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To cite this article: Fred Moten (2013) The Subprime and the beautiful, African Identities, 11:2, 237-245, DOI: [10.1080/14725843.2013.797289](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2013.797289)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2013.797289>



Published online: 03 Jul 2013.



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The Subprime and the beautiful

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Elaborating and extending Cedric Robinson's notion of 'the preservation of the ontological totality' is a crucial task for black studies at a moment when its practitioners are serially (and properly) enjoined to attend critically to the brutal conditions under which many black people live as well as the existential interdictions all black people are forced to endure. This paper assumes an irreducible relation between preservation and celebration and considers the subprime crisis to be a moment that requires and also allows practitioners of black studies to develop ways of integrating celebration and critique.

Keywords: consent; Afro-pessimism; subprime; blackness

Unowned/consent

In a recent review of Fredric Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*, Kunkel (2010) writes:

It's tempting to propose a period . . . stretching from about 1983 (when Thatcher, having won a war, and Reagan, having survived a recession, consolidated their popularity) to 2008 (when the neoliberal programme launched by Reagan and Thatcher was set back by the worst economic crisis since the Depression). During this period of neoliberal ascendancy – an era of deregulation, financialization, industrial decline, demoralization of the working class, the collapse of Communism and so on – it often seemed easier to spot the contradictions of Marxism than the more famous contradictions of capitalism . . . (p. 12)

The year that marks the beginning of the period Kunkel proposes – which is characterized by 'the peculiar condition of an economic theory that had turned out to flourish above all as a mode of cultural analysis, a mass movement that had become the province of an academic "elite," and an intellectual tradition that had arrived at some sort of culmination right at the point of apparent extinction' – is also the year of the publication of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, a book that could be said to have announced the impasse Kunkel describes precisely in its fugitive refusal of it (Kunkel 2010, p. 12; Robinson 2000). If the culmination of the Marxian intellectual tradition coincides with the moment in which Jameson begins magisterially to gather and direct all of its resources toward the description and theorization of what most clear-eyed folks agree is the deflated, defeated spirit of the present age, Robinson's project has been to alert us to the radical resources that lie before that tradition, where 'before' indicates both what precedes and what awaits, animating our times with fierce urgency.

One of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism is that it establishes conditions for its own critique (which anticipates a collapse whose increasing imminence increasingly seems to take the form of endless deferral); that those very conditions seem to render that critique incomplete insofar as it will have always failed to consider capitalism's racial determination is, in turn, a contradiction fundamental to Marxism. While *Black Marxism*

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emphatically exposes these contradictions, it is not reducible to such exposure. Rather, in elucidating an already given investigation of the specificities of Marxism's founding, antifoundational embarrassment, which bears the massive internal threat of critique becoming an end in itself while operating in the service of the renovation, rather than the overturning, of already existing social and intellectual structures, Robinson understands the Marxian tradition as part of the ongoing history of racial capitalism. This is not dismissal; indeed, it echoes the deepest and richest sounds of Marx's own blackness. It does, however, sanction the question in which I am interested today: what made Robinson's critique – and, more importantly, that which, in Robinson's work (and in Marx's), exceeds critique – possible? The answer, or at least the possibility for a more precise rendering of the question, is also to be found in *Black Marxism*, in which critique is interrupted by its own eruptive condition of possibility roughly at the book's rich, dense, but simultaneously, open and capacious center, a chapter called 'The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition'.

Robinson's critical discovery of racial capitalism depends upon and extends the preservation of what he calls 'the ontological totality'. In describing this integrated totality's character, Robinson notes how preservation impossibly proceeds within the confines of 'a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social or psychic senses'. Its motive force is 'the renunciation of actual being for historical being', out of which emerges a 'revolutionary consciousness' that is structured by but underived from 'the social formations of capitalist slavery, or the relations of production of colonialism' (Robinson 2000, pp. 243–244, 246). It is not just that absolutist formulations of a kind of being-fabricated are here understood themselves to be fabrications; it is also that renunciation will have ultimately only become intelligible as a general disruption of ownership and of the proper when the ontological totality that black people claim and preserve is understood to be given only in this more general giving. The emergence and preservation of blackness, as the ontological totality, the revolutionary consciousness that black people hold and pass, is possible only by way of the renunciation of actual being *and* the ongoing conferral of historical being – the gift of historicity as claimed, performed dispossession. Blackness, which is to say, black radicalism, is not the property of black people. All that we have (and are) is what we hold in our outstretched hands. This open collective being is blackness – (racial) difference mobilized against the racist determination it calls into existence in every moment of the ongoing endangerment of 'actual being', of subjects who are supposed to know and own. It makes a claim upon us even as it is that upon which we all can make a claim, precisely because it – and its origins – are not originary. That claim, which is not just one among others because it is always one + more among others, however much it is made under the most extreme modes of duress, in an enabling exhaustion that is, in Stanley Cavell's word, *unowned*, takes the form, in Edouard Glissant's word, of *consent* (Cavell 1995, p. 101; Glissant & Diawara, 2011, p. 5). 'To consent not to be a single being', which is the anoriginal, anoriginary constitution of blackness as radical force – as historical, paraontological totality – is, for Robinson, the existential and logical necessity that turns the history of racial capitalism, which is also to say the Marxist tradition, inside out. What cannot be understood within, or as a function of, the deprivation that is the context of its genesis, can only be understood as the ongoing present of a common refusal.¹ This old-new kind of transcendental aesthetic, off and out in its immanence as the scientific productivity of such immanence projects, is the unowned, differential, and differentiated thing itself that we hold out to one another, in the bottom, under our skin, for the general kin, at the rendezvous of victory.

To say that we have something (only insofar as we relinquish it) is to say that we come from somewhere (only insofar as we leave that place behind). Genesis is dispersion; somewhere is everywhere and nowhere as the radical dislocation we enact, where we stay and keep on going, before the beginning, before every beginning, and all belonging, in undercommon variance, in arrivance and propulsion, in the flexed load of an evangelical bridge, passed on this surreptitious vamp, *here*. If you need some, come on, get some. We come from nothing, which is something misunderstood. It's not that blackness is not statelessness; it's just that statelessness is an open set of social lives whose *animaterialized* exhaustion remains as irreducible chance. Statelessness is our terribly beautiful open secret, the unnatural habitat, and *habitus* of analytic engines with synthetic capacities. Preservation is conditional branching, undone computation (tuned, forked, tongued), improvisation and, what it forges, digital speculation beyond the analogical or representational or calculative reserve. Critique – for example, the deciphering of the fundamental discursive structures that (de)form Western civilization – is part of its repertoire but it must always be kept in mind that cryptanalytic assertion has a cryptographic condition of possibility.

Robinson's movement within and elucidation of the open secret has been a kind of open secret all its own. For a long time, before its republication in 2000, *Black Marxism* circulated underground, as a recurrent seismic event on the edge or over the edge of the university, for those of us who valorized being on or over that edge even if we had been relegated to it. There, at least, we could get together and talk about the bomb that had gone off in our heads. Otherwise we carried around its out, dispersive *potenza* as contraband, buried under the goods that legitimate parties to exchange can value, until we could get it to the black market, where (the) license has no weight, and hand it around out of a suitcase or over a kitchen table or from behind a makeshift counter. Like Pryor (1994) said: 'I got some shit, too . . . you respect my shit and I'll respect yours'. Maybe there is some shit in the back of our cars that we don't even know about. Certainly, this smuggled cargo would be cause for optimism, even against the grain of our constant, clear-eyed vigilance, even against the general interdiction – the intellectual state of emergency – enforced when we emphysemically authorize ourselves to speak of the spirit of the age. That spirit marks the scene in which the etiolation of black studies in the name of critique is carried out by way of our serial flirtation with forgetting our own animation, the collective being that is more precisely understood as being-in-collection insofar as the latter term denotes a debt that is not only incalculable but also subprime.

Therefore, by way of the brilliant black light in Frank B. Wilderson's Afro-pessimistic sound – which materializes, in an investigation of black being, the most rigorous instance of this fatal but necessary proximity to oblivion – I'd like to consider what it is (again and again) to lose a home. This is Wilderson (2007):

Slavery is the great leveler of the black subject's positionality. The black American subject does not generate historical categories of entitlement, sovereignty, and immigration for the record. We are 'off the map' with respect to the cartography that charts civil society's semiotics; we have a past but not a heritage. To the data-generating demands of the Historical Axis, we present a virtual blank, much like that which the Khosian presented to the Anthropological Axis. This places us in a structurally impossible position, one that is outside the articulations of hegemony. However, it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because – and this is key – our presence works back on the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence. If every subject – even the most massacred among them, Indians – is required to have analogs within the nation's structuring narrative, and the experience of one subject on whom the nation's order of wealth was built is without analog, then that subject's presence destabilizes all other analogs (p. 31).

Fanon writes, ‘Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder’. If we take him at his word, then we must accept that no other body functions in the Imaginary, the Symbolic, or the Real so completely as a repository of complete disorder as the black body. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Real, for in its magenitizing of bullets the black body functions as the map of gratuitous violence through which civil society is possible – namely, those bodies for which violence is, or can be, contingent. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analog – a past without a heritage. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Imaginary, for ‘whoever says “rape” says Black’ (Fanon), whoever says ‘prison’ says black (Sexton), and whoever says ‘AIDS’ says black – the negro is a ‘phobogenic object’ (Wilderson, 2007, pp. 31–32).

In the United States, whoever says ‘subprime debtor’ says black as well, a fact that leads, without *too* much turning, to the question of what a *program* of complete disorder would be. In any case, it is difficult to see how, in the impossibility that marks its ‘positionality’, the negation that is always already negated would carry out such a program. In conversation with the equally brilliant Saidiya Hartman, Wilderson takes care to point out that ‘obviously I’m not saying that in this space of negation, which is blackness, there is no life. We have tremendous life. But this life is not analogous to those touchstones of cohesion that hold civil society together’ (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, p. 187). What remains is some exploration of the nature of this antianalog, which is more accurately characterized as an ante-analog, an anticipatory project of celebration that pessimism must always disavow. Of course, celebration of what exceeds any analogy with the antisocial hostilities that comprise civil society is, by definition, antithetical to any agenda seeking integration in a civil society that, in any case, will have never survived such integration. On the other hand, precisely in the ongoing, undercommon instantiation of an already given, already integrated totality, celebration is an antiontological claim, an anteontological affiliation, a social and historical paraontology theorized in performance; it gives criticism breath while also being that to which criticism aspires. If ‘the tremendous life’ we have is nothing other than intermittent respite in what Hartman accurately calls the ravages and brutality of the last centuries, then feeling good about ourselves might very well be obscene. But what if there is something other than the phantasmatic object-home of inclusionist desire – which is rightly seen by Hartman simply to be the extension of those ravages and that brutality – to which we can appeal, to which we have always been appealing, in flight or, deeper still, in movement? Again, the question concerns the open secret, the kinetic refuge, of the ones who consent not to be a single being. The corollary question is how to see it and how to enjoy it. This is a question concerning resistance, which is not only prior to power but also, like power, is everywhere – as the mutual constitution of a double ubiquity that places the question of hegemony somewhere beside the point. The dark, mobile materiality of this ruptural, execonomic generality is a violence in the archive that only shows up by way of violence to the archive. Because I don’t want to kill anybody, because I want us to enjoy ourselves past the point of excess, I am violent in the archive. Because I am a thing seeing things, I am violence in the archive.

Perhaps, what is required is an acknowledgment of the fact that the discourse of social development, of the ongoing advent of another world that is both in and out of this one, has always been subprime. What we want is always already unaffordable and, moreover, the financialization of everyday life was a plantation imposition. Consider, then, a certain underground speculation. What if the subprime crisis is best understood as a kind of

collateral agency (something Berlant [2007] approaches in the faces and bodies of the ones who are preoccupied in subprime Chicago, in the invasive form of a seemingly undifferentiated mass of fat, black maternity acting out as adjuncts in the general neighborhood of the neighborhood)? Then, it is also the disruption and resocialization of an already given crisis. For a minute, by way of policy that accompanied another of those periodic attempts to deconcentrate that mass and its ongoing project/s, home ownership was infused with and disrupted by a kind of carnival, a country-ass hoedown, an embarrassing barbecue. This disownership renewed an old experiment that moves at the intersection of squatting and 'the imposition of severalty' (the name Theodore Roosevelt gave to his plan to eradicate the Indian who was not vanishing quite fast enough by liberal conferral of the gift of private property). That imposition, updated and disseminated by George W. Bush in the name of 'the ownership society', was sanctioned by the hegemonic public-private partnership so that it could continue in its brutal, violent habit of enclosing our common capacity, insofar as we are one another's means, to live beyond our means. Nevertheless, the ones Harris (2012) calls the dispersed remnants of the motley crew (which was, in the first place, composed of remnants) were engaged in a kind of general taking – an expropriation, however temporary – of refuge, a serial postponement of externally imposed contingency whose supposed intermittence is better understood as a whole other timeline's broken circle. It's not that people don't hate to lose the home they were holding, the home they didn't have; it's just that they had no moral scruples about engaging it, about claiming it, about moving in together (out from) under the virtual auspices of authority. Driven by man-made catastrophes of high water and boll weevils, drought and cotton, by scientific management and fucked-up customary spontaneities, the subprime debtor is bedu in the bayou, in the desert, in the cell, in school, still the itinerant researcher. Stopped for a juke-up minute, this manic, monkish, Thelonial, disobediently Jeromeboyish homegirl at study, learning dark arts on the Octavian highway of Loseiana, in the indebtedness of mutual aid, for which she remains without credit, also remains to be (im)properly thought, which is to say, celebrated.

Ode to the subprime debtor

What is owed to the subprime debtor? Think of her as a poacher in that black-lit river of the mind where the water remembers. Consider the double edge of the black act, the relation between the black act and the black arts. Poaching in black(ed) face and strange habit is the jurisgenerative, extralegal, contemplative performance of the ones who were and continue to be present at their own making (onstage, under enclosure, hard row, long road), in the transgenerational sharing of a mobile deixis marking there in here so we can get there from here (Thompson 1966, p. 9; Thompson 1975, pp. 21–24). We bear an interanimation of displacement and location that cannot be borne, as the speculative and material foundation of another world. What Brooks (2006, pp. 3–9) calls the Afro-alienation act is an irruption of this bearing, this gestic, jectural natality. Consider the evasiveness of the natal occasion, the moving, ludic refuge of the big mama, the play mama, and the auntie. Consider the relation between leaving and claiming, lost and found, which means thinking before the concept of fabrication. If it is true that the colonist fabricates the colonized subject, or that the master fabricates the slave, it is also true that the irrepressible making and unmaking of the ones who are made and unmade makes them more and less than that. The lack is terminally conceived in isolation from its excessive double and must of necessity show a kind of critical hostility towards what it clearly sees as certain fantasies of fullness. On the one hand, what's implied in this fantasy is loss, violated ownership; on the other hand,

what's implied in the clear-eyed, unflinching identification of colonized or enslaved, which is to say interdicted, subjectivity is a being-fabricated that laments the ontology its evacuated, evacuating positionality serves to orient. Moreover, loss and fabrication are cognate if we are only made in dispossession. The remainder is ownership, but can it remain? Can the fabricated bear a trace of what lies before their fabrication? Think about Fanon's rejection of what he took to be negritude's confabulated memory of what he also took to be genuine cultural self-possession. The nothing that remains in or as that rejection is borne in an assumption and analytic of abandonment. Thinking (through) this interanimation of fabrication and dereliction more or less demands the meditation of and on ubiquitous and unexplained incompleteness – something that is both more and less. But Fanon's work is brutally cut off when he begins to consider an irreducible presence at its own making as a mode of abandon (a certain choreographic permissiveness that recurs in revolution's punctuation of the impossible social life that is its condition of possibility). Whoever chooses not to acknowledge Fanon's approach to this question leaves that question behind, thereby abandoning himself to the empty positionality of an eternal preface to something he can neither sense nor want. Meanwhile, what lies before being-fabricated needs neither to be remembered nor romanticized when it is being lived.

This is all to say that the paraontological distinction between blackness and black people is always in danger of being forgotten in the discursive assemblage of Afro-pessimism. Failure to risk such forgetfulness is failure to think and failure to feel; but such forgetfulness places thought and feeling behind a theoretical red line where blackness, which is to say black sociality, is posited as an impossibility that is, as it were, *not* lived in the shadow of another impossibility that is unrecognized as such. For the very citizenship and subjectivity, the very subjection and civic obligation, that evade the Afro-pessimist – whose unavailability for him he has taken great pains to prove, whose destruction he believes his *empty* positionality to foster – are impossible as well, a condition that no doubt heightens the intensity of the Afro-pessimist's craving for it. Such black desire is, of course (and this is contrary to the Afro-pessimist's analysis as well as his own affective relation to that impossibly desiring subject), not unrequited. He is trapped within a brutal and obsessive codependence with an impossibility that he cannot, and cannot want to, refuse. For, to refuse what has been refused to you, even when what has been refused is a fantasy, is only possible from the perspective of having had something (beyond the constant imposition of a lack or barrier or impossibility). But having had, in this case, is not the description of some previous, violated ownership; it is, instead, a prophecy of having given everything away (in having consented *not* to be a single being, in having been continually acting out [of] the massive theoretical implications of holding and being held, against ownership, in dispossessive enjoyment of the undercommon underprivilege). Everything I love is an effect of an already given dispossession and of another dispossession to come. Everything I love survives dispossession, is therefore before dispossession. Can we own or claim dispossession while resisting it? Can we resist it while embracing it? We make new life, we make our refuge, on the run. We protect the old thing by leaving it for the new thing. Refusal is only possible for the ones who have something, who have a form, to give away – the ones who ain't got no home anymore in this world except a moving boxcar full of the sound and scent of animate pillows, strangers, readers; except a built clearing in a common word they break and scar to rest and lay to rest; except Aunt Kine's house which isn't hers, which is hers to hold and hand when we have no place to stay, and then they take it away, but she'd already given it away.

The crisis is given – in a kind of acceleration-in-equilibrium – as our quintessence. You have to be more than critical about some shit like that. The subprime debtor, clothed

in and tainted by the sin/garment of pathological black maternity, actively instantiates her own paralogic, like a paratrooper (dropped behind lines), like a hermetic meaning or a hermetic tenor (John Gilmore, between the lines, playing studies in ignorance). The awareness of nakedness is immediately manifested as something ready to wear. Is there knowledge in the service of not knowing, of study as unowning knowledge? We who are in the know often say not. We speak, instead, of the post-black, emphatically disclosing our own prematurity in the insistence with which we unify black criticism and black misery. Some of us speak, too, of the post-civil rights era, or the post-soul movement. However, these things don't die, they multiply, in whatever mixture of what is, to some of us, the unlikely and the embarrassing. They are the derivative's material precursor and disruption, as returned externality; the excluded bringing the sound and fury of outsourced risk like a redirected storm surge; derelict content, absolute volume, sowing utopian disaster on the run like a bunch of heretical prophets of shock, reverberating a noisy backbeat of doubt that even Alan Greenspan couldn't pretend not to hear. It keeps happening like that; that other history of working with and in catastrophe; the parastrophic poetics of emergency is still good – not as destruction but as out inhabitation, total disorder as the carnival alternative. Meanwhile, the half-life of antagonism, is what Marxists used to call, when we were talking about something other than ourselves and the incapacity we are too glad to be unhappy to claim as our own, contradiction. Again, it's not that we're not that; it's just that we're all that and then some.

The pathologizing discourse within which blackness' insurgent *materiality* has long been framed takes a couple of reactionary forms in relation and with reference to the subprime crisis. One, which proudly claims the mantle of reaction, criminalizes. But black maternal criminality is also irresponsible, in this view. The tendency to lie, to overreach by way of somebody else's swindle, in the wake of their interested unasked question, is a function of always already disabled self-possession, a fundamental incapacity for personal responsibility, an inability to mature, an endless developmental delay, a reckless childishness that demands instant gratification after hundreds of years. Here's where criminality and abnormality converge and it is the meeting place of the two modes of reaction, the other of which rejects that name in the name of a kind of recycled progress, a certain old–new liberality. In this other mode, the subprime debtor is a victim of predatory lenders and a long history of residential and financial segregation and exclusion while also remaining, most fundamentally, a victim of her own impulses, which could be coded as her own desire to climb socially, into a neighborhood where she doesn't belong and is not wanted – the general neighborhood of home ownership, wherein the normative conception, embodiment, and enactment of wealth, personhood, and citizenship reside.

