

Sounds from the Break

Exploring the Critical Potential of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's Undercommons for Gender Studies.

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Abstract

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's term undercommons, which they have introduced as an alternative way to think resistance and change in a neoliberal world, has been taken up by a variety of different scholars. This thesis investigates the critical potential of this term to the field of gender studies. Focusing on the value of historical, archival study, I argue that positing an undercommons of the dead, allows for new avenues into imagining resistance, agency, and life evaluation. Building on core concepts from the scholarship on the undercommons, such as: "remainders", "jay-walking", "fugitive listening" and translation, "Black ops", "the hold", "the shipped", "undercommon materialism", and "the general antagonism", I analyze Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. The aim is to learn, through being with, ways to imagine what could be, and what once was, distinct from the hegemonic (counter)discourses that rule our imagination, without dismissing the all-consuming power of discourses, understood in a Foucauldian sense. To think through the concept of an undercommons enables the critic to be with an entangled history of resistance, that, instead of playing by the rules of hegemonic archiving, lets its inhabitants intra-act with their past, present, and possible futures.

Stefano Harney og Fred Motens begrep the undercommons, som de har introdusert som en alternativ måte å tenke motstand og endring på i en nyliberal verden, har blitt tatt opp av en rekke forskjellige forskere. Denne oppgaven undersøker det kritiske potensialet til dette begrepet for kjønnsstudier. Med fokus på verdien av historiske, arkivstudier, argumenterer jeg for at en undercommons av de døde, åpner for nye veier til å forestille seg motstand, handlefrihet og livsevaluering. Ved å bygge videre på sentrale konsepter fra academia om the undercommons, som: "remainders", "jay-walking", "fugitive listening" and translation, "Black ops", "the hold", "the shipped", "undercommon materialism", and "the general antagonism", vil jeg analyserer Herman Melvilles *Benito Cereno*, Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* og Saidiya Hartmans *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Målet er å lære, gjennom å være med, måter å forestille seg hva som kan bli, og hva som en gang var, forskjellig fra de hegemoniske (mot)diskursene som styrer fantasien vår, uten å forkaste den altopplukende

kraften til diskurser, forstått i Foucauldiansk forstand. Å tenke gjennom begrepet the undercommons gjør det mulig for den kritiske å være sammen med en sammenfiltret historie av motstand, som i stedet for å spille etter reglene for hegemonisk arkivering, lar innbyggerne handle med deres fortid, nåtid og mulig fremtid.

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1

Undercommon Enlightenment

And finally, what good is a long life to us if it is hard, joyless and so full of suffering that we can only welcome death as a deliverer?

- Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent* (2004, p. 33)

The undercommons is a place. A place that you have heard of. A place you have been to. A place you can never reach. It is both never-ending and closed. It exists as a physical place, an electronic place, and as an in-between place where humans silently exchange thoughts and emotions. The undercommons only has room for the other and is fully aware that the other exists in us all.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten first theorized the undercommons in the article “The University and the Undercommons: SEVEN THESES” (Harney & Moten, 2004). Harney and Moten are interdisciplinary scholars who focus on work, organization, colonization, and Black radical thought. Their work on the undercommons from 2004 centers on knowledge production within a neoliberal university institution. When, nine years later in 2013, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* was published, the undercommons was no longer exclusive to the university. The concept is now theorized on a worldly scale. They elaborate both on how logistical capitalism dominates through its use of policy and logistics, and on the possibility of imagining radical new ways of resistance, agency, and life evaluation inside the undercommons.

The creation of spaces that enables new forms of imagination has long been a central concern within gender studies. Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous all argued that there is a need for new forms of imaginations that are separate from the phallogocentric order, Judith Butler argued for the necessity of subverting hegemonic imaginations on sexuality and gender from within, and Gayatri Spivak problematized how the subaltern is erased in Western feminist hegemonic imaginations. Harney and Moten’s undercommons is inspired and written as a continuation of the Black radical tradition and not the feminist

academic history. However, given that Harney and Moten's understanding of logistical capitalism's (counter)discourses touches on central concerns for an alternative feminist scientific and political praxis in a globalized world, this thesis asks the question whether their analysis might not also be fruitful for gender studies' endeavor to create spaces of radical (re-)imaginings of the past, present, and future. Is it possible to bridge the gap between the undercommons of Harney and Moten and the trajectories of gender studies that are looking for ways to criticize and change hegemonic systems of order?

Harney and Moten claim that the undercommons functions as a space that makes access to knowledge lost by the total appropriation of hegemonic (counter)discourses possible. They adhere to a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as power, and base the undercommons on the belief that logistical capitalism is a global, all-consuming machine that all (counter)discourses must be processed through. The undercommons, thus, must also exist within this machine. What sets the undercommons apart, according to Harney and Moten, is its ability to escape the policing eye of the machine. It does so by seemingly following its rules, yet through subversion enabling a space for study and planning not allowed by the machine. By escaping the police, it enables fantasies of what could be, and what once was. The hypothesis, that there exists a space inside the machine of global logistical capitalism, ruled by Foucauldian (counter)discourses, that evades the policing eye of governing, policies, and logisticizing called the undercommons, is one that Harney and Moten themselves use to imagine new possibilities for activism and change that manage to escape the threat of appropriation since they are built on subverting what is already appropriated. While the authors expand on the all-consuming power of logistical capitalism and the possibilities of the undercommons within this machine, they leave the specifics of how to enter the undercommons and what forms the undercommons might take open to the various circumstances of where one enters the undercommons from.

The lost knowledge that is sought both by Harney and Moten through the undercommons, and by major lines of study in gender studies, often take the form of dead people. Whether one wants to expand the historical cannon by introducing subjects lost to hegemonic power of time, or the project is to build a field based on lives lost to a brutal history of slavery and subjugation, knowledge is lost both through the material death of people and through hegemonic (counter)discourses that rule the archive. Following the undercommons' ability to exist inside the hegemonic (counter)discourses while subverting it, and the feminist desire to uncover that which has been lost to the hegemony, my aim is to investigate the possibilities of entering an undercommons of the dead. Is it possible to enter

the break in the hegemonic archive and search for an undercommon archive which contains the people lost to the hegemonic (counter)discourses of the archive?

An undercommons of the dead will potentially be a place that subverts the binary of alive/dead and that allows me to communicate, through the undercommon act of fugitive listening, across the material and non-corporeal worlds. Inside the undercommons of the dead, my aim is to research what forms of agency, resistance, and life evaluation become available through the radical form of imagination that the undercommons claims. What can the dead tell us about how to resist appropriation into the logistical machine? What does it mean to have agency if one is already appropriated? Does there exist forms of life evaluation other than that of the machine?

My method of fugitive listening, which I will expand on in the next chapter, entails giving up the power of interpretation held by the listener in favor of being with alien languages and unknown systems of understanding. By using fugitive listening as I enter the undercommons inside three written works, the aim of my thesis is to argue that the undercommons is a place where one can research and study one of gender studies main lines of interest, namely how change, resistance, agency, and life evaluation, can be imagined differently than within all-consuming hegemonic forms of powers.

The three written works I have chosen are Samuel Delany's memoirs from his time visiting the gay cruising scene in the porn theaters in what became Times Square, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (2001), Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulations on wayward living at the turn of the 19th and 20th century Philadelphia and New York, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), and Herman Melville's story about a slave ship mutiny based on the memoir of slave ship captain Amasa Delano, *Benito Cereno* (2005). They are all retellings based on memory and historical sources. All three are also the stories of dead people whose voices have been lost to the hegemonic archive. Delany lost contact with the subjects he wrote about, some of which certainly must have died in the hands of the machine that did not welcome them in. Hartman's fabulations are based on thorough research that left a void for the people whose story she wanted to tell. And Melville wrote about slaves who either were never given the chance to be part of the archive or actively chose silence.

All of the stories leave behind silences of lost voices that scream out to the reader. What are the possibilities of listening to these voices without distorting them? How can we approach these voices to access and at the same time safeguard an archive lost within the hegemonic archive? In order to address these questions through the lens of the undercommons, I will first lay out in further detail the theory of the undercommons and its

possible relation to gender studies. I will also address the question of how to balance the undercommon act of studying with the act of academic knowledge production. Then, in chapter 2, I will lay out and discuss the concepts from Harney and Moten that are particularly relevant to my reading of the dead: remainders, jay-walking, fugitive listening and translation, Black ops, the hold, the shipped, undercommon materialism, the general antagonism, and quilting. Chapters 1 and 2 function as the theoretical and methodological foundation of my thesis.

The three next chapters make out my empirical study. Between chapter 2 and 3 comes my intermezzo which reflects on the power of silence in Melville's story. The intermezzo functions as a bridge between the Black radical tradition of which Harney and Moten write in, and the next chapters in which I analyze from the point of view of a feminist educated scholar in gender studies. In chapter 3 I turn to Delany's memoir manifesto from when he was a part of the gay cruising scene in New York's porn theaters. Through a surface reading defined by social anthropologist Silvia Posocco, I listen to the contagious screams from the shipped and analyze how the porn theaters unveil the hidden discursive power of post-politics. Furthermore, I reflect on the tension between the static writing of Delany's subjects and their fluid and subversive ways to escape hegemonic (counter)discourses on gender, sexuality, and life evaluation. I find that the porn theaters were undercommon places of agency and resistance too dangerous for the machine to allow to exist.

Next, in chapter 4, I move to the choir of riotous girls assembled in the work of Hartman. I use queer wildness theory together with wild mathematics to further elaborate on the power of Hartman's definition of wayward and connect waywardness with its criminal counterpart vagrancy. The subjects of Hartman's critical fabulations open the doors to an undercommons in which the possibility for new radical imaginations of what could be becomes possible. In her work I find the power of fractious and multiplicitous lives that refuse the hegemonic archives want for singular individuality. Through fugitive translations I seek to study and be with, without interpreting into idiom, subjects whose systems of resistance and agency are alien to epistemic systems that the machine of logistical capitalism brings with it.

Finally, in chapter 5, I reflect back on what I found in the previous three chapters. I use the theory of entanglement and intra-action to analyze the undercommon archive in my own thesis, finding a history of resistance and agency that is entangled with the past, present, and possible futures. I end my thesis by asking what the undercommons contributed to the

field of gender studies in my thesis, and what I have learned from the undercommons of the dead.

The Undercommon Radical Tradition

Harney and Moten describe the undercommons as a space that finds its place in what is commonly understood as a neoliberal and imperial society where capitalism has run amok. As a place that gives refuge without consolation and that is revolutionary at its core—revolutionary against what it sees as the ruse of enlightenment, rationality, and the many historic and contemporary inequalities of the last centuries. Importantly Harney and Moten see the undercommons as the converse of a rational place. They are looking for a place where the slave still exists and where individual agency comes face to face with its biggest enemy, communal agency. The undercommons becomes their place for reckoning with one of the major tensions of the Black radical traditions: how to build a tradition on the grounds of a brutal history that it seeks to move on from without erasing it. Furthermore, the undercommons works to unveil their understanding that politics of today are reliant on policy and logistics when shaping an individualized agency that keeps the surround hidden from the inhabitants of the fort. The mantra of governance is “I don’t want to speak for those people” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 56), Harney and Moten’s undercommons’ mantra is to speak for all.

As a space it works to resist against logistical capitalism from within the machinery it seeks to destroy. And, while it exists wholly inside the fort, it hides from the police by subverting the rules without setting off the alarm. Harney and Moten are inspired by the Black radical tradition and the undercommons is for them the revolution already begun. The Black Panthers built its party by accepting that it had already been defeated and that regrouping and planning anew was the only option for the revolutionary (Jackson, 1990, p. 120). Furthermore, the undercommons is a place that exists only in the present that is constantly entangled with its past and potential future. By constructing a space entangled with history Harney and Moten refuse historical erasure by the hegemonic archive.

George Jackson stated that “there can be nothing dogmatic about revolutionary theory. It is to be born out of each popular struggle” (1990, p. 13). The undercommons is presented as a guerilla movement that hides in the open where it studies the enemies’ every move. The undercommons is the child of logistical capitalism and every struggle against it. It is born out

of the necessity by Harney and Moten to find a space that combines the commons of socialist resistance with the invisible revolution of forgotten Black people.

Harney and Moten define the undercommons as a space of debt, fugitivity, planning and study where the individual becomes the community. Still, the undercommons is never defined by the rules of rational knowledge production—neither by direct proof, induction, contraposition, nor contradiction. Instead, Harney and Moten opt to define terms inherent to the undercommons and its inhabitants. Each term is given its own chapter and are in the order of the chapters: Blackness and governance, debt and study, planning and policy, the hold, and the general antagonism. Harney and Moten are academic activists searching for a fluid and porous space to hide in while they criticize and work to change the monster looking to appropriate them back into the logistical machine. The undercommons is their want for a space that makes it possible to dream of a tomorrow where the logistical machine is no longer. The undercommons is their answer for how to imagine what could be, while believing that (counter)discourses are inescapable walls for our own imagination.

Listening is not one of the core terms of the undercommons as written by Harney and Moten, yet it has been theorized as an undercommon strategy by other academics, as I will show later in this chapter. They use the undercommons as a place in the break between what is and what could be, to listen to revolutionary voices from outside logistical capitalism. The outside is the theorization of what surrounds the fort of logistical capitalism; that which was lost in the colonization and appropriation of the world. Neither of the academics who have written on undercommon listening used it as a strategy, keeping to describing how it would work. In this thesis I will use the strategy of listening through the undercommons to listen to the screams from the surround. Through the undercommons I will communicate with voices from the beyond, discussing, reflecting, asking, and listening for lost knowledge on resistance, agency, and valuation of life. My aim is to reflect on ways to resist and exist that subverts the logistical machine's valuation of life, by listening through the undercommons for lost voices.

The Gender Studies Undercommons

One of the dominant trends of gender studies is concerned with reconstructing knowledge lost through differing forms of discrimination, power-structures, and languages. As such, it is interested in subverting and unmasking hegemonic power structures and has a history of self-

scrutiny and is often described by periods of differing interests and methods. In Routledge's guide to gender, gender studies is described as an interdisciplinary field with an explicitly political view on knowledge production (Williams & Evans, 2013, p. 216). It is a field that places all forms of knowledge production within its political sphere, so as to make apparent the forms of erasures and power structures that the production cannot escape. As a space for the lost, the undercommons may be productive to the aim of gender studies, and in my thesis, I will seek to combine the Black radical tradition of the undercommons with my gender studies education. Heteronormativity, patriarchy, whiteness, colonization, imperialism, gender, and sexuality are all forms of governing that gender studies seeks to dismantle by uncovering the many ways said structures are built on the continued subjugation of certain groups. It can be argued that the undercommons hides within these injustices by subverting its rules. My aim is to enter the undercommons by subversion and reflect on why the undercommons matter to the field of gender studies. What can the inhabitants of the undercommons tell us about the value of life, and how to find forms of resistance and agency against a society that rules by total control through policies and logistics?

When Gayatri Spivak, in 1988, questioned and answered whether the subaltern can speak (2015) she was criticizing and deconstructing the theory of Foucault and Deleuze by showing the lack of the subaltern voice within their writing. The undercommons, likewise, deconstructs Western thought to identify agency and resistance that avoid neoliberal capitalist appropriation. But, where Spivak writes on the subaltern, the undercommons takes the entire world as colonized subjects. Through Harney and Moten's undercommon study I am questioning what form change, resistance, and agency can take in a globalized logistical capitalist system. Inspired by feminist writers who have criticized and discussed Western knowledge production, such as Spivak, Saba Mahmood, Jasbir Puar, Mel Chen, Jack Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, Carrie Sandahl, and José Muñoz, I will aim to investigate resistance and life within a system of total control and appropriation.

The Dead

We can all inhabit the undercommons, and its inhabitants are all those affected by logistical capitalism—everybody. To get to the core of my question of new forms of resistance and agency, and to combine the question at the heart of gender studies and the Black radical tradition I have chosen to enter the undercommons to listen to the dead. The dead as a group

are ruled by bio- and necropolitics but are also the only subjects who have the possibility of escape as the machine has yet to find a way to fully control the non-corporeal world. They are not able to speak for themselves, and as subjects of history cannot stop producing knowledge ruled by the hegemonic matrix of (counter)discourse. To the Black radical tradition, the dead have long been at the center of the fight for power. The enslaved, shipped, killed, raped, and dead are its history, and no account of the world can circumvent them. This is evident for example in the writing of Audre Lorde (Lorde wrote extensively on the othered reality of queer Black women and the many lost lives that are part of their material lives (2018)), Cedric Robinson (Robinson is often credited as the founder of the Black radical tradition, and criticized European Marxism through the shipped realities of Black people and their struggles (2001)), George Jackson (his book *Blood In My Eye* (1990) has become central to the written history of the Black Panthers and paints the US as the original fascists because of its history with slavery), Walter Rodney (Rodney wrote about the similarities of revolutionary movements across Africa and South-America and how they all are connected through their shared history of colonization (2019)), Frantz Fanon (Fanon is quoted as an inspiration for Harney and Moten, and his writing on the psychology of colonized people was based on a staunch anticolonial stance of slavery continued through capitalist frames of governing (2013)), and Toni Morrison (Morrison used her fictional works to convey the many ways that slavery and continued subjugation influence Black women in the US (2019)). They all use the dead differently, but they are always there as an unescapable history. Within gender studies the dead have been researched to construct new historical canons, to seek new genealogies of gender and sexuality, to reckon with the consequences of colonization and imperialism, and as continued subjects of discriminatory power structures.

Following the arguments of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten I will use their writing on the undercommons to seek out the voices of an undercommons of the dead. The dead are my collective term of all beings that have gone through the discursive act of once being alive. Being alive is what Queer Studies' and Linguist Mel Chen calls to live within the biopolitical frame of the linguistic aliveness (2012). As a counter to this frame of understanding living Chen proposes the linguistic category of animacy. Chen summarizes her argument for animacy:

At bottom, the overbearing use of dead and killed functioned as an admission that a toxic spill was a lively thing: lively, perhaps, beyond its proper bounds. The well itself was alive, and not only because something had flowed out of it with such vivid

animation. It was a threat to life in the Gulf, as well as to a way of life. This occlusion of life over marginal life speaks, as I see it, to the inadequacy of lifely notions as a framework for governance, medicine, and vernacular affect and makes room for a concept like animacy, which encodes forces without being beholden to the failing categories of life and nonlife. As I have argued in this book, animacy permits an even more thorough registration of the role of racial, geopolitical, affective, and sexualized politics therein. (2012, p. 227)

By taking the binary of alive/dead as a consequence of language, and not biology, the dead get the opportunity to come alive by the same powers that deem them dead. It also makes it apparent that there are (counter)discursive powers involved in bio/necropolitics which do not rely on the biological definitions of aliveness and deadness—which are also infected by the power of (counter)discourse. Animacy is a politics understood that unveils the politics of the alive/dead binary.

