

***Black and Blur*. By Fred Moten. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. [consent not to be a single being, volume 1]. 339 pp. ISBN9780822370161**

Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* was published in 2003 and is steadily headed for canonical status amongst those studying intersections of music and critical race theory. Major jazz studies academics prescribe it in US universities; it is cited in recent sound studies and critical improvisation studies texts. The present review concerns *Black and Blur* (2017), the first volume of Moten's new work *consent not to be a single being* (2017-2018), a three volume collection of (mostly previously published) essays and short pieces. *Black and Blur* is intended as an 'extension' (p. x) of *In the Break*'s investigation of criticality, blackness, art and performance. In both books, Moten builds this investigation on an aggressive revision of conventional understandings of left-wing radicalism and of various dualities including subject-object, singular-collective, aural-visual, etc. Moten's weapon of choice is audacious close-reading and juxtaposition of very skilfully and intentionally selected texts. Nearly all of *Black and Blur*'s 25 chapters are critical reactions to writings, images, films, or (in a couple of cases) musical recordings.

Although Moten is certainly immersed in black music whether hip hop (p. 271) or jazz (p. 218, 273, 223, 275, see also chapters 5-6), his actual approach to it is mostly through textual sources: biographies, journalism and musicological texts. We see this in chapter 6, 'The New International of Rhythmic Feel/ings,' which discusses blackness and internationalism. Moten knits various sources and historical moments: a calypso song about the Little Rock Crisis, Charles Mingus writing music on a road trip to Mexico, Mingus' trash-talking of rival jazz musicians to impress women and fans, and a riot between black U.S. troops and locals in Trinidad during World War II. The connecting thread here is Mingus' use of calypso as an insult to denigrate rival jazzman Ornette Coleman: 'incapable of reading music... a calypso player... couldn't keep tempo or follow the chords.' (p. 88-89) This tactical denigration of non-US black music, Moten reveals, is a 'nationalist discourse' (p. 92) ironically coexisting with Mingus' international, diasporic musical influences, and ultimately embedded in an 'erotic-imperial paranoia' (p. 109) underlying both U.S. imperial power and Mingus' desire for sexual and commercial conquest. Mingus' problematic pronouncements regarding "the authenticity of blackness" (p. 91) therefore provide the impetus for Moten's analysis. (A similar technique crops up in chapter 20's defence of artist Jimmie Durham – a white man who identifies as part-Cherokee, despite vociferous objections from tribal representatives.)

Moten boldly tries to bring the bassist-composer's music into his analysis, searching for similarities in Mingus' rhythmic aesthetics and those of the calypsonian. He wants to show how Mingus' disparagement of supposedly inauthentic blackness was undercut by his own music's Caribbean and Mexican influences. However, Moten's use of musical terms falls short of precision: 'This all has, also, to do with thinking the harmonics of swing.' (p. 100) This is mystifying, and so is Moten's switch from considering jazz and calypso to discussing classical conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (via texts, again: an interview with Daniel Barenboim and some liner notes from a Furtwängler album). Moten wishes to compare a kind of 'improvisation' in Furtwängler's unusual, 'fitful' conducting style with aspects of Mingus' grooving. (p. 102) Such a comparison elides much, of course, and when Moten tries to link the conductor's 'unstable tempi' with 'participatory discrepancies' (p. 102) (Charles Keil's old concept which is not supported by contemporary groove research), this reviewer found himself unable to make the leap. However, such vague use of musicological texts (Moten also cites Ingrid Monson and Shannon Dudley) does not particularly weaken the conclusion that 'the possibilities of diasporic contact and solidarity were always structured, then, by a complex system of intramural and extramural antagonistic hierarchies.' (p. 112)

Importantly, though, engagement with complexities of diaspora through African-Americans like Mingus is not Moten's only approach. In chapter 1, he focuses on texts from elsewhere in the African diaspora. One is *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* by C. L. R. James; and the other *Remembering The Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire*, by artist/historian Tshibumba Kanda Matulu and anthropologist Johannes Fabian. This time, rather than a single problematic figure, Moten finds in each of his source texts a pair of protagonists representing European and African tendencies. These symbolise black radicalism's simultaneous dependence on European radical thought and exceeding of it. This complex relationship or dynamic is what Moten means by his chapter title, 'Not In Between.'

