

Stefano Harney, Fred Moten,
Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia
Vourloulomis

Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation

01/17

e-flux journal #121 — october 2021 Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia Vourloulomis
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Fred Moten: Hypatia and Sandra, the occasion of your book *Formless Formation* coming out is also the renewal of our ongoing family reunion.¹ In a way, we all got started, and also restarted, in and around the Department of Performance Studies at NYU around twenty years ago. I was teaching there when you were there as students, but I was a student, too, an initiate in the field, learning with and from José Muñoz, Barbara Browning, May Joseph, Peggy Phelan, Richard Schechner, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Allen Weiss. And Stefano, who was teaching in New York at that time, was always there. We were hanging out in the halls; we were students together. And having recently returned to the department, while never having left the field, I keep coming back to the words “performance,” “performative,” “performativity,” especially because of the way students formed and deformed and enformed and informed themselves last summer with the protests, in the midst of the pandemic, really becoming aware of themselves as activists. For many of them, the term “performative” is like a dirty word. It just means “you just playin’, you just talkin’ shit, you just merely making these empty rhetorical gestures rather than actually doing something.” Having been raised up in “Performance Studies,” it doesn’t quite go in my ear right when they use the term, even if I feel they’re right in the way they use it. But your book is guiding me through this.

Sandra Ruiz: Well, the “formless formation” of our book is performative and a little dirty; it is meant to enact what we learned as Performance Studies students, and it’s also meant to show how you *do* study as opposed to how you *think* study. In the process of deforming all these forms and genres and disciplines, the formless helps you understand how performativity actually labors.

Hypatia Vourloulomis: It seems to me that in different art, educational, or activist contexts, the word “performative” gets thrown around a lot. I agree that it often doesn’t *sound* right. Like you say Fred, the word is often used to describe an empty gesture, an insincere going-through-the-motions. I sometimes get confused by that and find myself having to go back to J. L. Austin’s delineation of the performative statement as a “doing things with words.”² And as Sandra says, so much about writing this book experimentally together is also because we’re Performance Studies students; we’re interested in the *doing* of the study, and the *doing* of the writing.

Sandra: It’s a study by two students who refuse to say they aren’t students. All our mentors, all our teachers, all our ancestors – they’re all in this formless formation, and that makes the writing alive; there are lots of entities



Yiannis Hadjiaslanis, *Formless Formation*, 2020, digital photograph.

and energies that are “alive” and were “live” while we wrote, and we hope still are now as one reads.

Stefano Harney: Reading the book, it felt like, yes, they were all there, but of course, in different form. The two of you write like water rushing down the mountain. It’s beautiful but maybe a sign of danger too, rushing water alive with murmurs and gushes of study.

Fred: Now you know who I wish was here, too, is Tracie Morris, and I’m thinking about *Formless Formation* in relation to her book, *Who Do With Words*, and also the long, antagonistic intensity of her engagement with J. L. Austin, where after starting off to topple him, just reading against the grain of Austin for so long and with such critical force, she couldn’t help but fall in love in a way.³ The way she showed her love to Austin was by tearing him apart, by breaking him down. She *did* something to Austin’s words with her words, and maybe that’s what is totally important about the unusual use of that word “form” in this moment, because it requires everybody to look at the form in performance, and it just seems to me that that’s what y’all have initiated. *Their* distrust of the word “performance” is of mere pretense or inaction, but when we read or hear that term, we hear it by way of Austin and it’s all about how words *do* things. But then there’s this other part of what our (fellow) students are doing by calling into question that term “performative” – they’re also saying, maybe this is a way to question form, and in that way, it totally jibes with what y’all are doing. There’s the old notion of “perform” as the completion of an action, maybe even all the way to its disappearance, and y’all are talking about endless action that troubles even the relay between disappearance and form.

Sandra: Exactly, that’s why we played a lot with “word” and “world” throughout the text; they start slipping into one another, because if you believe in what the word can do, then you might believe that there can be something beyond this world. *Formless Formation* is really an experimental project in critical minoritarian aesthetics and political thought. We see the book as an insurgent revolt, working side by side with planetary anticolonial forces mobilizing against debt, extractive capital, environmental catastrophe, and the militarized policing of people and borders. It is meant to be in intentional dialogue with all Indigenous, Black, Brown, ecological, queer, diasporic movements against capitalist formations. Through shared resonances, we really tried to bring to the forefront performative and aesthetic practices and methods that address current and future social organizing. As such, the book is organized into nine parts, divided and joined by nine words:

“momentum,” “swarm,” “vibration,” “ensemble,” “orchestrate,” “dimension,” “addition,” “magic,” and “respire.” These words and sections contain a series of vignettes, or episodes that conjoin.

Hypatia: Yes, the nine words that head the different parts of the book are key to our thinking of what composes a formless formation, conceptually and materially. They fold into each other. The book is an attempt to practice a formless formation through collaborative writing, through doing things with words together; it insists on experimenting and collaborating with different forces and forms of social organizing across and from within difference, and is written in dialogue with all those aesthetically engaged in such efforts, with all those who highlight what it is about this world that needs to end. We understand these collective efforts to be operations that necessitate endings that open up, that induce ongoing beginnings, with our writing of the book as a practice of jamming that moves toward composition and then responds in kind. The words and vignettes perform as shifting coordinates, always on the move. So, the book proposes a notion of formless formation as a modality of and for social and ecological movement, but is also a practice of forming words together, and that’s why it’s an open book written in the hope that others will continue to performatively form its formlessness, remaking the score.

Stefano: I read your words – for instance in the chapters “Swarm” and “Vibration” – as doing something to the world, to the concept of world. That is, if world sets itself up, sets us up, as something to be discovered, as something that is there to be revealed by measurement and mapping, and then predicted and controlled, sustained or detained. If that is the case, then your words in “Swarm” or in “Vibration” are breaking and running, running together – in both senses, in the senses – from this naming of names to something like naming without names, discovery without revelation. It’s just beautiful.

Fred: It is, and it makes me want to hear you both talk about the very deliberate, specific use of single words in the titles of the chapters. It’s a little paradoxical, and also totally brilliant, that y’all start with momentum, which is not usually what you start with, but what you attain. Y’all *start* with momentum.

