

consent not to be a single being

The Universal Machine



FRED MOTEN

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / vii

Preface / ix

- 1.** There Is No Racism Intended / 1
- 2.** Refuge, Refuse, Refrain / 65
- 3.** Chromatic Saturation / 140

Notes / 247

Works Cited / 271

Index / 281

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PREFACE

The Universal Machine is a monograph discomposed. Riding the blinds gone way off the rails. Though a certain movement might be discerned from object to thing to no-thingness, in general, and in the generative absence of a teleological principle, what you have here is a swarm. I hope it's also a party cum polygraph, establishing truth by feel(ing) despite juridical and philosophical inadmissibility. The swarm has no standing, troubles understanding's proper subjects and objects, even when both are radically misunderstood as things. It is not so much antithetical to the rich set of variations of phenomenological regard; rather, it is phenomenology's exhaust and exhaustion. On the one hand, phenomenology's comportment toward the thing itself (as given in experience, as consciousness) is deformed by an insufficient attention to the thing itself; on the other hand, phenomenology's assumption of thingly individuation renders no-thingness unavailable and unavowable. What remains of phenomenology in this fallenness and being-thrown? The social life of no-things bumps and thuds and grunts in plain song. When phenomenology is exhausted, no-thing insists on social life. Frantz Fanon's adherence to phenomenology's possibilities is given as a kind of manifesto for sociogeny expressing disbelief in social life, wherein the new discipline he invokes and practices takes the form of an autopsy report. It is pathontology (as opposed to paraontology—W. E. B. Du Bois had already discovered the necessity of an improvisation [a movement; a dehiscence; a quickening] of ontology for the study of social life, as Nahum Chandler teaches us) and therefore relatively unattuned to (what) remains, the exhausted, its marked breath and black lung.¹ High lonesomeness is both an effect of and a remedy for coal dust, which is moved ground. Edmund Husserl, too, is phenomenology's exhaust, as are Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Fanon, among others. This is to say that phenomenology's spirit, its song, its animation, its aspiration is its exhaust, the thing that it expels, that it abjures, as disorganized, as an anarchic principle of disorganization or constant reorganization, the enformal,

presence in motion, generative incoherence, black matter in black operation. Idle talk gathers around things in their diffusion, the internal and external sociality of things-in-themselveslessness. It's not that there's no such thing as things-in-themselves; it's just that such things are other than themselves. Such (dis)appearance is deep and not to be trifled with.

What if phenomenology were improperly, generatively (mis)understood as a set of protocols for the immanent critique (degeneration, corrosion, corruption) of its object, namely the transcendental subject of phenomenology? Let's say that deconstruction is the ongoing history of this misunderstanding, this refusal to understand. If we wanted to broaden this out, take it outside the proper philosophical enclosure, identify this movement's historicity in and as something that is both more and less than a performative mode, we could call it improvisation rewound—it might sound out something of that recursive predication that George Lewis calls “Toneburst.”² Phenomenology is there beside this irruption that places phenomenology beside itself. The soloist refuses to be one and this consent not to be single worries the joint composure of phenomenology, ontology, and politics past the point of distraction, where the lineaments of an aesthetic sociology await their incalculable arrangements. This swarm is on the way, and wants to help make the way to that rendezvous, happily consenting to such diffusion while counting on you to push it along.

More generally, the swarm is always only on the way. Its *Unmündigkeit*, translated as “minority” or “immaturity,” is, more literally, unprotectedness or, perhaps, what it is to be ungoverned, as what is out of hand or unhandled (as if Spillers's echo anticipates this) in having been handed; not in hand, not in good hands, ungrasped, unowned, passed around.³ What is it to go from hand to hand, like a honky-tonk angel? What is the relationship between fallenness and minority? What is it for no-thingness to have fallen into the world of things, to have fallen into a state of radical inauthenticity insofar as our talk is idle and our relation to things is one in which we do not grasp them, as if their showing is, in the first instance, not for us—as if, instead, world was always being reconstituted as a mutual showing? There are a whole bunch of questions for Immanuel Kant, for which these essays are a kind of preparation, or maybe just a kind of massive *Ausgang* through an opening he makes and sees and is determined not to see, the one in which unprotectedness, insecurity, danger, and chance are given in and as whatever “autonomy” is supposed to signify—the general gift and consent of the ones who are out of hand, unowned, ungrasped, fallen, falling; the ones for whom “toppling the vertical plane” of representation is lived as the birthright of the