The phrase comes from James' comparison of two kinds of historiography – an older kind, in which great men act in accordance with the power of God; and a newer scientific kind in which social forces determine outcomes. James concludes: 'As so often the truth does not lie in between. Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make.' (James, p. x) The space not in between is therefore a space for agency within constraint – a major theme throughout *Black and Blur*. Moten's concern is then to discern in James a black radical stance inhabiting this space 'not in between enlightenment and darkness (blackness).' (p. 11) He does so through a characteristic manoeuvre which is repeated throughout both *In the Break* and *Black and Blur*: the detecting of an 'aural infusement of the visual' (p. 27), a paradoxically musical aspect or 'phonographic content' (*In the Break*, 202) in texts or images. This concept is theorised at length in the chapter 'Visible Music' from *In the Break*, wherein Moten challenges the 'ocularcentrism' as well as 'the analytic-interpretive reduction of phonic materiality' common to much Western philosophy. (*In the Break*, p. 197)

Moten is able to trace subtle but undeniable incursions of vocal sound and musical action in James' writing: the rhythm of a military tactic; the dialect speech of a slave leader addressing his troops. Such 'infusement of lyric into historiographic narrative' (p. 27), Moten argues, empowered James to envision a black radicalism characterised again by incursions, of 'the future in the present, the invasion from the outside, socialism in the factory.' (p. 12) Moten also finds this 'trace and forecast of a future in the present and in the past' in Fabian and Tshibumba. He close-reads transcriptions of their 'encounter still too laden with power' (p. 14) and discovers suggestive breaks and interruptions. Moten extrapolates that such essentially musical 'accompaniment of the utterance' involving 'temporal disruption' (p. 18) (found also in Tshibumba's paintings which compress together historically separate events) forms a 'substance of sound in the image/commodity' – which, bearing in mind the history of imaging and slavery/commodification of black people, 'requires a revision, an improvisation of [Karl Marx's] labour theory of value.'

To discuss black radicalism's relation to Continental theory and the incursion of aurality into text, Moten here reuses a technique from *In the Break*: juxtaposing European philosophy with seminal black writers. So, in the 2003 book, Marx was intercut with Frederick Douglass, and Adorno with James Baldwin. This oblique excavation of useful insights from at times frankly racist European writers recalls Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, for instance when it theorised that 'Hegel... correctly places slavery at the natal core of modern sociality.' (Gilroy, p. 63) Moten goes further, however. In chapter 2 of *Black and Blur*, 'Interpolation and Interpellation', a particularly scintillating juxtaposition illuminates the constraints under which hip hop revises and rebirths 'the original.' (p. 30) Louis Althusser's theory that we are produced by social forces when hailed or interpellated by authority figures, is intercut with a scene from *Ghetto Supastar*, a crime novel written by rapper Pras (on the back of his hit track of the same name). In the scene, the hero is intercepted by a friendly-seeming policeman who, under the guise of helping him get a job, demands his phone number. Only the protagonists' rap skills of fast talk and memorising words save him, as he manages to pass off a fake number. Moten sees this as a smuggling of black traditions of resistance into what looks like a 'reproduction of the conditions of capitalist production.' (p. 33) Escaping the gaze of the law, it's a musical moment. Moten's point is that this corresponds with the 'black proletarianisation of bourgeois form' (p. 33) which Pras (the real-life musician) engaged in when interpolating a cheesy Dolly Parton chorus into his 'Ghetto Supastar.'

Another powerful juxtaposition occurs in chapter 5, 'Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape (Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis)', which explores early modernity's control of time via painting, photography and cinema. Theories from Adorno dialogue with an astounding quotation from Harriet Jacob's slave narrative, *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Her writing is black performance, Moten elucidates, in how it resists being edited out, in how its 'amazing medley of shifts' emerges from a constrained hiding-place, what 'Hortense Spillers has called a *scrawl*space.' (p. 69) Exploring such interplay between performance and confinement, Moten concludes that the 'dialectic of constant escape' (p. 85) Adorno valorised in Webern and Schoenberg, is central to jazz as well. Calling up resonances of the slave experience, Moten argues that 'the riff is a mode of confinement: the ear and hand of Gil Evans *drive* Miles [Davis] who is placed, composed, arranged.' (p. 85) Moten's achievement is to demonstrate the political force of these seemingly formal qualities of music and literature.

Chapter 4, '*Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia*,' continues the investigation of agency in constraint. It tackles pianist Glenn Gould, bestowing upon his qualities of metronomic time, fascination with multivocality and use of recording technology to upend the artist-audience hierarchy, the 'improper name' of 'Gould's blackness.' (p. 228) Moten approaches Gould through film and interviews. One crucial scene in Hamburg, 1958, foregrounds a chambermaid compelled by Gould to listen to a recording of his playing. (pp. 42-43) Moten has her stand for the captive, captivated audience in a concert hall, finding that her bodily presence raises the 'question of the relation between counterpoint and thingliness – between the baroque and blackness.' (p. 46) Building off Adorno), Moten discusses the paradox wherein groove music both forces people to move and makes people delight in moving, acting as 'a liberatory constraint.' (p. 47)