Hypatia: We talked about that a lot, Fred! I guess our sense of the formless formation is that it’s always already happening, already ongoing. That’s why we wanted to start with momentum. We began writing as a way to tap into an ongoing momentum. And to begin with it as opposed to attaining it undoes linear temporal and spatial orders. It’s like what Sade sings in the opening vignette, “I wait for the sound.” Momentum



Yiannis Hadjiaslanis, *Respire*, 2020, digital photograph.

sounds out and is also unsounded, it's already there and we need to attune our ears to hear it. I think it's also important to mention that we were writing together under lockdown, with Sandra in Illinois and me in Athens, amidst the beginnings of the pandemic, and during the rebellions last summer in the States. We felt that we were in this storm. Even though we were trapped indoors, we were swirling in this momentum.

Sandra: But momentum was also motivated by a little frog we met in Amsterdam. Hypatia curated this incredible day at the Stedelijk Museum back in 2019 in which she invited scholars and artists to think about aesthetic practices and politics mobilized across the globe to help cultivate new social orders. She asked us all to come together under the political power of resonance.⁴ She placed us all in conversation after locating the resonances in our respective work. The event was transformative. But the transformation was also incomplete. There were still questions about how one moves from resonance to action to create a better world with those who share similar practices. After about fifteen years of not seeing each other or keeping in touch, the event showed us our own resonances. So we went walking through a park in Amsterdam and saw this little frog trying to cross a bike lane to get to the pond. Hypatia and I yelled "Stop!" and safely pushed the little frog away from being crushed by bicycles. Somehow it was the beginning of something just between us, and the frog. Afterwards, we sat on a bench, smoked a cigarette, cried, and remembered how that frog might not have made it, might have been a haunting, or might have been all the ways in which we needed to spiritually come together to create something from us, but for more than us. So I would say that the first act of momentum was that frog. In that moment we realized, alright, I'm going to hold you, you're going to hold me, we're going to be responsible to each other (and the frog), and that just kind of propelled things forward, from phone conversations, to her visit to Champaign, to just deeply committing to holding each other's ideas tenderly and critically while never forgetting the importance of the little frog's life. We sent each other pictures of frogs, we saw videos of frogs, the frog was always with us in one form or another.

Hypatia: We talked about snakes that eat frogs for snacks.

Sandra: Yes! This little figure became part of our book in an act of multiversal resonance.

Hypatia: At the conference there was this thinking around resonance – the themes of the event were "wildness" and "critical fabulation," so I was wondering, could unruly resonance perhaps be a condition of possibility for fabulation?⁵ And I think this frog has a lot to do

with that, because this little creature – we're still talking about it to this day – had this weird resonance.

Sandra: We knew that "resonance" as word, method, and theory led us to other words. It was a playful word game the entire time and we had fun. We made lists of words, we drew them out, we doodled, we invented scenes. And we had the frog as the object-relation and compass. But all of these things were already psychically, politically, magically, and socially coming together, and the fact that we both tried to save that frog already meant that we were going to commit to saving each other from the non-study that permeates the profession. We never really knew what was going to happen, and we went about doing research in really queer ways. We turned to lot of unorthodox and sometimes dirty methods in order to get us where we wanted to be, but we never knew where we had to be. We just knew that those nine words were adjoined and that we couldn't detach them. *Resonances* started to appear without us even knowing that we were also enacting resonance.

Stefano: Dirty methods, exactly. I have a PhD student I am lucky to be working with named Laura Nelson. She's working out of American Studies at Harvard but she is connected to all these cool study collectives like the Oakland Summer School. One chapter of hers is a study of Noah Purifoy, the great L.A. and later Joshua Tree assemblage artist. Laura points out that his method – a dirty method, you might say – was also a form of study, and a form of study designed to combat "selfishness" and promote collective processes. She notes that Purifoy understands the fundamental creativity of the earth as a gathering-assembly-disassembly-gathering method of assemblage, of studying what's around us and part of us. It's dirty in the first stage, and dirty again in decay, so it's really dirty all the way through, and that's what gives it that anti-world, anticolonial power, like your book.

Sandra: This work sounds amazing, Stefano!

Fred: Man, I wish I could take three years and just go hang out with Fernando Zalamea to learn Spanish and math at the same time so I can better approach the topography of the book.⁶ It's got something edgy and edgeless at the same time and I'm sure there's some kind of topographical term that would correspond to the kind of space the book is making, or to the way the book is exploding, or moving, or exuding out of the very defined space of "the book." There's a kind of field or plane that these nine words/chapter titles are making. I think maybe the key term that y'all already said is "resonance" and then the other key term is

05/17

e-flux journal #121 — october 2021 Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia Vourloumis
Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation

“vignette.”

Sandra: I think the other word, too, to add to “resonance” and “vignette” and “dirty,” would be “score.” All of those words in themselves form part of the score, and then they are the actual larger score of that score. “Momentum” should sound like a gallop, for example. We imagined our reader to be essentially always a listener. From the gallop, the noise starts to come in and take over, and in “vibration” you’re shaken into sounds. The idea is to feel each of the words as they join one another, but also how they live singularly; the word “vignette” is one way for us to think of how to metaphorically play with the traps of representation mobilized by words, categories, colonial forms. In doing so, we were also trying to think about the borderless, the leaking frame. Or, how do you leak out of the frame, how do you move beyond it? We really wanted the vignettes to be edgeless. What would this all mean in terms of tempering the collective ear?

Hypatia: We were on the phone the other day trying to remember how things transpired, and it was hard, because the book began as an experiment and because so much of it came out of our study together, conversations, listening to music together, dancing, or watching *A Joyful Noise*, that beautiful documentary on Sun Ra and the Arkestra.⁷ Sometimes I have to think very hard, like, how did we come up with the “vignette”? The single words that Sandra noted down that first day were their own vignettes in a way, and then we were really fascinated that such a beautiful word, “vignette,” is borderless, the edges of it fade. We knew we wanted to play with the form and formation of the book. But then there’s this contradiction because you’re trying to write the fade down at the same time that there is a field, a topography, shapes and sheafs one writes upon that are formed by those moving edges. We were also thinking: What would that look like? How do words fade into each other, how do vignettes fade into each other?

Stefano: It’s not surprising that you have trouble with a kind of time line, of the book, of your collaboration, even if the frog stands guard at the beginning. I’m thinking of your opening in the chapter “Dimension,” where Grace Lee Boggs starts the chapter, but not in the linear timeline we are supposed to either live in, or to read in. She’s there to disrupt the timeline, but not the timing, the poly beats, the crazy counts. That’s what plays under and over the ticktock of the clock of the world. The vignettes will not be reduced to their overrepresentations. We’re grateful to have our ears tempered!

Fred: My old teacher Masao Miyoshi wrote a really important essay called “A Borderless

World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State.”⁸ He was really pissed, first of all, about neoliberal globalization, and he’s pissed about the ways that neoliberal globalization breaks the methods that postcolonial states might have used to protect themselves from imperial aggression. So, for him, borderlessness is a state of unprotectedness, and for him, when borderlessness, as the brutality of the neoliberal violation of borders, is covered over by an old-fashioned liberal pseudo-internationalist discourse of “brotherhood across borders,” it just produces misery. And then at the same time, that discourse doesn’t account at all for the way that the same neoliberal order erects borders that are absolutely impermeable. It’s a brilliant argument and it all feels totally right, and at the same time, it only seems to me to require more intensely from us a new theorization of the borderless. It’s because everything he says is true that a new practice of borderlessness has to emerge. And this is one of the things that for me is so deep and resonant in your book. There’s a way that y’all talk about resonance, by way of The Invisible Committee, about how resonance is the way that movement moves, how it spreads, and that it’s not the same as contamination. It’s communicable, but it’s a kind of communicability without contamination because it doesn’t acknowledge any prior existence of purity in the first place. The resonance was already there internally, and the question is how to ride their correspondence.

Sandra: That’s beautifully put. If resonance is the theory and also the method and movement, then the vignette is the thing that’s enacting these very things in its ability to be episodic, to be a moment upon a moment, to be ephemeral, to move, to be both sonically uncontainable but heard.

Hypatia: Yes, we were attempting to trace dissonance and discrepant, disintegrative resonance also, building on Nathaniel Mackey’s notion and method of “discrepant engagement,” and the coexistence of particulars, as Aimé Césaire puts it. Césaire isn’t interested in universality, but in the coexistence and deepening of particulars, and I think the vignette is trying to do that too.⁹ All of these things happened in a way that are difficult to explain – the doing determined a doing that couldn’t be predetermined.

Sandra: To return to the vignettes: they weren’t vignettes until they were spoken and heard. Often when you think of a vignette, you can be drawn to its visual components. We were trying to undo the dominant narrative of the ocular. What does it mean to make the vignette an auditory experience? We already had an

06/17

e-flux journal #121 — october 2021 Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia Vourloumis
Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation

interrelated theoretical toolbox that we were pulling from, our intuitive archives and creative writerly ways were already joined. In that sense, it was like the predetermination of the pre-. It was already there, we just jumped into the circle and started to play our instruments.

Stefano: The unshareable that shares out. I remember something like that in your entrancing description of boychild dancing in the vignette Swarm. Studying together, writing together doesn't make you come together as one. It shares you out. Gives you away. Sandra, you make me think of this listening collective called Le Mardi Gras that Fred and I are part of, named after a bar in Pittsburgh where it was started a couple of years ago. To really stay with the auditory, as we have tried to do with Le Mardi Gras, has been to resist translation into academic writing and talking, sometimes into writing and talking altogether. We just dedicate songs to each other.

Fred: That's one way to think about the co-resonance between "momentum" and "swarm." Sometimes I'm fascinated by these videos of birds swarming, of murmuration. There's some pseudoscientist in me watching those wilderness shows with zoologists who find a pack of wolves and tranquilize one to put a monitor and track the movements, and there's some kind of brutal part of me that would love to put a monitor on the leg of a bird just to see what it would be like in the swarm, just to see what it would be like to be in the murmuration, but it would be a false image because there actually is no single bird in the murmuration. The metaphysical assumptions that you would use to do a scientific study are inadequate to what's going on. What if the murmuration that we see from outside is really just a collection of vignettes; in any given moment, that duet becomes trio becomes octet, and then it goes back down to quintet, so that there's this constant deformative preformation going on, a formless formation in the way that y'all are putting it. And this book is a primer, an investigation, into how we make that our practice, our constant study.

Sandra: You know, you could totally flip the book around and start with "respire" rather than with "momentum." We can all start respiring and conspiring simultaneously, and in that moment, we've again committed to being responsible to one another, to giving ourselves away too. Or we start by holding our breath. Breath became a major part of this book as we realized over and over the privilege of our own breath. We were writing at the same time as we watched the world explode, flip upside down. What could we offer? We hoped to show, through the vignette (as we saw this in the world too), that the aesthetic and the political were never not

already necessary to one another. Moving from the aesthetic to the political or the political to the aesthetic was no longer sufficient; they were already inherently entangled in an act of murmuration.

Hypatia: The murmuration is very important for us because it is a formless formation materialized through a necessary sharing out of motion, one where its swooping nebulousness is dependent on intense coordination between a small number of groups of starlings that overlap. It seems to me that it's an important paradigm in terms of collective flight and questions of social organizing, of instituting, or de-instituting, de-structuralization – Guattari wrote about how institutions need to resist structuralization ahead of time. What would that look like? It makes one think of all of the impasses and failures in terms of our movements and uprisings. I'm thinking of Greece here. The Invisible Committee wrote that revolutions happen by way of resonance and not contamination in the context of the Athens uprising of 2008, and they were thinking how that insurrection resonated with the uprisings of the *banlieues* of Paris in 2005. The book is titled *The Coming Insurrection*, so they were almost prophesizing this resonance.¹⁰ After they wrote that, you saw Tunisia, and for those of us who live in the Mediterranean, there's this sense that, for example, if we're on the Northern Mediterranean, we're more connected to the Middle East and to the Maghreb across on the Southern Mediterranean, even though we're supposedly on this continent called Europe with its militarized lethal border. The Arab Spring was where you could sense what the Invisible Committee was talking about in terms of a ricocheting "resonance," because squares were then occupied in Barcelona and Madrid, then you saw it in Athens, then you saw it in Istanbul. These uprisings were sharing out across the Mediterranean, and then those led to the Occupy movements across the Atlantic or up in England. This seems to raise questions about form, about how we organize ourselves, because we also see how in Greece that momentum led to Syriza, a leftist government being voted in, and that's when things stalled. That was the ultimate failure, actually.