dispossessed.”⁴ But the tricky part is that the word Kant uses carries the trace of what it appears, at first, to want to escape. If *Unmündigkeit*, minority, is “the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another,” and if it is self-imposed insofar as one does not lack intelligence, then what we’re talking about is what it is to be self-guided, in submission of oneself to one’s own protection.⁵ What is this submission, this fealty, of self to self? What is it to own oneself; to keep oneself in hand; to grasp, and thus also to know, oneself? The ecstasy of Nathaniel Mackey’s “Dolphic Oracle” is not supposed to be in play here.⁶ In order not to fly off the handle, not to have his hand or head fly off in some anti- and ante-analytic traversal and retraversal of every Königsberg bridge, Kant pulls back from the general impropriety, the general expropriation, that he also gestures toward or opens onto—the dark time or black time of the enlightenment’s commonunderground, the double edge of the fact that modern times have only ever been dark. This *longtemps* of darkness and its black light, its open and general obscurity, is seen by everybody but the overseer in his blindness. Kant wants us to get a hold of ourselves. But why don’t we let ourselves go? See, in spite of all this omnipresent law enforcement, because we want to hear and taste and smell and feel, we can’t go very long without trying to talk about some art.

The Universal Machine offers three suites of essays on Levinas, Arendt, and Fanon, key figures in a certain dissident strain in modern phenomenology. Dissident strains usually operate under the shadow of a question concerning the humanity they cannot assume. Such dissidence often stretches out in the direction of a displacement of the human that appears to exert gravitational force as if it were a body. What’s at stake is not just the strangeness of displacement’s capacity to attract but also a more general unease regarding the very idea and, as Gayle Salomon puts it, assumption of a body. Jan Patočka can, with some confidence, proclaim that

we arrived at the conclusion that the world in the sense of the antecedent totality which makes comprehending existents possible can be understood in two ways: (a) as that which makes truth possible for us and (b) as that which makes it possible for individual things within the *universum*, and the *universum* as a sum of things, to be. Here again the phenomenon of human corporeity might be pivotal since our elevation out of the world, our individuation within the world, is an individuation of our subjective corporeity; we are individuals in carrying out the movements of our living, our corporeal movements.

Individuation—that means movements in a world which is not a mere sum of individuals, a world that has a nonindividual aspect, which is prior to the individual. As Kant glimpsed it in his conception of space and time as forms which need to be understood first if it is to become evident that there are particulars which belong to a unified reality. It is as corporeal that we are individual. In their corporeity, humans stand at the boundary between being, indifferent to itself and to all else, and existence in the sense of a pure relation to the totality of all there is. On the basis of their corporeity humans are not only the beings of distance but also the beings of proximity, rooted beings, not only innerworldly beings but also beings in the world.⁷

On the other hand, in the wake of phenomenology's distress, Levinas, Arendt, and Fanon will have never fully arrived at that conclusion, having been forced to speak from, if not always of, a corporeity under profound relative distress. Their speech and thought produce powerful and profound echoes—perhaps most intensely and shatteringly in the work of Frank B. Wilderson III as it engages with and follows from that of Hortense Spillers—that explore the unlivable, postlivable, yet undercommonly lived experience of that distress up to the point where relative deprivation opens out onto absolute chance. If “in their corporeity, humans stand at the boundary between being, indifferent to itself and to all else, and existence in the sense of a pure relation to the totality of all there is,” then these essays tend toward the exploration of chance outside of the relation between self and world. Chance is the way of all (irregular) flesh as it breathes and bears the palpable air of buried, undeniably anearthly life whose terrible beauty has been the aim and essence of black study all along.