Moten's theorising of the groove, particularly in chapter 6 and in chapter 24, 'Entanglement and Virtuosity,' builds on *In the Break's* concept of 'the break' – a space for action opened by the presence of both an 'exterior aurality' which challenges the 'reduction of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form', and a vexed appeal or connection to Africa through the figure of the estranged mother or lover. (*In the Break*, p. 6) Moten names this vexed connection 'the sexual cut' (*In the Break*, p. 6), building on Nathaniel Mackey and Jacques Derrida, and his theorising of grooving performs another sexing, gendering cut. He finds a sexual division between the patriarchal mastery attributed to the greats of black music in 'pious recognition' of their genius (p. 274); and the 'virtuous, communal, maternal attention to' (p. 277) detail which actually characterises musicians' practices of grooving. 'The area that drum and bass lay down constitutes [a] womb-like, family circle, foregrounding a certain maternal responsibility.' (p. 106) This womb-like space is the break, the groove, the pocket. This gendering of groove opens new possibilities for music criticism. It empowers Moten to look back on his early reverence for Rakim and note that 'a whole bunch of critics at that time' (p. 273), were projecting onto the rapper a desire for a Miles Davis-like hero to prove that hip hop, just like jazz, was a 'music of nonstandard but nevertheless identifiably intellectual individuation.' (p. 274) This perspective, Moten realises, misses how a soloist's bold 'announcement' of him- or herself is not about individualism but instead troubles 'the very idea of [the opposition of] the one and the many'. (p. 274) 'The soloist... does not announce himself but rather our collective evacuation of the field in which the self is incessantly advertised.' (p. 274) Moten then examines contemporary saxophonist Kamasi Washington, finding that the matrilineal, maternal aspects of groove in his music have been submerged by an emphasis on founders, personality and patriarchy.

In the final chapter of *Black and Blur*, we glimpse something very like the 'virtuous, communal, maternal' attention to detail of grooving in a different context: the day-to-day work of veteran Democratic Party political organiser, Bobby Lee. Lee stands for a kind of selflessness combining aesthetic sociality and political activism, symbolised in a scene from a documentary film where he cuts the grass for an elderly neighbour and flirts with her, on the understanding that he has her vote. It's a notably pragmatic, political, down-to-earth image to sign off a book mostly concerned with philosophy and criticism. Lee's political practice is tactile and aesthetic, in stark contrast to the kind of aesthetically dead political meetings Moten mocks elsewhere as 'embarrassed discussions of freedom.' (p. 29) It's pleasing when Moten peeks through the curtain in this way – we sense he's been to a few too many 'embarrassed discussions.' Similarly, when Moten defends his professional turf, the straight-up grumpiness of his 'Who the fuck you talking to?' (p. 293, addressed to Paul Gilroy in answer to Gilroy's critique of African-American complicity with corporate multiculturalism) is certainly more memorable than chapter 3's evaluation of such intramural concerns as 'postdiscipline' in 'the changing U.S. academy.' (p. 34) (Although this chapter does contain useful general formulations on black performance and its articulations.)

Moten's linguistic provocation no longer reaches such heights of performativity as seen in *In The Break's* 15-word opening sentence which is completed/interrupted by a 3-page endnote. Certain gestures such as intentional mistypings or heavy use of fragmenting brackets, dashes and slashes, have also faded from Moten's style, although he still routinely uses paradox, negation, abstraction, juxtaposition and wordplay. (Recently, a major jazz studies academic recounted to me how early training in reading absurdist drama and poetry had equipped him to deal with *In the Break*.) Language games are central to Moten's project of troubling the conventional assignment or predication of meaning, 'rewind[ing] the given.' (p. viii) They are deployed in an improvisational flight through densely packed ideas. Sometimes this can be exhilarating, particularly when clues and catchphrases strewn throughout Moten's work begin to resonate

together. It becomes possible to extract meaning from passages like the following: ‘The vast range of violence the ante-national international perpetrates on the verb *to be* in the unholy name of the nominative case of the first-person plural pronoun is a clue that is, at once, both immanent and transcendent.’ (p. 220) Moten here is suggesting that black slang like ‘we doin’ it’ and ‘we be’ points directly but covertly to a special conception of subjectivity and collectivity. Interpreting this kind of prose involves multiple emotional cycles, wherein frustration provokes deeper personal engagement, leading to exhilarated connection and momentum, which then founders in more non-sequiturs. This perhaps best suits *Black and Blur*’s art criticism which resounds with poetry in response to extraordinary works such as Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*. (In fact, Moten conveys the excitement of contemporary visual art better than he does the experience of music in, say, Chapter 9’s review of a 2002 noise music album.)

In style and content, *Black and Blur* forms a stimulating extension to *In the Break*. However, considering how many fundamental ideas are better detailed in the earlier book – the break, the troubling of subjectivity, the aural infusement of the visual – and how many of *Black and Blur*’s new themes it prefigures – the making and breaking of rules, authorianism and grooving – *In the Break* remains the definitive text, one whose possibilities for theorising music have barely been tapped. Scholars who have been citing *In The Break* will find in *Black and Blur* fresh angles, new examples and deep workings-out of a similar set of concepts, all based in Moten’s wielding of Saiyyida Hartman’s concept that racial terror is ever-present in a never-ending, constant ‘diffusion’ (p. xi). Music academics new to Moten will do better with the earlier text. It has longer, deeper trajectories of analysis. That said, *Black and Blur*’s wider purview, taking in the cultural history of modernity and a lot of passionate contemporary art criticism, will likely appeal more to readers who aren’t specialists in black music or literature.

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