FIGURE 1. Thornton Dial, *Monument to Minds of the Little Negro Steelworkers*, 2001–3. Steel, wood, wire, twine, artificial flowers, ax blade, glass bottles, animal bones, cloth, tin cans, paint can lids, and enamel. The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and Gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection © Thornton Dial / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"Common Informality"

Aesthetics, Renomination, Philology

CHRISTOPHER LAW

More Preliminary Still

In the preface to *Black and Blur*, the first of three essay collections published between 2017 and 2018 as *consent not to be a single being*, Fred Moten positions the ensuing book—and the trilogy as a whole—in relation to his only other monograph, *In the Break*: *The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. In a somewhat uncharacteristic moment of self-reference, Moten describes *In the Break* as a "preliminary report," in relation to which *Black and Blur*, it's promised, will be "more preliminary still."[1] Time is subject to a peculiar warp in this description. If an "aesthetics" of black radicalism could constitute a "preliminary report"—though what it is preliminary to remains unspecified—*Black and Blur* undermines the temporal schema hazarded by that designation, tearing the anticipatory momentum afforded by the "preliminary" away not only from the determined fulfillment of a project but, more radically, from the very horizon of completability. To the extent that it is "more preliminary still," *Black and Blur* therefore ruptures the time of aesthetic experience (that is, the lived material time of sense-perception, or "aesthesis," which throughout Moten's work registers a dimension of experience as yet uncaptured by philosophical conceptuality) from the various uses to which "aesthetics" has—in its famed uselessness, or "purposivelessness"—historically been put. Taking Moten's words literally, the preface crystallizes "still"-ness as an interruption in the model of temporal progress that has determined the relationship between aesthet-

liquid blackness ▪ 6:1 ▪ April 2022
DOI 10.1215/26923874-9546552 ▪ © 2022 Christopher Law

ics and politics since Immanuel Kant. This moment of stillness functions as a refusal of the temporal economy that governs conceptions of the relation between aesthetics and politics. In lieu of a movement from a subject taking "purposiveless" pleasure in a beautiful form to the political promise of the communicability of that pleasure—the long-standing fantasy of a community of taste—Moten's introductory remarks capture what he elsewhere figures as "moving without moving," a kinesis that is irreducible to any one form and that at the same time is resistant to the forward, future-oriented momentum of political aesthetics.[2] The unique temporality forwarded in *Black and Blur* is inseparable, then, from Moten's pointed rebuttal to the "formalism" typically associated with Kant's third *Critique*. Listening, however, for the "unlikely" liking for Kant's work that Moten evidences across his writing, we can ascertain a linguistic affinity between "Kant's tradition" and what Moten maintains is "its most (im)proper name, which is the object of its most proper and appropriative disavowal: black radicalism."[3] This essay pursues this affinity by tracing how Moten thinks of written language not as a formal manipulation of matter capable of inspiring political community but as an informal process, often indistinct from already existing, and already political, communities.

The difficulty of highlighting Moten's disentanglement of aesthesis from aesthetics—informality from formalism, and the preliminary from progress—is intensified when apparently similar but in fact radically divergent contemporary discourses about philosophical aesthetics are taken into account. This goes especially for those studies that attend to the scope and virulence of Kant's racism, a topic and legacy incisively highlighted and interrogated throughout *consent not to be a single being* but often cast, by other readers, as reason to reject the aesthetic per se. According to the introductory claims made in David Lloyd's *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, for example, the aesthetic's main task is to consolidate the Kantian transcendental project of establishing the putatively universal conditions of possibility for experience; aesthetic experience is therefore inseparable from the project of normatively ordering human beings on the basis of racial difference.[4] For Lloyd, the aesthetic, rather than enacting a break from this order (as some Kant scholars have long been wont to attest), entails its most thoroughgoing, regimental enforcement. So implicated is the aesthetic in the racial regime of European philosophy that Kant's claims

MOTEN THINKS OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE AS AN INFORMAL PROCESS, OFTEN INDISTINCT FROM ALREADY EXISTING, AND ALREADY POLITICAL, COMMUNITIES