So I want to argue, or move in preparation of an argument, for the necessity of a social (meta)physics that violates individuation. Critical discourse on the Shoah and on racial slavery, even in their various divergences, rightly align mechanization (or a kind of mechanistic rationalization) with de-individuation while also recognizing that de-individuation—the theft of body—is a genocidal operation. Mutually dismissive analytics of gratuitousness notwithstanding, the slave ship and the gas chamber are cognate in this regard and, in their separate ways, jointly end at the convergence of death and utility (for only one of which either one or the other is supposed to stand). There's a question concerning the requirements of preserving and fostering an entirely mythic national-subjective hygiene and worldly maturation, which emerges at the intersection of extermination and fungibility.

At that intersection, individuation and de-individuation orbit one another as mutual conditions of im/possibility operating in and as the frigid mechanics of an indifference machine. The genocidal erasure of entanglement and difference is the culmination, and not the refusal, of the metaphysics of individuation. The serial presentation of outlined, isolated black bodies, sometimes alone and sometimes in logistical formation, or the brutal merger of emaciated Jewish bodies in collective graves or clouds of ash, is an extension of that regulative compaction and dispersive de-animation of ensemble (swarm, field, plenum) whose inauguration is subjection's all but interminable event. If Levinas is accidentally right to say that violence is done to the individual, the one, whose sovereign Otherness remains invisible despite whatever instance or activity of graven imaging, then Arendt is accidentally wrong to say that violence is an act of the individual who renders himself invisible and inaudible in whatever inarticulate and unseemly petulance manifest as simultaneous withdrawal from and invasion of orderly public/private détente. It's not just about the brutal actions of the state, or the brutality of the individuals who stand (in) for the state; it's also about ensemble's violent care. If genocide is the disavowal of incompleteness's differential entanglement, then violence is differential entanglement's improvisational activity.⁸ Aunt Hester's violence, the gift she gives and is given, which is given again and again all throughout the history of the social music it animates and that animates it (as Levinas would say were he both consistent in his analysis and proficient in his dancing), must—in the most terrible of ironies—keep faith with the incalculable while accounting both for (what Arendt would see, were she both consistent in her analysis and sufficient in her reading, as) the rapacious weakness of the master's response and the reactionary, totalitarian power of racial, global, state capitalist mastery that sanctioned him while he symbolized it. The music will mess you up but that fails to constitute an alibi. Where did the savage breast come from? To figure that out, in accordance with the refusal of the unique figure, we need a difference engine, recalibrated. Fanon reinitiates this cryptographic operation with militant affection. The anti-genocidal renewal of ante-genocidal violence is his concern, and ours, and even against the grain of a certain cryptonymic impulse that phenomenology bears, we feel the obscurity of a disorder, an incompleteness, that which rearranges the rendezvous, across every deathly boundary, in the flesh. We say blackness and the imagination are none. How soft that softest darkness bends the light. *consent not to be a single being* is meant to bask in that light, available, like a monument you see through.

NOTES

Preface

- 1 See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
- 2 George Lewis, “Toneburst (Piece for 3 Trombones Simultaneously),” *The Solo Trombone Record*, SKCD2-3012, Sackville, 2001.
- 3 Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black and White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 228.
- 4 Such toppling is a fundamental concern, leading to fundamental insight, in the work of André Lepecki. See his *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 5 Immanuel Kant, “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” trans. Thomas K. Abbott, in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen K. Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 135.
- 6 Nathaniel Mackey, *Atet A.D.* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 119.
- 7 Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 178.
- 8 For the most beautiful elaboration of this principle of incompleteness see Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 196–97.

Chapter 1: There Is No Racism Intended

Epigraph: Emmanuel Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other,” trans. Andrew Schmitz, in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 149.

- 1 Franz Rosenzweig, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. Nahum Glazer (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 62–63. This passage is the epigraph for Annette Aronowicz’s introduction to her translation of Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), ix.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 70–71; emphasis in the original.