” – self-destructive love. As Fred often says about James Baldwin, “At least I know he loved me,” and Baldwin did, all that beauty in the hallways, in the vestibules. You and me, Stephen, would have to earn his love, put ourselves into a kind of service to and in the anger of a common love. But you need help the more your class position is scaffolded with ideas of development, improvement, merit – in other words leadership.

My dad was the first one to help me. When I was a kid in Toronto, he used to take me to someone’s home, almost every Saturday afternoon. My father was a historian of the contemporary, a proponent of people’s histories. He was from the school of “history from the bottom up.” He didn’t just write from that perspective. He also practiced it by turning over the writing and editing of his journal to people in the community. He ran oral history projects about experiences of migration and settlement in Ontario, training young people from the immigrant communities in recording oral histories of their relatives. And on the weekend, it was our turn. I would sit in these living rooms with him as he listened to the stories of our hosts. Most of these rooms were modest but very

formal. There was food, almost always sweet, and there were grandchildren, and there was unofficial, unauthorized social life of all kinds, from “illegal” wine to “illegal” house additions to “illegal” people. On those weekends my father taught me without saying it that we were in an experiment – we weren’t running one. I think our understanding of the undercommons has always been that you could get displaced into this (dis)position if you just commit yourself to study, to groundings as Walter Rodney says, to *rasanblaj* as Gina Athena Ulysse and M. Jacqui Alexander teach us.

SS: I was trying to think what would be a fitting heroic, or anti-heroic, figure out of this moment, and I keep coming back to the buddy character from *Get Out*, the one that’s the TSA officer. What’s his name? Rod, I think. And I’m thinking about towards the end of the film when he manages to find and rescue the main character from his predicament. And then he gets asked how did you find me. And his answer is that he’s TSA, we handle shit, and that Chris can now consider this situation handled.

FM: It’s a classic fable of how the working class comes to save the asses of the black bourgeoisie yet again. When will the black bourgeoisie ever get over its embarrassment? That’s a question for black studies that black study will have to answer.

SH: It’s perfect to bring him up right now because if you look at the United States, what’s very clear is that whatever conversation they have about this pandemic, the one conversation they cannot have is about actually creating a government workforce at the level that would be able to do all this tracing and tracking that needs to be done, or vaccination, to say nothing of fulfilling ongoing community health and healing roles. They can’t even conceive of a true government workforce that wears uniforms and has benefits. And yet, lo and behold, they did that overnight with the TSA. They created an army of tens of thousands of people for this thing. And those people went through training (of a kind) and became federal employees. And yet in the realm of social welfare it’s clear that it’s never even been contemplated that you would create a force for this pandemic. Instead they just keep talking over and over about hospital capacity. What the fuck is hospital capacity?

But of course, I have drifted into distributional politics here. And that is dangerous territory even if it’s hard to resist. So, take defunding the police – the idea that resources should be going to mental health professionals or community centers instead of to

the police who are asked to do everything (and let's leave aside where policing ends for a minute or even what it is). It seems to me we have to support defunding the police and facing down police brutality – and Dylan Rodriguez reminds us that the phrase is redundant: brutality is what the police do. We have to support this call because it emanates from the generalized generosity of this movement, the most generative and also the most vulnerable kind of generosity. It's a stray generosity that makes things possible for anyone who would take it up.

And at the same time, we have to study together against the premise behind defunding the police. It's contradictory to say this of course, but absolutely necessary. I say this because all (re)distributional politics are based on the premise of scarcity. And the way the premise of scarcity is imposed is through meritocracy. Meritocracy is the imposition of scarcity masquerading as the management of scarcity. And it is the worst kind of imposed scarcity. We would be better off with hoarding! Because this kind of scarcity is always based on an implicit bell curve. Meritocracy is always racist. Meritocracy does not reward the talented or the deserving. It invents them on a curve precisely in order to restrict our access to socially generated wealth. So, the question is, can we learn that meritocracy has no merit? Are we willing to be taught? How can we be of service?

x

14/14

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stephen Shukaitis
Refusing Completion: A Conversation