I am looking towards the dead to see how an undercommons of the dead brings with it consequences of real material value that cannot be overlooked if one's goal is to escape the monster that is logistical capitalism. In the articles on the undercommons and listening, the dead are silent subjects that beckons further exploring. Jack Halberstam states that: “we must enter the scene of the crime, not to change it, not to know it, not to solve it but to find a new context within which to listen to the dead” (Halberstam, 2018, p. 42) and when answering a question about how Harney and Moten approach the task of writing together Moten answers: “It's not a dead thing. What you listen to or what you're reading is still moving and still living. It's still forming” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 106). He speaks to the fluidity of their writing process, but his argument for the aliveness and locomotion is aimed at all forms of reading and writing. The text is alive in the undercommons. To read through fugitive listening is the undercommon task of speaking with the dead.

Moreover, to enter into partnership with the dead is to evade the logistical machine's want for ownership by the “refusal to prevent loss that we call sharing, rubbing, empathy, hapticality: the undercommon love of flesh, our essential omniscient or anacentric eccentricity” (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 14). The dead are the waste of the machine, except for special occasions where the dead can be used for its productive advantage (such as 9/11, dead soldiers on foreign soil, civilians who die to enemy governments, etc.), and are labeled as no longer in use. A collaboration with the dead, on shared terms, will give me access to

their knowledge of valuation and resistance and will give them direct access to the hegemonic world they are planning to destroy.

In all three cases that make out the majority of my thesis, the dead can be seen as a community of untold stories and desires, whose history has been appropriated by politics of both early and late-stage capitalism and its many institutions, including the university. The dead will be treated as people with real material agency while at the same time preserving the ghostly relationship between the living and dead. Adorno and Horkheimer stated that “Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope” (2010, p. 215). The only relationship between dead and living in the undercommons is our shared fear of appropriation into the logistical behemoth that is capitalism. In the undercommons solidarity comes in the form of a shared “conscious horror of destruction.” It is the only solidarity possible in a space constructed by the horror of said destruction through policy and logistics. As the world separates, the undercommons grows larger in the breaks of separation becoming a place of dangerous refuge as it plans the final destruction of the fort that will bring us all together.

The Fort

The image of a surrounded fort as a synonym for capitalism is put forward in the opening chapter of Harney and Moten’s book. It is an image that motions the reader to shift focus from the fort to the surround. In other words, what if the walls of capitalism are broken down and we are made available to the surround? I quote them in full:

The fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure. The surround antagonises the laager in its midst while disturbing that [*sic*] facts on the ground with some outlaw planning. Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 17)

The undercommons is part of the laagerⁱ, it hides in its cracks and is always aware that the laager is surrounded. That is, it knows that the hegemony of today, our neoliberal colonial and imperial society, is a fort that, expertly well, hides us from its surroundings. The fort hides its secrets by putting up walls and building a mote all around us. The walls and mote are today policy and logistics. The undercommons is built on a theory that there exists radical new knowledge of what life is and can be, that are hidden by the consequences of colonialism, rampant capitalism, and neoliberal policies, but that still are available within the fort. This image of the fort and its surround is retold by G. H. Greer, a PhD student writing on the undercommons, when they define the undercommons as “belonging within the community of those who have been excluded” (2018, p. 6). Under the prerequisite that we understand that we are all excluded from the surround.

Gender studies is a field with a wide variety of differing understandings of the political world. Still, whether one is looking for change inside the current ruling structures of power, or if one is aiming at criticizing the entire system, the possibility for change is a tenet of gender studies. The undercommons is a place of possibilities, and shares the field’s want for new systems of valuations and logistics. Gender studies is part of the fort the same way the undercommons are, and while the field does not always seek its destruction it does seek to criticize and change. My hope is that my thesis will inspire further reflection on the undercommons as a space of study and that I manage to argue for why the dead should be considered as valuable subjects when discussing the implications of living in a world ruled by an all-consuming logistical machine.

A Topology of the Undercommons

The undercommons is used by multiple academics in a variety of fields. The undercommons keeps its core characteristics throughout the majority of the texts, while its porosity makes it a productive space for many writers. Most of them use Harney and Moten’s book from 2013 as their starting point, but how their book is read and understood differs. Many use the undercommons as a place of subversion within the hegemony they are trying to escape from and find that it offers them opportunities to study and be with forms of knowledge production

ⁱ The laager is an Afrikaans term that describes an encampment that is surrounded by wagons and other vehicles as its defense. Often used in the context of South Africa and how the Zulu were slain by Dutch Settlers.

that escapes the (counter)discourse matrix while staying inside of it. Others, use it as a space that enables discourses not available within the institution they are located at. My short topology of the writing on the undercommons underlines the undercommons' refusal of a static reading and will make it apparent why the undercommons should be considered as part of the ever-expanding toolkit of gender studies.

In the field of gender studies, the undercommons is most notably taken up by Jack Halberstam, known for his writing on queer time, female masculinity and for his analyses of cultural expressions of sexuality and resistance. Halberstam is the author of the foreword for Harney and Moten's book, and is clearly inspired by the undercommons in his newest published book *Wild Things: the disorder of desire* from 2020 (Halberstam). In it, he expands on the undercommons of Harney and Moten to find wild, brown, Black, and animal undercommons. Each undercommons work as a dangerous space of solidarity across the specific forms of characteristics that Halberstam reflects on. And, in a book chapter aptly named "Gender and the Queer/Trans* Undercommons" (Halberstam, 2021) from *Why Gender?* (Browne, 2021) he attaches the space to the field of wildness and Trans* Studies to theorize a queer/trans undercommons containing "unidentified and unidentifiable" bodies and "undocumented history" (2021, p. 43). In the chapter Halberstam sees the undercommons as a wild place and reflects on the similarity between a queer undercommons and the trans body with both being antagonistic products of the machine that wants it gone. Halberstam's undercommons is the place where the truths and lies that the queer/trans body represents become visible, and where the queer/trans body can start the revolution of becoming its wild self. His undercommons is a queer/trans space for study that is aware of the bodily and institutional pain of its inhabitants. Both in his own article and in the foreword to Harney and Moten, Halberstam uses the undercommons as a space with the ability to transform and resist hegemonic structures from within.

Fellow Queer and Culture Studies researcher, Alexis Lothian, finds the undercommons in her research of the vidding community (video-mixes made as a homage to favorite shows, music, celebrities and so on). She highlights how the undercommons rely on stealing time and resources in its production of knowledge against a world where ownership rules (2015). To Lothian stealing time and resources is the undercommon act of messing with the rules without breaking them. She too, seeks the undercommons as a transforming place.

Halberstam and Lothian are the only scholars, as far as I have found, who write on the undercommons as researcher of gender studies, or closely related fields. For both, the space works to cast light on different ways subversion creates spaces of resistance that become

invisible to the logistical capitalism, and an alternative tool the more commonly used concept of countercultures. Still, there are several authors whose articles on the undercommons display tactics and strategies valuable to a gender studies thesis on the undercommons.

I will begin with Sarah Hankins, who find the undercommons to be a space that enables academic activism and reflect on gender studies' lengthy battle with university activism. Then I move on to the undercommon archive which exist inside the hegemonic archive, discussing why the undercommon archive is inherent in my thesis question of listening to the dead. I follow up by considering the art undercommons of Lee and Perucci to understand how subversion can work as a door opener into the undercommons. I shortly note the writing on undercommon listening, fugitive listening, as I will expand further on it in the next chapter. Then I discuss the undercommons as a place that is in but not of the colonized land. This is important to understand how it works as spaces for radical change, and I will take a closer look at it in the next chapter. Next, I look to the urban undercommons for border-crossers and aliens, to see how it works as dangerous places for safety. I end my topology by going back to the university undercommons where it all began discussing the different understandings of Harney and Moten that arises in the different articles.

A topology is the study of mathematical properties that stay unchanged no-matter the operation it goes through. My topology of the undercommons hopefully exhibits the core porosity and fluidity of the undercommons that stays unchanged throughout its use in the different fields, and its revolutionary character even when used academically.

Sarah Hankins, an ethnomusicologist that I will come back to again at in the next chapter, follows the trail of Halberstam and Lothian. She is interested in the possibilities that become available as one enters the undercommons within institutions. More specifically she looks to the university undercommons of depression and anxiety. In her article "Unfit for Subjection: Mental Illness, Mental Health, and the University Undercommons" (2021), Hankins argues that the university relies on physical and psychic struggles in order to control its workforce, and that the mental and physical consequences of the constant push for publication and tenure is coupled with a rhetoric of wellness, self-care and adjustment programs that exist solely as a veil that let the university continue its liberal politics of exploitation (p. 154). The undercommons, she argues, is not a way out of this individualized neoliberal institution but a way to see mental health struggles as "an experience of psychic and bodily suffering that is always-already structured beyond the individual" (p. 154). It is a place that does not try to cure you, but a place that when you turn to complain about your misery, states "*We agree*" (p. 156). The agreement from the undercommons is a validation of

the misery at the same time as it is an active pushback against the wellness rhetoric of the university.

Harney and Moten define the undercommons as an “unsafe neighborhood” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 28) where safety is lost in favor of solidarity in the constant danger from the fort. Hankins, too, find the university undercommons as unsafe. It is unsafe in the sense that it lets misery and mental illness flow freely and thus does not exist as a space for active protection against the institution—although its ability to let you just exist might feel like a breath of fresh air. This unsafe space makes it possible for her to search for the “remainder – whatever of the self cannot be instrumentalized in service of production” (Hankins, 2021, p. 155). Although she is writing as an ethnomusicologist Hankins’ writing on the tensions of working inside the academic machine fits well with gender studies core tenet of self-scrutiny. Her argument to use the undercommons as an active pushback against the university also deals with feminist academic pressure of being both an activist and an academic. Through the undercommons Hankins enables a space of activism that is hidden behind a subverted veil of depression and anxiety.

Other writers have borrowed the concept to look at the archive and what I call an archival undercommons. Grisha Coleman and Brenda McCaffrey, a movement and migration researcher and electrical engineer respectively, investigated the way movement is archived through digital capture devices. Through their archive they enter a movement undercommons that hides in the shadows of hegemonic movement to elucidate the way border crossing and fugitive movement involves subverting hegemonic moving patterns (2018). Similarly, Fiona Lee, a postcolonial literature and culture researcher, reflects on a private digital archive in Malaysia that aims to archive the unarchived (2021). She shows and argues for why it is necessary to understand that the reason the archival undercommons gets to exist is because it is always positioned inside the institutions it actively seeks to deconstruct. Both Lee and Coleman, and McCaffrey make use of the undercommons as an archive of hidden knowledge inside the hegemonic archive. I will be using the power of the undercommon archive in chapter 4 as I work with Saidiya Hartman’s archival work. She, too, places her archive inside the hegemonic archive in order to subvert and collapse from within. The undercommon archive is a doorway to history lost in the breaks of the hegemonic archive.

Performance researchers Hyoon Joo Lee and Tony Perucci both find ways into the undercommons through art as a performance. Lee reflects on the art of Nikki S. Lee (2019) and Perucci discusses Mary Overlie and her six viewpoints on how art is created (2020). Both find that the undercommons is a place where the unexplainable part of art that comes through

connecting and being with, is allowed just to be, and through this lack of trying to translate movement or pictures into rational knowledge, we get a new type of knowledge production hidden by the many ways knowledge is institutionalized, but still available in the undercommons. Lee and Perucci find art as undercommon places to be with the unexplainable. The undercommons is not looking to make sense through rationalization. Instead, it substitutes making sense with study. Through art one can study, but not necessarily understand, that which (counter)discourse, logistics, and policy deem illegible. I will likewise seek to study, not understand, the sounds of the surround.

Where Lothian, Lee and Perucci looked to the visual arts to find a way into the undercommons, others have discussed the act of listening—both as a way to hear the undercommons and as a way to be in it. Gascia Ouzounian, a professor in music, has written extensively on sound and space, especially in urban settings. She puts forward a sonic undercommons that thrives in silences and finds power in being left out of the canon (2021), stating that undercommons acoustics “makes and unmake [the] disciplines and the complex webbing of sociocultural systems and histories at their core” (2021, p. 9). For Ouzounian the sonic landscape of the undercommons enables non hegemonic listening. Andrew Navin Brooks agrees with her assessment of listening as an important form of power, but puts an emphasis on listening as a way to hear the undercommons (2020). He is a lecturer in Media Studies and uses Harney and Moten to theorize what he calls fugitive listening that shift the power from the listener to the speaker. He defines fugitive listening as “[refusing] the fixity of the idealized voice, laboring instead to listen to, and for, the movement of things and the forces of interruption” (2020, p. 37). I will use fugitive listening as my undercommon tool throughout my reading of Delany and Hartman’s writing. Fugitive listening is a way to come in contact with not only the subaltern, but all minoritarian and fugitive subjects unable to speak.

Others again, use the undercommons to make sense of decolonization and migration. Suzanne Enzerink is an America Studies and Media Studies scholar who utilizes the undercommons to reflect on *Guapa*, a novel written by Saleem Haddad that takes place in the middle of a revolt in an unnamed Arab country, paired with the revolution in Lebanon (2021). She understands the undercommons as an explicit form of decolonization that is in, but not of, its colonized land. This makes it possible to imagine new forms of being within the colonized space that is not possible outside the undercommons.

Sociologist Niki Kubaczek together with artist and curator Sheri Avraham write in the same field as Enzerink, but their focus is on Europe and cross-border migration. They

construct what they call the urban undercommons: a place for those alienated by a government that relies on their workforce as a way to keep society afloat (2020). The urban undercommons is acutely aware of the constant contradictions that migrants live under and is that nowhere place that becomes the home of migrants living on the border. Within border-crossing and colonization the undercommons becomes home to the alien. Kubaczek and Avraham, as well as Enzerink, use the undercommons ability to be in but not of similar to how the undercommon archive inside the hegemonic archive was theorized by Lee and Coleman, and McCaffrey. To be in but not of is the undercommons survival strategy. In the next chapter I will reflect on the similarities between the undercommons being in but not of, and disidentification, José Muñoz' term to describe queer of colors survival strategy.

Lastly, in a topology of the undercommons one cannot escape the university, the original place of the undercommons conception. Speaking at a conference for academic activism, Eugenia Zuroski, a professor in English and Cultural Studies, argues that twitter has become an undercommon place of refuge for academics. It is a site where anonymity rules, and where you discuss and produce knowledge across class, gender, and culture, while at the same time being constantly reminded of the horror of capitalism as shown through social media (2018). G. H. Greer, at the time a PhD student in Art Education, writes about their own experience of alienation, as a queer scholar, and how the theory of the undercommons as an epistemic tool can help theorize new ways to avoid exclusionary policies in public schools (2018). Greer and Zuroski understand the undercommons as already there but emphasize that you must choose to enter it. Much like Harney and Moten, and Hankins, both Greer and Zuroski discuss how to be an activist within the academic institution, finding the undercommons to be an answer to their quest. Neither of the academics place themselves within gender studies, but still battle with its core tension of change while following the strict rules of academia.

Mary Hermes, professor at University of Minnesota, together with two of her PhD students in the field of education, Chelda Smith and Erin Dyke, write about their work in the university undercommons, for example through unions, Black university associations, and academic work with the indigenous on the university ground (2013). Aylwyn Walsh, a scholar working in the fields of Performance and Social Change, use the undercommons in the same way as Smith, Dyke and Hermes and argues for making the classroom a university undercommons through rethinking how one teaches (2018). They all use the undercommons as a concrete space one can construct inside the university and utilize its ability to produce new radical knowledge. But, to understand the undercommons as a concrete space

constructed at will is at odds with the writers above who, like Harney and Moten, make use of it as an all-encompassing place that already exists. That it is always there is what makes it possible for Greer to use it as an epistemic tool, and for Lee and Coleman and McCaffrey to reflect on the undercommon archive found within the hegemonic archive. It is also what makes Halberstam able to theorize a trans undercommons as another way of understanding trans spaces of survival, and Kubaczek and Avraham to define an urban undercommons that acts as a survival strategy for migrants and aliens. This is not to say that it is impossible to understand the undercommons as constructable spaces, but that such an interpretation of Harney and Moten's concept omits the undercommons tension of being within but not of logistical capitalism.

It is clear by the different usage that the undercommons is a space that have led many academics to argue for new ways of seeking knowledge and resistance within logistical capitalism. Harney and Moten also position it as a place for resistance against the hegemony within the hegemony. I, like most of the academics and activists interested in the undercommons will reflect and study through the lens of an all-encompassing undercommons that is in but not of. Following Halberstam's queer/trans undercommons of resistance and the undercommon archive found in the cracks of the hegemony my intention is to look closer at how the undercommons exists as a place for revolution, resistance, planning, and study within the hegemony of logistical capitalism, without being appropriated by it.

I will be seeking an undercommons that traverses my topology being part of the archive, art, queerness and transness, fugitivity, listening, migration, border crossing, colonization, the university, and Blackness undercommons. By seeking to always work within the universal undercommons of Harney and Moten, I will need to constantly be aware of both the materialistic and discursive powers that the undercommons battles at all times. I will further discuss the viscous porosity of the undercommons in the next chapter.

To Study the Undercommons

The undercommons refuses knowledge production in favor of study. Study is the act of learning through living, encompassing wisdom gathered through social exchanges, conversations, interactions, and the everyday sensory exploration of the world. To study the undercommons in the form of an academic thesis necessitates one to battle with the university's knowledge production requirement. If it is possible to forgo production of

knowledge while writing a thesis, that possibility exists outside the institutionalized rules of the university. My way of wrestling the issue is neither a naïve refusal of my own institutionalization nor to give in to its discursive power. Instead, I choose to stay with the tension that the undercommons brings to the table, electing to study through academic knowledge production. I want to argue for why it is important to think through the undercommons, and what we can achieve by placing ourselves and others in a world where the undercommons is always at an arm's reach. By letting the undercommons be both my area of study and the space which I study through, I hope to show the value of being with the anxieties and pressures that comes with living in a logistical capitalist world. To write a master thesis is to battle the aim of producing a thesis I find worthy, while living up to the expectations of the university that is going to scrutinize and set a numeric value to my work.

The undercommons has a fluid topology that requires further consideration. My next chapter will discuss term for term important ideas of the undercommons, not only by Harney and Moten but by Hankins, Brooks, and Spivak. I pause after chapter 2 for a short intermission of fugitive listening and the power of refusal. In the third chapter I take a closer look at Delany's memoirs from his time at the porn theaters in New York, before I listen to Hartman's choir of riotous girls. I end my thesis with a reflection back on what I have done, what I have not done, and why the undercommons matter while not being an end all space for resisting and understanding the world.

2

Terms of Service

As a space, the undercommons is defined by how its inhabitants interact with each other, and by the possibilities that become available as one enters it. Depending on the institution or place one chooses to enter the undercommons from, there are different terms and characteristics that become important to understand. For my thesis the terms remainders; jay-walking; fugitive listening; translation; Blackness; Black op; the hold; viscous porosity; the general antagonism; and the shipped are most important for understanding how the undercommons of the dead works. This chapter will make up the quilt of the undercommon terms that I build my thesis on. They are the terms that make it possible for me to search for lost semiotic systems through fugitive listening in an undercommons of the dead. The quilt will be sewn patch by patch, each patch being its own term. I end the chapter by looking back at my quilt, discussing why the quilt lends itself as a feminist method for studying the undercommons, and how I plan to use it in the following chapters.

The first patch is that of the remainders. Remainders are what is left of what once was before our bodies were colonized. Then I move to jay-walking to discuss the power of being *in*, but not *of* logistical capitalism. Jay-walking enables the undercommons to be a revolutionary space of change and transformation, and by linking jay-walking with disidentification I show the resistance in being in but not of. Next, I sew the patch of fugitive listening and translation, expanding on how fugitive listening gives power back to the speaker and how I combine fugitive listening with Spivak's catachresis reading of translation as subject making. Using Moten's definition of Black op as a starting point, I discuss Blackness and debate the difference between Blackness and fugitivity, and why fugitivity brings with it the mobility that makes it possible to communicate with the evermoving group of the dead. The next patches are all terms from Harney and Moten's book on the undercommons, except for the patch on viscous porosity. First, I begin with the patch on the hold. The hold as a material and subconscious space makes possible fantasies of what could be and is the place that cannot be appropriated into the logistical machine. I continue by discussing the shipped. The shipped are what is left of what once was before humanity was made into flesh for the logistical machine. Afterwards, I discuss the viscous porosity of the undercommons, and the

material matter of it all. The general antagonism is my final patch. The general antagonism is the theory that the tension between desire and possibility is the generator of life. To play with the general antagonism is to be in the undercommons where possibility meets desire in the fantasy of the hold.

Through a thorough discussion of how I understand these terms within the undercommons, I hope to clarify the foundation of my thesis as well as the academic landscape that I find the undercommons to fit into. I will also connect the terms with academics from gender studies to show how the similarities between the different traditions.

Close your ears, the remainder is speaking

On the University Undercommons, Mental Health, and the Subject

The undercommons was at conception a theory about radical knowledge production in the university. The university is here used to denote the global institution of knowledge production at large, and not a single institution. It is within the university that Hankins finds our remainders in her article “Unfit for Subjection: Mental Illness, Mental Health, and the University Undercommons” (2021).

Remainders are the remains of a surround that the fort is not able to fully appropriate. They are what is left of what once was and are the breadcrumbs of a system of understanding long lost. Hankins is interested in what we can learn from our remainders as well as how logistical capitalism makes our remainders fester into anxiety and depression, since the politics of the university gives it no other choice but to turn on itself (p. 155).

The remainder is a term taken from psychoanalysis, more specifically from Julia Kristeva. In her book *POWERS OF HORROR: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva defines remainders as:

residues of something but especially of someone. They pollute on account of incompleteness. (...) The remainder appears to be coextensive with the entire architecture of non-totalizing thought. In its view there is nothing that is everything; nothing is exhaustive, there is a residue in every system—in cosmogony, food ritual, and even sacrifice, which deposits, through ashes for instance, ambivalent remains. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 76)

The quote comes from the chapter in the book where she first discusses abjection; it is part of a subchapter on Brahmanismⁱ and how Brahmanism views abjection in connection to food. It is also the first time she discusses remainders as residues that come forth as the consequence of abjection. The shift from remainders to residues brings with it the image of something being left behind both materially and culturally.

To understand the undercommons as an unsafe place where residues of what once was lost becomes visible as remainders, is to understand it as a place that beckons forth dead voices. My intention of listening to the dead for new knowledge is only possible because they are alive through their residual remainders. The undercommons is, as Hankins argues, a place where there is no need to fear appropriation from the canons of history. Thus, we have a place where the threat of becoming a martyr or saint is non-existent. This is of critical importance since it makes the undercommons available to forgotten souls without taking away their pain and suffering.

Jay-Walking

Disidentification and Being In but Not Of

Hankins argues that the university and its use of mental illness and mental health discourse makes for an uncomfortable and dangerous way into the undercommons. Since this thesis is looking at the undercommons in a broader scope where the undercommons is available for all, one should ask if there is a more general way to access the undercommons, and if the entry fee is as taxing as it seems to be in the university according to Hankins.

To answer the question of entry fee I will discuss Harney and Moten's motto of *being in, but not of*, and the consequences that follows from this way of being. I will then discuss how disidentification, defined by José Muñoz (1999), can be used to understand how it is possible to be in the undercommons. Furthermore, this connection will work as a bridge between the undercommons and gender studies and highlight the concerns that arise when pairing queer theory with the undercommons. These are both important discussions since they will help to further explain how and why the undercommons exist. I will also link this kind of thinking to Judith Butler and her theory of the heterosexual matrix. By discussing

ⁱ Ancient Indian religion where Brahman, the Hindu theory of everything, is its supreme being

both Butler and Muñoz I hope to further show the similarities between the Black radical tradition of the undercommons and the different strategies found within gender studies.

When discussing the university and the intellectual, Harney and Moten argue that the only relation one can have to the university is a criminal one (2013, p. 26). They, like Hankins, argue that it is an institution that preys on its inhabitants, whether they be students, faculty, or the cleaning staff. Furthermore, they argue that the critical academic is just as important to the university as the “normal” academic, and that the revolutionary’s only option is subversion. In this context, they define the method of the undercommons in the following terms: “To abuse its [the university’s] hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university” (p. 26). To be in, but not of is the subversiveness that paints the walls of the undercommons. It does not believe that one can escape being in the institution, but it does believe that one can choose to not be of it.

The logic is similar to Judith Butler’s logic when discussing how to use the heterosexual matrix as a way out of the heterosexual matrix in *Gender Trouble* (2007). To Butler, the heterosexual matrix is the matrix all people are read through. Anyone who tries to position themselves differently within it, or gets read as falling outside its normative framework, suffers the consequences of modern-day capitalism and its cultural and institutional iron fist. That there is no “pure” oppositional place outside the matrix, is precisely what makes us readable as persons. She argues that in order to subvert the matrix one has to use “parodic repetition” (p. 43), or mimicry as Irigaray names playful repetition (1985, p. 76). Parodic repetition has the capacity of unveiling the pure constructedness of the matrix, revealing that the idea of a “natural origin” of gender expressions is purely fictional. Parodic repetition acts as a form of resistance that actively tries to change hegemonic (counter)discourses from within through displacing the norm that governs the system as such. All human expressions of sexuality and gender are, according to Butler, just copies of copies where the original does not exist.

The undercommons acts in similar ways by being in but not of. To be in but not of the university, is to follow its rules to the extent that one escapes the eye of the police, at the same time as one steals and uses its resources in order to produce subversive knowledge. Or, as Hankins would say it: to let oneself stay depressed and anxious instead of playing along with the university’s mental health game.

This in-between state *is* the undercommons, defined by Jack Halberstam as the break between capitalism and that which is to come after: “What we want after “the break” will be

different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break” (2013, p. 6). The undercommons is the break, the revolution already happening. The undercommons is not the after, nor the before. Marx said that the revolution was inevitable; Harney and Moten say it has already begun. But with the distinction that the undercommons believes that logistical capitalism, with its many policies, has made it impossible to simply ignite this revolution on a large scale. The solution is to start with the break infused into the foundation of the fort. It is the break that remains after the fort separates from the surround. Thus, we all have the opportunity to be in the break, but we need to choose to do so, and the way in is by jay-walking, to be in but not of:

But with the critical infrastructure that is the new line, and with the resilient response that protects it, the jay-walker becomes no longer just a rube in the way of logistics, a country bukee in traffic, but a saboteur, a terrorist, a demon. Jay-walkers do not sabotage by exodus or occupation as once a maroon, or a striking miner, or a ghost dancer may have. Jay-walkers disturb the production line, the work of the line, the assembly line, the flow line, by demanding inequality of access for all. (...) Jay-walking is dissed assembly for itself. (Harney & Moten, 2015, pp. 142-143)

Playing on jay’s second dictionary definition as “an impertinent chatterer” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the jay-walker is the rube ruining everything they come in contact with. They are the original subverters who steal time and resources refusing to stay quiet in the library as they plan and study the world’s demise.

It is not a new idea to find resistance in the in-between. As mentioned above, Judith Butler found it in the elasticity of the matrix. For José Muñoz, the in-between was always a place of interest, most notably in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* from 1999, in which he theorizes disidentification as a queer survival tactic. This is a tactic similar to being in but not of which I will use in the next chapters, and that further exhibits the resistance of the undercommons.

Disidentification is a way of being with culture that both identify with it, and against it. As a queer act of survival, it makes it possible to imagine and analyze ways of being that both take part in the culture that alienates us and to subvert and resist it:

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that

continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4)

Disidentification is to negotiate between worlds of belonging. Muñoz, who later wrote a book on queer utopia (2019), marks disidentifications as a way to both be in the world of tomorrow and in the world of today. While disidentification works for some as an end all survival strategy, for other disidentification has to step aside in favor of more explicit forms of resistance, and, for others again, disidentification is only one of many survival strategies. In order for the undercommons to exist as a place where one is in but not of, it too must involve a negotiation between oneself and the “phantasm of normative citizenship” (p.4).

When discussing the dichotomy of being either good, those who identify with the hegemony, or bad, those who “imagines [themselves] outside of ideology” (p. 12), Muñoz reflects on the ability of disidentifications to negotiate between the binarity of (counter)discourse:

As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. (...) To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject. (p. 12)

This how I understand Harney and Moten when they say that to be in the undercommons is to be in but not of the institution. It is to find oneself investing new life into the institution that is actively trying to dispel you, that is: to literally find a new life within that which does not want you. Here is also the crux of the difference between the aim of Muñoz and the undercommons. While disidentification is a form of resistance and a revolt against the hegemony, it is mainly written as a survival strategy within a phobic world. The undercommons, on the other hand, is primarily a place of revolution that actively seeks to change this world, while at the same time acting as a place of dangerous safety. Still, the act of disidentification, negotiation and investing new life, are all important aspects of jay-walking into the undercommons.

Fugitive Translation

Andrew Navin Brooks uses the undercommons' porosity and fluidity when he defines fugitive listening. In his article "Fugitive listening: Sounds from the Undercommons" (2020), Brooks argues for a form of fugitive listening that "allows us to open our ears to the noisy voices and modes of speech that sound outside the locus of politics proper" (p. 27). He argues for fugitive listening as a way to communicate with the surround, with our screaming remainders. The reason he values sound and listening, is that he sees the ability to have a voice as one of the preconditions for being accepted as a human in society (p. 28). Thus, the listener of said voice becomes the bearer of power. Importantly, we are not all listeners, since the power to decide who has a voice is held by the keepers of the fort. The power of the keepers is, in a Foucauldian sense, acted out through the inhabitants, but within the confines of neoliberal ideology. Consequently, voice becomes rationalization and the universal; the other is only listened to when speaking on the terms of the listener. Brooks sums it up as the following:

These constitutive divisions are reproduced in a 'sonic' norm befitting the ideal voice of the self-possessed liberal subject. This sonic norm, steeped in Western post-Enlightenment values and aesthetics, is predicated on the eradication of messiness and fuzziness. Stripped of all extraneous noises, the voice becomes separated from that which conditions its possibility, emphasizing coherence and transparency as the primary functions of (uni)vocal expression. (p. 28)

To Brooks, the others are messy and fuzzy, but he sees their messiness and fuzziness as the condition of possibility. To the undercommons, the voice of the other is heard through their remainders. Fugitive listening is thus a way to listen to the surround. Like Hankins' university undercommons makes it possible to come in touch with our own remainders, Brooks makes it possible to listen to it.

Brooks' reflection on hegemonic listening unveils the power of the translator. The translator is the machine that when given information decides the output. It is "[a] person who expresses or renders a thing in a new medium or form; a person who converts or adapts a thing to a new context or use" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-b) and possesses the power of translation as "the action or process of translating a word, a work, etc., from one language into another", as well as its secondary use as "[t]he action of transferring or moving a person

or thing from one place, position, etc., to another” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-a). The translator is the ruler of the alive/dead binary bringing people into the realm of the dead, through their translation of subject’s aliveness/deadness. In a world ruled by (counter)discourse, the translator makes the subjective hegemonic rulebook.

When listening for the dead through the archive of other authors, such as Delany and Hartman in my thesis, the role of the translator is twofold. First, it is the author of the original archive that understands their findings through their own experience and knowledge. Second, it is me who analyzes in order to read anew through my lens of knowledge and experience.

The memoir of Delany is his translation of the many interactions he had in the porn theaters of New York. He translates the cloudy language of memory into the static language of a memoir and transfers the fluid and evermoving subjects from his real-world interactions into the fixed space of his written down New York. Hartman is a historian who translates her ledgers, missing pages, newspapers, photographs, etc., into critical fabulations and stories that are translated through her own experience of the world, moving static history into the fluid space of fabulated possibility. As I look to study and analyze their works, the people and sources are again translated and moved. For me to make sense out of them, they must be translated into my language based on my experiences and knowledge. I will move them into my thesis, hoping that such a move will make it possible for me to listen to them.

In her article “Translation as Culture” (Spivak, 2000), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses her own experience as a translator and the power of translating, stating that: “In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible” (p. 13). Following her own interpretation of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s work on translation, she argues for a *catachresis* reading of translation. She understands translation as the unconscious act of making nature into culture, to make sense out of the natural world. Translation is no longer the controlled act of the subject since the subject comes into being through the translation of nature into culture:

Indeed the human subject is something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject. This originary translation thus wrenches the sense of the English word translation outside of its making. (p. 14)

Along with the catachresis reading of translation, she renames translation in the literary sense to be transcoding. Transcoding is most often used to describe how one converts one file

format into another (for example, the process of converting mp3's into FLAC files), but Spivak uses it to describe the process of converting one language into another. Transcoding can entail that a system gets lost as it is converted into idiom. Spivak's case of transcoding Aboriginal culture and language is such a case. As a consequence of colonization, many Aboriginal cultures have lost contact with their cultural history. This loss of a semiotic system entails that they can only hope for a transcoding that gives back cultural idioms (p. 16). The semiotic system was their generalized system of making sense that was lost with colonization and forced entry into an industrial world with its own semiotic system.

As Spivak read translation as a catachresis, fugitive listening must be rethought as a strategy that avoids the hegemonic violence of transcoding. It is not the power of transcoding that fugitive listening switches from listener to speaker, but the power of generalizing control of the semiotic. Fugitive listening is the call to not transcode into idiom and to stay with an alien semiotic system. Fugitive listening is to inhabit the role of the translator forgoing the subconscious rulebook of the hegemony for the undercommon rulebook of subversion. Fugitive listening transfers the dead into a realm of legible illegibility where communication becomes possible and where their alien semiotic systems get translated through the study of being with. By listening and being with the illegible, one lets the unconscious translation machine work without forcing an idiomatic understanding. The undercommons is part of the forts' generalizing semiotic system and can only hope to study, through being with, the language of the surround.

Modern Warfare: Black Ops

On Blackness and Listening

Brooks argument for fugitive listening as a method of the undercommons, is similar to what Moten has called Black ops. First named in an article aptly named "Black Op" (2008), Moten plays on the term "op" as a way to see Black optimism, optics, and ops as one. When describing Black optics, he says that: "This black optics is an auditory affair: night vision given in and through voices that shadow legitimate discourse from below, breaking its ground up into broken air; scenes rendered otherwise by undertones that are overheard, but barely" (p. 1743). Moten's definition of Black optics is akin to how Brooks defines fugitive listening, but where Brooks is explicitly concerned with sound and listening, Moten defines sound as auditory, visual, and sensory. The difference between Black op and fugitive listening, both in

language and its connected history, calls on a reflection on Blackness versus fugitivity and the consequences that comes from defining listening as either audible or as a multiplicitous sensory act. The discussion on Blackness and fugitivity is central to the undercommons as a concept drawn from the history of Black radical thought and reflecting on the sensory act of listening will make it clear why both Moten and Brooks choose to use the act of hearing as their epistemic strategy of choice.

Firstly, Moten uses the word Black instead of fugitive as an adverb to describe listening. Black is of course a race signifier, but Moten uses Black meaning Blackness, and Blackness is not just a race signifier. Blackness and Black are both highly discussed terms both inside and outside of the university. Still, Black remains a signifier of color while Blackness is seen both as synonymous with Black and as a separate term. As Moten points out: “the fact that blackness’s [*sic*] distinction from a specific set of things that are called black remains largely unthought” (2008, p. 1745). To him the universality of Blackness is vital to understand it as separate from Black; “everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness” (p. 1746). He defines Blackness as the following:

Blackness is a general, material aspiration, the condition of possibility of politics understood, along but also off Foucauldian tracks, as the irreducible unconventionality of race war— covert, gentle violence in the midst of conversion, an effect of conversion and imminently convertible in and as this essence of covering rolled back (flourished, ex--caped) and aggressively forgiving modesty. (p. 1744)

Blackness is not a concept, but something concrete and livable. He highlights the materiality as well as aggressively forgiving modesty as connected to Blackness. He also connects Blackness and politics, emphasizing that no politics can exist outside the (counter)discourse of race. Blackness is not a state of mind or a skin color. It is not a feeling or the choice to read everything as connected to race. Blackness is all these things connected in the *shadows below*. The quote also shows how he sees Blackness in the same way as he sees the undercommons: “along but also off Foucauldian tracks.” That Blackness is part of a larger political (counter)discourse that both creates it and wants it gone is easy enough to grasp, but Blackness is also a discourse of its own in that it is part of the unknown and has connections to the surround and a politics understood.

In the context of the undercommons, the question is why Moten, along with Harney, choose to use fugitivity instead of Blackness as their preferred term, when Moten chose to

use Blackness in his earlier writing. Which connotations follow with the metaphor of the fugitive that one does not get with Blackness, and why is that important to the undercommons?

Both fugitivity and Blackness are used to describe a way of being that holds true for all beings. They see the fugitive on the run as including all the inhabitants of the fort, even though we might not be in connection with this fugitivity at all times. The significant difference between fugitivity and Blackness, as I see it, is the difference of history and motion. Blackness is a term that comes from the long history of radical Black thought, fugitivity is a more general term with a history that changes depending on the reader. Some might see fugitivity in connection with their own family history, others with WW2, some might have the last years refugee crisis in Southern Europe in mind, and others might think about the Middle East and Palestine. This fluidity of fugitivity leads to the other difference, namely motion. The fugitive is someone who is on the run, always in motion, running from one place to another, hiding in back alleys and living on borrowed time. Moten's Blackness, in contrast, is not stillness, but that something we all have that makes us dream of tomorrow, and which gives us the awareness of not only the fort, but of the possibility of its surround.

The second difference between Brooks and Moten, is that where Brooks is interested in how voices are othered and how we can learn to listen, Moten argues that these other voices are open to all forms of sensory interaction. Brooks' voices are audible, but the change in power dynamics from the listener to the speaker holds if these voices become sensory voices that we can both see and feel. It is still a question of who has the power to make sense. Following this, it should be remembered that when I talk about fugitive listening, it is a listening that follows the power dynamics of Brooks' original definition, read through Spivak's catachresis reading of translation, with the sensory actions of Moten. Thus, fugitive listening becomes an epistemic strategy used when looking for information communicated to us that we choose to not transcode. Fugitive listening can give us access to a form of semiotic knowledge that, by definition, cannot become rational since the act of rationalizing entails making idioms of the semiotic and thus forgoes the knowledge it sought in the first place.

Going back to Moten and his Black optics, I will end this subchapter on a note on him defining the voices from the surround as a discourse on its own. Because to argue that Moten thus defines the undercommons as a counterdiscourse within the fort, would be a misunderstanding. Both Harney and Moten are supporters of a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and argue that counterdiscourses are just as an important part of politics as the hegemonic discourses are: they are what upholds the fort. Counterdiscourses allow the

hegemony to continue by continually allowing it to appropriate itself by always letting it know when it goes wrong. It is also not able to produce knowledge from outside the (counter)discursive hegemony. Following Foucault, the undercommons has to be within this frame of (counter)discourse as there is no way of escaping it, however, the point of the undercommons is not to escape (counter)discourse, but to be able to listen, search and imagine the outside from within. Even more, Harney and Moten's undercommons understand, much like Spivak, the power in Foucault and his way of seeing history as discourse, but are not willing to forget ideology's role. The undercommons of the dead in turn is not a place where the dead can talk freely without taking part in the (counter)discourse of necropolitics or escape the rigid hands of modern-day archiving. As Brooks appropriately states, "the policing and disciplining of the voices continues in the afterlives" (2020, p. 30). But the dead are also the bearers of lost semiotic knowledge. Through fugitive listening we can hope to study and learn without making idioms of a surround that flees at the first sight of a transcoder.

The Hold

Being Enslaved in the Past, present, and Future Hold of the Slave Ship

Under deck, outside the storage compartments and separate from any of the crews' sleeping compartments is where you find the hold. The hold is where only the most valuable, and at the same time dispensable, cargo was kept as the trade ships traveled across oceans and continents. The slaves made up the livelihood of the crew and captains, while being expendable in cases of emergencies or if one needed some extra hands.

Figure 1 shows the main slave deck on the slave ship *Brookes* (British Library, 1787). What would normally be a single deck is divided horizontally such that they could fit two decks in the space of one. The picture below is the lower of the two. The ship had allotted enough space to carry 470 slaves but managed to store 609 men, women, and children. In order to manage the extra 139 slaves, they had to be stored on their sides or on top of each other. The slaves, who were often chained in pairs, had 25 cm where they had to lie still. If the weather permitted it, they would be allowed on deck where they were fed while the crew cleaned out the hold. Cleaning out often involved getting rid of the ones who had died during the night. The unknown author of the print of *Brookes* stated that "the only exercise of the men slaves is their being made to jump in their chains; and this, by the friends of the trade, is

called *dancing*” (1787). The print was one of the first pieces of propaganda against slavery in the UK. It was widely distributed and reprinted in newspapers and books as well as appearing as a poster hung around the country (1787)

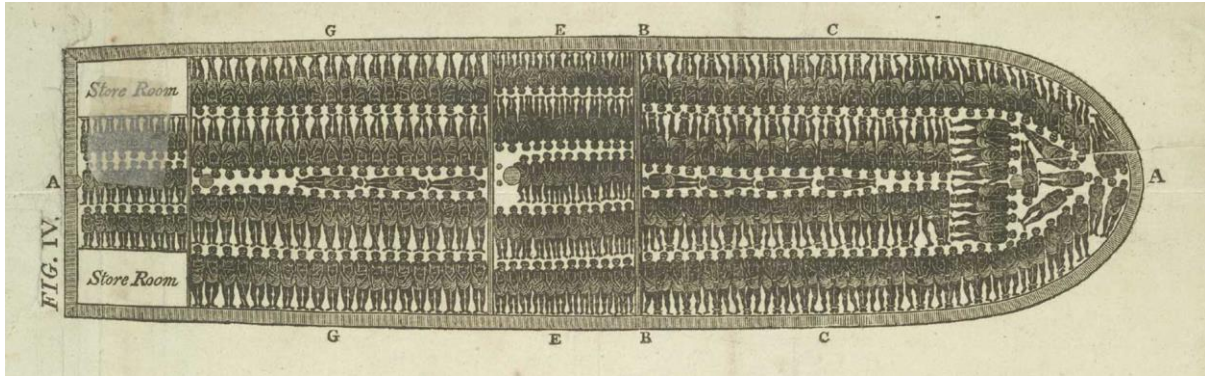


Figure 1 Main slave deck of the Brookes slave ship (Library, 1787)

Harney and Moten see the hold of the ship as still existing. We are all cargo captured in the hold of the ship captained by logistics and policies. But “logistics could not contain what it had relegated to the hold. [Because] there are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship. And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 94). The goal of logistics has always been to automatize the transportation and transaction of goods, but no amount of dancing and chains could keep the slave from resisting the machine while sleeping in their 25 cm of space. Thus, resistance is not only physical forms of struggle, but the hold makes visible the power that the machine is never able to control. To live in the hold is to live in the break and to know that you have no hold on the other. The hold is a place of love and touch just as it is a place of misery and sorrow. It is a dangerous neighborhood of solidarity.

In the introduction to *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam reflects on searching for the hold: “it will not be there where the wild things are, it will be a place where refuge is not necessary and you will find that you were already in it all along” (Halberstam, 2013, p. 12). The hold is a place you are always inside and a place you can search for. Freud might have defined the hold as a super-ego—the repressed cultural imprint of slavery. And, like the super-ego, the hold is part repressed and unconscious, part subconscious, and part conscious. Halberstam’s further elaboration supports a psychoanalyst perspective on the hold: “The hold here is the hold in the slave ship but it is also the hold that we have on reality and fantasy, the hold they have on us and the hold we decide to forego on the other, preferring instead to touch, to be with, to love” (Halberstam, 2013, p. 12). But an understanding of the hold as the hold in the slave ship cannot let go of its materialistic part. The hold *is* like the super-ego, the

cultural repression of being shipped. It *is* also a space defined by the physical world of logistical capitalism. The hold is inside the walls of the one-bedroom cellar apartment you cannot afford; it is inside of the university building that demands all of your time for zero payment; it is found in the schoolyard that is divided by class and ethnicity; it is inside male/female marked toilets; it was in the Grenfell Tower when it burnt down; it was in Gjerdrum when the earth shattered; it is inside the closing walls of the ocean in Bangladesh; it is in all the places touched by logistical capitalism; it is everywhere.

The Shipped

We are the shipped. What was taken and displaced. We are the commodity that refuses the marked. The shipped are the slaves that were shipped over the Atlantic Ocean with the new vision of a future where work and labor was relegated to the ones less worth. But the shipped are also the ones who brought over the slaves: the captains; shipmates; queens; kings; and common people. As the first slave was brought on board, all humans were commodified and shipped.

The shipped are an all-encompassing class of people theorized by Harney and Moten as their answer to the Marxist proletariat. They hold the power of revolution and revolt against logistical capitalism:

If the proletariat was thought capable of blowing the foundations sky high, what of the shipped, what of the containerized? What could such flesh do? Logistics somehow knows that it is not true that we do not yet know what flesh can do. There is a social capacity to instantiate again and again the exhaustion of the standpoint as undercommon ground that logistics knows as unknowable, calculates as an absence that it cannot have but always longs for, that it cannot, but longs, to be or, at least, to be around, to surround. Logistics senses this capacity as never before – this historical insurgent legacy, this historicity, this logisticality, of the shipped. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 93)

The class of the shipped is not defined by culture, wealth, race, gender, nationality, or body type. It is defined by how one relates to the logistical machinery. The shipped are those who the machine has decided it wants to logisticize yet knows it can never control. The shipped

are logistics biggest enemy, and its wildest desire. Within the logistical machine the shipped are another part of the machinery and stand in contrast to the proletariat that runs the machine of its own doom. A large part of the shipped is part of the proletariat and do keep the machine running, but importantly not all.

As one enters the dangerous neighborhood of the undercommons, the shipped raises to the surface from the hold because “to have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one” (p. 97). The shipped is the commodity fighting back against logistics by refusing to be “held in the movement of things” (p. 92). The shipped refuses transportation by letting their movement be dictated by their relation and being transformed by playing with the general antagonism of desire and possibility.

The shipped is a concept of Black radical tradition where there is a want to incorporate their own subjugation into the conceptual language that describes the world. As part of my project to bridge the gap between the Black radical tradition of the undercommons and gender studies, it is worth discussing the similarities between the shipped and the commodified woman.

Harney and Moten place the shipped in the same taxonomy as the proletariat, but they do not comment on the shipped’s relation to the commodification of women. In the chapter “Commodities among Themselves”, from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Irigaray, 1985), Luce Irigaray discusses the commodification of women within the phallogocentric order and what it would entail if women as commodities refused the market. Her remarks bear close resemblance to those by Harney and Moten on the shipped. By connecting the shipped to Irigaray’s definition of how women are commodified, I hope to show how the shipped should be thought of in connection with a history of suppression and commodification that goes further back in history than the first slave ships.

The women of Irigaray are defined by the masculine and cannot exist as anything but masculine. The same goes for female relationships, also those among women themselves: “as soon as she desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (expresses herself, to herself), a woman is a man” (p. 194). There is no escaping the logistical machine and we are all cogs in it, even if we choose to be the shipped in the undercommons. We cannot escape the order that creates meaning within the fort. But Irigaray wonders aloud what would happen if the commodities refused to go to market, what would commerce and exchange look like then:

Exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end . . . Without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman . . . without sequence or number. Without standard or yardstick. *Red blood* and *sham* would no longer be differentiated by deceptive envelopes concealing their worth. Use and exchange would be indistinguishable. The greatest value would be at the same time the least kept in reserve. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 197)

The greatest threat of the shipped is its *what if*. What if the revolt of the shipped was let loose from its repressed being inside the hold?

Undercommon Matter

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana analyses how the hurricane made visible the intersection of both discursive and material power (Tuana, 2008). She uses the metaphor of viscous porosity in her article. This conceptual metaphor is used “as a means to better understand the rich interactions between beings through which subjects are constituted out of relationality” (p. 188). The relationality in question is the relations between all things of matter; human and non-human, organic and in-organic. In the tradition of new materialism, Tuana argued for matter mattering in a time when post-structuralism was the dominant paradigm within feminist theory. Post-structuralism is still dominant. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* are both on the curriculum in gender studies, and the understanding of discourse as power continues to be important in understanding how gender and sexuality effect and affect our lives. Tuana and other new materialist’s projects are not to dissuade us from seeing the importance of discourse, but to reflect anew on materialistic ontologies. Tuana’s metaphoric concept of viscous porosity is powerful in that it makes visible the multiple ways matter and discourse infect and affect each other. Viscous porosity becomes Tuana’s way of seeing what Karen Barad called the intra-action of all things¹.

¹ Karan Barad’s theory that agency is not the task of individual agents and must be understood as the constant interaction between all agents and forces, with no bodies being pre-established as the interaction is all-encompassing and happening at all times: “thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future” (Barad, 2007, p. ix).

Viscous porosity and intra-action are important theoretical concepts to understand the undercommons as a material manifesting space in the physical world and as a super-ego connecting all humans across the globe and universe. Tuana explains how her metaphor works when she argues for the viscous porosity of flesh:

There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediators of interaction. (p. 199)

The undercommons always hinges on the world that makes it. Logistical capitalism is running through its pores being its antagonist and its lifeblood. Its manifestation is always dependent on the time and place, being at the constant mercy of the intra-acting world. The viscous porosity of the hold is logistical capitalisms biggest enemy. It can never capture what it once thought it had, and although we are all always already captured within the walls of the hold, its porosity secures its elusiveness, and its viscosity enables its power as it intra-acts with its prisoners.

The General Antagonism

In the very earliest days of Canopus, we too took what we wanted, and blundered, and wondered why it was everything we touched went wrong and at length failed and collapsed, until we discovered the Necessity and were able to do what we should.

– Doris Lessing, *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*

The general antagonism of the undercommons is never explicitly stated by Harney and Moten. Instead they appropriate Marx who once said that, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need!” (Marx, 1996, p. 215). This was no antagonism to Marx. To him this was the communist dream where the balance between need and ability was finally to be restored. Harney and Moten borrow Marx’ communist dream and wonder aloud:

What if we thought of the experiment of the hold as the absolute fluidity, the informality, of this condition of need and ability? What if ability and need were in constant play and we found someone who dispossessed us so that this movement was our inheritance. Your love makes me strong, your love makes me weak. What if “the between the two,” the lost desire, the articulation, was this rhythm, this inherited experiment of the shipped in the churning waters of flesh and expression that could grasp by letting go ability and need in constant recombination. If he moves me, sends me, sets me adrift in this way, amongst us in the undercommons. So long as she does this, she does not have to be. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 99)

The general antagonism of the undercommons turns need and ability into desire and possibility. In the hold our desire to break free meets the possibilities of the surround. But sometimes we come in contact with the shipped. We come in contact with what once was and create new possibilities that dispossess us. The dispossession in turn makes it possible to dream about fulfilling our desire. The undercommons is this place of dispossession. It is a place to experiment and be with the general antagonism:

The riotous production of difference which is the general antagonism cannot be tamed either by the feudal authority or social violence that is capitalism much less by policy initiatives like agonistic dialogues or alternative public spheres. But where the aim is not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity, that place is the undercommons or rather, wherever and whenever that experiment is going on within the general antagonism the undercommons is found. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 110)

It is in the undercommons that desire meets possibility and makes it feasible to be in dispossession. Dispossession in turn makes new possibilities available, and it beckons us to be in contact with the shipped. In the next chapter I will look at the undercommons of the porn theaters of New York that made it possible for straight heterosexual guys with micro-penises to play with the fluidity of gender and sexuality – to experiment with the general antagonism of desire and possibility. The micro-penis becomes the possibility of disconnecting gender and genitalia, and the heterosexual porn shown on the screens, coupled with the heavy majority of gay cruisers, makes it possible for a straight man to be aroused by the onlooking, jerking, gay men.

It is the general antagonism that connects Hartman's riotous Black choir, which is the subject of chapter four, with Delany's gay haven. They are both places where possibility becomes possessed in its dispossession. These are not places of joy and laughter, but neither are they places of repression and rational neutrality. These are places where joy and laughter, sadness and sobbing, anger and shouting, chaos and screaming, all become disposed and available as possibilities. Where policy and logistics are mute as nothing can tame the wildness of the uncommon experiment with the general antagonism.

The general antagonism is never used in connection with gender or sexuality by Harney and Moten, as that is not their project. It is part of my project, and the general antagonism of the uncommons generates much of the same possibilities that other academics have found generated by gender or sexuality as general antagonisms.

When Sandy Stone spoke of the transsexual body as the producer of the ideal type, she was arguing for gender division as an irreducible difference and knowledge producer (2014). José Muñoz study of Vaginal Creme Davis in his article "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag" (Muñoz, 1997) shows how sexuality is an antagonism and that queerness, too, experiments with desire and possibility to produce the world around us.

While attending one of Davis' projects, Pedro, Muriel, and Esther (PME), Muñoz is presented with a personality of Davis he has not seen before. Muñoz is well aware of Davis' ability to inhabit different personalities depending on the performance, having seen them perform as Most High Rev'end saint Salicia Tate, Buster Butone and Kayle Hilliard (p. 88). This time Muñoz is watching Clarence, the new name of Davis after she decided to go through a race and gender reassignment in order to become one of the many "*really hot*" white supremacist militiamen Davis sought after: "she imitates and becomes the object of her desires" (p. 88). While performing, Clarence sings about his love of shotguns, his hate for homosexuals, and gropes both his bandmates and the audience in homophobic ways. Importantly, this is not a parodic drag performance, and it is not a defense for white supremacy. This is Davis who disidentifies and the "performance works on Freudian distinctions between desire and identification; the "to be or to have" binary is queered and disrupted" (p. 89). As Muñoz argues, there is powerful resistance in Davis' disidentification, but in Davis' performance I also find the uncommons as he plays with the general antagonism of desire and possibility. Clarence is both the possibility and the desire in Davis' performance. As the performance goes on, the play between desire and possibility continues, and Clarence removes one clothing item at a time until he is undressed and becomes Davis again, who stands in their own sweat and a military nighty. The play between desire and

possibility becomes even more evident as Davis in an interview with Muñoz tells him that her birthname is Clarence. Through her own play on sexuality and queerness Davis gets to inhabit and be themselves. Her performance is not knowledge production but a study on how to be and desire within the undercommons. Furthermore, it makes visible the similar ways that gender and sexuality as productive antagonisms are similar to the general antagonism. Playing with the antagonism of gender and sexuality opens possibilities for new radical imaginations of what could be. And, to play with the general antagonism of the undercommons is to be in the undercommons where desire and possibility become one. To play with the general antagonism is to unleash the fantasy of the hold.

In their follow-up work to the undercommons, *All Incomplete* (2021), Harney and Moten state that “the first odious vessel produced by and for logistics is not the slave ship, but the body—flesh conceptualized—which bears the individual-in-subjection” (p. 14). In a statement that approaches the feminist antagonism of gender difference as a defining part of flesh conceptualized, Harney and Moten also reveal the all-consuming power of the logistical machine. That the body is the individual controlled by the hegemonic matrix, is not a new statement within gender studies, but the body is not only controlled, it is a vessel for the logistical machine; we both make up the logistical machine and are produced by it. Thus, resistance, agency, and valuation of life are all defined by the machine. As I seek to research new forms of resistance, agency, and life valuation, I cannot circumvent said machine, but I can subvert it from the inside. I can contact what remains of what once was through fugitive listening that does not transcode into idiom that which it cannot understand. I can let the urge of Blackness lead me to the break that is the hold, where I can call on the dead and watch as they play with the general antagonism. I can enter the undercommons and let the shipped loose.

Quilting the Undercommons

There is no feminist undercommons, just an undercommons. Further, the undercommons is not a method or methodology, and it refuses knowledge production as there can only be study. As a student writing my thesis on the undercommons, its elusiveness and refusal of academic method can be daunting, but it can also be an invitation: an invitation to explore my own academic education and reflect on how to use the undercommons on its own terms. Feminist method has always been wary of the power of hegemonic knowledge production

and long argued for new objectivities and viewpoints. The undercommons is a space with its own history and political understanding that beckons an academic to inquire old fields of research anew within its theoretical confines. Although there is no feminist undercommons, the undercommons lends itself to gender studies and feminist investigation.

My answer to the problem of the undercommons' elusiveness and refusal of knowledge production is the quilt. In this chapter I have sewn a quilt of the undercommons showing its complex nature as a subversive space and the many possibilities that it enables. The quilt is a concept I borrow from Karen Warren.

Karen Warren, an ecofeminist, argued for quilting as a method of ecofeminist philosophy in her book chapter "Quilting Ecofeminist Philosophy" (Warren, 2000). She argues that to quilt is not only a traditional female act, but its many patches and the easiness of being able to add on to and remove makes it possible to imagine a feminist quilt with patches that makes visible the need for generalization as well as the patches that are hidden by said generalization:

First, quilts are highly contextual: They grow out of and reflect specific historical, social, economic, and political influences. (...) Second, the quilt metaphor helps one visualize the role of generalizations in theory. (...) Third, quilting is historically a women-identified activity. (...) Quilts are a form of discourse. (pp. 67-68)

The undercommons is not a field and does not have multiple authors arguing for different methodologies and theories as ecofeminism does, but the metaphorical quilt still lends itself to imagine the different academic fields, theories, authors, and activists that have influenced it. Furthermore, a quilt of the undercommons would make visible all the different forms the undercommons take and show how and why it is important.

My quilt has patches of the theoretical frameworks surrounding remainders, Blackness, fugitivity, and new materialism. It also has patches of different undercommon strategies: listening, translating, disidentification, and Black ops. As I move towards the next part of my thesis, it will get patches of sexuality, gender, photography, sound strikes, resistance, agency, and life. It is an opportunity to see the connections and distinctions between fields of analysis and theories that all intra-acts. The quilt is in constant intra-action with itself, having neither an end nor a beginning. Furthermore, the patches all talk to each other, and no patch can be looked at without consideration of the others, and how the whole quilt looks at the time.

To study is to be with and learn through being with—a refusal of knowledge production. I cannot fully refuse knowledge production, but I can subvert it. The quilt is a way of being with the material. The act of quilting requires one to be with the quilt, and while its production constantly produces knowledge, it is a subverted production that also involves the act of studying. As I write with, and in, the undercommons, I have had to admit that there is knowledge that refuses the academic eye and semiotic systems which can only be presented through a transcoding into idiom. My hope is that the quilt makes it possible to listen and study the illegible that screams out from my thesis through the translated bodies I have transferred from the beyond.

I will now take my quilt, filled with holes, knots, newly sewn patches, and old patches that disintegrate at touch, into the next two chapters. I will be using it as an undercommon tool of studying. But before I turn to Delany's porn theaters listening for the contagious poison of the general antagonism, it is time for an intermission and the tale of Captain Don Benito Cereno, and Babo, the silent captain of the mutineers.

Intermezzo

Black Ops in Black Water

Fugitive Listening and Black Ops in the Middle Passage

Fugitive listening, or Black ops, as theorized by Brooks and Moten respectively, are not concepts that easily lend themselves to examples since both of them build on the unexplainable. Fugitive listening aims to hear the surround that remains in the undercommons, and Black ops seeks to grasp knowledge from the lowdown maroons of the hold as physical spaces from the past, present, and future, as well as the spaces within us that remains from the time before we got trapped by the fort. In order to get a better grasp on the concepts of fugitive listening and Black ops, I will go back in time to the Middle Passageⁱ, captain Benito Cereno, and the stranded ship San Dominick.

The tale of Don Benito Cereno is told by Herman Melville in a story by the same name, published in the collection *The Piazza Tales* (2005), originally published in 1856. The stories in *The Piazza Tales*, are based on Amasa Delano's memoir *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (Delano, 1817). Delano was an American captain of a slave ship who discovers Don Benito and his ship from Spain stranded in the Caribbean Ocean. Melville's story is long removed from the historical events of the tale, and there is no source material from the slaves on the ship that give their version of their experience of the forced journey. The silence from the slaves in the source material, found in the archives from the Middle Passage, begs the researcher to look for new ways to listen.

Danielle Skeehan, a scholar of English and Comparative American Studies who have done extensive research on the Middle Passage, argues for the use of Melville's story as a cautionary tale in her article "Deadly Notes: Atlantic Soundscapes and the Writing of the Middle Passage":

I begin with Melville's novella because it may also caution scholars who study the archives of Atlantic slavery. Inevitably, we too, like Captain Delano, view the

ⁱ The term used to describe the forced voyage from Africa to America that resulted in millions of Africans being forcefully traded into slave work. The term is most often used to describe slave trade between early 16th century to mid-19th century.

contents of ship's logs, captain's journals, and account books with "a stranger's eyes." The cold empiricism of these records encourages us to read at a surface level and glean only the facts that record keepers intended to be found. Yet ships traveling the pathways of the Middle Passage—and beyond—were anything but silent spaces. (Skeehan, 2013)

There is a need for new ways of reading the archive that takes proper care of the oral traditions of the slaves that has morphed into different oral traditions in the Caribbean. Skeehan does not write on the undercommons, yet I choose to read her arguments as an indirect call for fugitive listening through the "cold empiricism", making fugitive listening a doorway into the undercommon archive.

In her article she quotes late Martinique writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant and his writing on the sound and language of slaves. As the slaves were forbidden to communicate, they hid their words in screams that sounded like roars of animals to the captain and crew (Glissant, 1989, p. 124). Glissant was also aware of the power of silence and secrecy that language can contain, a power he traces from the slave ships to modern-day Creole (p. 123). He says about the screams of the slaves that developed into creole that:

Slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. (...) This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech. There developed from that point a specialized system of significant insignificance. Creole organizes speech as a blast of sound. (...) A requirement is thus introduced into spoken Creole: speed. Not so much speed as a jumbled rush. Perhaps the continuous stream of languages that makes speech into one impenetrable block of sound. (...) In the pace of Creole speech, one can locate the embryonic rhythm of the drum. The speaker dictates the rhythm: a perfect poetic concept of practice. (p. 124)

And of the power of silence, he says:

If Creole is whispered (for whispering is the shout modified to suit the dark), it is rarely murmured. The whisper is determined by external circumstances; the murmur is a *decision* by the speaker. The murmur allows access to a *confidential* meaning, not to this form of nonsense that could conceal and reveal at the same time a hidden meaning. (p. 125)

I choose to quote Glissant extensively because he argues that Creole is a language built upon the act of fugitive listening and Black ops: a language which came to be within the shipped being held in the hold of flesh. This is the same hold that was the originator of the fort later built by their hands under service by their masters. This language is built on a “system of significant insignificance” (p. 124), which is the mantra of fugitive listening, to find the significant in the insignificant: to translate, not transcode, through being with alien semiotic systems. Glissant’s argument that whispering is determined by the external and that murmur is the conscious decision by the speaker, further reinforces the argument for fugitive listening as a method of the undercommons. Fugitive listening is to listen on the terms of the speaker, to not make murmur into whisper. Hegemonic listening cannot help but transcode into idiom that which it does not understand.

The hold of the ship is the originator of fugitivity, and it is the hold that we are hoping to get to through fugitive listening. The hope is to access that which was taken away and placed in the hold, the shipped.

In a moment that adds to the creepy mystery of the stranded ship, San Dominick, the visiting captain, Delano, is approaching a Spanish sailor who sits with a rope, knotting a knot he has never seen before. The sailor answers short and quiet to the visiting captain’s questions before:

While Captain Delano stood watching him, suddenly the old man threw the knot towards him, saying in broken English—the first heard in the ship—something to this effect: “Undo it, cut it, quick.” It was said lowly, but with such condensation of rapidity, that the long, slow words in Spanish, which had preceded and followed, almost operated as covers to the brief English between. (Melville, 2005)

Delano does not know what to do and is stunned by the murmuring Spanish sailor. The knot ends up in the hands of a Black slave who excuses the sailor, pointing out that he is tired and sick, before throwing the knot to the sea after deeming it garbage. The quick exchange of words between the sailor and the captain does not involve any of the slaves and thus do not stand out as a place of fugitive knowledge. But, since the ship is later to be revealed as taken over by the slaves, in a mutiny months past, with the Spanish sailors only pretending to have control while they have a visitor on board, the murmur takes another form. Delano takes the word of what he thinks is a Black slave and believes the sailor is simply sick and out of his

mind. Still, knowing that the sailor is captured, we could read his murmur as him appropriating the language of what used to be his slaves, which is now his commander.

The murmuring sailor with his hidden speech is not able to communicate his message of capture to the visiting captain, and his confusion highlights the power of the murmur. The murmur is a conscious decision that needs the receiver to understand the terms of the caller. Had Delano been aware of who the real captains were, he would no doubt have put more value on the apparent sickness and confusion of the Spanish sailor. It was later revealed that the sailor in question in reality was a clerk by the name “Hermenegildo Gandix, who had been forced to live among the seamen, wearing a seaman’s habit, and in all respects appearing to be one for the time” (Melville, 2005).

The exchange above begs the question of how the slaves were able to communicate and plan a mutiny while under strict control and without any visiting captains to save them? Delano himself was not made aware of the mutiny before leaving the ship and seeing what he believed to be the captain jumping overboard. The story of captain Delano and Don Benito is the untold story of a resistance not possible to write down. It is about screams and murmurs we can only catch glimpses of over 200 years later.

The deafening silence of the Africans who in the end were captured and put before a court in St. Maria is best captured by Melville’s imagining of Babo’s inner thoughts. Babo was one of the two Senegalese captains of the ship before being captured again by Delano’s crew. When captured, Babo, “seeing all was over, (...) uttered no sound, and could not be forced to” (Melville, 2005). This choosing of silence is clearly a sign of defeat if we are to believe in Melville, but if we open our ears, eyes, and feelings to the shipped that are part of us all, we can clearly hear Babo laughing, plotting, and screaming. In his choosing not to speak, is a resistance against being understood, against his story being written down. It is a resistance that has made it possible for him to stay out of the commons that is the historical canon and instead made room for him in the undercommons down in the hold of the ship where he is planning yet another mutiny.

3

The Undercommons of Public Sex

Det er en dyp, menneskelig ting å ha håp. En menneskerett, faktisk. Og jeg har håp. Det kan jeg ikke løpe fra. Det er der.

— Shabana Rehman, interview by nrk.no (2022)

Times Square Red Times Square Blue is a memoir and manifesto by science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany from 1999 (2001), containing two essays: “Times Square Blue” and “... Three, Two, One Contact: Times Square Red”. The first essay recounts his days as a visitor and user of the porn cinemas at 42nd street and 8th avenue in New York City, the place that later became Times Square after the demolition and rebuilding of the plaza under former mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The second essay of the book is an expanded version from when he held the Annual Kessler Lecture at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the State University of New York. It is an academic essay written as two different manifestos with sections marked by § and either a number or a letter depending on which manifesto it corresponds to. The manifestos are supposed to be read side by side, one section at the time. The whole of the second essay argues for cross class, culture, sexuality, and race contact as a way to produce new radical knowledge that has been erased by capitalist societies’ urge for progress and modernization. Delany states his aim with the two essays as the following:

I hope these two extended essays function as early steps (though by no means are they the first) in thinking through the problem of where people, male and female, gay and straight, old and young, working class and middle class, Asian and Hispanic, black and other, rural and urban, tourist and indigene, transient and permanent, with their bodily, material, sexual and emotional needs, might discover (and even work to set up) varied and welcoming harbors for landing on our richly variegated urban shore.
(p. xx)

His example of a harbor, that no longer exists, is the porn cinemas that lay on the streets that became Times Square. The argument does not fit in with the theory of the undercommons as it is looking at a type of resistance that has the goal of altering hegemonic discourses within

the structures of capitalism. This raises the question of how to find and enter the undercommons in a text that does not fit with the undercommon mantra of being in but not of? Moreover, how I can use fugitive listening to hear voices from the beyond if I am entering a space on the grounds of an author that does not adhere to an undercommon understanding of (counter)discourse, politics, logistics, and policy? The large discrepancy in the aims between Delany and the undercommons, make his memoirs function as a starting point for showing how to enter and stay in undercommon spaces when you are not invited in by Harney and Moten, or other writers on the undercommons. His examples from his time using the New York porn theaters will show the universality and everywhere-ness of the undercommons, as the undercommons cannot be found by reading the book on Delany's stated terms, yet it is still there. The voices I am seeking to listen to are in the porn theaters Delany visited, just as they are everywhere else, but to enter the undercommons where these voices become audible, and where fugitive listening is available, one must enter on the terms of the undercommons. By listening and being with the undercommons in Delany's book I will argue that his stories of public sex and random points of contact, mainly written about in the first essay *Times Square Blue*, all are examples of why the undercommons and fugitive listening matter. This chapter will also work as an example of the everywhere-ness of the undercommons and how to enter the undercommon break.



Figure 2. The porn-filled 42nd street jungle on a Saturday night in 1989 (New York Post, 2017).

Resisting Difference

In the first paragraph of the second essay §0 Delaney explains his political position and understanding:

The primary thesis underlying my several arguments here is that, given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large number of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will. My Secondary thesis is, however, [that capitalism] perpetually works for the erosion of the social practices through which interclass communication takes place and of the institutions holding those practices stable. (p. 111)

Delany follows Foucault's understanding of discourse (pp. 119, 199), and argues for the reward of the diverse set of discourses that follow from intraclass contact. He also believes that the current form of capitalism makes the possibility of intraclass contact difficult as it destroys the possible material places where such contact is possible. Still, Delany is an optimist who argues that we do have our own tools to change the hegemonic discourses. Even though he knows that it will require effort to seek out meeting places of intraclass contact against capitalism's will. His optimism is built on his own life filled with contact, and his Foucauldian understanding of discourse as being driven by the people who discourse rules:

The effects of my primary and secondary theses are regularly perceived at the level of discourse. Therefore, it is only by a constant renovation of the concept of discourse that society can maintain the most conscientious and informed field for both the establishment of such institutions and practices and, by extension, the necessary critique of those institutions and practices—a critique necessary if new institutions of any efficacy are to develop. (p. 112)

Delany understands discourse, just as Foucault did, as the producer of subjects and as a product of said subjects. His writing has been described as actively pushing back against normative politics on gayness (Hubbs, 2015), and others have used his memoir manifesto to

argue for why environmental studies should look to queer studies for an ecology based on cruising that centers spontaneity (Ensor, 2017). Both as a non-normative writer and a proponent for cruising ecology Delany's work is used as a strategy against hegemonic discourse.

While Delany's belief in discourse as both a product of ideology and a production of people is in line with the anti-capitalist thought of the undercommons, it also disagrees with the undercommons in how it sees the possibility of resistance and change in critical ways. The undercommons is built on the theory that logistical capitalism is an all-consuming monster of appropriation that keeps us from accessing the surround. Thus, it is not possible to change the (counter)discourse from within in any meaningful way as the only possible form of change is a change of appearance.

Delany argues for spontaneous intra-class contact as a way of making life more "rewarding, productive, and pleasant," which runs counter to the thought of the undercommons as a dangerous neighborhood. In the unsafe and dangerous neighborhood, it is the act of continuous suppression of the surround that brings us together in solidarity, not an appreciation of people being different. Delany knows that the appreciation of interclass difference contains an understanding of the difficulties that different classes, cultures, sexualities, bodies, and races experience, but he is not arguing for that difference as an oppression that brings us together. Rather, he is arguing for the understanding of difference as the spark that will lead to a radical shift in discourse, and thus the institutions. The undercommons is not concerned with difference. In the undercommons we are all the same, as we are all the oppressed within the walls of the fort. Resistance is to find together in oppression – as it is only in the solidarity of oppression that we can start the undercommon revolution.

In the latter half of their book on the undercommons Harney and Moten are interviewed by Stevphen Shukaitis, fellow scholar and editor/coordinator at Minor Compositions which published their book. When discussing why it is important not to find solidarity in difference but instead see how we are alike, Fred Moten explains that:

The problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just

need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know? (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 140)

Where Delany puts the stress on contact through which one learns about the troubles of others, the undercommons recognizes the fact that “this shit” is killing us all. When I look to the porn theaters and the random sexual and non-sexual meetings remembered by Delany it is not to argue for interclass contact as a way into the undercommons, but because his text gives me the opportunity to listen and enter the undercommons that is hiding inside his stories.

Post-politics and the Viral Contagion of the Undercommons

To listen is to read, and I will start my reading by shortly discussing the method of an article by Silvia Posocco, a social anthropologist writing interdisciplinary within the fields of gender, sexuality, violence, conflict, and genocide studies. She argues for a “flat, thin, descriptive reading” (2020, p. 6) when reflecting on relationalities within the world of post-politics and the undercommons. After discussing her method of reading I will use it to see how Delany and the different people he comes in contact with function as examples for why descriptive reading works as a tool for the undercommons.

In her article “Curfew: Sensing Post-politics, sensing the Undercommons” (2020), Posocco writes within the world of post-politics. Post-politics is a term that emerged in the time after the cold war as late-stage capitalism became the politics of the world and the markets went global. Post-politics refers to the universalism of neo-liberalism on a global scale. Where politics once was about the difference in ideologies, it is today a question of differences in policies. Posocco defines post-politics similarly to how Harney and Moten define logistical capitalism as post-Fordism: as the time where individuality is given, ideology is mute, and politics are concerned with how to best facilitate so-called free speech and free choice of the rational individual. Logistical capitalism is a way of explaining the governing of society through hidden policies and logistics, and post-politics is a way of reflecting on how and why people see politics, individualization, and ideology as separate. Posocco argues that by shifting from a rational understanding of the world, where meaning is found under the surface, to a relational and descriptive point of view, where meaning is found on the surface, the hidden power of post-politics becomes visible. Furthermore, she argues

that the resistance found in the undercommons is a resistance against post-politics and its hidden discursive power.

By changing focus to the flat surface, we will be able to see the virality of politics in the world of post-politics:

A flat, thin, descriptive reading, or one focused on ‘contagious relationalities’ aim to offer glimpses into the residual politics attached to these cultural forms by staying on the surface of texts and immersed in the relationality of things. (p. 6)

She borrows the term “contagious relationalities” from Tony D. Sampson (2012) who defines contagious relationalities as those relations that “exist as potentiality, but are fundamentally disavowed, truncated and cast in the domain of impossibility” (Posocco, 2020, p. 5). These relations are contagious, not in a symbolic way, but in a material way in that they infect the other with a radical potentiality. I understand this potentiality as the potentiality to play with the general antagonism of desire and possibility. The contagious relationalities spread the fear of a politics understood – the converse of post-politic politics.

That the world portrayed in Delany is a post-political one is evident in multiple ways. In the second chapter of the first essay, he introduces the theater Variety Photoplays in the following way:

At the Variety Photoplays you gave the elderly fellow inside his booth your dollar, and, through the tiny window in the glass, he gave you a nickel change and your ticket from a large roll—weekdays yellow, Saturdays orange, Sundays blue. (Yes, it was 95¢ in the seventies, up from 45¢ in the sixties.) Always in a brown or blue suit and a red bow tie, he mumbled heatedly to himself nonstop. For years the theater had been a gay sexual cruising ground. The (strictly heterosexual) pornographic movies started as a Saturday offering. At first management was afraid the straight films might drive away the theater’s gay audience. The tickets’ color coding allowed them to compare the take from days when sex films played and days when legit features ran. The figures for the porn were pretty good, however. Soon it was pornography Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, with legit films the other days. Within a year and a half, it was double-feature porn Monday through Saturday. On Sunday, in deference to what I’ll never know, a porn film alternated with a legit offering. That persisted for another year, till the porn drove out even that. (Delany, 2001, p. 19)

Delany is looking to change the discourse through intraclass contact instead of deconstructing and reflecting on the myriad of ways the political ideology of urbanization, cleanliness, development, and capitalism led to a politics that demanded the dismantling of the queer porn district in order to move forward. Furthermore, he did not reflect on that it was the politics of capitalism that led to the porn theaters being built in the first place. As we can see from above, he does note that the ticket prices have increased and that the reason for the theater only showing porn is that it increases income. Earlier in the introduction he also quickly notes that the choice of building Times Square as we know it today was a political choice, but he chooses to linger on the opportunities lost and not on the power of resistance found in the theaters that led to their unavoidable destruction. By quickly moving on from the institutional reason for why the theaters catered to the gay cruising scene he makes the ideology and politics of capitalism become the natural state of things, even though it is in line with the book centering contact between Delany and other gay cruisers. Post-politics is an infection that Delany himself is not aware of.

By reading the multiple intraclass points of contact as cases of contagious relationalities, the residues of politics keeping the surround trapped in the hold become visible. One of these cases is Delany buying a ticket from the old man who speaks to himself. It is an interaction that is quickly over, but you can see from Delany's description of his clothes and way of being that this is one of many times he has bought a ticket from him, and that the old man has left his mark on Delany. The contagious relation between him and the old man selling tickets is evident as well in the relation between the theater at large and its customers, as the ticketer works as its gatekeeper. Through their contact they both become aware of Delany's reason for being there (given the color of the ticket) and with his many returns to the gay cruising theater their relation is one of knowing without knowing. The old man and Delany intra-act and infect each other. It is not an interaction between seller and buyer, but the continued acting out of multiple already ongoing (counter)discourses. The poison they both get infected with, a poison that works as the contagion of Posocco, is the poison of possibility. In a concrete sense the possibility of being part of a space that, although its monetary cause for existing, cannot help but be a subversive tool against the system that it is part of. Subversive in that it makes possible lives and interactions that are always on the border between wrong and right, clean, and dirty, stillness and moving forward, friendships and transactions.

In a not so concrete sense, the possibility they infect the other with is the possibility of the surround. But, in order to see the residue of the surround, one needs to be aware of the residual politics that keeps the poison in check. Because what politics is keeping in check is visible only through the lens of being kept in check. Hankins found it possible to search for our remainders by losing the fight against the university's mental health policies and finding possibility in being depressed together. It is also possible to see residues of the surround by adopting Posocco's flat and contagious reading in order to let the residues of post-politics politics be visible. In the intra-action between Delany and the old man selling tickets it is apparent that Delany lives in a world where gay cruising is being heavily controlled and is alive because of its monetary value without any consideration of the value such places had for Delany and the other visitors. The old man is also described as talking to himself and without knowing much more about him than the color of his suit, he seems like one of many workers trapped in a system that does not care for their wellbeing. The possibility, or resistance as this possibility can become, is in simply being aware. By making post-politics a politics understood, the possibility for change is suddenly back on the table—just as being aware of the many controlling ways of the university makes it possible to subvert it from the inside. A politics understood, whose connection to Blackness I discussed in chapter 2, makes ideology available and makes post-politics the effect of neoliberal late-stage capitalism becoming global. The theaters become a place to play with the general antagonism of desire and possibility—the undercommons—where the desire for the surround becomes possible.

Warning! You are now Entering the Undercommons

Listening to the Undercommons of Delany's Porn Theaters

In the first chapters of this thesis, I discussed how fugitive listening, as a multiplicitous sensory act, can be a way to listen to the surround through the undercommons. When reading *Times Square Blue*, the first of the two essays by Delany, there are a cacophony of voices and sounds that call to the reader. These voices are not physical sounds, waves, smells, or contours that jump from the page to interact with us, but they are there calling out to a response already given by undercommon intra-action of the break. The voices are everywhere: on the surface that Posocco is helping us read, outside jay-walking across the assembly line with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, in the silences of Ouzounian, within the urban undercommons of Kubaczek and Avraham, and in the depression of Hankins. Yet when

listening to the voices in Delany's essay one has to be careful of who one is listening through. The essay is written from the perspective of Delany and is a description of the feelings, reflections, and knowledge he got from once again being able to visit the porn theaters that no longer existed at the time of writing. Thus, what we are privy to is Delany's own transcoding of what happened, and a surface reading would give us the voices that were audible for Delany; a story of idioms where the generalized semiotic system of the theater is gone. Still, by not reading the surface and purposely listening to the orchestra of the silences – or “reading between the lines” – we can listen to the voices and sounds that Delany himself might not have noticed or been able to translate into meaning. Because the undercommons is both available in the break of the surface and in the break of the lowdown maroons. The undercommon knows that (counter)discourse is all over and that it must infect all parts of the machinery. Thus, my intention is not to argue against surface reading, but to make visible all of the undercommon voices in Delany's porn theaters.

I will start by listening through the ears of Delany before I in the next section search for the screams of the undercommons that he left behind unnoted. My aim is to show how listening and meaning making through translation, in the catachresis sense of Spivak, are tools of logistical capitalism that if broken down shows us ways to resist and gives us a chance to enter the undercommons of possibility.

In one of the subchapters, he discusses why he never thought of the theaters as dangerous places, especially the ones he was a regular visitor at. There were always people, or queens as he calls them, who gave him a heads up of where trouble might be brewing. Warnings that gave him the option of seating himself elsewhere or avoiding certain people. He gives examples of how he recollects these instances of contact:

“Honey, watch out for that guy over there. He's up to no good!”

“There've been three *very* loud arguments in the balcony in the last two hours, baby. I'd stay down here if I was you.”

“Sweetheart, there's a suspicious man been hangin' around downstairs in the john since this afternoon. Frankly, *I* think he's a narc.” (p. 33)

There are dangers to look out for in the theaters, but the warnings are Delany's safety net. Later, he goes on to describe an encounter between an older white upper-class man who gets robbed by two younger black guys, but he shows no signs of this affecting his own feeling of safety (p. 35). The warnings have become calling cards that welcome him into the theater,

and they also work as signals that welcome you into the unsafe neighborhood of the porn theater undercommons. The theater lets everybody in, which is why the warnings are needed, and except for the warnings there are no barriers or other forms of protection that try to shield you from the dangers. The dangers are there plain as day because the dangers are the residues of an invisible politics that enables the porn theaters to become the intraclass places of contact Delany is showing us. The sound of the undercommons is the sounds of politics becoming understood as it cannot help but fail in its attempt at control. In the queen's sassy warnings there are an infectious contagion: a failure in control that everyone who listens gets infected with. It is not noted in the essays, but this failure is also what leads to the unavoidable destructions of these rooms of contagion as the contagion becomes too widespread for the fort to control even outside the theater doors. No master of the fort will allow such weakness to be displayed any longer that it has to. Even though, as the theaters are a proof of, the undercommons is always most visible when faced with destruction.

Through listening to the sounds that Delany is exposed to, the already thereness of the undercommons is visible and its contagious call for possibility is audible to all. The undercommons is always already a part of us while being that somewhere of possibility that we are seeking out.

Silence in the Fort

Delany's book is marked by silences. He recounts several dialogues and exchanges between himself and others, but the others are only silent protagonists in their own life. They are people who come and go, and whom are no longer a part of Delany's life. He has learned of some of their deaths, some he knew were doing sex work outside and inside the theaters, others worked as bartenders and roadworkers, but the static way their jobs and situations are described stand in contrast with how he writes of them as people, where their emotions and ways of being are in constant motion. The contrast between Delany's emphasis on the others being real people with real lives and real emotions living lives of real material differences, and their static and missing stories leaves an uncomfortable silence of something missing. I believe this is a conscious silence by Delany who wanted to argue for the knowledge missed by not being in places of intraclass contact, but it is also the screaming silence of the hold. It is the silence of Babo, the secret slave captain, who refused to let himself become known to Melville, and the silence of all those who refused access to Delany when he was trying to

write their stories. The silence of the undercommons is the silent resistance of playing with the general antagonism of desire and possibility that no writer can put to paper, not even Delany, a gay Black man who is himself part of that silence. But, as the undercommons has taught us, the silence is nothing if it is not loud, it just requires the listener to give up on the task of transcoding in favor of the fugitive task of letting oneself drown in the sound of silence. Only by entering the hold and becoming part of the silent choir can we hope to understand it.

An example of the loud silences in Delany's book is evident in his friendship with Arly, a regular visitor to the theaters who only lets Delany have a relation with him after he promises to stay until he has had at least three orgasms. Arly lost a leg after being thrown under the subway by his father at five, he is a user of both cocaine and crack, and he loved visiting Delany's mother at the nursing home after she suffered a stroke. He is in constant motion, although his past is a static onlooker we never get a hold of.

At one of their visits to the nursing home Delany asks Arly if he can sing as his mother loves music:

“Naw,” Arly said. “I play the drums, but I don't sing too good—” then sang with me anyway: “She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain,” “When the Saints Go Marchin' In,” and “Jesus Loves Me,” Arly in Spanish, me in English, as, in her orange robe in the wheelchair, her paralyzed arm belted with white Velcro into its fiberglass brace, Mom “la-la-ed” along. (p. 54)

Arly and Delany lost contact after the closing of the theaters. When he last met Arly, by chance, outside his house several years later, he wore shiny shoes and had his “arm around an extraordinarily attractive and fresh-looking black-haired woman” (p. 55). Arly is written as a mystery, a seemingly delightful mystery, but still a mystery. He is a lesson in why strangers might turn out to be caring drummers who would welcome a visit to your sick mother. More importantly, he is a survivor. He survived a subway train running him over and severe drug use. Moreover, he survived the constant hunt of the fort to make one understandable. His life and way of living is squarely within the walls of the fort, yet the fort has not managed to police him fully into its semiotic system and he can only be read through idiomatic glances at his life. He is not a part of the automated system that the fort calls life. By being with Arly through his alien semiotic system found in the silences, without asking how he survived, and instead letting his residual resistance infect us, we can also hope to survive transcoding. Arly

has lived a life in the undercommons. A life with love, crime, orgasms, drums, drugs and strangers, and his knowledge is that of the fugitive – always in motion, always on the run. By explaining his drug habits as the consequence of a violent upbringing or applauding the system for being able to make him into a man with a wife and shining shoes one makes idioms out of the secret knowledge of survival and resistance that is Arly.

Delany's goal was to argue for places of intraclass contact where we could hope to change the discourse of alienation that has led to the destruction of such places, but Delany's book is a place filled to the brim with resistance that has only one goal, namely, to bring down the walls of the fort that made the theater in the first place.

The Sword of Damocles

Letting the Sword of Suppression Kill us All

Earlier I reflected on the undercommons of the university and how Sarah Hankins argued for resistance through giving up the fight against the university and its mental health discourse, and instead find the undercommons in the dept of being together in depression and anxiety. In the porn theaters of Delany, we get introduced exclusively to people that have found resistance in giving up. Arly only wants to cum at least three times and the queens giving him warnings have no intention of acting on the perceived dangers. Even the managers of the theaters have given up and are solely showing porn as that generates the most income. To give up is a central tendency of the theaters as well as of the undercommons. Instead of changing the color of the (counter)discourse that are the cement holding the walls up, the undercommons simply gives up. By giving up on the visible fight it finds resistance in the subversive fantasy of the hold, and through the subversive it hopes to get in contact with the surround that is banging on the walls screaming to be let in.

I compare the undercommon act of giving up with letting the sword of Damocles fall. To give up is not to let go of the hope that is at the heart of resisting the fort, but it is to let go of the act of resisting (counter)discourse. To give up is to know that logistical capitalism will appropriate fights in order to further strengthen itself as the ruling way of life. To give up is to know that the only way to get to the surround is by letting oneself be jailed in the underground holds of the fort where the soil is soft enough to dig a tunnel without making any turmoil on the surface, and where the planning and study of the fort's demise is camouflaged behind wailing and laughter.

The language of the undercommons is the language of foreign planets, a distant fantastic past, melodramatic family dramas, superhero cities, depressed college students, high class intrigues, or whatever it is you choose to escape into while reading. This is not only the language of the undercommons, but the language of entering the hold. It is how we escape and manage to imagine something different. This is also why I have chosen to liken giving up to the sword of Damocles and why I will cite the story in full. Because, as Spivak says, we can only use what we already know as we try to imagine what could be, and any attempt to find knowledge in the unknown will require its colonization (1981). By using the story of Damocles as told by Cicero, one of many late and great scholars in the Western tradition, we can use what we already know to subvert our own knowledge and imagination.

The story of Damocles is found in the fifth book of Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputationes*, written sometime in 45 B.C. The story goes that the unhappy and brutal ruler Dionysius gave Damocles the option to enjoy all the riches that comes with being a leader, but only under one condition:

Damocles thought himself very happy. In the midst of this apparatus, Dionysius ordered a bright sword to be let down from the ceiling, suspended by a single horse-hair, so as to hang over the head of that happy man. After which he neither cast his eye on those handsome waiters, nor on the well-wrought plate; nor touched any of the provisions: presently the garlands fell to pieces. At last he entreated the tyrant to give him leave to go, for that now he had no desire to be happy. (Cicero, 2005, p. 186)

The moral of the story is that no happiness can follow from wealth and power if its price is constant apprehension; it is hard to be a leader. Today this might seem like a naïve way of justifying a tyrant's rule, but by reading the story of Damocles through the subversive glasses of the undercommons I find that it is not a story of a tyrant and his lack of happiness but the story of logistical capitalism and its sword of ruin. Damocles was not able to experience the pleasures that the dynasty of Dionysius had gathered through many years of war and ironhanded ruling, just as there is no way of enjoying the spoils of capitalism without its constant treat of ruination. Logistical capitalism requires one to always play within its rules lest you feel the consequences of economic ruinations or being left out of its logistical system of friendship and love. But, to give up is to let the sword fall and to let the veil of ignorance be cut away. That is again why the undercommons is a dangerous neighborhood since all of the dangers of capitalism are present at all times. But where Damocles risked death by

staying put and feasting, the undercommons risks nothing in its subversive resistance as it knows that the swords have long since fallen in the undercommons where the shipped were all pronounced dead on arrival.

In the theaters of Delany all visitors accept their death as they enter the hold. Still, I would be careful by stating that there is an equivalence between the sword falling and them deciding to give up. Instead, one should put the onus of giving up on the theater that houses Arly, the old man in the ticket booth, and the warning queens. It is the collective of cruisers and visitors that have given up, because in the theaters only the subversive is allowed to exist. This subversiveness of already being aware of one's death and to give up is apparent in the contact between Delaney and Al.

Al is an Italian man who Delany always found sitting in the front row. He has a micro penis and never let anyone touch him since he was fiercely straight, although he did not mind people watching him jerk off:

“You know, they were gonna turn me into a girl when I was born—the doctors? But my mom said, ‘No fuckin’ way!’ Thank God I had some skin, or nobody would’ve known what I was!” (...) “When I first come in here, it was just for the damned movies. I didn’t even realize the kind of shit that went on here till I’d been comin’ in for a couple of weeks. (...) But don’t you know, I got me a regular little fan club in here. There must be about six or seven guys come in, they just think I’m the hottest thing since sliced bread. About two hours back, I had me three of ’em in here fightin’ over me, man!” (Delany, 2001, p. 49)

By what little Delany knew of Al, he was far from revolutionary. Still, his being and body inside the walls of the theater cannot help but be a subversive resistance of the undercommon revolution. His micro penis that almost got him turned into a girl, and that later made him exclaim “Thank god I had some skin” leaves a tension within the binary system of sex and gender that no doctor, academic or politician can police away. His refusal of letting any of the gay men touch him coupled with his love for people fighting over who gets to sit the closest and watch him is a clear violation of the logistics of sexuality. But Al does not mind, he has entered the hold of theaters where the sword has already fallen, and no logistics or policies matter when dead.

The theaters that Delany is writing about were places for the subversive, where the logistics of the outside were given up on in favor of dangerous and free spaces to be in. They

never became fully free, as there was the occasional police bust, ticket prices that increased out of ones pay range, and a stolen wallet every now and then, but the theaters were an undercommons where the walls of the ship became visible, the contagion of the undercommons got to run free, and where resistance through the subversive was the only option.

Cruising for Love

Delany argued for the value that comes with the many points of contact that he experienced in his time cruising the porn theaters of New York. A big part of that value is the intraclass love and connections that were all over his many sexual experiences. When Delaney writes about Hoke, his understanding of Hoke's history becomes secondary to the unrequited love he had for the man. As he says himself, "Hoke is a bit hard for me to write about" (p. 97). His interaction with his secret love is a month's long event that involved a few exchanges of words and ultimately led to a sleepover at Hoke's home that did not end up in the orgasmic euphoria that Delaney had hoped for. Hoke's place in the story of "Times Square Blue" becomes clear as Delaney goes on to describe a later point of contact in where he got to ask his former love what he thinks about the destruction of their former meeting place. But Hoke's thoughts on the former theaters are not as interesting as is Delaney's own description of Hoke. Knowing that this is a man Delaney ended up knowing quite well, his description is one that reflects the author's love without a trace of Hoke's later usefulness as firsthand witness:

I first met Hoke in the Capri in the late seventies. A head taller than anyone else in the balcony, in his jeans, denim jacket, and orange workboots, he filled the theater seat with his wide, bear-like body. On a small, cubical head, a walrus to rival Nietzsche's overhung a harelip whose surgical correction went on up through the first half-inch of the right nostril of a nose whose deformity had rendered it Negrowide. Talk about hands? Hoke's are among the biggest I've ever seen. And he was an inveterate nail biter. His cock was notably shorter than mine, but generously uncut. Most foreskins have all the presence of a fold of parachute cloth over a grape. Hoke's, however, I can only call meaty. (p. 79)

Hoke is a former love of Delany, and his love letter to what is at the time of writing nothing more than a long-gone acquaintance is the dangerous sound of playing with desire and possibility – the general antagonism that is the undercommons. His longing and lust towards what he has already been refused echoes back and forth, diminishing but never disappearing. Hoke is the written desire of the shipped that Delaney cannot get rid of. He is the nagging feeling that it is not as it should be. That *what if* that never lets go. As what once was vanish into a Freudian subconscious it is in these floating moments of pain and love, of future and past, and of being with and being alone that we feel with our whole body the residues of the surround beckoning to us from the undercommons.

In their second to last paragraph on the undercommons Harney and Moten brings the reader back from the hells of academia, policy, debt, and logistics to set the records straight – the undercommons is all about love. They show their love of, “ugly and dark and fugitive” Karl Marx, and appropriate his communist goal of balancing need and ability into the general antagonism. To them, the undercommons is all about dangerous, disposed, unhinged love (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 99). This is the love that makes and breaks Delaney in his relationship with Hoke. It is the same love between Babo, his fellow slaves, and their homeland of Senegal that was too powerful to be spoken of. And it is the same love that the theaters of Times Square had for all its visitors. A love all about giving back what was lost and fulfilling the deepest desire of every inhabitant of the fort. A desire that was put into every being as we entered the hold of the ship and were sent forth into the arms of policy, logistics and debt.

This love is not always unrequited, nor is it always asked for or even on one’s mind. Still, the undercommons is a place where love is always present. Delany had several encounters that were without the same all-consuming love he had for Hoke. We saw this in how he spoke about the old man selling tickets, the queens giving out warnings, Arly who sang for his mom and Al, the fiercely straight Italian man who loved being watched by gay men while jerking off.

As a last example of the undercommons of Delany’s theaters and why his book lends itself as such a powerful tool to listen to and be with, I want to visit and reflect on the moment between Delany and Larry.

Larry was a “bushy-headed fellow” (Delany, 2001, p. 60) with a working-class Jewish accent who Delany had never seen before in the Capri theater. Larry stuck out because every now and then he stood up from one of the front rows, stripped naked, and did a 360 degree turn so that everyone could see his buttocks. He knew what he was doing and when Delany

sat down next to him Larry asked him: "You don't think I'm completely bug-fuck crazy, do you?" (p. 61). Delany soon found out that Larry had just been dismissed from hospital and that he "don't really like to take" his medicine, even when it is stolen (p. 62). He also learned that while Larry would let him play with his soft genitals, he had no sexual interest in any of the men cruising the Capri.

In the multitudes of contacts that Delany describes in his book, Larry stands out. His weird habits immediately make him a subject of interest. From an academic gender research point of view, we could easily feel the want to question Larry about his class and cultural background, whether or not he thinks his gay brother (who he once peed in the mouth of on the brother's request) has influenced his sexuality, or why he was in hospital and if he thinks his masculine way of being contributed to him being kicked out? The undercommons on the other hand, is not interested in Larry because of his weird way of being. The undercommons wants him because his study of being in the world is as important, if not more so, than any other person in the theaters. Delany is not a conscious disciple of the undercommons, yet as a scholar in what is most definitely a lowdown maroon he knows to be *with* Larry. Because even when questioning a man off his meds in a porn theater, Delany cannot help but know that they are both the other. When he asks Larry why he takes his clothes off, he gets an answer that could only be given by someone who has studied life and survival every moment awake and asleep:

"Oh," he said. "For the stimulation. So I don't . . . you know, go to sleep." He took another breath. "Or disappear. Or just . . . drift away—completely. That's why I gotta take my clothes off." (...) "What happens if you don't?" "I told you, I just drift away. I fall asleep, maybe even stop breathing . . . and die. I'll just turn into some smoke, and then I won't be here anymore. It's come close to happening, a few times, now." He looked at me. "I don't mean really. But my heart slows down, way down; I stop breathing—and I'll die. So I have to do weird shit—take off my clothes. Lie down in the middle of the sidewalk." He chuckled. (...) "It doesn't have to be a whole lot. It's better when it's just a little bit. You can even laugh—that's okay. It's better when they laugh than when they get all upset and crazy about it. But you feel the shock—and this energy goes out from you. And I get the energy. It keeps me awake. It holds me together, so I don't just drift away and disappear—or stop breathing." Suddenly he stood up, turned as though he were about to leave—only, once more, he dropped his pants below his buttocks. (p. 63)

After their short conversation Delany buys him a sandwich and later, when he has helped Larry gather energy a couple of more times with his always shocking performance, he says goodbye and leaves. He never sees Larry again and wonders how someone in his state even survived two nights on the street outside the hospital. But Larry will always survive, and he can never leave, because Larry is the general antagonism of the undercommons. He is always in a fluid state where his desires and possibilities are in a constant call and response with the surround, always planning the forts imminent demise.

This is not an argument for the undercommons to be used as a tool that can magically turn tragic lives into heroic and inspiring tales of tomorrow. The undercommons knows the pain we are all under, it is aware of how that pain is unfairly felt more by some than by others, and how this difference is built upon a system of logistics and policies only visible to those who no longer fight it. What I am arguing for is that the undercommons is a place of love where Larry gets to be Larry. Where what Posocco called surface reading is the only form of reading we can offer Larry. By only offering to listen to what he says the undercommons does not wonder how Larry survived. Instead, the undercommons offers him refuge and wonders if he would like to teach others the skill of gathering energy. The undercommons wonders if Larry might in fact be the only person stimulated and alive and welcomes others to take part in his disposed study group of life.

My aim was to search for the undercommons in Delany's memoirs, and as I entered the porn theaters from his memory, I was welcomed into an undercommons of radical resistance, subversion, and agency. Even though Delany's goal of arguing for a change in discourse is counter to the undercommon mantra of giving up, the undercommons was found by searching for the sound of the break. The sound was found by listening to the surface as well as the in-between and unveiled not only the power of post-politics, but the possibility of resistance and agency as post-politics is made into a politics understood. As one enters Delany's porn theaters, we encountered several people who in their own way played with the general antagonism. This play subverted the heterosexual matrix and made it possible to find agency and power in dangerous spaces of solidarity. As one enters the undercommons inside the porn theaters, the rules of the fort are subverted in favor of the rules of the other. The theaters do not try to make whole what is broken, it finds the value and threat in choosing to stay othered. The poison of the surround is shared as one enters the hold of theaters as the shipped, and as one chooses desire and fantasy over the fort's possibilities and rationalities. By studying and

listening to the fantasies of the hold that is Delany's porn theaters, one gives up on the fight against hegemonic (counter)discourses and their powerful institutions, choosing the resistance of subversion.

4

Wayward Wilderness

Like a true nature's child

We were born

Born to be wild

We can climb so high

I never wanna die

- Born to be Wild, Steppenwolf, 1968

Wildness is a research field with an age-old history that has recently been appropriated and born anew within critical research fields. On the one hand the wild has been an important strand of research within Western philosophic history with Aristotle, Plato and Descartes writing about the divide between the wild and tamed. In modern times Arne Næss, Alfred North Whitehead, and Arne Johan Vetlesen have written extensively on the wild as that which surrounds us and have made the wild an important axis of environmental philosophy. Within natural sciences the wild has long been a focus of attention, both as that which is to be governed and understood – animals, our brain, diseases, the sun, and outer space—and as a description of what can never be fully understood by definition of natural sciences own axioms – black matter, quantum physics, uncountable sets, and chaos theory. Gender studies, queer studies, Black studies, and its different iterations have begun to see wildness as a field of its own in the last ten years. Jack Halberstam and seasoned performance and Black Studies researcher Tavia Nyong'o have spearheaded the field, and they also credit late friend and colleague José Muñoz. That wildness is still in its preliminary stages within critical gender studies and its neighboring fields is evident in *South Atlantic Quarterly's* special issue on wildness. The issue is edited by Halberstam and Nyong'o and almost all the articles reference articles by the editors as their link to wildness. Many of the articles are appropriated to be within the field of wildness by Halberstam and Nyong'o in their introduction and never explicitly mention wildness as its own field of thought and method. Instead Halberstam and Nyong'o is looking to make science wild by rewilding theory through appropriation.

To better understand what this appropriation entails and what wildness theory is, I will look at how it is defined by Halberstam and Nyong'o. The core of wildness theory is that

there is knowledge in the wild, and that this knowledge is in opposition to the society of private property and neo-libertarianism. What that knowledge is and how it takes form is dependent on the researcher and their understanding of the wild. In their introduction to wildness theory, Halberstam and Nyong'o discuss the colonial past of wildness as the dichotomy of civilization and why that past makes wildness a fitting place to start one's quest for all that has been hidden by the hegemony:

Wildness has certainly functioned as a foil to civilization, as the dumping ground for all that white settler colonialism has wanted to declare expired, unmanageable, undomesticated, and politically unruly. For us, that makes wildness all the more appealing. Like another problematical term – *queer* – *wildness* names, while rendering partially opaque, what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins. (...) Wildness is where the environment speaks back, where communication bows to intensity, where worlds collide, cultures clash, and things fall apart. (Halberstam & Nyong'o, 2018, p. 453)

It is natural for Halberstam, a seasoned academic of Queer Theory, to note the connections between queer and wildness – especially when he later goes on to credit the whole field of wildness to a conversation with José Muñoz. As a field, Queer Theory, has always been about the margins of the hegemonic. The same goes for wildness, although where queer is associated with sexuality and gender, they trace wildness back to the colonial subject.

But the wild is not only that which the colonial machine forced into the “civil” world. The wild is also a place of sorrow, happiness, stillness, and storms. bell hooks starts her poetry collection *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* (hooks, 2012) by reflecting on the wilds of her childhood home in Kentucky:

Sublime silence surrounds me. I have walked to the top of the hill, plopped myself down to watch the world around me. I have no fear here, in this world of trees, weeds, and growing things. This is the world I was born into: a world of wild things. In it the wilderness in me speaks. I am wild. I hear my elders caution mama, telling her that she is making a mistake, letting me “run wild,” letting me run with my brother as though no gender separates us. We are making our childhood together in the Kentucky hills, experiencing the freedom that comes from living away from civilization. Even as a child I knew that to be raised in the country, to come from the backwoods, left

one without meaning or presence. Growing up we did not use terms like “hillbilly.” Country folk lived on isolated farms away from the city; backwoods folks lived in remote areas, in the hills and hollers. (p. 1)

To hooks the wild is places without human intervention and she uses it to make sense of her own life as a wild being in a tamed world. If the power of the undercommon fantasy is as powerful as Harney and Moten first made it seem, and as I found it to be when analyzing the subverted lives inside Delany’s porn theaters, it beckons the question of whether the fantasy of the hold is wild? Through investigating the wild and wayward lives written by Saidiya Hartman I will be researching the contributions that wildness can have on the undercommons. Does wildness further impress the radical ability of imagination in the hold?

Before I move on to Hartman and her wild and wayward fabulations, I will discuss a side of wildness that is not often connected to the wild theory of Halberstam and Nyong’o to further elaborate on wildness as an axis of understanding that is inherent to grasp the world even on the rational terms that go counter to the undercommons. I will take a moment to consider the wild side of theoretical mathematics and how the strictest of the natural sciences can help the-no-barred hold field of wildness defined by Halberstam and Nyong’o.

In the huge field of mathematics there is no term that exists without multiple definitions that all depend on the rules of the space you are operating within. The same goes for wild mathematics. In the world of matrices, it is a categorization of matrices all with the same properties, it is also a multiplicative semigroup and a term used to connect all mathematical findings found outdoors in the wild. Wild mathematics is not one thing. Being well aware of the different uses of the wild category in mathematics Raffaella Mulas, group leader at Max Planck Institute for Mathematics in the Sciences, seeks to find the lowest common denominator between different understandings in her paper “A Survey on Wild Mathematics” (2020b). She finds that one definition (she calls it Definition 1) is that the wild is all that “gives us a sense of *Monstrosity*” (p. 1). Then, after listing and explaining six different understandings of what could be categorized as wild mathematicsⁱ she reflects on them all being *fractals*, “objects for which zooming in always reveals the same pattern. Fractals are therefore characterized by self-similarity on different scales and, by Definition 1, they are wild” (p. 6). The monstrosity is found in the never-ending patterns that is fractals and

ⁱ She defines both irrational numbers and the cantor set as wild. Both are vital building blocks to both theoretical and practical mathematics.

how they by definition cannot ever be written down or shown without a large majority of the fractals pattern being hidden. In connection with the field of wildness that I am looking to explore and use in this thesis the definition of fractals as wild and monstrous is important as it underlines with strict mathematical rules how the wild cannot ever be fully understood, and that you cannot have the wild without its core tenet of being elusive, never-ending, and monstrous. Most importantly, mathematics shows that no matter how strict the set of rules are, there will always exist wild knowledge that is needed in order to explain the civilized and not-wild. The wild can never be policed or put into a system of logistics that tames it, as that forces the shutdown of said system.

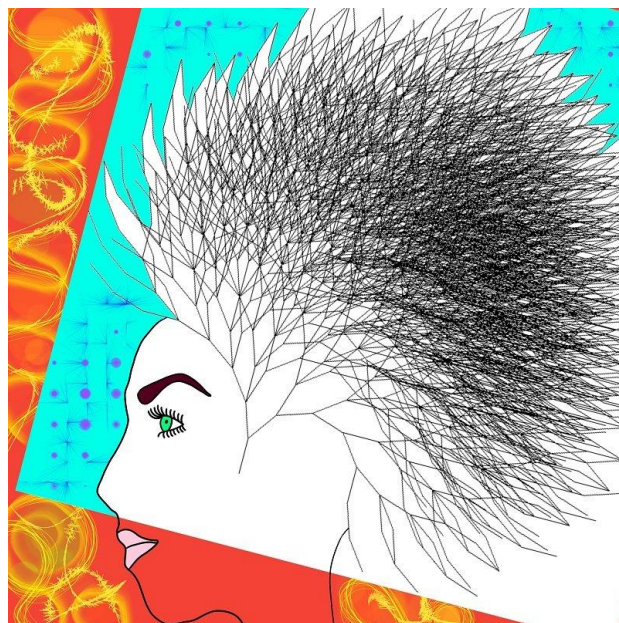


Figure 2. Fractal Hair (Mulas, 2020a)

The wild is similar to the surround as they both give access to that which we no longer live amongst. Both exist as residues in us all and is a place of both danger and safety at the same time. Also, the notion of the logical and rational are both terms that do not exist in either the wild or the surround. The logical and rational is part of the policing, neo-liberal, individuating world of the fort, which is everything the surround is not, and everything wildness fights to not be. In the divide between human rational and robotic instinctual animality that leads back to Aristotle and which Descartes naturalized, they would both choose to be on the side of the robotic animals. There is no rational to the wild, and whatever logical structures might exist in the surround will be of a wild form we can only start to imagine.

The wild also differs from the surround. Wildness exists both within and outside the fort. Wildness exists as residual memories and subconscious instincts while being an always evolving place and way of being inside the system that tries to control it. Although the wild as we know it is disappearing and changing at a rate we have lost control of, we can still step into the wild that exists all around us. bell hooks shows us how wildness can be both a physical space and a place we travel to in our minds (which might not even have trees).

The importance of wildness to the undercommons is as a form of knowledge production and a place of study. As I will shortly give multiple examples of the undercommons can be found within wildness theory and the stories of the wild, and just as I came in contact with the undercommons by reading and listening to the surface of Delaney's memoirs, Saidiya Hartman's wild historical research opens up new ways of listening to the undercommons of early 20th century New York and Philadelphia.

Wayward Fabulations

Saidiya Hartman is an academic who has focused on writing the stories of those you can only find traces of in the margins of ship-ledgers, hospitals, mental institutions, and prisons. Her newest longform work, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (Hartman, 2019), is the untold stories of Black feminine people in New York and Philadelphia from the turn of the 20th century and into the 1940's. The work is based on extensive historical research, but where Hartman before has chosen to ground her work both as classic academic history, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (1997), and a personal story where she traces her own origin tale, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), she defines her newest work as speculative history, or critical fabulation in her own words (2018, p. 470). The book is a collection of stories, many about people without any physical connection to each other, written by Hartman as a way of imagining the lives of those that according to the hegemonic archive did little else other than being incarcerated for prostitution. This is her way of filling in the void left by a history of policy and logistics who only cares for the wellbeing of its machinery. But as I have shown earlier and as Hartman knows all too well, this void is also the silent action of protest and resistance that is to not fit in to the neat picture of modernity.

Hartman's archive of critical fabulations is an undercommon archive that she finds within the hegemonic archive similar to how Fiona Lee, and Coleman and McCaffrey found the undercommon archive within hegemonic institutions. But where Lee saw the undercommons in a private Malaysian archive, and Coleman and McCaffrey contributed to the undercommon archive by capturing fugitive movements, Hartman finds her way to the archive through her own writing of critical fabulations.

Hartman's choice of writing critical fabulations fits well with her goal to find the wild desires of forgotten souls. This is underlined by her own reflections on choice of method:

This book recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes. It is a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia. (...) The endeavor is to recover the insurgent ground of these lives; to exhume open rebellion from the case file, to untether waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology; to affirm free motherhood (reproductive choice), intimacy outside the institution of marriage, and queer and outlaw passions; and to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable. (...) The wild idea that animates this book is that young black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise. (Hartman, 2019, pp. XIII-XV)

Her reflections bring to mind Donna Haraway's statement that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway, 2006, p. 117) from "A Cyborg Manifesto". Not because Hartman's fabulations are fantasy, but because she bases her project on the theory that all stories are fabulations. Fellow feminist and late science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin, saw her fantastical and futuristic medium of choice as a way into the unimaginable and wild that Hartman is looking for. When reading science-fiction Le Guin knew that she was interacting with a partial truth of imagination:

I know that I am going to meet a personal variation on reality; a scene less real than the world around us, a partial view of reality. But I know also that by that partiality, that independence, that distancing from the shared experience, it will be new: a revelation. (...) It will not tell the truth; but it will be imagination. (Guin, 1980, p. 20)

Le Guin uses “real” and “truth” as adjectives describing literature that accurately describe the world as it is. Science fiction is not aiming to describe the “real” and “true” world in the naturalistic sense, but neither is Hartman. Hartman knows that the real world is anything but real. In fact, her fabulations work, much like science fiction, as real space for her subjects to be in and as a world in which she, the author and researcher, gets to actively interact and be with the Black girls in 1920s Harlem, New York. The resulting book is the aftermath of her conversations. It is an undercommons of history set in a place just as fantastical as the distant planets of Le Guin that lets go of the optical illusion pointed out by Haraway. Le Guin needs to travel lightyears in order to imagine her ungendered people in *Left Hand of Darkness* (Guin, 2018), but Hartman manages the unimaginable by using her feminist imagination to imagine a world in which we get to speak with the surround through people of the past of whom the world never cared for. A wild and fantastical world, filled with danger, resistance, and radical new knowledge of being.

