"Words Don't Go There": An Interview with Fred Moten
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An Interview with Fred Moten

by Charles Henry Rowell

This interview was conducted by telephone on June 23, 2004, between College Station, Texas, and Los Angeles, California, where Fred Moten resides with his family.

ROWELL: You are one of those rare academics; you are a poet as well as a literary and cultural critic. In each of the sites you occupy, you attempt to engage audiences through written and spoken words. But each of these sites, we often contend, requires particular ways of speaking that we assume are different—and, in some instances, are directly opposed to each other. We definitely argue that these two forms of communicating—criticism and poetry—are produced by different sensibilities, and what results are two distinct forms of communication—one critical and the other creative. This has led, of course, to contemporary critics ignoring contemporary literature, especially poetry, and contemporary writers not reading contemporary critical texts. Where do you stand in this divide? Or should I ask the question this way: How do you negotiate the two sites you occupy—that of "high" theorist and that of "experimental" poet?

MOTEN: I don't think I'm that rare, partly because the folks who have been the most influential for me operate precisely within that dual mode and partly because those who have influenced me have influenced many others as well. Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey have been and remain extremely important to me. They are both deeply embedded in the commitments and protocols of a strain of American poetic experimentalism that goes back to Whitman and Dickinson and that includes seminal figures like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan. Like all of these writers, Baraka and Mackey find it necessary to make contributions to poetics to ground and justify the kind of deconstructive and reconstructive pressure they put on poetic norms. Their poetry and their writing about poetry always reveals how hard and how seriously they think about the nature of poetry in its relation to the world and to history. That kind of thinking must be an intensely theoretical endeavor; it brushes up against and infuses and is infused by the kind of thinking that people usually consider philosophical. So that there are some "high theoretical" tones that mark both the poetry and the poetics of, say, Olson or Duncan and those tones or their variants are evident all the time and everywhere in Baraka and Mackey. Moreover, Baraka's engagement with German philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Karl Marx, and Mackey's encounter with

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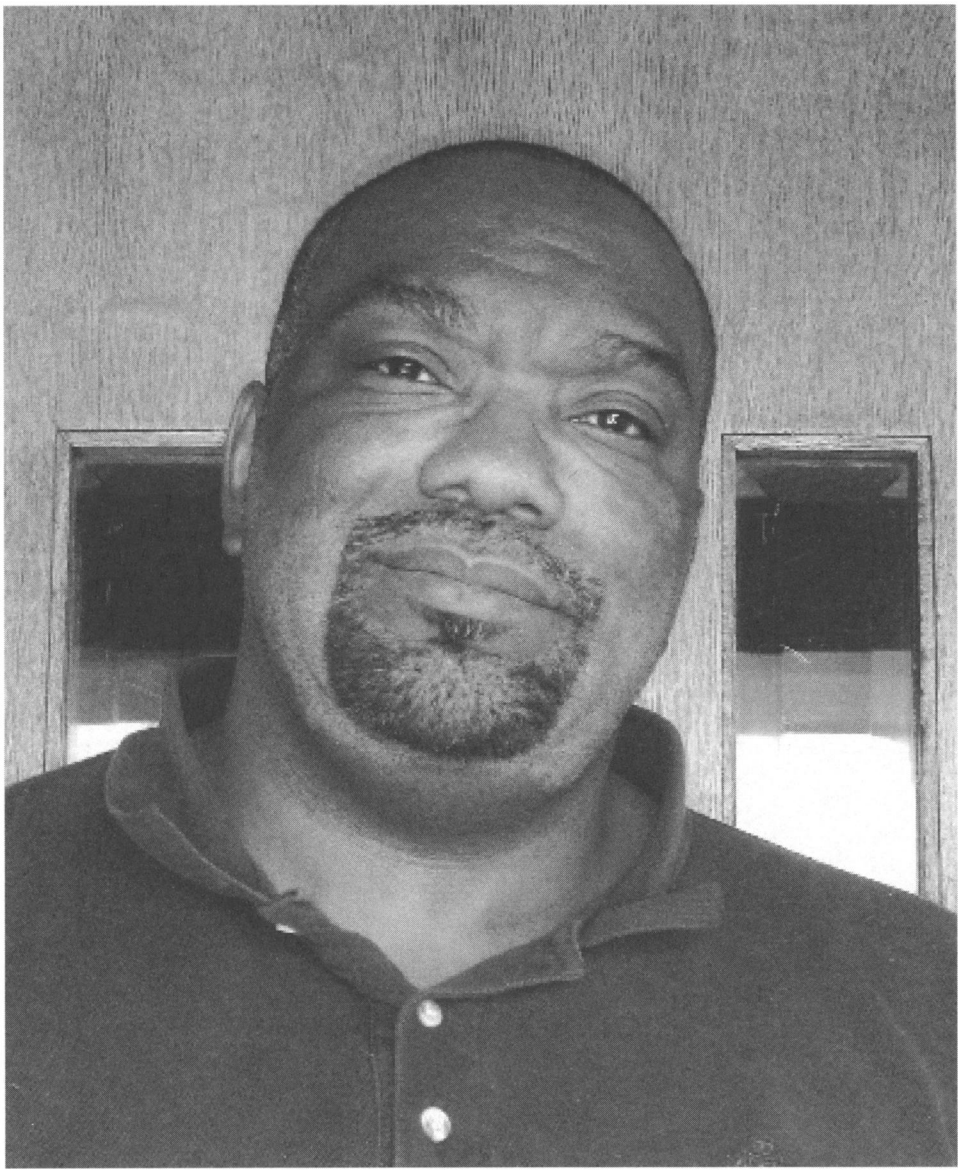