Stefano: It encourages us to think of betrayal in a register other than a moral or personal one. Why must we be betrayed? This should not be a lament, it should be an investigation. Not all defeats can be attributed to betrayal alone, but no defeats come without them. The Guyanese feminist, activist, and intellectual Andaiye writes an essay about the Barbadian novelist and essayist George Lamming's 1970s talks on the betrayal of

07/17

e-flux journal #121 — october 2021 Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia Vourloumis
Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation



Yiannis Hadjiaslanis, *Magic*, 2020, digital photograph.

Caribbean movements for independence.¹¹ This is the postcolonial moment – the one where Gayatri Spivak says the fight for decolonization begins the day after negotiated independence. There is a betrayal by the new middle classes of the working classes. But Andaiye and Lamming help us to see that this is only part of the story. Yes, there is a negotiated independence, but there is also a revolution. Because only revolutions can be betrayed. You can't betray a constitution, or a democracy, or a nation. It is the formless formation of the working classes, a revolutionary commitment to access, to collectivity, to shared life that provides the opening for the middle class to betray these classes to the plantocracy, and they do, producing that postcolonial moment, that Syriza moment.

Fred: Sandra and Hypatia, your collaboration is also a collaboration of the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. It's a non-continental, archipelagic thing, or thinking. Y'all think by way of islands, rather than by continental landmasses, in a way that accesses the somehow more palpable way that islands shift and move, and exist as a function of a certain volatility. You link up with a long line of thought that approaches beach, and shoal, and delta.¹²

Hypatia: Yes, and I would say that this non-continental "tidalectic" thinking, to cite Brathwaite,¹³ spans all the way towards the *nusantara* (archipelago) of Southeast Asia as well. In my research I think about the islands of the "former East Indies" and the "former West Indies" together too, and, working with Sandra, also Puerto Rico and Greece. What I appreciate so much about Sandra's book *Ricanness* is her insistence on the use of the word "anticolonial," which resonates for me because Puerto Rico and Greece share a history of being ongoing debt colonies.

Fred: Geopolitics is organized around continents. It's organized through an imperial logic that is manifest in the crossing and claiming of land masses. Obviously, there's transoceanic movement, but there's this active practice at the level of administration and at the level of policy, about the settlement and conquering of land in a way that is predicated on, on some level, the physical impossibility of the settlement and the conquering of the sea. So that resistance to geopolitical brutality is a kind of oceanizing of land mass or an archipelagizing of land mass, which islands, in their movement and in their movements realize, or surrealize. It's like we want to make continents move and they want to make islands stand still. This is how y'all's work resonates with the work Mary Pat Brady has been doing for years.¹⁴ It turns on this

radical refusal of scale and the way scale is all bound up with the concept of static, statist land mass. Layli Long Soldier accesses a history of the refusal of land mass that was already given. And it shows up in the way in which her writing recognizes the tidalectic *momentum* of land. She describes the mountain not as a place, not even as a relation, but rather as a general movement. She's like Brathwaite's secret sharer, and you share too, Hypatia: from *nusantara* to Namsetoura.

Stefano: As we often say, scaling up is really scaling down, losing connection rather than gaining it, losing abilities rather than consolidating them, settling for form rather than formation.

Hypatia: The way Long Soldier writes "grassesgrassesgrasses," that's formation, and also the performative again, the doings with and to words in, through, and *as* land, history, poetry. And it's there in the ways in *Whereas* where she works with those performatively genocidal legal documents, the state documents, the actual historical policies doing violent things with words, violations sanctioned by words.¹⁵ The "grassesgrassesgrasses" sounds out for me – it's the writing out, a swaying out, and a sighing out of a formless momentum of land, life, and memory that is in excess of performative legal decrees: she's actually materially *doing* things with words. She made "grassesgrassesgrasses" tidal. I appreciate what you say that a refusal to think in these geopolitical, continental land-mass ways is somehow related to what Sandra and I were attempting to think through and do with these "vignettes."

Fred: A lot of times you can read shit without ever having to pay attention to the fact that it was made up out of words. You know what I mean? It's great when the word comes as a surprise to you. It's great when the word shows up to you not having always already been assimilated into your vocabulary. People read for comfort, and they also read for speed. And the way that comfort aligns with speed is by already having a kind of lexical grip on the situation. I know what that word means, I don't have to think about it, I can keep going, let me keep going. Ideally, particularly when it's academic overproduction time, when it's all about volume reading, when it's about quantity reading rather than quality, you just need to go, you need to go as fast as you can, and you really don't want to be fucking bothered by a fucking word you don't know, because that means you have to fucking stop and go oh, what does this word mean? Unless of course, you want to get off that clock. What did y'all say Grace Lee Boggs said? What time is it? You know, let me get off the clock.¹⁶ In *Formless Formation*, words I thought I knew

made me think: I better look this up. Let me pause over this word, let me linger over this word. Then, somehow, it becomes, let me linger over some words that ain't here. Let me linger over the word that you didn't choose. Let me linger over the word "vignette," and then also let me linger over the word "chapter." Let me see if I can understand what it meant for y'all not to use that word.

Sandra: Yeah, we hope to arrange and also disarrange you in the process of reading against the colonial formation of the chapter. So much of what you're saying about how one reads is what we were unconsciously doing as we wrote. It's always a tussle. For example, the intentional precision over every word for us to the point where, if it didn't have a beat or produce a rhythm, it needed to be rewritten. Sometimes that meant whatever came at the end needed to come to the beginning. Now thinking back, I wonder what it would mean to write without any time and space. In this book, the vignette is always borderless, it is always the edge of the edge, it is always almost there but not quite there, or a type of map for the future of the future; we are always in those spaces and dimensions unknown; and the sensorial space that we committed to is the sound of the vignette as it is sounding. And temporally, we committed to doing the labor together. What would it mean for the next project to have no fucking time or space? What could we even write? How would the word become a world? Does it all need to mean anything? And if it doesn't, then have we actualized the formless formation? I don't know.