BLUR IS PRELIMINARY, BUT ONLY TO A FURTHER BLUR, A REPETITIVE REFUSAL OF ANY DETERMINATE LINK BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

found an entire "aesthetic anthropology" for Lloyd, a history of racism's self-inoculation and subsequent capacity for constantly variegated implementations.[5]

Many of Lloyd's analyses ring true for Moten, whose readings of Kant's other "trilogy"—three essays on race, written between 1775 and 1788—are among the most necessary accounts of the Enlightenment racism available. However, Moten's complex deviation from "Kant's tradition" should be framed not only as a critical response to the capability of the aesthetic for (re)enforcing racialized norms, but also as a rejection of the premise—which inflects both the canon of philosophical aesthetics and Lloyd's response to it—that *any* purpose could be attributed to aesthetic sensation. The aesthetic serves absolutely no "purpose" in Moten—differentiating it from claims typically made on Kant's third *Critique*, which assert the possibility of making a "purposive" (moral, political, or social) claim on the basis of the radical "purposivelessness" of aesthetic judgments. Indeed, one of the major achievements of *consent not to be a single being* is to decouple the pleasures of aesthesis (which Moten regularly affirms as "lawless freedom," "imaginative criminality")[6] from the "intersubjective" communicability to which they are liable to give rise, or—to more accurately recall the insight of the ninth paragraph of the third *Critique*—with which they are identified.[7] An aesthetics—if that "name" remains correct—that is "more preliminary still" is, on the contrary, a prelude to nothing. Blur is preliminary, but only to a further blur, a repetitive refusal of any determinate link between aesthetics and politics. No hint of a future community dwells in Moten's reading of aesthetic experience, then, distinguishing his work from Hannah Arendt's well-known attempt to extract a political philosophy from Kant's appeal to the *sensus communis*.[8] Nevertheless, if Moten is resistant to the conventional link between aesthetics and politics, where subjective judgments take on a universal validity said to model and make possible political agreement, he is just as resistant to the dominant critique of this model, which Lloyd continues to advance. For Moten, the experience of aesthesis remains detached from, or immanently oppositional to, an ontology of order and, no less, to forms of critique such as Lloyd's that reassert (however negatively) that order's dominion over all aspects of life.

Lloyd's approach, of course, is not simply to claim that art is wholly determined by historical factors: his work advances a dialectical account, heavily indebted to Theodor Adorno, according to which "artworks above all, charged as they are with the burden of subjective and particular articulations of social life,

cannot but give voice to the painful grappling of individuals and communities with the coercive constraints that everywhere confront their efforts at undominated living. As such, however, rather than representing a sphere of freedom, they bear the signifying scars of unfree existence."[9] A similarly formalist assertion can be found in Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. Here the autonomy and critical potential of experimental literary texts—couched as "the political possibilities of literature *as* literature"—rest dialectically, once again, on such texts' alienation from oppressed social life.[10] Reed calls for "an analysis of literary politics that looks beyond familiar terms of critique or protest that treat form as another kind of content in an effort to trace in its aesthetic demands the outlines of new forms of community and thought."[11] Even these accounts, however, maintain a furtive investment in the temporal economy that sutures aesthetics to politics. Despite opposing "the critical antagonism of artworks to the false promise of aesthetic liberation," Lloyd's opposition to aesthetics paradoxically threatens to entrench the dimension of aesthetic theory that Moten most vehemently refuses, the premise that art "cannot but" engender an otherwise unimaginable (that is, unimaginable by the "unfree" people who populate it) community.[12] Likewise, Reed's affirmation of the "aesthetic demand" for formal experimentation to give rise to "new forms of community"—the demand for a formal link between the poetics and politics of the book's title—again ironically mimics two dimensions of Kantian aesthetics that, as noted above, Moten explicitly rejects: its orientation toward the future and its denigration of heteronomous "content" in favor of autonomous "form."[13] For Moten, such promised communities already exist, have always already existed, and bear their own expressions and intentionalities that are, in every way, sensible.

The "aesthetics" of *consent not to be a single being* should be distinguished, then, both from the subject-bound, cognitive formalism of "Kant's tradition," where natural or artistic beauty is said to inspire the feeling of free play between a subject's imagination and understanding, and from the anti-Kantian, dialectical formalism of recent accounts of literary autonomy, where artworks are capable of embodying contradictions and therefore of pointing toward both the unfree nature of contemporary racial capitalism and alternative possibilities of political existence. Moten's resolution of a link between aesthetics and politics is unique for the fact that it eludes the conduit of "form" as it is yielded in either of these variations. Instead, Moten argues for a black radical tradition whose *informal* expressions risk, again and again, the intractable possibility of invisibility: the possibility that they might go unread, unseen, or unrecognized. This illegibility might be understood to arise on account of the radical artistic experimentalism of such works, but Moten's writing attends to the possibility that illegibility might also be a result of expression's submergence into an already existing, intentional social life, the works' rhyming indifference to and from the world they emerge in and inhabit. In Moten's singularly patient elaboration of aesthetic intentionality,

however, this possibility raises an equally intractable set of questions that threaten or dare an indistinction between artistic expression and aesthetic perception: "When does the decaying orbit of centripetal force itself become a kind of centrifugitivity? How would one know the difference? More precisely, how would one inhabit such eccentric, impossible ground? This is the essential question concerning the radical in general and black radicalism in particular—its comportment toward a center that is, if not nothing, certainly not there."[14]

I want to propose in what follows that Moten's writing itself is a site of such indistinguishability, of a center that is "if not nothing, certainly not there." In the essay "Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape" Moten writes out another question, into which—by means of the graphic swerving afforded by italics—he introduces an internal differentiation: "*What if we consider that improvisation is the unacknowledged grapho-spatiality of material writing*—the arrangement of people at the scene as audiovisual condition and effect?"[15] What Harryette Mullen identified as the "writerly text" here precedes and silently generates form, acting as its condition of possibility and—insofar as writing might give rise to nothing at all—its condition of impossibility.[16] Writing stands in as the (name for the) differential field that is capable of giving rise to other names, such as "form" itself. Moten, to be sure, adroitly cites Adorno's reference to the "nomenclature 'form,'" noting that "form" here captures a "spatialization" of musical time. Rather than resting at this point, however, Moten goes much further than Adorno, offering an an-archic radicalization of this idea by hitching spatialization to the grapheme's endlessly generative, if often invisible, preexistence. As Moten notes, this insight is integral to Mullen's rebuttal of the canonization of "authentic black voice." "Even if the objectification of time is made possible by what Harryette Mullen might call a kind of 'spirit writing,' a fetishizing secrecy of technique from which the work emerges," he argues, "such writing does not undermine and is indeed made possible by an irreducible materiality that lies before the work as well and, as it were, *as writing*."[17] What ties or unties this writing to the unruly time of stillness?

Anticipatory Interpolations

As the apprehensive tone of the remarks above might indicate, the task of specifying, and indeed (re)writing Moten's aesthetics is a difficult one, fated perhaps to obscurity, perhaps to repetition, paraphrase, and citation. Moten's own writerly attentiveness to the problems of amplification tend to prohibit, after all, the self-affirming coinage and confident deployment of new concepts. *Black and Blur* begins with the claim that the essays contained therein "attempt a particular kind of failure," which ties the specified "aim" of the essays—"blackness"—to a force, expressed not in the creation of concepts but, as in the engagement with "Kant's tradition," in "rituals of renomination, when the given is all but immediately taken away."[18] A significant, if obscure, precursor of Moten's general reluctance to invent new concepts (despite the singular, idiomatic nature of his style) and