Photo by Laura Harris

Fred Moten

contemporary French theorists like Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida are also very evident in their work, giving it a whole other kind of theoretical or critical intensity. And this is all in the service of a deep immersion in the massive theoretical demands and resources of Afro-diasporic art and life. So that the two writers who have the most immediate and lasting influence on me move in the necessity of a breakdown of the oppositions between poet and critic, experimentalist and theorist, from within the complexity of the Afro-diasporic cultural field. And their critical extension of their own multiple lines of origin just lays down tracks for the future investigations of a whole lot of others (as Hortense Spillers, another great poet-critic, might say). So many names come to mind; it's hard to think of all this in terms of rarity, and it's hard to think of the divide between high theory and experimental poetry as an especially difficult one to negotiate.

ROWELL: When one looks at your poems, one discovers a new texture of English, or one finds a struggle toward language, or one is revealed the inadequacy of English to render all you want to say. (It's even difficult for me to fashion the exact phrase or sentence to describe, with certainty, the linguistic field of your poetry. [*Laughter.*]) "Words don't go there," as Charles Lloyd is reported to have said when he was ask to comment on one of his musical compositions. Actually one might be inclined to say the same about some sections of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, especially the section on Cecil Taylor. Some of the writing there reminds me of your poems. I would not be surprised if you have written a poem on the subject of that section of *In the Break*.

MOTEN: It's true that a lot of the objects of inquiry in my critical work are objects of inquiry in my poetry as well. My wife, Laura Harris, has been working on the relation between experimental and documentary aesthetic forms, on what it means for artists and critics to consider both as modes of inquiry, and this has had a big influence. She has really transformed the way I think about and write poetry. Writing a poem has become for me, at least in part, an attempt to find out some things and to try to work through some things intellectually, emotionally, and musically. I'm trying to find out some things, get at some things, and consider some things, while at the same time trying to *make* some things. That process is a struggle toward language that tries to struggle toward things; it is movement in preparation. In *In the Break* I refer to Eric Dolphy talking about preparing himself to play with Cecil Taylor: I'm trying to write in preparation, as well; maybe not to play with Cecil but to abide with his work better or more fully, to listen more carefully and creatively and critically. For me, this sense of writing as preparation or even anticipation constitutes something on the order of a mode of inquiry. And this gets us back to some issues that are embedded in your first question, issues concerning the differences and the relations between modes of inquiry (the poetic and the critical, the experimental and the theoretical). Many of the folks I write about in *In the Break*—Billie Holiday, Adrian Piper, James Baldwin, Dolphy, Taylor, and, probably above all, my late mother, B. Jenkins—I have written poems about as well. There are thematic and stylistic gaps between these modes of writing/inquiry but the connections probably far outweigh them. I think these

connections are getting stronger, more pronounced in my work, but, at the same time, I'm still deeply committed to maintaining the distinction between the two modes and to the notion that they are both indispensable in this preparation for, or struggle toward, things. So I've been thinking a lot about that distinction, how to inhabit it and trouble it at the same time and in the interest of things.

The difference between a poem "about" Lady Day and a chapter on her in a more properly critical or theoretical text might emerge in the poem's challenge to syntactic or semantic norms, in its going after a sound that might not get you where the word or the sentence gets you, but might get you past the word's or the sentence's limits or, even better, might take the word or the sentence past its own limits. It's not so much that a critical text might allow me to *say* this while a poem might allow me to *do* this; it is, rather, that they can both be beautiful ways both to say and do this. What Lady does to the words (and the sentence)—"Don't explain"—explains everything. Anyway, I think that the oppositions between theory and experiment, poetry and criticism, are constraints that enable us when we resist them and when we resist the urge simply to obliterate them. In the end, I want my criticism to sound like something, to be musical and actually to figure in some iconic way the art and life that it's talking about. At the same time, I also want my poetry to engage in inquiry and to intervene, especially, in a set of philosophical and aesthetic questions that are, I think, of profound political importance. This is, for me, a specifically Afro-diasporic protocol.

ROWELL: I am fascinated by your description of poetry as "a mode of inquiry." Will you say more about that in relation to two of your poems, "Other Dimensions in Music, *Ghostcatching*" and "Johnny Cash/Rosetta Tharp"?

MOTEN: "Other Dimensions in Music, *Ghostcatching*" is a poem I wrote in New York when I was teaching in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University. That is to say, I was in a kind of intellectual transition from less traditional literary critical methods to the very different kinds of attention that the study of performances and the theorization of performance demand. One of the big questions in which I found myself immersed at that time was this: "Where do performances go?" If you think about it as kind of independent partner to the question concerning the fate of words that Charles Lloyd (and, by way of Lloyd, Nathaniel Mackey) addresses a whole lot of interesting things open up, all of which depend upon your dealing with the imperative to go and see (and hear) performances. So in New York I attended lots of performances while always thinking—by way of the work of my colleagues in Performance Studies, especially José Muñoz, May Joseph, Barbara Browning, Peggy Phelan, and Richard Schechner—about the fate of those performances after they were gone. I wanted to figure out a way to write (about) these performances, to record them, without killing them or capturing them. I also wanted to think about performances as modes of inquiry and as modes of writing to see how a kind of recording was already embedded in them. This seemed like precisely the kind of constellation of issues that demanded lingering in the break between poetry and criticism, experiment and theory, and that's the place "Other Dimensions" comes from and lives in. But all that's just a preface.

The poem is a recording of two performances. The first part of the title is simply the name of a wonderful quartet—consisting of trumpeter Roy Campbell, saxophonist Daniel Carter, bassist William Parker, and drummer Rashid Bakr—that I saw and heard one night at a club called Tonic in the lower East Side. The second part of the title refers to an experiment in improvised choreography and new technologies of motion capture and animation performed by Bill T. Jones and digital artists Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser. I was able to see their work and the story of the putting together of their work when it was installed at the Cooper Union. The material of the poem is those performances, my reaction to them, and my desire to record them (a desire mediated by debates in performance studies about the relation or no relation between liveness and recording). At a certain point, I guess, the necessarily fragmented notes I took during the performances and the cut-up memories I scrambled to transcribe after the performances were given over to a poem rather than an essay by way of a process or a decision that I'm still trying to get a handle on. At the same time, I'm aware of the trace of those performances in the critical work in which I'm now engaged and certainly the juxtaposition of the words—"motion" and "capture"—so resonant in Jones's dancing and in his reticence toward the very form of *Ghostcatching*, so central to the Afro-diasporic philosophical and aesthetic assertion, has become fundamental to that work. And the performance of Other Dimensions in Music always kept this issue of movement's relation to confinement—this time in its relation to the production of sound—alive. Daniel Carter's torso bending and twisting after notes so strenuously as to suggest an attempt to wrench himself away from his own firmly planted feet seemed to cross over into the Pentecostal quickening of Jones's hands and breath, however weighed down they were by the very instruments (of restraint: wires, relays, a special suit) that made his choreography, his movement-writing, possible. I wanted to get in on all this *phonochoreography*, to think about or amplify and illuminate the movements that were produced to make music and the movements that the music produced; I also wanted to ask some questions about the relationship between artist and audience as well as that between performances that are discrete in terms of time, space, and genre.

"Johnny Cash/Rosetta Tharp" is concerned with a lot of the same things though the personal connections are of a different order. Cash and my mother were both born in a small town in southeastern Arkansas called Kingsland. Early in his childhood Cash moved north to Dyess, Arkansas, a cotton-farming community near Memphis. His family was part of a New Deal experiment in which poor farmers were given a plot of land to work in a kind of cooperative arrangement with other farmers that was mediated and enabled by the federal government. In one of his autobiographies Cash speaks fondly of growing up under socialism. I was thinking of that particular experiment while listening not only to Cash but to Sister Rosetta Tharp, who grew up in a place called Cotton Plant, which is not too far from Dyess. All kinds of associations came to mind, some of which I tried to make room for in the poem, however obliquely: my cousin Jacqueline who has taught school in Cotton Plant for thirty years; Jerry Brinkley, a great running back from Cotton Plant High who played for the University of Arkansas Razorbacks; the trains that run back and forth through Cash's music and through much of the music of the Mississippi/Arkansas Delta. I imagined a train

moving from Kingsland to Dyess, the sound of the horn of the first diesel that came through Kingsland and how my mother told me that she thought it was Gabriel on Judgment Day; I thought about how the part of Kingsland that she—and later, for a couple of years, I—lived in was called *Cuba* (pronounced *Cubie*) by my great Uncle Eli because the neighborhood's fugitive nocturnal goings-on corresponded to what he'd heard about Havana. I wanted to imagine some kind of commerce between the music that emerge from underground, experimental, stolen collectivities, and I wanted to approach it in a poem that was precisely trying to work through this kind of complicated being together. This poem, as well as "Other Dimensions," investigates and tries to sound and move with some old and new ensembles (of different musical traditions and social constructs, of public histories and secret personal reference).

ROWELL: Your comments anticipate my next question. Without the background information you have given us on those two poems, we, as readers, by the absence of helpful information, cannot acquire a full experience of a great number of your poems. And yet you cannot—and should not—give us a gloss of the personal or private elements of each of your poems. Is it appropriate for me to ask you to give us, however brief you'd like to make them, some helpful comments or notes on how we might read or experience your poems? And I apologize for such a sophomoric question/request.

MOTEN: It's not a sophomoric question; it's a very difficult question, too hard to answer directly. My first chapbook was called *Arkansas*, and I remember I sent a copy of it to my mother when it first came out, a couple of months before she passed away. She called me on the phone one day and said, basically, that she didn't know what was going on in these poems. She told me that every once in a while she saw a name or something that she recognized but that what she didn't recognize was the poetry as poetry or, at least, as the kind of poetry she'd had to read in school. She would say, "You know, I had to read poetry in school. And by the way I didn't like reading poetry in school when I had to read it, but I know from reading that poetry that yours is not like that. So what are you doing?" One of the things that I tried to say to her was that I grew up in her house, a house infused with music, including the music of the speech of the people in that house and in my neighborhood. I wanted my poetry to record and amplify that music. But I also wanted to change that music. Now I think that amplifying and transforming that music is done by way of something that already lies at that music's very heart. This root seems to me to be unavailable and secret, like a chain of receding events, any one of which might fool you into calling it an origin. It is, nevertheless, there and one prepares to get at it by going out. There is a reading of Mackey and Spillers and Baraka and Samuel R. Delany that I have been engaged in and that I hope is just and that reading was my guide. That kind of movement—Mackey would call it "centrifugal"—is inseparable, I think, from a certain desire for misrecognition, but I have to say that it was hard on me for my mom not to recognize herself or her music in my poetry. We talked about it for a long, long time. We communicated a lot that day in failing to communicate and I like to think that there was something in the poems, independent of shared references and even of the fact that I was her son, that made her think it was worth it to read them. There might be

only a few folks for whom the poems seem worth it (not in spite of but because of their failure or refusal to communicate). But I would say to those folks that I hope that they can, or will try to, recognize some music that they know in my poems. But all this is just another mournful preface.

Okay. Here's something I wrote really early this morning. "There is a kind of pressure that music and poverty (constraint) puts on the sentence; the remainder (freedom) is poetry. Over the course of history the demands of truthful expression (as either or both correspondence and discovery) become more and more severe, but at the same time 'the plain sense of things' becomes more plain and the striated polyvocality of the vessel, the medium, the conductor strives for directness." I think poetry is what happens or is conveyed on the outskirts of sense, on the outskirts of normative meaning. I'm trying precisely to work on that edge, and I assume that the content that is conveyed on that edge, on that fault line, is richer, deeper, and fuller than those things that are given in writing that passes for direct. That's definitely a kind of prejudice of mine—and I could be wrong. The art that always threatens the boundaries of sense has been the art that has been the most beautiful for me. What I love about Schoenberg or Olson is not the same thing as what I love about my cousin Reverend L. T. Marks's sermons, but it's nothing other than that either. I want my poems to carry that weight, and part of what I do to accomplish this is maintaining a wide range of reference. And while certain names or titles—or certain phrases or breaks in phrasing—might not resonate for every reader, what I'm hoping is that the music I'm trying to make with that name or by way of certain tones or images that are part of the composition and that I associate with this or that proper name will come through. So that the kind of embedded experimentalism in both the ceremonial and the everyday speech of my cousin corresponds in rich and interesting ways to a set of issues and a set of problems that I've been trying to work through by way of the critical theory that I've been reading. I want my poems to be a musical effect of encountering Marx and Marks and of the encounter between them in my work of their impossible communication of the new possibilities of communication that might occur as a function of courting miscommunication in general and of this miscommunication in particular.

So I'm depending on the kindness of strangers (and friends to whom I make unsolicited submissions!) toward stuff that I know is not for everybody even though I'm trying to make it for everybody. In the end, however, as Saidiya Hartman says, "the right to obscurity must be respected." This is a political imperative that infuses the unfinished project of emancipation as well as any number of other transitions or crossings in progress. It corresponds to the need for the fugitive, the immigrant and the new (and newly constrained) citizen to hold something in reserve, to keep a secret. The history of Afro-diasporic art, especially music, is, it seems to me, the history of the keeping of this secret even in the midst of its intensely public and highly commodified dissemination. These secrets are relayed and miscommunicated, misheard, and overheard, often all at once, in words and in the bending of words, in whispers and screams, in broken sentences, in the names of people you'll never know.

I'm trying to write the poetry of riding the bus in the city. What keeps this from being bare romanticism (I hope) is the misunderstanding.

ROWELL: As I listen to your comments, I was reminded of Alice Walker's short story "1955."

MOTEN: Yes, she's definitely attuned to the secret and to the question of the secret, the problem of its marketing, and the racial limits of its comprehension. But her story also, it seems to me, demands that we consider—on the other side of sheer thievery and impossible imitation—someone like Bob Dylan maybe listening to The Mississippi Sheiks *and* Roscoe Holcomb doing very different performances of "Sittin' on Top of the World," the secret in blues and bluegrass, both versions of the secret crucial in Dylan's singular forging of his own. Dylan talks about what he calls Holcomb's "untamed sense of control" in ways that let you know, in apposition to Walker's formulations, that the secret is only transmitted in transformation and transmutation.

ROWELL: Are there cultural secrets in the two Brazilian art forms: samba, an African-Brazilian invention, and bassa nova, a European-Brazilian invention after samba. Were the whites attempting to possess the secrets of samba in their appropriation of that black form in their creation of bassa nova?

MOTEN: I don't know enough about bassa nova to make any kind of definitive claim though when I listen to João Gilberto (and then to Gilberto Gil's sort of devoted interruption of him) I hear something that might be thought of as much in terms of possession by samba as possession of samba. But I'm only beginning to listen to this beautiful music, to claim it, and let it make its claim on me. Browning writes very beautifully about samba, about the ways samba reveals that possession is also always being possessed and dispossessed, a loss of one's self-possession by holding and by being held by what it is you think to be your own. While attempting to stave off any naive romanticism regarding the salutary effects of racial mixture, especially given the brutal ways power can deploy it in the same interests for which it also deploys racial purity, it's still necessary to consider the potentially fruitful ways that whiteness is disturbed and blackness reconfigured by Gilberto in his context and Dylan in his. They both contribute to the international of beautiful and necessary obscurity.

ROWELL: From the angle of the maker or from the angle of the subject?

MOTEN: I think this secret that I'm talking about is both in the maker and the maker's subject. I listen to some music that I love and it inspires me to write a poem. My poem is not going to be that music. And if my poem only attempts to imitate that music, it's not going to be worth a lot. But if it's an attempt to get at what is essential to that music, perhaps it will approach the secret of the music, but only by way of that secret's poetic reproduction (some singular thing given in falling short or in going past but also in the intuition of and desire for the connection with the subject that prompted it). Derrida once said that "what is happily and tragically universal is absolute singularity": that's the secret—that the poem contains and is structured by the irreducible generality of human making and the political, economic, and erotic particularity of a

given making. Art is the transmission of the secret, but the secret is transmuted in every moment of its transmission. I think that transmutation must show up as obscurity; but such obscurity must also be recognizable; an obscurity that people can feel and know, but not necessarily by way of supposedly simple and supposedly direct declarative statements.

ROWELL: I want to go back to you idea of poetry as a mode of inquiry. Whose mode of inquiry? Is it only that of the poet or maker, or is it also that of the reader? When you commit yourself as a reader to reading a poem, are you committing yourself to inquiring, or has the maker/poet already done that for you?

MOTEN: I would say that inquiry is transmitted and transmuted in the same way that the secret is. Inquiry is directed toward the secret but it is directed by the secret as well. At the same time, reading a poem is a mode of inquiry into a mode of inquiry; it is, hopefully, a response to a creative and questioning call that is also creative and questioning. Such reading is best characterized by the word "generosity." Writing, reading, or teaching art is like passing the gift of some inexhaustible disruption from hand to hand. You mess with it and it messes with you. This is a question concerning love and politics but see, that formulation is too "simple" and too "direct", now I'm just babbling.

ROWELL: You have already spoken a lot about music, but I will still ask this question or make these comments about music and your own work. One of the most unmistakable features of your poetry is its grounding in musical traditions as well as in twentieth-century American poetic traditions. Will you talk about the importance of these two groups of traditions to you as a poet? I am not talking about the contents of your poems so much as I am speaking of the art or the craft or the making of your poems.

MOTEN: Although there are a whole set of very complicated, well-developed and well-defined protocols within which music is created and received, music is not constrained by the requirement *to mean* in the way that language is so constrained. It is in this sense, according to Louis Zukofsky, Baraka, Harryette Mullen and a whole bunch of others, that music becomes a limit that poets attempt to approach. But even though music is not constrained by meaning, no one would ever say that music doesn't bear content or that music doesn't have something to say. So I'm trying to write poems that are situated in relation to this question: how is it that a work can bear content, have something to say, while not being wholly bound to the constraints and the requirements of making meaning? At the same time, I never want totally to refuse either the requirement or opportunity that is given in poetry to produce meaning. I want to write poems that recognizably inhabit, but in some kind of underground or fugitive way, the space between the laws of music and the laws of meaning. I want to challenge the law that language lays down while taking advantage of the opportunity that language affords. Of course, with regard both to language and to music, the African Diaspora is a global experimental field in which the laws of valuation, phonic

organization and graphic (re) production are constantly placed under the severe pressure of questioning and creativity. In "Ev'rytime We Say Goodbye," Cole Porter writes: "There's no love song finer / but how strange, the change, / from major to minor"; but what Betty Carter does both to these words and to that change takes Porter's composition out into the very economy, the very discovery, of the secret (of loss and of love) that he wished to transmit. She moves against the laws he broke and made, and I want to move on her line (which is also Baraka's line and Mullen's line, but also, by way of different protocols, different versions of the secret, Porter's line and, in a whole other way, on wholly other terrain, Zukofsky's line as well).

ROWELL: In your critical text, *In the Break*, you made a statement that I think inform your own poetry. You were speaking of Cecil Taylor's poem "Chinampas":

> This loosening is part of Taylor's method: of the word from its meaning, of the wounds from the word in the interest of a generative reconstruction, as if all of a sudden one decided to refuse the abandonment of the full resources of language, as if one decided no longer to follow the determining, structuring, reductive force of law.