Fred: You know the famous formulation by Audre Lorde, "We were not meant to survive." She says it in a certain way. Lucille Clifton famously says it in a certain way, and people like to repeat it. People like to repeat it, but sometimes you can repeat it to the point where you lose it and so you need another voice broken off from or in their voice to say, "No, no, you don't understand: we *weren't supposed to survive*." That gives us a way of understanding what's going on here now. This shit is genocidal. Genocide is happening now. This is a lesson I learned from Dylan Rodriguez. I had a flat-footed understanding of genocide.¹⁷ If it wasn't total annihilation, or if it didn't show up as some unmistakable attempt at total annihilation, then it was a kind of misuse of the term. Jasbir Puar also thinks about this relation between genocide and maiming.¹⁸ I was listening to these two great scholars, Elizabeth Dillon and Erica Fretwell, talking about this yesterday on another Zoom where they were talking about the intensity in sugar plantations in the Caribbean, but also in the North American landmass.¹⁹ There was this ridiculously high incidence of amputations. It was just dangerous work. The

cane itself is sharp. People were constantly being cut, and the remedy for the cut was to cut whatever was cut off. So much so that at the sugar mills they would have axes. There was this constant threat of amputation. Whether it's sugar in Barbados, or bauxite in Guyana, or cars in Detroit, its industrial production, in which making and murder are homotopic. This is what C. L. R. James, Walter Rodney, Norman Girvan, Clive Thomas teach us. The plantation theory helps us to understand that it's this interplay between plantation ideology on the one hand, and industrial production on the other. And all of this is genocidal. It is what all of us die of. It's the general cause of death. Now, somehow, we survive the shit. And what y'all are talking about when y'all are talking about the resonance of vignettes in your mode of practice shows and tells us something about how we survive. There's a kind of care you take with words and with each other. And it resonates for me because I know I've seen a hundred billion different modalities of just such care that are taken with people holding hands with an old lady as she's walking cross the street, or changing a diaper, or just these little small acts, I suppose, as Gilroy would say in a certain way.²⁰ Academic writing tends to run roughshod over small acts. It runs roughshod over the nuances of language because people gotta produce. And so it's injurious in that way. I've been learning so much from talking with my son Julian, though he doesn't talk to me that much because I'm his dad and by definition I'm uncool and annoying and, as you all know, I talk too damn much. But every once in a while Julian will sit and talk with me about music. He's learning, he's playing, he's composing. And we were listening to some stuff the day before yesterday, and for him, what happens, he says, when you listen to somebody play, what you can hear, is that they zoom in. They *zoom* in. And they zoom in to the point where it's not even subdivided into notes. And this is how you understand the sound, the sonority, of the use of the pedal, or the sonority that would manifest itself as a specific shift in the angle of your finger's attack on the key of the piano. And he's getting to the point where he can hear that shit, and he can talk me through it. I can't hear it like him, but that's what y'all are talking about, right? These very small things, and they fuck up space and they also fuck up time. That's my long-winded way of agreeing with you, sorry.

Hypatia: It's beautiful! The link between plantation ideology and industrial production makes me think of Stefano's insistence on how infrastructure can also be genocidal. We were thinking together, quite a few years ago, about friendship as infrastructure. Those small acts of care, of zooming in can counter the problem that

a lot of writing within our sphere (which is academic, or within art institutions or pedagogy, but also within Performance Studies) is not really writing *with* the performance, or with the author, it's writing *about* them. Again, it just seems that the question of how we *do* the writing is important.

Fred: I have a question about the difference between “about” and “with,” which corresponds to another difference between “against” and “with.” Say there’s a performance or a thing and you like it so you want to write about it. It is an object. As an object, it shows up for you precisely insofar as you are distant from it, you are separate from it. And there are certain formulations regarding the necessity for “critical distance.” And then there’s another kind of critical distance when you’re writing “against” something. “With” is a refusal of that distancing, and at the same time, it’s an acknowledgement of a certain kind of differentiation. It’s a Denise thing, it’s a difference-without-separation thing.²¹ With your work I learn how to be careful with what we love, how to take care, how to be precise, where precision is not the same as definition. It’s really *careful attendance to indefinition*. You move slow and you take care and you don’t stomp over shit.

Hypatia: Yeah, it’s listening as Julian teaches us, attunement by zooming in; Julian can hear all of those things because he’s also zooming into the zooming in.

Fred: It’s this attunement with what you love. And y’all associate anticoloniality with attunement with what you love. And we live in a decolonial moment which comports itself against what it hates. And the justification for this is that what we hate is killing us. This is a dilemma I’m constantly trying to understand and figure out. The first fucking thing we do is that we pay attention to what we do, we carefully attend to our own thing. But academic speaking or writing “about” or “against” – and at the same time also forms of political speaking “against” – can fall so easily into thoughtlessness.

Hypatia: Yes, I’m thinking of José Muñoz here and how much he taught us about what it is to write with what you love, but also at the same time how writing with what you love is also, inevitably, writing against.²² We’re still students and we like to go back to our training and what we shared in this department called Performance Studies. José was always interested in what things were doing. He wasn’t interested in knowing or being so much. He wasn’t interested in those kinds of epistemologies. He was asking about doing, and how writing with performance, writing with the artists and the thinkers that he loved and he was engaging with, was always about how the theory

is already there. It wasn’t about attaching stuff. That’s the problem with so much academic production.

Fred: But it’s not just in academia, it’s in a whole range of activist formations that are constantly trumpeting how non-academic or anti-academic they are. It’s like this continual adherence to already existing forms which just breeds thoughtlessness, because it’s just easy to say you’re against bad shit. Everybody says it at the end of the day.

Sandra: You’re right. I think that’s the reason I’m getting all teary-eyed is because when we commit to the first act of love being study, we immediately re-shift the epistemological and genealogical terrain. We need to think of genealogy as a form of poetic kinship and creative fellowship. Throughout the entire book, our teachers remain, whether named or not. We never stopped studying because we never stopped being their students. If we didn’t have those teachers – and Fred, you’re one of them – I don’t know if we would’ve been brave enough to commit to never being thoughtless. That’s one of the things I learned from all my teachers: to be thoughtful, to never break someone else’s spirit by being thoughtless.

Fred: Y’all know the end of *Sula*, which may be my favorite Toni Morrison novel.²³ I had the chance, right before coming to Performance Studies, in 1993 and ’94, to hang out with a great writer named Cherry Muhanji who loved and studied the end of *Sula*. She made me notice when Nel says, “We were girls together.” Well, we were students together. And that’s a togetherness that really doesn’t correspond to classical space-time.

Sandra: That’s resonance! We just can’t lose sight of that because of the brutality of the current moment, which is designed to make us lose sight of that. The bosses of the current moment need to take away the curiosity, the imagination, the dreaming, the magic. That’s the only way that they keep killing us. The current moment takes away the presence. It’s deep. All the teachers and all the committed girls together. In “Orchestrate” we have this moment where we talk about the incessant walking careers that make study difficult.²⁴ What about if we all just woke up and said I’m going to write the way I want to write, I’m going to write what I feel; I’m going to write what I love; I’m going to commit to it, and I want to be part of it with you, you, and you. And it didn’t have to be an article in a top-tier journal; it didn’t have to be a book, and it didn’t make us think we were prisoners of resource and scarcity wars. We could all be something *alive*, meaning that’s what a formless formation must be. It doesn’t rest because it’s always something else in the process of meeting

others and being thoughtful with others. But we're in a profession that does not promote study in these ways. Writing with Hypatia felt very rare and spiritual. Why can't it always be about thinking as this kind of spiritual doing?

Stefano: The "Orchestrate" section is so insistent and so brave in the face of the colonial split – we are the organized and you are the disorganized – the settler and the native towns, as Fanon would put it. But we are organized in gappings in a universe of particulars, as you say with Louis Armstrong and Aimé Césaire! This has always also been a problem for the left when it calls for organization. C. L. R. James again: the organizing is done. But "Orchestrate" adds two things at least to this. The organizing is done to be undone. This is why the colonial eye cannot ever see it and presumes it sees just a lack of organization. But also, Sandra, you are right, you have to break these rules of writing because they also stem from the idea that somebody over there is unorganized and the writing will organize them. It's an extension of policy. It's policy's vehicle. The vehicle must be flipped in the streets. I think we get disappointed because comrades, sisters and brothers, won't give up this commitment to organize others by organizing their writing in the empty universalism of academic prose, citation, exhortation, lament.

Fred: It's without guilt and recrimination. Without feeling guilty oneself, without ascribing guilt to other people, without feeling bad about not doing it before, without any of that. Because y'all found something, y'all discovered something together. You did something together and it's good that it's great.

Sandra: And it's against and with. I feel like, on the one hand, it would be right to encourage people to do this kind of thing, to work with somebody else on the most basic level, to work with other people, to resist the individuation, but then also to create, insofar as it is possible for us to do so, to constantly foster the conditions that enable people to resist the individuation.

Hypatia: Yeah, I remember asking many years ago something about the difference between "the commons" and "the undercommons,"²⁵ and Stefano you said something like the commons just reinforces, rather than undermines, the conditions that would reproduce the commons in the first place. It's a forced individuation and socialization in a way. So of course we strike because of very material needs that need to be addressed, but it still shores up the institutions we strike against, as if they're naturalized institutions and relations we want to retain. We demand from the institution what we think it should be giving us, what it should be, as opposed to questioning its

existence as an individualizing platform and business model in the first place.

Fred: The point is that the comportment is toward the institution. But I'm not even gonna let the institution come between me and the friends I have who work there. Or the art I love that is held there, dying of preservation. So how do we practice the absence of the art institution? And how do we practice the absence of the university? That's different. The walking careers say this is my job, but the thing about the walking careers is that they have a kind of allegiance to the shit that they hate.

Sandra: They're the same motherfuckers who tell you how to use and not use words, and in their own privilege and desire for whiteness as a type of property they enact violence against those who they don't think deserve to have what they think they deserve to have, when in fact, we all deserve everything.

Fred: But we can't get rid of them, not only because we technically don't have the capacity to get rid of them, but also because 97 percent of what they say we agree with, and 97 percent of what they want, we want. I actually believe that however walkingly careerish they may be, they actually want most of the same shit we want. I don't think of them as insincere. I don't think they're lying when they express their political desires. I think there's a fundamental contradiction between their expression of political desire and their inability to act out, to practice, what they desire.

Sandra: Then we're back at the first word: "performativity." How is their shit not just a posturing performative that exists outside the promises of the performative?

Fred: But what if it's not a matter of choice? What if it's not a matter of their defective will? It's not like I'm such a nice fucking person. I hate motherfuckers, and most of the time I just want to slit their throats. But part of it is being older maybe. I just look at folks and I think, first of all, why are you so mean? Don't you ever look at people and think, why are y'all so mean? And what's usually the answer to that question?

Sandra: Maybe something happened to them, or they don't love themselves, or they're broken, or they're beyond wounded. But there are also people who are broken and don't break others.

Hypatia: Like you say, we mostly agree, because we're thinking, reading, writing, we're fighting for the same things. We have this common project and then there's the meanness, which is to say a lack of generosity, or care for and toward that common project. It makes me think of Walter Benjamin's writing on left melancholia and intellectual betrayal as where and why fascism finds opportunities.²⁶ Maybe

it's just the hyper-professionalism, the competitiveness, the supposed scarcity.

Fred: I feel it too. And I've said the same things pretty much every day myself. And then I have to confront the fact that saying those things also goes against the grain of a whole bunch of things I believe. And not just vague ethical formulations, but what I would call social and physical formulations that undergird the refusal of the entire metaphysical structure and foundation of the fucked-up way shit is. Stefano and I have been reading this extraordinary Guyanese organizer and activist-intellectual named Andaiye, who wrote this beautiful essay on George Lamming.²⁷ She talks about a kind of postcolonial betrayal in a way that is totally rhymes with Benjamin – it's the same kind of intellectual and political formation that Benjamin is within and that he decries. She's talking about Lamming as a kind of crucial figure in the history of the representation and narration of such betrayal, which is not only a betrayal of anticolonial movement, not only a betrayal of the nascent postcolonial state, but it's a betrayal of a set of ideals that have been captured in the antagonism between anticolonial movement and colonial stasis in postcolonial state formation. It's a betrayal of a set of beliefs.

