

consent not to be a single being

Stolen Life



FRED MOTEN

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CONTENTS

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Acknowledgments / vii | 8. Seeing Things / 183 |
| Preface / ix | 9. Air Shaft, Rent Party / 188 |
| 1. Knowledge of Freedom / 1 | 10. Notes on Passage / 191 |
| 2. Gestural Critique of Judgment / 96 | 11. Here, There, and Everywhere / 213 |
| 3. Uplift and Criminality / 115 | 12. Anassignment Letters / 227 |
| 4. The New International of Decent Feelings / 140 | 13. The Animaternalizing Call / 237 |
| 5. Rilya Wilson. Precious Doe. Buried Angel / 152 | 14. Erotics of Fugitivity / 241 |
| 6. Black Op / 155 | Notes / 269 |
| 7. The Touring Machine (Flesh Thought Inside Out) / 161 | Works Cited / 297 |
| | Index / 309 |

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PREFACE

What it is to be given (as) something to hold, always in common, has really got a hold on me. It's not mine but it's all I have. I who have nothing, I who am no one, I who am not one. I can't say it and I can't get over it. I can't fathom it and I can't grasp it. It opens everything and, in that exhaustion of what it is to acquire, a choir is set to work. More and less than tired, more and less than one, we just want to sing that name, which is not the only name, though it's not just any name. Movement in the history of that name and naming is insistence in the history of study. Theory of blackness is theory of the surreal presence—not in between some things and nothing is the held fleshliness of the collective head. There, we study how blackness and imagination are compact, in reconstructive flight from imposition, its sovereign operations, which keep on taking their incalculable toll. Beyond that, in the im/possibility of anything beyond that, those operations are resisted and refuted, often by way of simulations of that sovereignty. Wherever sovereignty is thwarted, whenever it's unsettled, everywhere, all the time, the radical events and things of our surround are shadowed by control, by its biopolitically antibiotic effects, which destroy, they say, in order to preserve, and then take an even more incalculable toll. To invoke the more (or less) incalculable is to recognize how life-in-danger takes certain conceptual apparatuses over the limit, in unnatural defiance of their rule, placing *them* in danger, such that the difference between internal and external imposition, or that between major and minor struggle, fails properly to signify. Dispersed, broken sovereignty and its various shadows are what apposition always turns away, what animated ground refuses to uphold. The double burden of our atmosphere has a double edge whose interstice we inhabit, with which we are preoccupied, as anti-occupation.

On the ground, under it, in the break between deferred advent and premature closure, natality's differentiated persistence and afterlife's profligate singularities, social vision, blurred with the enthusiasm of surreal presence

in unreal time, anticipates and discomposes the harsh glare of clear-eyed, (supposedly, impossibly) originary correction, where enlightenment and darkness, blindness and insight, invisibility and hypervisibility, converge in the open obscurity of a field of study and a line of flight. Consider what it is to be concerned with the fluorescence and efflorescence of generation's self-defensive care, its prefatory counterpleasures, which reveal the public, intramural resources of our undercommon senses, where flavorful touch is all bound up with falling into the general antagonistic embrace of inhabited decoration, autonomous choreography, amplified music, of which what happens in the yard or at the club or on record are only instances unless the yard is everybody's and the club is everywhere and everything is a recording.

All that intellectual descent neither opposes nor follows from dissent but, rather, gives it a chance. Consent to that submergence is terrible and beautiful. Moreover, the apparent (racial) exclusivity of the (under)privilege of claiming this (dis)ability serially impairs—though it can never foreclose—the discovery that the priority of the imposition, of sovereign regulation, of constitutive correction, is false. In order to get the plain sense of this you have to use your imagination. Certain critico-redemptive projects, which are always accompanied by the disavowal of what they valorize as becoming, encompass one way to understand such usage, such being put to use, such means; but in the meantime, in the improvisation of beginnings and ends, way on the outskirts of town, in the blur over the edge, critique and redemption submit to a poetics of condensation and displacement when blackness, which already was and was always moving and being moved, stakes its claim as normativity's condition.

Generation puts normativity in play, past the supersensible's interdiction of the representations it demands, through the ones who (refuse to) represent. They wear the material they work like a bad habit, out of uniform(ity), between thread and protocol, seen and heard and danced as a kind of skin, a vehicle for passage, in and through the merely epidermal. What if we could speak of generation's elementary structures, certain submarine, supercutaneous areas of unfamiliar resemblance, without losing sight of the best place to look for them, where they can change, where the antenormative persists in being numerous, in the immensity of its constant aeration and free alteration? Why is this uncountable finitude—its mass immeasurable as the masses, the weight of their hard, studious pleasure in and as the things they live among—so vulnerable to the noumenal prophylaxis of the very idea of a single source who doesn't dance, who has no skin, who can't be seen or heard?