MOTEN: In Nathaniel Mackey's great essay "Cante Moro," he discusses—by way of Federico Garcia Lorca's elaboration of the term "duende" as well as some amazing stuff Baraka has to say about how saxophonist John Tchicai's tone and phrasing "slide away from the proposed"—a particular quality of sound that implies and encodes movement, restlessness, a kind of fugal and centrifugal desire and execution that he calls "fugitivity." This sound is indicative of something that one is possessed by; it indicates, finally, life; that, as Foucault says, life constantly escapes; it steals away. Art works this way, too, I think; this sliding away from the proposed, this placement of the truth or of the secret in that space of tension or movement that is characterized by obscurity and indirection is what [Theodor] Adorno calls art's "immigrant law of motion." That law is given, and as its breaking, in a sound, in the dispossessive tension between music and meaning that Harryette Mullen talks about under the rubric of the "runaway tongue." This is the sound of the resistance to slavery; the critique of (private) property and of the proper, and it is, in the radical transformationality of all of its reproduction and recording, its commodified dissemination and circulation, irreducible and ongoing. That sound infuses Taylor's art and that's what I was trying to get at in the passage you quote. He's operating on a plane (and in a plain) of desire in which freedom and justice, each in its own complicated relation to law, are envisioned as unopposed to one another. That's our tradition. It is fugitive, even criminal, but not lawless. It is, as musician and musicologist Salim Washington says, a tradition of freedom but not of license. It's not but nothing other than the tradition within which Holcomb exerts his "untamed sense of control." I can't help thinking of a vast set of ranges and styles of fugitivity: Mondrians's and Shakespeare's (and now I'm back to the question that precedes the one I'm supposed to be answering) and Rakim's and Aretha's. But, see, this is the trouble with talking about transitions and the qualities that inform them: you just start babbling and dropping names. In the end,

that's probably all my writing is—dropping names and droppin' things, like Betty Carter.

ROWELL: Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I see our poets reading us into a variety of forms—texts like your own, those of Thomas Sayers Ellis, Natasha Trethewey, Carl Phillips, and so many others. Aesthetically, I view us as a long distance from the Black Arts Movement. And yet that is not to say that the poets of that movement do not have anything to offer us. Your poems and your critical texts tell me that the Black Arts Movement was an informing necessity in African-American expressive culture, and that it is an informing necessity in African-American culture, the same way the Harlem Renaissance must be. The same as such writers as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison continue to be. Is there a relationship between the experimentalism of the Black Nationalist art and the foundations of aesthetics in African-American vernacular culture? Are that experimentalism and the aesthetic of vernacular culture important to your work? Oh, I did not mean to ask you so many questions at one time. [*Laughter.*]

MOTEN: But all those questions are part of the same question and that's cool because this problem of the one and the many characterizes the Black Arts Movement as well as what it is that the Black Arts Movement was trying to approach and to convey: the multiple oneness of blackness (like what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls "the multiple oneness of life") in its relation to the history and hope of a radical political comportment; something inextricably bound to escape, fugitivity, criminality. So for me the Black Arts Movement is crucial and indispensable. And this is not only because of the range and depth of its address—however complicated and problematic—of fundamental questions but also because it was under that movement's protocols and emphases that I was introduced to art. My mom was a teacher and I remember going to work with her during Black History Week in the late sixties when I was five or six, watching and sometimes participating in the little programs and presentations in which she would direct her third- and fourth-grade students. One time she had the kids doing some kind of performance, the music for which was a song by the Temptations called "Message to the Black Man" from an album called *Puzzle People*. The refrain from that song—"No matter how hard they try they can't stop us now" was imprinted on my brain. I can hear it right now in what feels like the same way that I first heard it. Anyway, the point is that that song and my mom's adaptation and contextualization of it were all operating under the umbrella, so to speak, of the Black Arts Movement. That movement, that cultural field, was formative for me and, I think, for a lot of other scholars and poets of my generation. My mom had Baraka's and Larry Neal's anthology *Black Fire* and another anthology edited by Abraham Chapman called *Black Voices*; I remember her talking to me when I was very small about the *beauty* of George Jackson's writing in *Soledad Brothers*. These books are still on my shelves, held together by rubber bands. In *Black Voices* there's a poem by Mari Evans called "Black Jam for Dr. Negro," whose sound will never leave my head. I knew that stuff before I knew Chaucer or Milton; it remains formative for me and beautiful.

Now, that doesn't mean there aren't elements of the Black Arts Movement that require critique. I hope that *In the Break* adequately expresses both the depth of my love for that particular cultural formation, even in the moments when I'm trying to be critical of it in a rigorous and severe way. I'm talking now about the key figure in that movement and the one who's at the center of my book. Baraka is not only the condition of possibility of my writing but also almost always anticipates my critiques of him even though the critiques remain necessary. I'm thinking, particularly, of a set of questions concerning the sexual politics of the Black Arts Movement that converge with some questions regarding its racial politics as well as its relation to bohemianism and experimentalism. Baraka writes about both the loudness (which is to say both the publicness and the sharpness) of the changing of his ways and, more famously, of the sameness of what changes in black cultural life more generally. This is important when one considers that the participation in and delineation of the Black Arts by Baraka and others emerges by way of, as well as in response to, bohemian experimentation. Baraka's downtown New York sojourn is carried over into and enables the very formation that disavows it; but it is just as important to recognize that the presence of Baraka, A. B. Spellman, Robert Thompson, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Adrienne Kennedy, Adrian Piper, and Samuel R. Delany meant that the downtown thing was also always a black thing and, in certain complicated ways, also a Black Arts thing. Downtown was one of the points of transformation—if not origin—of Baraka's experiment. Baraka carries an experiment, a secret, with him that changes with him and by way of him. After he leaves downtown, Baraka carries the experiment to Harlem in a return that is not a return of the native who is not a native; and after a short stop he goes to Newark, carrying his version of the experiment back to where you could be fooled into thinking it started. The experiment/alism that he carries (back) to Newark vibrates with the radicalism of black everyday life *and* the energy of advanced American poetics (which was, itself, never not either seeking to own or to disavow itself as a black thing). I think there's a very intense relationship between experimentalism and the everyday (which includes but is not reducible to what people call "the vernacular") that animates radical artistic practice in the second half of the twentieth century generally and that the Black Arts Movement helped to conceptualize it. But that relation was already in place, it seems to me, in Zora Neale Hurston's work or Ma Rainey's. This is to say that stuff that gets placed under the rubric of the black vernacular is as much an experiment as that which is coded as avant-garde. I know I'm rambling, but so does the experiment in its necessary obscurity and promiscuity, in the freedom in constraint of a crawlspace or a middle passage.

ROWELL: The Black Arts Movement created a generation of African-American poets. Rita Dove and Yusef Komunyakaa represent another generation that comes after the Movement. Two more generations follow these two poets. How would you describe recent black poetry? Can we pin it down the way we can the poetry of the Movement? I am willing to celebrate the poetry being written now because it is not controlled by a collective or individual prescription or dicta. The poets are now as free as our jazz

musicians; they are free to create out of themselves, their own private lives, which is the source of all art. The new poets are striking out in so many different directions and coming up with so much. I consider this to be an extraordinary time in African-American poetry. There is a lot happening.

MOTEN: That's very true and yet I think there was always a lot happening. The Harlem Renaissance was broad enough to contain the vast formal difference between Claude McKay and Langston Hughes just as the Black Arts Movement was expansive enough to encompass Sonia Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti. And when you consider that at the same time you've got Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, N. H. Pritchard and Julia Fields, it makes you kind of wonder, on the one hand, how folks could blind themselves to such diversity and, on the other hand, how others could take such blindness so seriously. Anyway, the point is that now there is a whole bunch of great black poets writing, performing, and recording in a whole bunch of ways and that is extraordinarily exciting. Between Ed Roberson's architecture and Tracie Morris's acoustics and these old MC Lyte twelve-inches I've been playing I don't know what do with myself. It's too much! Obviously, there are significant differences both between these poets and between those types of poetry that foreground either the literary or the performative; nevertheless, you can't help but recognize the kinship between them and I just want to be part of the family.