The distinction between pathologic and paralogic, upon which our entire history turns, emerges here as well. Consider the subprime debtor as guerilla, establishing pockets of insurgent refuge and marronage, carrying revaluation and disruptively familial extensions into supposedly sanitized zones. Deployed by the imposition of severalty, demobilized from the general project, she infiltrates domesticity, restages race war's theater of operations under the anarchic principles of poor theater. In this, she extends and remodels the freedom movement's strategies of nonexclusion, where courts of law were turned into jurisgenerative battlefields, where public schools and public accommodations became black study halls, greyhounds-*contra*-hellhounds, where fugitive spirits, sometimes misconstrued as evil or void even by themselves, take freedom rides on occasions that parallel the radical commensality of the counter-lunch. The subprime debtor, in the black radical tradition of making a way out of no way (out), is also a freedom fighter, a community disorganizer, a suburban planner.

But where does this revolutionary tranny (this mobilized transsexual transgressor) come from? (She is revolutionary in that old extra way; she brings her ordinary culture to bear in a kind of non-violent overturning and eschews the clotted, marmish imperatives of ‘exposure’ or ‘psychological warfare’ that comprise our wan half-measures when we think we have nothing beyond fantasies of patrimonial honor either to lose or defend.) Where does she get these Tiresian audio-visions of broken home ownership? Where is she coming from and what is the time of her irruption? Having considered the relation between impossible maternity and the inalienable natality that evades each and every natal occasion, one is given to believe that what is given is that the given cuts the given. (Even Fanon’s) phenomenology is inadequate to this givenness, though it infuses – though it is, as it were, regifted in – Fanon’s work, as the thingly contragrain and mechanical counter-time that those of us who are his disciples are too often trying too hard not to hear. But in refusing to pay – or in enacting a constitutional inability to pay – the debt we have contracted, we pay the debt we never promised, the one they say should never have been promised, the one that can’t be calculated, and thereby extend another mode of speculation altogether.

Cooper and Mitropoulos (2009) argue that the moralistic denunciation of usury that neoliberalism cranked out in the aftermath of its latest episode of recognizing, which is to say policing, the crisis is really an attempt to eliminate all forms of incalculable debt, particularly insofar as those forms constantly bear the capacity to induce ‘the liquefaction of securitized investment’ in the mixture of surprise and precedent that every day comprises the new *commercium* as the stolen life traditionally led in common projects on brilliant corners). What’s cool is that in their very language – which I can’t help but think bears the echo of an old reference to the sweetly flowing liquefaction of Julia’s clothes, that brave vibration each way free, the fugitive desire she walks around with, in that housecoat, that always threatens to blow up whatever outpost on ‘the household frontier’ – Cooper and Mitropoulos move with Robinson in the line he studies and extends, beyond the critique of *them*, and what *they* think, and what *they* try to do, toward the life *we* locate and imagine when the materiality of the subprime cuts the sublime by grounding its excess in the anarchic, historical materiality of our fleshly sociality. When we talk that talk, what we say must seem stupid to the regulators; the unbroken code of our enchanted, inkantatory refreshment of the paraontological totality – theorizing what it is to hold some land or what it is to let me hold 20 dollars – is so much undercomputational nonsense to the ones who cannot see the con/sensual, contrarational beauty of blackness, the universal machine.

Note

1. The idea of paraontology is one of many that I borrow from Chandler (2008).

Notes on contributor

Fred Moten is the author of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, *Hughson’s Tavern*, *B. Jenkins*, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (with Stefano Harney) and of two forthcoming books: *The Feel Trio* and *Consent Not to be a Single Being*.

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