his preference for renomination—the endless de- and reconstitution of words, most often at the level of the phoneme—can be found in a text only distantly present in *consent not to be a single being*, the "Epistemo-critical Prologue" to Walter Benjamin's book on German *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin here voices a prohibition on the creation of new terminology, which he deems "misfortunate acts of naming in which intention plays a greater role than language."[19] His thesis is that philosophy ought to proceed not as "revelation" but instead simply as "contemplation" of a finite number of infinite ideas, whose "naming" is free of the arbitrary dictates of subjective communication. To be sure, much separates Moten's celebration of writing's "informal" generativity from Benjamin's account of philosophy's monadic language, not least the former's affirmation of an expressive yet nonsubjective intentionality. Nevertheless, Moten's account of writing's anoriginal materiality contains a relatively rare but highly relevant reference to Benjamin, noting as it does a proximity between his "object-language" and what Moten glosses as "Adorno's discourse in the realm of nonsubjective language" (for which Benjamin's consideration of dramaturgical "spatialization" is, as it happens, the recognized if unattributed source).[20] There is, in short, a significant, if furtive, Benjaminian influence on Moten: Benjamin's attention to language's own nonsubjective materiality—to the demand for renomination, rather than conceptual creation—might help us to ascertain the temporal strangeness that Moten recognizes as integral to the black radical tradition. In considering how Moten

ILLEGIBILITY MIGHT ALSO BE A RESULT OF EXPRESSION'S SUBMERGENCE INTO AN ALREADY EXISTING, INTENTIONAL SOCIAL LIFE

takes up this lineage, however, we can also recognize how the black radical tradition challenges the forms of philosophical purity that continue to inflect Benjamin's work. To these ends, I want to consider a significant instance of renomination—a celebration of "philology"—that is advanced explicitly by Benjamin and explored indirectly by Moten. Philology, I intend to wager, may help us navigate or simply appreciate the "unacknowledged grapho-spatiality of material writing" as it punctuates Moten's conceptual, or rather "underconceptual," vocabulary.[21]

Traditionally, if diversely, associated with the aim of establishing the authenticity, authorial intentions, or original meanings of texts, "philology" had a singular but significant influence on Benjamin's thought, one that upheld his commitment to a nonsubjective language but relieved it of its indebtedness to the history of philosophy. In a 1921 letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin directly associated philology with a break from the demand for completeness that characterizes philosophical aesthetics, describing phi-

lology's procedure as one of "perfection instead of completion."[22] This simple description has profound implications for the way we might conceive of the temporality—and conceptuality—of criticism and aesthetic response. Philology rids the experience of art of any compulsion toward the "completion" of works, tears the link between reading and fulfillment, and indexes the text instead to an immanent, but less readily identifiable, state of "perfection." In this sense, Benjamin refuses for philology any similarity with the projective, future-bound temporality of aesthetics. Philology instead harbors only "a most puzzling concept of time and very puzzling phenomena."

This dually "puzzling" character renders philology an important but hitherto neglected idea in imagining how we might go about considering the temporality of a writing that claims to be "more preliminary still," whose time is—to borrow the phrase of Nathaniel Mackey's that serves as a kind of motif throughout *consent not to be a single being*—both "premature and postexpectant."[23] What exactly is it, though, that makes philology so puzzling for Benjamin? The answer, which establishes its relevance for Moten, concerns nothing other than language's materiality and irreducibility to form. Philology's concept of time is "puzzling" because language—the word here is "terminology"—does not simply *take place* in historical time, but instead *generates* it. When responding to a (now lost) letter in which Scholem presumably addressed the issue of historical "chronicles," Benjamin draws on the traditional practice of philological "interpolation"—usually understood to describe modes of textual determination, such as filling in a gap in a historical record, or even identifying places where gaps have been incorrectly filled by previous readers—in order to articulate a radical deprioritization of form: "The chronicle is fundamentally interpolated history. Philological interpolation in chronicles *simply reveals in its form the intention of the content*, since its content interpolates history."[24] Philology—defined "not as the science or history of language but as the *history of terminology* at its deepest level"—recognizes "history" not as the conceptual or empirical ground on and through which terminology develops, but instead as a generated matter, *coterminous* with language. The traditional historical "form" of interpolation still has a function, to be sure, but a less fundamental, even somewhat redundant one: it "simply reveals" the intentional and puzzling nature of the "content," which *already* interpolates history. Every form is also the revelation of a content, and so—because that content is ceaselessly interpolating—remains open to further interpolations. "Perfection," then, describes not an unchanging ideal but, rather, the uncovering of this unceasing material kinesis—anticipating Moten's "moving without moving"—in every material phenomenon.

Philology—despite its numerous feted "returns" across the humanities—has only recently, and only among a relatively small number of readers, been recognized as a significant facet of Benjamin's work.[25] It is little surprise, therefore, that Moten's explicit references to a "philological" practice of reading are also relatively rare. In the essay on Levinas that opens

The Universal Machine, the third volume of *consent not to be a single being*, he conjures a more traditional image of philology, associating it with a racialized phenomenological attempt to trace the roots of "European man" in the "classical world." For Moten, this phenomenology is characterized by a sleight of hand, a feigned "openness" that is "always also and most fundamentally a closure at the level of an insistent German philological return to the Greeks as originarily European."[26] Despite the absences of clear, positive references to a philological practice, however, Moten's writing demonstrates a comportment to language—even as it appears in nonverbal media—that, insofar as it engages both with philological terminology and with the radicalization of "informality," could aptly be named philological.

Two texts from *Black and Blur*—"Interpolation and Interpellation" and "Nothing, Everything"—can serve as examples of this philological approach's relevance across media. From its homonymic title onward, "Interpolation and Interpellation"—an essay revolving around the track "Ghetto Supastar," performed by Pras, Ol' Dirty Bastard, and Mýa—explicitly calls on an instance of philological terminology, albeit one that has purchase across various academic and cultural spheres. In popular music, "interpolation" generally refers to the practice of inserting a melody into a new composition by means of rerecording (rather than direct sampling). As Moten points out, the liner notes for "Ghetto Supastar" indicate that the track contains an "interpolation" of "Islands in the Stream," the song made famous by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. As my earlier recall of Benjamin's definition of philology suggests, the term *interpolation* was integral to philology's resistance to forms of closure and completion. Whereas Benjamin's argument remains relatively rarefied, however—his engagement with philology was limited to a small number of fragments, letters, and notes—Moten takes a risk in recognizing its workings across popular culture: for him, interpolation is a mode of critical, interpretive, and intertextual entanglement that traverses various media, creating new conditions of legibility in and across genres. As the essay relates, interpolations of "Ghetto Supastar" branch out in various directions, spanning multiple forms of appropriation—academic, cultural, political (the "American Left's aggressive and ambivalent incorporation of that [black radical] tradition in general")—but also creative modes of reorientation, such as the novel written by Pras and kris ex, which Moten's essay goes on to cite at length.[27] Attending and contributing to this play of interpolations, Moten indicates, demands "incessant listening," a perceptiveness that is inseparable from the "taste and smell of music" and that therefore undoes the denigration of culinary taste that typifies the "formalist" strain of aesthetic theory running from Kant to Adorno. Again, if aesthetics means anything for Moten, it is not the hierarchization of matter into form, but the multiplication and dispersal of content, beyond the confines of interpretation and the demand for political effectivity.

Appositely, Moten here writes of "phonic substance, phonic materiality irreducible to any interpretation but antithetical to any assertion of the absence

IF AESTHETICS MEANS ANYTHING FOR MOTEN, IT IS NOT THE HIERARCHIZATION OF MATTER INTO FORM, BUT THE MULTIPLICATION AND DISPERSAL OF CONTENT, BEYOND THE CONFINES OF INTERPRETATION AND THE DEMAND FOR POLITICAL EFFECTIVITY

of content."[28] For Moten, in a manner that recalls and consolidates Benjamin's insight, the irreducible "content" of a work is capable of interrupting, ever again, the interpretive decisions anyone might make about it, the forms that are placed on it, even those forms (as embraced in the phenomenological tradition more generally) that proudly assert their own minimal openness. The content itself interpolates the form, both anticipates and undoes form's totalizing impulses. In this sense, according to Moten, content figures a real but hitherto unrealized politics, a radicalized Marxism "anticipated in and by the black radical tradition. This essay just responds to a Marxian interpellative call that was itself anticipated by the black radical tradition, always already cut and augmented by an anticipatory interpolation."[29] Itself "just" a response among responses, an interpolation among interpolations, Moten's essay goes on to articulate the intractably serial nature of this informality: "The black radical tradition contains numerous other examples of such anticipatory interpolations, vicious revisions of the original that keep on giving it birth while keeping on evading the natal occasion."[30] Interpolation precedes interpellation, then: Moten's listening cuts across time and space, folding one into another in order to sculpt a spatial "vestibule, where we belatedly await our own invention of, our own coming upon, the liberatory."[31] For Benjamin, philology remained constitutively unrealized, something that pulsed only sporadically in the most marginal texts and references. In the black radical tradition, however, this philological attention to content gives way to what in Benjamin remained unrealized, "the black proletarianization of bourgeois form," erupting in a "common informality" that is always already its own otherness, a "paradise of the informal."[32]

Moten, as already shown, describes the "essential question concerning the radical in general and black radicalism in particular" as "its comportment toward a center that is, if not nothing, certainly not there." In

the first of the trio of short texts that stand, like "nothing," at the center of *Black and Blur*—"Nothing, Everything," "Nowhere, Everywhere," and "Nobody, Everybody"—Moten's own "philological" method manifests itself in a reading of Thornton Dial's paintings and sculptures. The essay calls on a term integral to Kant's description of aesthetic judgment, but that term's temporal strangeness upsets the image of a subject whose experience of beauty is defined by a sudden decision or singular moment. Kant, in the twelfth section of the third *Critique*, refers to a sense of "lingering," a strange temporality that defines a person's experience of the free play of their faculties and refers that experience to the desire for its own continuation.[33] Moten's text on Dial follows Kant in this regard, depicting the temporality of aesthetic experience as one of a (repeated, that is, lingering) lingering: "We have to linger, art requires and allows us to linger, in the exhausted, exhaustive space between something and nothing, nothing and everything, so that we can begin to understand again, how the interrelation of wealth and poverty is all bound up with the question, which is to say the study, in things, of nothing and thingliness."[34] For Moten, there is an explicit relation between the experiential time of aesthetic "lingering" and the possibilities—coded in so many ways throughout *consent not to be a single being*—of relationships between things and their environment that elude our predominant patterns and forms of conceptualization and dominion. In Moten's reading of Dial, this is a question of and for language, precisely because it is a question of sensual, aesthetic differentiation. "He is concerned," Moten writes, "with material and sensual emergences (of light, flashes of eye/spirit, glints, echoes, cutting acts of speech that cut speech in the interest of its formation) and with their subsequent fades and traces."[35] This philological work of cutting undoes even our most self-assuredly radical concepts of relationality, networks, and entanglements, pointing to a "whole other ecology of the thing." Insofar as it is ceaselessly re- and deconstituted, rather than subject to a formal totalization, this other ecology is perceptible only through the radical (phonetic, material, graphic) separability of language, what Thomas Schestag, one of the most perceptive readers of Benjamin's philology, refers to as the word's "cleavability."[36]

Here too Moten is resolutely indifferent to "form," which is not, to be clear, made into an object of determinative derision but, rather, is left to simply dwindle in the face of a more mobile process that is already underway:

> That his works may someday fade or fall apart, *not into nothing*, but rather into the informal, deformed, enforming somethings that they were and never were (which is to say into the general conditions of possibility that we call the life cycle, the re-cycle) is a massive, incalculable source of comfort-in-disturbance. In these works, the richness of the informal is given to, but not suppressed by, form.[37]

Dial's works are not merely "preliminary" to a critical fulfillment but instead attest to a more precarious, untold futurity, never guaranteed: "Someday, someone,

THE CONTENT ITSELF INTERPOLATES THE FORM, BOTH ANTICIPATES AND UNDOES FORM'S TOTALIZING IMPULSES

something will make some thing, some one, some day, out of the fragments of (the) everything that Mr. Dial has made."[38]

Mobilizing Predication

By way of a conclusion, I'd like to turn back on the preface to *Black and Blur*, which, at the same time as articulating the experience of blur that characterizes the ways of looking expressed in the pages to come, also has a surprisingly sharp thematic focus on a word never far from philological inquiry: "predication." The focus is unexpected because predication appears to be at odds with philological informality. Indeed, in one of the most pronounced contemporary variations on Benjamin's "philological" approach—Werner Hamacher's *95 Theses on Philology*—a striking claim is made for language's "impredicable" nature.[39] By this, Hamacher means that language's incessant movements deny the possibility of a "metalanguage that could not be disavowed by a further one."[40] "Language cannot be the object of predicative assertions," Hamacher writes, "because these assertions would both have to belong to their object and not belong to it."[41] Language is a "having" that cannot be had, and thus yields a structure of desire and reference that is never present to itself, but ceaselessly demanding of more language. This is a question of freedom for Hamacher, for whom philology "is the event of the freeing of language from language. It is the liberation of the world from everything that has been said and can still be said about it."[42] Releasing language from the predicative demand to say anything *about* anything, philology unleashes the possibility of a "sheer speaking to and for."[43] Moten, as I hope to have shown, is deeply sympathetic to this possibility. Throughout *consent not to be a single being*, language creates the demand for more language; its "jurisgenerative" impulse creates—against the law—its own conditions of possibility and impossibility. "Speak, so you can speak again" is the banner that hangs over this work and, at the same time, trips it up and enfolds it.[44]

Impredicable freedom has its limits, however. In the eighty-sixth of his *Theses*, Hamacher writes of the need for another philology to counter the "juridicism, classism, racism, and sexism" of the "national philologies," which are, in his words, "assaults on linguistic and philological existence."[45] Only here does Hamacher seek to position philological existence within the material and social nexus that surrounds it. In Moten's work, on the contrary, language's informality is inseparable from blackness as it is lived, meaning that predication cannot be so easily dismissed. Primarily through an engagement with two of his proj-

ect's key interlocutors, Saidiya Hartman and Nathaniel Mackey, Moten affirms black study as anything but a confirmatory celebration of language's "impredicable" freedom. On the contrary, "black art" is explicitly identified with the "predication of blackness," a term whose genitive ambiguity (is blackness predicated or does it predicate?) remains unsettled. Freedom from predication, after all, remains impossible and therefore irrelevant for Moten. Freedom instead is constitutively modified by "structures of subjection that—as Hartman shows with such severe clarity—overdetermine freedom," rendering it not only out of reach (this perennial ungraspability of freedom is, after all, integral to its definition in the Kantian imaginary) but out of place and time.[46] Whereas freedom is defined by its constitutive inability to be experienced in Kant's traditional, white supremacist version, indexed only by the so-called free play of the faculties in aesthetic judgments of taste, black study recognizes freedom itself as overdetermined.

To this end, Moten borrows the phrase "subjectless predication," again from Mackey, to announce the possibility of a movement of language—a black, finite, situatedness within language—that at once undoes the imposition of subjecthood and at the same time rejects the universalizing notion of an "impredicable" linguistic freedom. Given the impossibility of a "last word" on this subject, I want to give the final words back to the preface, back to its "open sentences" and interpolations—of Hartman, Mackey, Naum Chandler, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, others—that yield a "defense of the irregular," the informal, other:

> But to be committed to the anti- and ante- categorical predication of blackness—even as such engagement moves by way of what Mackey also calls "an eruptive critique of predication's rickety spin rewound as endowment," even in order to seek the anticipatory changes that evade what Saidiya Hartman calls "the incompatible predications of the freed"—is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure's eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness. To celebrate is to solemnify, in practice. This is done not to avoid or ameliorate the hard truths of anti-blackness but in the service of its violent eradication. There is an open set of sentences of the kind blackness is *x* and we should chant them all, not only for and in the residual critique of mastery such chanting bears but also in devoted instantiation, sustenance and defense of the irregular. What is endowment that it can be rewound? What is it to rewind the given? What is it to wound it? What is it to be given to this wounding and rewinding? Mobilized in predication, blackness mobilizes predication not only against but also before itself.[47]

CHRISTOPHER LAW currently teaches literature at the University of Glasgow. His writing has appeared in *Postmodern Culture*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *European Romantic Review*.

Notes

1 Moten, *Black and Blur*, x. My citations going forward will refer to *Black and Blur* (and to the titles of the other volumes of Moten's trilogy, *Stolen Life* and *the Universal Machine*), rather

than to individual essays contained therein, though the relevant texts will be distinguished when necessary in the main body of the essay.

2 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 70.

3 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 41.

4 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 2.

5 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 8.

6 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 81.

7 On the "anybodies" bound together by intersubjective communicability of taste and the "nobodies" of Black radicalism, see especially Moten, *Black and Blur*, 204. For Kant's claim that the feeling of a judgment's communicability in fact informs the feeling of pleasure, see *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 102–4.

8 See Arendt, *Kant's Political Philosophy*.

9 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 11.

10 Reed, *Freedom Time*, 5. Reed's commitment to "literature as a mode of *self-production*" (6) is echoed by other contemporary, production-oriented theories of poeisis. I'm thinking especially of Audrey Wasser's conception of the modernist work as a "productive" form, which does away with the Kantian-Romantic critical legacy, said to be defined by an "inability to account for any productive *difference* between form and intention, or between a work and its causal conditions." See Wasser, *Work of Difference*. As I try to show in what follows, Moten—and the tradition he occupies—does not ignore this distinction but is consistently wary of its own tendency to reproduce the forms of social distinction it tasks literature with overcoming.

11 Reed, *Freedom Time*, 2.

12 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 11.

13 Reed, *Freedom Time*, 5.

14 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 91.

15 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 82.

16 Mullen, "African Signs and Spirit Writing," 670.

17 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 77–78.

18 Moten, *Black and Blur*, v.

19 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 37; I have used the translation of relevant passages from this text offered in Fenves, "Of Philosophical Style," 79.

20 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 78.

21 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 187.

22 Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 175–77. All subsequent references to the letter draw on these pages.

23 See, for example, Moten, *Black and Blur*, 7, 81, 246, 268.

24 Emphases mine.

25 On philology's recursive appearances within the academic humanities, see Hui, "Many Returns of Philology."

26 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 23.

27 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 29.

28 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 30.

29 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 30.

30 In her *Dear Angel of Death*, a text that offers at once the most perceptive elaboration of Moten's concern with writing's materiality and at the same time the most incisive querying of its premises and effects, Simone White describes how practices of reading and listening developed by Du Bois and Baraka, and later by Moten and Mackey, purport to sense "phonemenologically" an entangled "weave" of sonic and textual materiality. In White's reading, this "weave" is posited "repeatedly" by these thinkers in order to index the inseparability of "origin" and "historical convulsions." White's essay, to be sure, demands a lengthy response of its own, so imaginative and astute are its insights into this interpretive mode. Such a detailed response is far beyond the scope of the present essay, but for the moment it is worth pointing out White's prolonged awareness—in the poems and

eponymous essay that constitute the volume in question—of the maternal tropes that often drive this trajectory of black radicalism. See White, *Dear Angel of Death*, 82.

31 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 29.

32 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 171–72.

33 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 107.

34 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 154.

35 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 155.

36 Schestag, "Porcelain," 217.

37 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 156.

38 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 156.

39 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 16

40 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 56.

41 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 58.

42 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 51.

43 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 7.

44 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 152.

45 Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 95.

46 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 76.

47 Moten, *Black and Blur*, viii.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by Ronald Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, edited by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.

Fenves, Peter. "Of Philosophical Style—from Leibniz to Benjamin." *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (2003): 67–87.

Hamacher, Werner. *Minima Philologica*, translated by Catharine Diehl and Jason Groves. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Hui, Andrew. "The Many Returns of Philology: A State of the Field Report." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78, no. 1 (2017): 137–56.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Lloyd, David. *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.

Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

Moten, Fred. *The Universal Machine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Mullen, Harryette. "African Signs and Spirit Writing." *Callaloo* 19, no. 3 (1996): 670–89.

Reed, Anthony. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Schestag, Thomas. "Porcelain," translated by Jason Kavett. *German Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2014): 216–28.

Wasser, Audrey. *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

White, Simone. *Dear Angel of Death*. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018.