Too often life is taken by, and accepts, the invasive, expansive aggression of the settler, venturing into the outside that he fears, in search of the very idea as it recedes from its own enabling condition, as its forms are reclaimed by the informality that precedes them. Genesis and the habit (the ways, the dress, the skin, the trip, the jones) of transcendental subjectivity don't go together; can generation and origin—the thin, delusional line between settlement and invasion—be broken up, as well? The generative breaks into the normative discourses that it found(ed). They weren't there until it got there, as some changes made to previous insistence, which means first things aren't first; Zo just wants to travel, to cities. Do you want some? Can I have some? (Octavia Butler might have called it the oncological difference; she sounds dispossession as our xenogenetic gift; migrating out from the outside, always leaving without origin.)

Generation, in its irreducible sociality, in the infinitely inspiring dispersion of its finitude, is identified as pathology; the informal is understood as formlessness, the structured, structuring force that settlers, running diabolical errands, take for wilderness; juvenile court judges passing phobic judgments, prior to any experience, on the socioecological space they invade, where everyone dies before they get old. The self-appointed judge makes settlements in his favor, against whatever is already preoccupied in and with the scene, which he kills without finding, erecting unsustainable homes and prejudicial legalities in order to protect himself, which is to say his expansion. The most effective mode of such protection places prejudice under the cover of an appeal to its eradication, which now becomes a hidden, metaphysical foundation of judicial ownership, legislative priesthood, or whatever other vulgarly temporal authority of the ones who find relative nothingness everywhere. Effective protection is their insubstantial, antisubstantial ruse, even in its viciousness, as the thinking and wracking and locking up of bodies. But the suspension of such sentencing, the abolition of its degenerative grammar, is already on. Its reconstitutive enjoyment and distribution is a project, a hermitage, a multipurpose room. That admission to the study and the making of law is open shows up most clearly against the backdrop of denials of jurisdiction that variously enable and are enabled by the supposedly elect(ed). Before and against the grain of that negation habits are sewn in cotton, sown like cotton, on the hard, veered, spread-out row of volunteers, their (de)livery of touch, their handing and tilling, their disruptively autonomous agriculture, in the shadow of scientific management, under its ground, making rhizomatic criminal law.

This comes into relief as black forms of life that anticipate and appose epidermalization, criminalization, and genocidal regulation. In the inexclusive mobile situation and idiom, to which we people who are darker than blue have been inexclusively given, our runaway history gives us this: that affirmation in and through negation, situated mobility, and differentiated presence is blackness; that blackness is generation's more-than-arbitrary name; that she is our more-and-less-than single being; that critical celebration of tumultuous derangement, of the constitutive force of dehiscence, of the improvisations of imagining things, is written in the name of blackness, on and under its skin, in its paraontological difference from, which is its paraontological differentiation in and as, the people who are called black. What it is to be—to be with and against—that name has something to do with what Luce Irigaray calls “the fecundity of the caress.” The caress makes social space like a garment, social fabric biopoetically brushing up against a wall that opens out into a room or rises up as a resting place—slave ship, favela, space ship, project. It's like the preparation of a table, or a piano. It can't be sung alone.

Stolen Life is a set of social essays, to use Amiri Baraka's term.¹ In play is not only the reversal of an all-but-canonical valorization of the political over the social, but also a commitment to the sociality and sociability of the essays themselves. Their tendency to rub up against one another in a mutual overstepping of bounds is also meant to indicate common effort as well as differential approach. The essays are, more pointedly, concerned with how it is that a kind of impossible publicness emerges in and from the radical exclusion from the political, as the refusal of that which has been refused. Life which has been stolen steals away in this refusal in a range of insurgencies that, insofar as they call regulation into question, can be said to anticipate its beginning and its end. The essays collected here are concerned with, among other things, pedagogy, criminality, and the social force of neuratypicality given at the intersection of the artistic and the autistic. There's a lot of stuff in here about how we go to school, and how we play, and how we see. Because of this pointedness, which is more emphatic here than in the rest of its companion volumes, the contents of *Stolen Life* resist collection. Or, perhaps more precisely, there is resistance to the power of the executive even as another mode of desegregation is intimated. If a certain devotional and club-like buzz is alive and well here—because rubbing, worrying, brushing, and handing bear certain irreducible phonic effects—it is in echo of everything I've been taught on various dusty roads.

NOTES

Preface

- 1 See LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966).

Chapter 1. Knowledge of Freedom

- 1 Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, trans. Henry Pickford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). My concern with Kant, and with the claims of blackness in Kant, moves by way of Menninghaus whose work has been, for me, a kind of rebeginning. Of course, I deviate from that rebeginning from the beginning. This deviation is, in part, a function of Pickford's translations of Menninghaus's interpellations of Kant. Pickford uses Werner Pluhar's translation of *Kritik der Urteilkraft* exclusively; sometimes I refer to that of Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 188; and *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Eric Matthews, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 197. More deviance, and even some actual attention to what might emerge in the interplay of divergent translations, follows.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 301, 302. I am grateful that Anne Norton alerts us to these phrases so that it is possible to deeply consider the trouble, in mind, they bear. See her "Hearts of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 257.
- 3 This is Guyer and Matthews's rendering of the original *gesittet*. Pluhar translates it as "civilized."
- 4 Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense*, 2. See also Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2000), 122. The translation Pickford consults is *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 112.
- 5 Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense*, 1.
- 6 This attunement to Kant's ambivalence is a common. See Robert Bernasconi, ed., "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment