

### 3. Relate, Resist, Resurface

#### On Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013)

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"I FEEL LIKE A CITIZEN IT'S TIME TO GO  
AND COME BACK A DRIFTER"

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Notebooks*  
(no date)

This is writing against the backdrop of a manifesto, the transformative spirit of poetry and marronage. It's the pleasure—the desire that lurks underneath—of drawing matters into one's own relations. It's the excitement and anxiety of placing and displacing, of diving right in. It's reading and relating within *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, and putting placement and displacement into effect. For every sentence, every sentiment in the book has been an invitation to resist and assist, to refuse and effuse, to withstand and to understand. The following is a concession to movement, to a state of always already being on the move, to "study," as Harney and Moten refer to it.<sup>1</sup> Harney and Moten do not explain. They relate to study as a relation. In my "study" of *The Undercommons* (and the undercommons), a study which is neither an analysis nor an interpretation, movement is a three-fold affair, a three-headed monster that exists in a space-time of radical dislocation. Movement as *relation*, movement as *resistance*, movement as *resurfacing*—force, communication, and journey. This study is itself an invitation to understand "relation" as a form and as a genre of the art of

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<sup>1</sup> I will refrain from issuing and engaging in tentative definitions of what Harney and Moten "mean" when they use certain terms such as *study*, *logistics*, and, ultimately, *the undercommons*. Rather, I will relate to these concepts, play with them, think with and through them.

essayistic intervention. It seeks to relate to *The Undercommons*, it seeks to unfold the book's aesthetics of resistance, and it seeks to think its premise of Blackness in and through the cultural mobility of what I refer to as "resurfacing." Resurfacing as movement is resistance and mobility in relation; it is improbable and inappropriate. To resurface, or, as Harney puts it, "the way we read a text, we come in and out of it at certain moments"—this "sense of dispossession, and possession by the dispossessed," "the riotous production of difference" (109)—is to wonder what happens once we realize that the horizon cannot be found ahead but simultaneously above and below.<sup>2</sup> What if it unfolds in a state of simultaneously touching upon and moving beneath the surface? These are not esoteric or religious questions. These are theological and aesthetic questions, questions emerging from and carefully relating to what Martin Luther King, Jr. refers to as "creative suffering."<sup>3</sup> These are, in short, questions that center on a struggle that is in and of itself always already a relation of struggles—of struggles in the making.

*For Harney and Moten, the struggle of the undercommons is the struggle of "Black study," which is not the study of a racially or ethnically defined collective, but the study in and through Blackness as a "social force."<sup>4</sup> It's the study of the "modality of life's*

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- 2 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
  - 3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper, 1991), 219. King, Jr. unfolds this idea in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. It revolves around the Bonhoefferian trope (which Bonhoeffer most strikingly develops in his letters from prison) of a Christian God who does not intervene, but who, after sacrificing his only son, retreats to suffer compassionately with mankind. And it is in and through suffering that new things emerge. King, Jr., in turn, uses the idea of creative suffering as a transhistoric characterization of Black life in the United States. See especially parts II, IV, V in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: Macmillan, 1959). I want to thank my brother for inviting me to think about the relationship between Bonhoeffer and King, despite the fact that I have certainly failed to do justice to the more complex theologian argument.
  - 4 Fred Moten, "T. S. Eliot Memorial Reading," April 25, 2019, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, video recording, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp-BjI3i1Fzs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp-BjI3i1Fzs). During the Q&A that followed his reading, Fred Moten states that "Blackness is best understood as a social force and not an identity"—a claim, of course, which could never be made by someone in my subject position, but I nonetheless feel that Moten's definition marks an opening, a gracious invitation, in and through which I can relate my particular reading experience with a larger scope of Harney and Moten's writ-

constant escape" (51), "an instrument in the making" (94), "the site where absolute nothingness and the world of things converge" (95).<sup>5</sup> Blackness, for them, is an "aesthetic sociality" (96), but even though this aesthetic sociality of Blackness may be related to what is commonly referred to as the "Black aesthetic," it is, as *The Undercommons* makes abundantly clear, certainly not tantamount to it.<sup>6</sup> According to Harney and Moten, it is not a politicized means of cultural expression and expressive difference, but a submerged mode of relation that quite bluntly *occurs*. It is a set of practices and, at the same time, the scrutinizing relation to their inherent resistance and refusal. It relates in the tradition of Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, and Moten himself. It is, in a way, difference that extends below, relates, and resurfaces from (the) within.