Hypatia: And comrades.

Fred: And comrades too, but also the entire social formation, of the formless formation. But the formless formation does not subdivide itself into comrades and betrayers. And that's a social physics problem, not a problem of political relations. It's not a liberal problem. It's a physics problem, and a social problem. Are Lamming and Andaiye saying that betrayal – to the extent that what we're fighting against is the political regime that's predicated on the very idea of the individual subject – is redoubled when we talk about individual subjective betrayal? As you just said, Sandra, motherfuckers are broken; they're not subjects. They're broken in what they do. That doesn't excuse what they do. I say this and then I want to take it back because it's like some "I hate the sin but not the sinner" kind of bullshit.

Sandra: When you can't see how that rock on the ground has as much vitality and as much presence as any other entity, tensions will inevitably rise. When you feel like there's nothing to learn from others, including the porous rock, and you have all the answers, and in the process of getting where you want to be, you will kill me to get there, then the soldier of love in me will fight, defend, care, and tend simultaneously with the rock and for the rock. This tension lives throughout *Formless Formation* and that's why we move from artists mobilizing the aesthetic to how the militarization of the police mobilize it.

There's this ongoing interplay throughout the book: a constant call and response, a move forward and a move back, tango, a careful hustle. I am always trying to understand how I am in them, and how everything that I see as two is also one, and how the most important thing I'll ever be able to hear and say is thank you to them, to myself, to the rock, to the frog, to you. But I don't know that I'm there, because too much brutality, not thoughtfulness, is our everyday. It's a cycle created and perpetuated by racial misogynist colonial capitalist logics and I want to get someplace else.

Stefano: Yes, you have both moved us from antagonism to a general antagonism. There is no way around the antagonism, but there is a way into the general antagonism in formless formation. The clock on the wall of the world is there – brutal antagonisms – but we can't stop it by proposing or trying to enact the opposite of antagonism: peace, oneness, democracy, human rights, environmental sustainability. That is just shifting the brutality onto someone or something else. As you say, Césaire knew this, Armstrong too. Difference is an antagonism, but it is in the commitment to suppressing difference that we find brutality. Dwelling in the general antagonism is our only refuge from this brutality. And the general antagonism ain't heaven – there's a thin line between love and hate. That's the sound of the general antagonism.

Sandra: That's why you wait for the sound.

Hypatia: We wait for the sound, but at the same time we hear things already sounding too. What Benjamin worded as intellectual betrayal is, in my reading, not about personal betrayal. It's not about specific people or comrades, but rather a movement, a general intellect maybe, a general antagonism as you say, Stefano. It's also about this queer ideality, and I'm thinking of José again, where in *Cruising Utopia* he writes about a performative horizon that is not yet here at the same time as it's there and then. I think that's why the intellectual betrayal feels acute sometimes, because we actually do want the same things and we already have those things. And as you say Stefano, it ain't heaven.

Sandra: That is what the now is – it's a fucking ongoing everyday betrayal. It's brutal, and it's also really beautiful simultaneously. It also ends. The minute it happens, it's done and also begins again and anew.

Fred: I remember when I was a child we would go to my grandmother's house on Sunday, and whoever had the youngest baby would come to dinner – it was a big extended family – and they couldn't get through the door with the baby, the baby would be immediately taken out of their arms – gone!

Hypatia: Of course! I'd be the first to take

the baby!

Fred: And it wasn't just grown people who would take it. The baby would be up and down the street. There'd be little nine-year-old girls with the baby on their hip. I once heard the great trumpeter Bobby Bradford talk about the absolute importance of that handling, of that being handled, and handed. And that now, babies are a form of private property, and their care and feeding is a thing to be owned, and jealously guarded. I don't think we were all *handled* like that. But I don't think it's too late. That's why we have to get a farm or something like that: our kids need more handling. Matter of fact, so do I! I need people to pick me up and hand me around too. I wish someone was big enough to carry me on their hip, take me up and down the street and show me to everybody. And it's not just that academic protocols and forms are designed to obliterate that kind of shit, but activist forms and protocols obliterate it too. This is the fucking liberalism at the heart of so-called radical activism.

Hypatia: Yes, it's really a question of organizing, handling each other. The pandemic reveals how we're all going through something together planetarily, inequitably, and it seems like an opportunity for change in terms of social organizing, which was also revealed in the ways the US rebellions of 2020 resonated and ricocheted on a planetary level. That's why the murmuration is important for us, because it's paradoxically structural in a sense. Small vignettes are perhaps a method, of care and of things overlapping.

Sandra: Social organizing is a constant negotiation between trying to figure out your difference and sameness, sameness and difference, and everything inside and outside, above, below, beyond these categories. It's not easy. You will survive the tension if you commit to it. The Romantic construction of solidarity is not sustainable. It can begin in this position theoretically, but after a while, the revolutionary farm doesn't happen because the goats decide to buy it. We have to stop saying that's what we want, and we have to start cultivating the new world we want. Let's handle each other now before there's nothing left to handle, before there's no big band left to play with, to sound out.

Fred: That's the biggest, most frustrating thing to me about academia. Without all the sort of self-obsessed, self-absorbed navel-gazing and self-hatred in academia, there's very little recognition of the fact that on a day-to-day basis, the business end of the university just don't give a shit what we do in the hallways, in the offices, in the classrooms. We don't have to accept those protocols. And the protocols that they would want to impose on us with the most

brutality are easy protocols to cheat. Who are we to think we are too good to lie, cheat, and steal from these motherfuckers?

Hypatia: I remember, Fred, you taught the Anthropological Foundations of Performance Studies one semester and you suggested we read S. R. Delany's *Nevèryon* series.²⁸ If I recall correctly, in the first book, *Tales of Nevèryon*, the figure of the smuggler appears. We need to smuggle more.

Fred: We have to evangelize the pleasure of that, and also figure out ways to make it less scary, in the sense of a plan for supporting you, for making sure that they don't fuck with you for doing it this way. I see people come towards their tenure and it's three years of misery, because a sword is hanging over their head and they're all alone. We shouldn't let people go through that shit alone. We shouldn't create weird, fucked-up forms of antisocial support for their going it alone. This is the only weird-ass zone in the world where "fellowship" means, "Oh, I won some money so I can go off by myself."

Sandra: That's academia.

Stefano: We know what makes us feel good – being together; and when being together makes us feel bad, it's still good. Going off by yourself is a punishment, unless you are going off by yourself to rid yourself of self. But a fellowship is not that. We got to take care of each other because we live under authoritarianism if we work in a university or a museum. We are subject to arbitrary rule, though we have trouble facing that fact. Peter Fleming writes in *Dark Academia* about how these institutions will kill us as surely as a snap on the line, just slower, and with wellness.

Hypatia: We're taking care of each other as much as we can in these times when we can't be together. I just want to get as many of us together at the same time, because we have such a massive band. Sandra has friends that we've never met, who are part of the band. We each have people we need to meet. We have friends and collaborators that we're already in conversation with before actually meeting in person. That's also what the formless formation is to me. It's ongoing conversations across ages and dimensions. We just need to get together more often, and handle the babies.

Fred: There's a great Ed Roberson line – "What's on you lifts you up" – that explicates a great Paul McCartney line – "The movement you need is on your shoulder." If the movement is on your shoulder it's because you're on the shoulders of the movement.

Hypatia: It's momentum! But it could also be a burden, the accumulation of something that builds to momentum. You might have a burden as well on your shoulder. The weight that lifts you

up.

Stefano: That line by Roberson is amazing, and it reminds me of when you both are writing in the “Addition” vignette about Sylvia Rivera giving that speech. And she is so pissed about what she has had to carry on her shoulder, about what’s on her. And then suddenly the question is not what’s holding her down, but what’s holding her up!

Sandra: Exactly. Stefano and Fred, what is your favorite word, or your favorite vignette, or the moment that you had to read differently, or had to not read differently?

Fred: It’s “Dimensions.” It crystallizes and articulates all these questions that I couldn’t figure out how to put together, and it articulates a general approach y’all share – a combination of grounding, in Walter Rodney’s sense of the term, and flying, as in the way birds swarm, the formless formation of murmuration, sensing a richness that is shaped and joined and defended. Y’all talk about something unknown and, after Sylvia Wynter, “undared” that is at the same time rigorously thought and felt. And you talk about it from inside of it. This meditation on “dimension” and its permutations goes all the way through your book and approaches a kind of “non-dimensionality,” so to speak, or at least a question concerning the dimensionality of “with,” rather than “against” or “above” – some kind of non-dimensionality or pan-dimensionality that refuses dominion.

Stefano: I would have trouble picking one word because each word comes with all the cool stuff that gathers under that word in each vignette. But “Vibration” sure held on to me when I read it, and learning about Erica Gressman’s work. And it’s also hard because the words can’t really be separated from each other.

Hypatia: Yes, and that’s why Vibration is also so important to Dimension, or how Respire is to Momentum, for instance, and it goes on. The words can’t be easily separated, and this echoes the way that theoretical physicists talk about resonance in terms of an imperceptible multidimensionality, or non-dimensionality, as you say, Fred. Manos Danezis, a Greek astrophysicist, talks about three-dimensionality and all perceived surfaces as “the matrix,” that we’re living in the matrix, and we organize ourselves politically, socially, culturally in this matrix by reflecting it back to ourselves through mediated matrices. But that doesn’t change the fact that there are these other dimensions that we just can’t perceive.²⁹ He actually says that the universe is formless, echoing Bataille.

Fred: And then the additions at the next chapter where the matrix twists and exists. It makes you slow down and take seriously the word “existence.” Your book is very rich. It should be read slowly. And it should be savored. You

wrote it to be read that way, so you have to give people the chance to read it. You practice “resonance” even more than you preach it. There’s no such thing as a single-author book, and when you embrace that and openly acknowledge it, you make what’s already real more real and the resonance increases exponentially. You’ll be thinking, “Oh shit, does this make any sense? Will anybody know what we were talking about?” But that doesn’t even matter when it wasn’t about that. It was about the practice.

Hypatia: We had faith in the practice. It is what it is, and the practice continues.

Sandra: It’s a plan for how we can do all of that as an act of intentional labor and love for one another.

Fred: It’s a prayer, a prayerful thing. It’s really not about making an argument or proving somebody wrong, so it doesn’t operate within those protocols. It’s not for people who expect those protocols, or maybe they’re not for it. But there will be people you don’t expect who will find some resonance that’s necessarily incomplete – sometimes people feel the “let’s get together” but not the “tear shit up,” as if they want the inseparable to be separate.

Stefano: Maybe we have to concentrate more on tearing ourselves up. That’s the classic problem of the movements – the social reproductive problem. I’m not against tearing down a bank or a fort, but will that act make me a new man? I hope not, because I don’t want to be a new man. I just want to stop being this man. And for that I need help from my friends.

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Transcription and footnotes by Joseph Diaz.

15/17

e-flux journal #121 — october 2021 Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Sandra Ruiz, and Hypatia Vourloumis
Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation

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16/17

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Resonances: A Conversation on Formless Formation

1
Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis, *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of This World* (Minor Compositions, 2021). The images by Yiannis Hadjiaslanis that illustrate the present conversation appear in this book. They are part of a series of photographic vignettes created in response to the book's title, themes, and section headings.

2
J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

3
Tracie Morris, *Who Do With Words* (Chax Press, 2018).

4
Hypatia Vourloumis, "Excess Swarm (Wild in the Wild)" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQvcGVhJ334>.

5
See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

6
Fernando Zalamea, author of *Synthetic Philosophy of Contemporary Mathematics* (MIT Press, 2012).

7
1980 film on Sun Ra, not to be confused with 2012 film featuring Queen Latifah, Dolly Parton, and Keke Palmer.

8
Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 726–51.

9
Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

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Andaiye. "Postcolonial Negations: George Lamming's Future," in *The George Lamming Reader: The Aesthetics of Decolonisation*, ed. Anthony Bogues (Ian Randle Publishers, 2011).

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14
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2002).

15
Layli Long Soldier, *WHEREAS* (Graywolf Press, 2017).

16
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