Blackness as a social force, as I understand Harney and Moten, expresses itself in an aesthetic sociality and it ultimately unfolds as a dynamic of poetic relations—in a "poetics of relation," as Édouard Glissant reminds us. And thus I desire to *relate* most emphatically my reading of Harney and Moten's book to the vulnerable sensitivity of the social force they seek to evoke. I trust in the relatability and proportion of communication, commensurability, and connectivity—I trust that there is "feel" in the non-binary thicket of our ever-growing poetic relations. And I hear Fred Moten's call for creative resistance in the concluding interview of *The Undercommons*, that "what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can't be repaired. The only thing we

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ing experience. I want to thank Laura Bieger for turning my attention to Moten's reading, and I want to thank her even more firmly for sharing an essential insight of her own research.

- 5 Anything "of" the undercommons may also be referred to as being, of taking place "in" the undercommons. Or, to put it differently, when it comes to the undercommons, any preposition is able to make palpable the dynamics of relationality of the undercommons.
- 6 Accordingly, Laura Harris in *Experiments in Exile: C. L. R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) argues that Blackness has its own aesthetic sociality, which is marked by "dissident forms of congregation and collaboration" (2). These forms are, of course, related and, at the same time, decidedly resistant to Andreas Reckwitz's definition of aesthetic sociality as a "form of governmental control when it grows beyond subculture to attain broader legitimacy and attempts systematically to control the production and reception of aesthetic events." See Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. Steven Black (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 209. *The Undercommons's* aesthetic sociality of Blackness, I argue, may best be understood as the *Un-grund* of this excess of cultural control.

can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new" (152).<sup>7</sup> The process of tearing down and building anew, the transformative spirit of poetry and marronage—the spirit of study in the undercommons as a relation to “manifesto art,” i.e., an exercise in the intricacy of “social theory, political acts, and poetic expression,” as Martin Puchner puts it—that I have touched upon in the beginning of this study, is *difference resurfacing*.<sup>8</sup>

*All of this has been thought of, has been composed and written in the summer of 2020, during a globally enforced lockdown, at a time of social and individual, of public and personal crisis, a time of social distancing.* All of this has been written at a time when individuals and institutions, for the sake of the common good, have endured and might still endure severe government-issued restraints and prohibitions. Distancing, I have learned, brings forth curious modes of relating and associating. It is a false sentiment, almost pitiful, to think that once social life has been reduced to a so-called “bare minimum” you begin to appreciate what’s truly important, what’s “essential.” In reality, you gradually lose the ability to distinguish between what’s important and what is not, navigating your affects and intellectual curiosity through a state of collective indifference and anxiety to a point at which you can no longer trust that you are, in fact, dealing with a collective fragility or merely your own. (Who, in fact, are you to yourself in these moments and movements of distance and distancing?)

The lockdown turned out to be a space of relations in which subordinate clauses cease to exist; in which everything becomes a matter of main clauses—maintaining the materiality and purported stability of the minimum, only to overemphasize the minimum as a relation of essential importance. (What is all of this to me? How many people truly understand and care that wearing a face mask not only protects them from others but others from them?) If you were lucky—if you were geopolitically, economically, socially speaking “fortunate” enough—you could look outside the window of your living-room, your study, or your bedroom. You could listen to the birds chirping

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7 For Harney and Moten, this is not just the task of culture and the community, but a matter of academic credibility—not least in my field of American studies. They write, “[t]he new American studies should do this [i.e. break open the memory of the conquest], too, if it is to be not just a people’s history of the same country but a movement against the possibility of a country, or any other; not just property justly distributed on the border but property unknown” (41).

8 Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

in the freshly blossoming trees and realize that you haven't seen or heard a plane in a long time. In Berlin, herons began to nestle on the banks of the Spree because cruise vessels were anchoring indefinitely. In the meantime, delivery trucks would roam the streets because we would still need everything right away, job security in the service industry would decrease with menacing speed because we wouldn't (and we won't) fight for their labor agreements, and universities would hail the digital classroom in the spirit of a "creativity semester" only to put future cuts to the test. The list of "in the meantime" observations is much longer because the list is nothing less than the totality of our social makeup.

I wonder whether the catacombs of the lockdown could ever be shaken by the anxious movement in and of the undercommons. At a time of social distancing, reform movements have begun to repeat themselves in feedback loops of unfounded hope. Greek islands remain filled with the agony of disillusion. The countless ships, boats, and cutters on the horizon of the Mediterranean Sea—the vessels that transport and produce an uncharted mass of bodies—cannot possibly compete with the question of whether the professional soccer leagues can count on the profits from ticket sales. Europe currently dwindles in the afterimages of its cynicism, breathing the stifling air that is stirred up by clapping hands on balconies.

On the opposing shore of the Atlantic, in the summer of 2020, 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery goes for a run—he is not *on* the run, but goes *for* a run—in Satilla Shores outside of Brunswick, Georgia, when a father and his son, Gregory McMichael and Travis McMichael, track him down in their truck and kill him with two shots from a shotgun. Gregory McMichael is a former Glynn County police officer. A Black man being shot and murdered in public—being *executed*—by two white men who form an armed posse to practice vigilante justice? It is appalling (and appallingly telling) how little you can oversimplify this. There is hardly more to it—because there aren't two sides to this story. There is no right side of history to emerge from. It's just one story that repeats itself in the eternal return of the same. A video documenting the killing has been circulating on the internet, but ultimately, it does not seem to be a matter of images but of the imagination (of "the ghosts of lynching"?<sup>9</sup> Of

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9 See George Yancy, "Ahmaud Arbery and the Ghosts of Lynchings Past," *New York Times*, May 12, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/opinion/ahmaud-arbery-georgia-lynching.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/opinion/ahmaud-arbery-georgia-lynching.html).

“still living and dying in the slaveholders’ republic”?<sup>10</sup>) that won’t stop to repeat itself. All of these killings, all the bodies and bodies and bodies, emerge from age-old narratives and myths of “lockdown” and “social distancing” in the name of race, racism, and violence. They are tantamount to the age-old experience of white supremacy and the resistant study in the undercommons. In her poem “Weather,” published in the *New York Times* on June 15, 2020, Claudia Rankine writes the two verses, “Social distancing? Six feet / under for underlying conditions. Black.”<sup>11</sup> And in the police report of the Arbery killing, also published by the *New York Times*, it says,

I [the police officer typing the report] began speaking with Gregory McMichael who was a witness to the incident. McMichael stated there have been several Break-ins [sic] in the neighborhood and further the suspect was caught on surveillance video. McMichael stated he was in his front yard and saw the suspect from the break-ins “hauling ass” down Satilla Drive toward Buford Drive. McMichael stated he then ran inside his house and called to Travis (McMichael) and said, “Travis the guy is running down the streets let’s go”. McMichael stated he went to his bedroom and grabbed his .357 Magnum and Travis grabbed his shotgun because they “didn’t know if the male was armed or not”. McMichael stated, “the other night” they saw the same male and he stuck his hand down his pants which lead [sic] them to believe the male was armed. ... Coroner Rozier pronounced time of death to be 13:46.<sup>12</sup>

*And then: 8 minutes and 46 seconds.* After I had already handed in the final draft of this essay, a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, and this essay has inadvertently (also) become a reaction to the feeling that, all of a sudden, the world feels differently yet again. The world witnessed yet another lynching. An inescapable need to relate. Study in the undercommons is a matter of relations. It is sickening to feel, to see, and to imagine further how violently Black lives and white silence are intertwined—the contingency that unfolds

10 See Ibram X. Kendi, “We’re Still Living and Dying in the Slaveholders’ Republic,” *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2020, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/what-freedom-means-trump/611083](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/what-freedom-means-trump/611083).

11 Claudia Rankine, “Weather,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/books/review/claudia-rankine-weather-poem-coronavirus.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/books/review/claudia-rankine-weather-poem-coronavirus.html).

12 “Public Release Incident Report for G20-11303,” Glynn County Police Department, February 23, 2020, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6915-arbery-shooting/b52fa09cdc974b970b79/optimized/full.pdf>.

in the confrontation of the existential and the comfort of a mere privilege. We (that is, in this case, those of us who, in the words of James Baldwin, “think they are white”) have constructed and reconstructed and reconstructed a world in which there is a freedom to be silent which is not only greater and looms larger than the freedom of others to exist, but in which the former ultimately impedes the latter. It’s the construction and reconstruction of a culture of white supremacy. In his “Anatomy of a Lynching,” a contribution to the *Texte zur Kunst* “Notes from Quarantine” columns, Robert Reid-Pharr reminds us, “we exist in lynching culture .... We (Americans, Germans, blacks, whites, indeed the whole of the planet) watch and rewatch George Floyd’s being killed because watching black men being killed is what we always do.”<sup>13</sup> And so, we watch and listen. “Leave me alone,” George Floyd asked repeatedly. “I can’t breathe,” he unambiguously declared, only to cry for help from his mother moments before he died.

*You cannot oversimplify this. You can’t. And despite the fact that the officer who killed George Floyd, Derek Chauvin, has been pronounced guilty by now, study in the undercommons is to be responsive. After having read Harney and Moten, I wonder whether it has always been the study of social distancing, the study of a “we” that resists silence, a “we” that is simultaneously exposed and isolated—insulated in the Du-Boisean “veil” of a persistent lockdown.* On July 5, 1875, with Reconstruction in full (and arguably fully failing) swing, Frederick Douglass addressed Black Washingtonians on occasion of Independence Day festivities with one of his most explicit speeches on race relations. Amongst other issues, he reflects upon the impact and legacy of the Civil War, and he, ever so wryly, asks, “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?” Only to note a moment later, “The signs of the times are not all in our favor.”<sup>14</sup> There is a “we” tied up with and within the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, the killings of Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks (and all the events like them that occur on a daily basis); a “we” that moves beyond the juxtapositions of racism, disregard, sympathy, and a general concern for the public good. There is, for that matter, a “we” at stake that transcends the idea of the public, for it unfolds at its core as the momentary

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13 Robert Reid-Pharr, “Anatomy of a Lynching,” *Texte zur Kunst*, June 19, 2020, [www.textezurkunst.de/articles/anatomy-lynching](http://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/anatomy-lynching).

14 Frederick Douglass, “The Color Question: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., On 5 July 1875,” *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One, Volume 4, 1864–80*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 417.

breakdown of relatability and social recognition, and, as such, it's not a matter of appropriation and false identification (and certainly not a matter of white guilt that subliminally longs for Black solace). *The Undercommons* acknowledges this breakdown as resistance. The book is an evocation, a provocation, to be more precise, of relations. The book and its authors unfold "Black study" as a relation of the promises and improbabilities, i.e., the "we," of its inherent (undercommons) relatability (the "we" that is, in this case, so much bigger than the aforementioned sum of the people who "think they are white").

One of the prosecutors in the Arbery case who eventually recused himself, George E. Barnhill, wrote in a letter (also published by the *New York Times*) about the motifs of the suspects, "It appears their intent was to stop and hold this criminal suspect until law enforcement arrived."<sup>15</sup> Stop and hold. Ah-maud Arbery went for a run and was violently stopped and held up. He did not run into a hold. In the logic of *The Undercommons*, he already ran *within* the "hold" (the "hold," as Harney and Moten characterize it), within the space that contains, as they argue, Blackness as its "fantasy"—the very space that emerges, as I have quoted earlier, as "the site where absolute nothingness and the world of things converge" (95). Bodies and bodies and bodies, for the hold "repeats and repeats and repeats," as Christina Sharpe puts it.<sup>16</sup> Being in the hold, *The Undercommons* seems to suggest, is comportment to repetition, to the perpetual movement of drawing beneath and resurfacing again and again and again.<sup>17</sup>

*All of this has been thought of, has been composed and written at a time of lockdown and social distancing.* And lockdown and social distancing are inadvertently tied to privilege. Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer at Johns Hopkins Medicine, Sherita Hill Golden, M.D., M.H.S., a specialist in endocrinology, diabetes, and metabolism, lists five factors why African Americans and people of color in the United States suffer more severely during the coronavirus epidemic: (a) living in crowded housing conditions, (b) working in essential fields, (c) inconsistent access to health care, (d) chronic health conditions, (e)

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15 George E. Barnhill, "Letter from George E. Barnhill to Captain Tom Jump," *Office of the District Attorney Waycross Judicial Circuit*, April 2, 2020, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6916-george-barnhill-letter-to-glyn/b52fa09cdc974b970b79/optimized/full.pdf>.

16 Christina Sharpe, "What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe," interview by Selamawit Terrefe, *Rhizomes* 29 (2016).

17 See also Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), esp. chs. 2 and 3.



stress and immunity.<sup>18</sup> Can one argue that African Americans and people of color in the United States do not suffer excessively from violently established modes of distancing—segregation, isolation, and ghettoization—that exceed, no, that are intentionally excluded from the privilege of social distancing? Exposed to the dangers of dwelling, working, breathing, suffering, enduring: the aesthetic sociality of the undercommons takes shape and form in the hold of racial disparity, it grew out of social distancing and physical lockdown centuries ago, it has unfolded in the aesthetic motion (sickness) of resurfacing ever since, and it continues to echo what is with images and ideas of what *has been* and what *can* be. This is, in turn, the potential of the undercommons—its practice of creative placement and displacement.

When I conceptualized this essay, I re-read Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons*, and I started to understand that the two authors engage in and with a notion of aesthetic sociality that is of an utmost fragility and uncertainty; that exceeds the comfortable relativity of compassion and indignation. "The black aesthetic turns on a dialectic of luxuriant withholding—abundance and lack push technique over the edge of refusal," Harney and Moten write, "so that the trouble with beauty, which is the very animation and emanation of art, is always and everywhere troubled again and again. New technique, new beauty" (48). I tried to relate to this idea and thought that the aesthetic sociality of *The Undercommons* (as "Black study")—which I conceive of as 'resurfacing'—must be a matter of "reluctant activism," to use a term coined by Kara Walker.<sup>19</sup> Is it a space-time that either unfolds in the poetics of hyperbole, violence, and manifesto-like rhetoric, or in modes of withdrawal, tranquility, and distancing? I felt that there is an emphasis to this mode of reluctance, a curiously confident and self-resonating gesture: in *The Undercommons*, in its aesthetics alone, the reluctant activism of the (of its) aesthetic sociality of Blackness unfolds and excels in an equiprimordial congruence of urgent vibrancy and unassuming deceleration that is constantly challenged by violence and deprivation. It repeats and repeats and repeats as the Other to the oppressive forces of subjugation and Nietzschean exuberance.

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18 "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color," *Johns Hopkins Medicine*, April 20, 2020, [www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities).

19 See Colleen Walsh, "Artist Kara Walker: Reluctant Activist," *Radcliffe Magazine* (Winter 2015): 6-7.

*There are a couple of sentences in the author's preface of Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl which, to many, may have passed unnoticed, but which have been on my mind for years now. Jacobs writes, "Since I have been in the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself."*<sup>20</sup> Jacobs recognizes, but at the same time rejects, the established conventions of creative expressivity and instead draws on a constant and excitingly productive state of dissatisfaction, discontent, and unrest. In these few sentences, this sentiment, Jacobs resists with impressive reluctance.<sup>21</sup> She relates her writing, herself and her self to the aesthetic sociality, the creative disposition, of Blackness (as Harney and Moten will frame it)—and she exposes the dehumanizing and disenchanting normativity of 'Western' humanism, that "noble study of 'Man' [which] has a quite intelligible history, one based in a set of material realities that are not distinct from the histories of slavery and colonization," as Robert Reid-Pharr reminds us.<sup>22</sup> Jacobs does not so much reinvent herself as a writer and self-liberated subject but resurfaces from a submerged stratum as a "veteran of creative suffering," to once more return to Martin Luther King's aesthetico-theological sentiment. And it is crucial to note here that resurfacing exceeds a moment of *return* in that it excels in a dynamic of *reform*. In this line of thought, in this moment of creative forcefulness, Jacobs has resurfaced from my reading of *The Undercommons*.

So, against the backdrop of lockdown and social distancing, Harney and Moten's book has been, above all, an invitation for me to become and remain invested in this spirit of resistance and resurfacing that seems to constitute the book's approach toward its aesthetic sociality of Blackness. It has been an invitation (and a relation) to reconsider Jacobs in the North and Jacobs in her "loophole of retreat"; to reconsider Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" in the gleaming confines of his basement, and Glenn Ligon's artistic appropriation of the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It invited me to reconsider the burning pizza parlor and the final confrontation of Sal and Mookie in Spike Lee's

20 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Norton, 2001), 5.

21 For a more detailed reading of this passage, see Dustin Breitenwischer, "Dis/Claiming the Creative Self: Race, Experience, and the Paratext in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)," in *Rückkehr des Erlebnisses in die Geisteswissenschaften? Philosophische und literaturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, ed. Mathis Lessau and Nora Zügel (Würzburg: Ergon, 2019), 205–216.

22 Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 5.

*Do the Right Thing*, the intimacy between Branford Marsalis's saxophone and the surreal colors of Lee's images. Everything is too little and too much at the same time, always on the brink of being beyond all bearing and, as such, an experience that Harney and Moten refer to as the "feel." Their book has been an invitation to reconsider Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1983 painting *Death of Michael Stewart* and what art historian Liz Rideal refers to as Basquiat's "permanent grimace of death," and to imagine Basquiat's imagery and reconsider the horrific beauty, the grimy sublimity, of the following verses by avant-garde rap artist Conway the Machine who claims to have "Shot him in the hall / Blew his brains on the Basquiat."<sup>23</sup> It evoked the haunting imagery of Kara Walker's mural *Event Horizon* in the stairway of the New School in New York City where none other than Hannah Arendt taught—Hannah Arendt who writes in "We Refugees," "hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something real as houses and stones and trees."<sup>24</sup> *The Undercommons* has been an invitation and a relation to be and become bold and ludicrous, to transcend irony, and exceed the effect of provocative improbability. Against this seemingly endless set of relations, the aesthetic sociality of Blackness in *The Undercommons* seemed to play out—and it seems to exist—beyond the status (and the immovability) of a mere antithesis to the norm. All of this is to say, Harney and Moten invited me to reconsider their book's affectionate ecstasy of evocation—the perpetual resurfacing of relations from the sensitive thicket of an aesthetic sociality expressed in a truly unique form of intellectual writing.

*Resurfacing, that perpetual movement in which something or someone surfaces, disappears, and surfaces again, is both a mode of aesthetic sociality and its own process of study.* Resurfacing, as I relate it to *The Undercommons*, is not a game of hide and seek, not a means of performativity, but a cultural practice that intricately relates to itself as a mode of being. As the result of creative doing, it simultaneously contextualizes and calibrates the premises and implications of creativity and artistic intervention—the construction and destabilization of

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23 Liz Rideal, "Essence of Memento Mori," *Basquiat by Himself*, ed. Dieter Buchhart and Anna Karina Hofbauer (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 22.

24 Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 265. Unfortunately, Arendt herself was not able to shake off her anti-Black resentment and relate her sensitive recognition of the reality of hell to the reality of the struggle for Black liberation in the 1960s. See, with certain reservations, Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

a physically impairing (white supremacist) social reality. The aesthetic movement, or, rather, the mobility, of resurfacing produces and emerges from the intricacy of evasion and absence—it is, in the dislocating logic of *The Undercommons*, “Black study” against the ever-shifting backdrop of its displacing invisibility, its “undercommon appositionality” (96). When I was reading and re-reading Harney and Moten, I became entangled in their dialogical thinking as a relational poetics that unfolds in socio-aesthetic interplays—a poetics that forces and allows us to complicate the relation to ourselves. Their poetics of the undercommons let us understand that there is a fugitivity and an elegance to relations which has nothing to do with a mere will to connectivity. Rather, it “feels” like a never-ending series of invitations to relate. You follow Harney’s and (above all) Moten’s poetic gestures, and, all of a sudden, you sense a curious intimacy.

While I contemplated intellectually and emotionally what this invitation to relate might entail, what it enables me to see, and what it refuses me to be—when the study that is *The Undercommons* emerged as a relation to a resistant aesthetic sociality—I stumbled upon Jackson Tisi’s short documentary *Leon*, the story of Leon Ford who was shot by a white Pittsburgh police officer during a traffic stop and who was left permanently paralyzed from the waist down.<sup>25</sup> In the shadow of *The Undercommons* (sensing the chambers of the undercommons) unfolded a sociality of immobility, a culture of paralysis. Leon Ford’s case had been “a case of mistaken identity,” as representatives of the media put it. But is this true? Isn’t his case a case of defining and further cementing an identity, of cementing identity as a category of unjust differentiation and cross-differentiation? In Tisi’s documentary, we hear Ford saying, “Honestly, I got comfortable in that pain,” pausing meaningfully between “comfortable” and “in that pain,” then adding, “I’m at war with myself.” The aesthetic sociality of *The Undercommons* is a force that relates aesthetic freedom to social and not to individual freedom.<sup>26</sup> In this spirit, the undercommons (and *The Undercommons*) is a resonant space—a state of perpetual and ever-accumulating responses. It’s not a flexible network but a fragile community of mutually evoking and resurfacing relations.

‘Black study’ in *The Undercommons* is a social force that impacts the practice, the poesis, of creative resistance to its created being (its constructedness). *The Undercom-*

25 *Leon*, directed by Jackson Tisi Leon, 2020, [www.vimeo.com/415204754](http://www.vimeo.com/415204754).

26 On the difference between social and individual freedom, see Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

*mons* unfolds in an aesthetic sociality (in the aesthetic sociality of the undercommons) that seems to be marked by the mobility of a particular “creative social power,” to use a term from C. L. R. James’s *American Civilization*.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, and in addition to what I have tried to express above, resurfacing is not merely something that occurs, that befalls some/body or some/thing. It is a mode of being, a creative practice, that emerges both of its own accord and in the exploratory action of its agent. The dynamics of resurfacing open up an extremely mobile area—the freedom of its aesthetic sociality—in and through which resistance and difference can be communicated in an oscillating manner. “Knowledge of freedom,” Harney and Moten write, “is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break” (51).<sup>28</sup> It is, to play around with another central term from the book, in the “interest”—in the symbolic and literal in-betweenness of resurfacing that transcends and ultimately precludes the violence of subjugation and subjectivity.<sup>29</sup> And yet, it is decidedly not a stable position, but a state in between locating and dislocating—an apposition that is as much opposition as it is composition. To be “in the interest” is to be emphatically unclear and dangerously impure, constantly on the brink of resurfacing, of being that which has resurfaced and may not disappear again (i.e., the looming menace to white privilege and supremacy). To be “in the interest” is the refusal—not merely the disinterest, but the creative social power—to be “in the interest of” some/thing or some/body:

And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it. This contrapuntal island, where we are marooned in search of marronage, where we linger in stateless emergency, in our lysed cell and held dislocation, our blown standpoint and lyred chapel, in (the) study of our sea-born variance, sent by its pre-history into arrivance without arrival, as a poetics of lore, of abnormal articulation (94).

Interest is that “being in-between” which enables direct confrontation and a comportment beyond oneself and beside oneself while it is marked by an

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27 C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, 1950 (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

28 On the aesthetics of the “break,” see Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

29 Harney and Moten refer to “interest” both in the sense of (curious) interestedness and financial interest. In the interest of my argument, I have decided to focus on the former.

extraordinary sense of vulnerability and fugitiveness. Accordingly, the beautifully mysterious “poetics of lore”—a poetics of Benjaminian character, of storytelling and translation—draw on the collaborative spirit, the in-betweenness, of deviance, of poetry as criticism of division and purity. The ever-shifting relations in *The Undercommons* (and the undercommons) do not allow for positions in the center. There is no center. No relation that steadily holds. And there is no transparency in interest. At which point I keep wondering whether I have come to touch upon the perpetually resurfacing presence (and, to be clear, *not* the essence) of the aesthetic sociality of *The Undercommons*.

*Resurfacing is without teleology. It is marked by an aesthetic sociality of redirection that resists the luxury of critical control.* It’s Fred Moten asking, “How can I begin after all those beautiful beginnings?”<sup>30</sup>

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30 Moten, “T. S. Eliot Memorial Reading.”