Wayward Lives are critical fabulations that both call and respond to the reader. Through the simultaneous call and response, readers are able to fabulate and play with the general antagonism of desire and possibility. It is by allowing oneself to be lost in the world of Hartman that we enter her wayward undercommons in which one sees the living world as the confabulation it is and her fabulated place as a world of politics understood. A world where the surround is at our fingertips and the undercommon revolution threatens to tear down the walls.

The Wayward Undercommons

Hartman defines waywardness in a chapter solely dedicated to what wayward could describe, while making sure the term stays porous and viscous. She is aware of the dictionary definition of wayward as, “disposed to go against the wishes or advice of others or what is proper or reasonable; intractable; self-willed; perverse; (of a child) disobedient, refractory” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-c), and appropriates it in order to transform wayward into a verb that describes a productive survival strategy of dispossession:

Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse. To love what is not

loved. To be lost to the world. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is the lived experience of enclosure and segregation, assembling and huddling together. It is the directionless search for a free territory; it is a practice of making and relation that enfolds within the policed boundaries of the dark ghetto; it is the mutual aid offered in the open-air prison. It is a queer resource of black survival. It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live. Waywardness is a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. (...) Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of *what might be*. (Hartman, 2019, pp. 227-228)

To be wayward, or the act of waywardness, can be a choice of life, but can also be the act of living to the best of one's ability within the fort. Muñoz defined disidentification as an act of survival that many partake in subconsciously in order to survive both as a queer of color and a neoliberal subject. Similarly, Hartman's wayward Black girls in her fabulated world of New York and Philadelphia do not all live consciously wayward. To be wayward can be the choice to live adrift outside and to the best of one's ability disengage from the expected norms. It can also be to live in a world that refused you entry into the hegemony even though all you ever wanted was to engage with its expected norms. Thus, your only choice of life becomes the wayward. Hartman is interested in both forms of waywardness. What does the riotous girl know that we do not? What knowledge of life drives her when she drifts around town late at night living wayward while knowing with certainty that she will soon be discovered by an undercover police officer who loves nothing more than handcuffing all those Black girls who do nothing with their life? And what does the forgotten and nameless nine-year-old who dies after being sexually assaulted know about life and death? Hartman's critical fabulations are reflections on the wayward living of revolutionists, but it is also the desire to give back agency to the wayward people who only exist as desireless datapoints in archive.

That said, Hartman is not a naïve optimist who believes all lives are worth living. She knows the horror of not being valued by the machine and that the many lives lost to the tragedy of the logistical theater of capitalism cannot simply be made whole again by her imagining desire back into their lives. Hartman is arguing that living a horrid life does not take away the critical possibility of knowledge of the wild and wayward. Or said in the words of the undercommons, she knows that there is nowhere where the surround is as visible as in the lives of those that fall into the cracks of society because they have been policed away into the nothingness of the hold. Hartman calls her book an album and says that "the album

assembled here is an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise” (p. XV). It is a dream of potentiality and possibility that plays with the general antagonism; an undercommons of wild wayward resistance.

The Antagonizing Desire of the Hold

A year before the release of her album of waywardness, a chapter from her upcoming book was published in the South Atlantic Quarterly’s issue *Wildness* (Halberstam & Nyongó, 2018). The article, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner”, differs from the chapter by the same name published in her book. There are no pictures, and she has omitted several fabulated exchanges. Moreover, the text found in the journal focuses less on the story of the chapter’s main protagonist, Esther Brown, and more on the politics of her project. I note the difference because the addition of the political contexts in a special wildness issue makes the wild waywardness of Esther Brown explicit in a way that is not available on a surface reading of her critical fabulation in the book. I will return to her stories all on their own, but it is worth reflecting on Esther Brown within the context of an explicitly political article. In my reflections I am referring to the Esther Brown that has come alive in the fabulations of Hartman, not the Esther Brown found in the back of the archive. It is the undercommons of Hartman and her wild and wayward friends that I am listening to in the hope that they will lead me into their undercommons of death, agency, anarchy, wildness, and song.

Esther Brown was known to her friends as a woman who was always there and never shied away from being the center of the party. To her mom she was a failure who had gotten pregnant too early with a man who refused her proposal, and someone who could not keep a job for more than a couple of weeks before she was bored. Esther herself would agree with both; she did love to dance and party with her friends and did not care that she was not married to the men she went home with, and she knew she was a failure without a job living with her sister and grandmother. Although, she did love living with them. But Esther knew why she did not have a job:

[She] hated to work, the conditions of work as much as the very idea of work. Her reasons for quitting said as much. Housework: *Wages too small*. Laundry work: *Too hard*. Ran away. General Housework: *Tired of work*. Laundress:

Too hard. Sewing buttons on shirts: Tired of work. Dishwasher: Tired of work.
Housework: *Man too cross.* Live-in-service: I might as well be a slave.
(Hartman, 2018, p. 467, Emphasis by Hartman when citing source material)

Esther Brown lived the general antagonism of the undercommons. Esther is the fluidity of the undercommons. She was aware of her little family's needs and knew she had the ability to fulfill those needs. But Esther also knew that she needed to dance, that it was for the better to live with her grandmother and sister instead of an angry mother or the lost father of her child. And she knew that she could dance, that she could give and receive the love needed from her friends and family. A family she knew she could choose. Every day of Esther's life was a battle with the antagonism of living in a world that polices what you need and where the ability to provide for that need depends on how well one fits into the logistical machine, all while living with the desire to dance, cry, and sing as if one was no longer a singular being, but a plural wild mess of waywardness. That is why when Hartman introduces Esther it is with the flair of the revolutionist:

Esther Brown never pulled a soapbox onto the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to make a speech about autonomy, the global reach of the color line, involuntary servitude, free motherhood, or the promise of a future world, but she well understood that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew firsthand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than what she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable. Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy. (pp. 465-466)

This is the anarchy of desire found in the undercommons. Where one plays with the general antagonism of desire and possibility as they become fluid and in motion. But to live them out is to be the antagonist of the fort. Nothing is more antagonistic than to refuse to be governed by logistics and policies. And nothing refuses those systems more than exclaiming loudly that no punishment is harsh enough to silence her desire to dance and be with her people on her own terms in her own language. As her ex-husband stated in a letter of apparent love while she was suffering the consequences of wayward living, “[I hope you have learned the] *long lost lesson in the wild world of fun and pleasure*” (p. 477, Emphasis by Hartman when citing

source material). Had Esther written him back I am sure she would have written in bold letters, “YES!” Cause she had learned the pleasures of giving in to her desires and knew that nothing could clench her thirst for the *wild world of fun and pleasure*.

Applying Posocco’s undercommon surface reading to the statement of her ex-husband I find the poisonous infection of a politics understood as well as residues of the post-political, even though it was written centuries before the term was first coined. Her ex-husband, who she willingly divorced, was not the father of her baby. Still, had he been able to love her like she needed, the courts would have been kinder to her; a single young woman with a kid walking around at night is a lot more dangerous than a stay-at-home mom with a happy husband. His own disciplining words of hope makes it apparent that he is aware of this fact, and that he is caught up in the logistics of how to behave and live in accordance with the civility and stature that society demanded of you. Post-politics, the politics that rule without discussion, was well integrated into the world of early 20th century capitalism.

There is also evidence of surround. Esther’s ex-husband knows about the wild world of fun and pleasure. He cannot help but deny it, but he also cannot help but cling on to it. No residual post-politics, no police officer, no threat of death can bring him out of the hold. The hold seeps through the cracks infecting everyone it comes in contact with. It knew to hide its true intentions behind words of encouragement and disciplining love in order to make it through the guards watching over Esther, making sure she never got a glimpse of what surrounded her on the outside.

Incarcerated and Free

On the night of July 17th, 1917, Esther Brown was caught red handed by an undercover police officer. She was sitting in the hallway talking to a boy while Rebecca, her friend, snuggled up with Brady, the undercover police officer. The consequence for being caught in the midst of sitting down with another boy in the hallway was an indictment for vagrancy under the Tenement House Law (Hartman, 2018, p. 473). To be vagrant is to be without home and lawful income. Esther who lived with her grandmother and sister, did not have a home as she was not living with the father of her baby. Esther was wayward and vagrant.

Hartman never connects vagrancy and waywardness. There are discrepancies for why Hartman would like to keep waywardness and vagrancy separate, the biggest being that

vagrancy was a punishable offence and an “expansive and virtually all-encompassing category, like *the manner of walking* in Ferguson” (p. 473). Although its origins came many centuries before the slave trade, Hartman is quick to note how vagrancy is part of the long history of a discriminatory legal and justice system looking to control Black bodies that goes back to when slavery was first banned. By keeping the terms distinct waywardness defends itself from being defined by the system it tries to avoid.

Hartman also argues for the necessity of connecting the systemic system of control that led to Michael Brown Jr. being killed in Ferguson in 2014 with the same system that incarcerated and killed Black women in the 1910s for sitting around in hallways. In doing so she opens the door of possibility and welcomes the reader into the undercommons where they might be lucky and sit in and listen to a conversation between Esther and Michael talking about the rewards and punishments of ever daring to be wayward enough to just walk or sit around in hallways.

While Hartman’s definition of being wayward is a revolutionary way of being and exploring the unknown—the *what ifs*—connecting it to vagrancy keeps waywardness grounded in a reality that needs to hide the power of *what ifs* behind a wall of logistics, policies, and other historic forms of governing. Because to be wayward is never an act of wilderness in the surround. On the contrary to be wayward is to be uncomfortably seated within the walls of the fort. What makes waywardness revolutionary is its wild and dispossessed ability of making the *what ifs* seem possible even when knowing they are not; to play with the general antagonism. That is also the ability of being wayward that Hartman makes visible in her conversations with multiple riotous girls. She knows that we cannot afford to overlook the knowledge of subversion and revolutionary potential that is hidden in the never-ending list of people who lived and live wayward. This knowledge becomes even more potent if we refuse to separate it from its criminal and unlawful axis.

I Wanna Scream and Shout and Let It All Out

Esther Browns case of vagrancy was not a long case. Hartman could not find a record of the proceedings, and since there was no jury and the police was the only needed witness, both she and her friend Rebecca were sentenced to three years at Bedford Hills.

Bedford Hills was a reformatory whose goal was to rescue girls from the streets, and where the majority of the incarcerated were colored girls as they were the most likely to

need their help. As expected, Bedford Hills was a reformatory only in that it tried its hardest to traumatize the girls into behaving by their extremely strict rules. If you were caught laughing when you should not, or if the guards found you disrespectful, which they often did when interacting with the Black inmates, you knew to expect punishment in the form of isolation, beatings and losing privileges. If you were seen as particularly troublesome, you could assume that they would drag you into the disciplinary building to hang you by your hands with your toes just touching the ground. Bedford Hills was a place of nightmares. (Hartman, 2018, pp. 479-480; New York State Commission of Prisons, 1921, pp. 74-78; Staff Correspondence, 1999a, 1999b)

A dreadful and cosmic irony of the undercommons is that it is most visible and loud in nightmares. Bedford Hills was no exception. The undercommons became most apparent during the last month of 1919 when the screams and shouts in the hold were punished to the surface where they erupted in a sound strike that the New York Tribune reported as “deafening”. Stating that “Almost every window of the cottage was crowded with negro women who were shouting, angry and laughing hysterically” and that “philosophy and soothing words had no effect upon the wailing, shrieking chorus” (Staff Staff Correspondence, 1999b, p. 22). As with Esther’s ex-husband a surface reading shows us the residues of post-politics. The staff of the New York Tribune finds it important to note that “philosophy and soothing words” have been tried to no avail. What is meant by the word philosophy is not easy to know for certain, but one can imagine it entails a form of preaching about the virtues of a good American woman living in the civilized world. A surface reading of the news report also contains the poison of the possibility of play with the general antagonism. The staff describes the women as a “wailing, shrieking chorus” and thus are themselves guilty of unknowingly giving them the power of a chorus. A chorus that “spoke with one voice” (Hartman, 2018, p. 483) against the horrors of not only Bedford Hill, but the system that guided them there. A guide often seen in the form of police officers, social workers and tenants, and a guide that was always there as that nagging feeling telling them to stop living wayward. A guide that is the invisible form of policy and logistics armed with the knowledge that it cannot allow waywardness to persist as its revolutionary potential is too dangerous.

While it might be a horrific nightmarish irony that the worse you have it the more available the undercommons becomes, it also makes visible the wild and wayward sounds of the undercommons knowledge of the *what ifs* that is invaluable when planning the

undercommon revolution. This is apparent when Hartman describes the choir of the noise strike at Bedford Hill:

Each voice blended with the others in a common tongue. Every utterance and shout made plain the truth: riot was the only remedy within reach. The *black noise* (...) provided the language. (...) It was the sound track to a history that hurt. (...) The aesthetic inheritance of “jargon and nonsense” was nothing if not a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances—struggle and flight, death and refusal became music or moaning or joyful noise or discordant sound. The refrain were redolent with all the lovely plans about what they would do once they were free. (Hartman, 2018, pp. 483, 484, 486)

A choir of noise in late 1910s New York that reaches not only back to slave songs, but across to their creole comrades who found subversion and resistance in speed and silence. They also reach forward into the ears of Hartman and all her readers and become the shipped trapped in the hold visualized. The women scream at us, letting us know that there exist other possibilities; that there exists a surround and that the *what ifs* can lead us there. In the undercommons of Esther Brown and her fellow inmates at Bedford Hills, we get the opportunity that they never got but still stole for themselves: to be reformed back into wayward and wild beings. When Harvey and Moten state that “the multitude is already productive for itself” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 77) it is the multitude of the choir sounding from the undercommons. Esther Brown never wrote anything down, and is no revolutionary hero cited on placards today, but that did not hinder her from producing and planning against the fort. It did not hinder her from living her wayward life to its fullest and it did not hinder her from screaming out from behind bars infecting all who listened – and all those listening now – with the poison that is undercommon study and planning.

Criminal Justice

Before I move on to listen to one of the other subjects in conversation with Hartman, I must reflect on both mine and Hartman’s positive reading and communication with Esther Brown regarding her incarceration. Because even though we listen, and even though we see the

power in her waywardness and her choir, it does not take away from her the unjust treatment and punishment. Even so, the question to ask is not what could we do to make justice for Esther Brown? The undercommon question is found all over Hartman's research: tell me about yourself, Esther Brown?

In the spring of 2022, while writing this thesis, I participated in a digital seminar with scholar Báýò Akómoláfé (Akómoláfé, 2022 2022). Akómoláfé is the founder and chief curator of *The Emergence Network*, a post-activism collective seeking new ways to tackle the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism through subverting the crisis in on itself. In the seminar he was presenting his concept of *making sanctuary*. The seminar and the concept of making sanctuary was one of those experiences you know will influence your writing even though his work might never be referenced explicitly because it falls outside of the scope of one's writing at the time. He asked one question in particular that I found bothering as I knew it was a question the theory of the undercommons should be able to answer easily, but which I could not seem to find an answer to. That question was: "what would justice look like for Bakhita?" Bakhita is the given name of a slave-woman whose remains were found under the foundations of a house in Brazil when they got ready to host the Olympics in 2016. Bakhita, like Esther Brown, has no voice in the judicial system of Brazil, or anywhere else, and thus cannot claim any justice for herself. She might be represented by others or become part of a bigger group of remains who gets represented by somebody else, but she can herself never claim any power or agency in the name of justice. Akómoláfé knew the fault in his own questioning and noted that the power of Bakhita is that she has already gotten justice as it is justice that brought her to Brazil, and justice that buried her deep in a forgotten place. Arguing that justice is an inherently flawed concept that will always be connected to its colonial past.

The problem with justice in Akómoláfé's account is that power is never given to Bakhita as she is deemed unavailable to answer. That is why Hartman gives Esther Brown her own place to explain and tell us about herself. In asking her the questions she gives her the onus of agency and embraces the undercommon task of listening without transcoding. All conversations are predicated on vast imaginations of the participants and the world we live in. The agency given to living humans is given through the act of listening and interpretation, a transcoding done on the terms of the fort. But in the undercommons we know that all who wants can speak, and that the listener must engage on the speakers' terms. Akómoláfé knows the danger of making idioms out of Bakhita's semiotic system, but in the undercommons the task is not to make idiom but to let generalized semiotic systems be in their undesirable and

incomprehensible state. This is an act of giving and receiving, of call and response, that Hartman through her extensive and grounding conversations with riotous girls shows to be manageable.

When Hartman engages in conversation with Esther Brown letting her tell her own story, it is justice that is served. It is the justice of the undercommons where you can never ask for what is never given:

Justice is possible only where it is never asked, in the refuge of bad debt, in the fugitive public of strangers not communities, of undercommons not neighbourhoods, among those who have been there all along from somewhere. To seek justice through restoration is to return debt to the balance sheet and the balance sheet never balances. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 63)

This is the justice given to Esther Brown. It is a subversive justice too dangerous to be brought up in the courtrooms where its visibility will simply make it disappear. This is the justice of the undercommons where it never gets the sweet taste of restoration but instead takes the form of study and planning. It is the wild justice of waywardness in the hold that infects all she comes in contact with.

Forgotten, Gone, and Together

In the chapter “A Minor Figure,” Hartman introduces the reader to the case of an unnamed girl of her chorus who lived a life in Philadelphia only available to forgettable Black girls. To be unnamed and forgotten is not easy, but “anonymity enables her to stand in for all the others. The minor figure yields to the chorus. All the hurt and the promise of the wayward are hers to bear” (Hartman, 2019, p. 16). Hartman is not looking to further erase by watering down the girl’s history. But she is admitting to the fact that all her fabrications are drawn from her own experience and the stories she has found in her research. Her anonymity demands of Hartman that she draws from her own fantasy to imagine how her life was lived as she has no personal information to build on. No knowledge of her family, origins, or friends, and no knowledge of what her favorite sweets were, if she liked to dance fast or slow, or if she preferred rain over sunshine. The girl is a monstrous fractal of forgotten history and memory repeating infinitely. With the language of the girl gone, Hartman’s only choice is to wander

along the infinite spiral of history hoping to catch glimpses of a semiotic system lost in the break to the hegemonic archive of transcoded idioms.

At this point I would like to remember the captain of the slaves who mutinied against their captors and who refused talk when captured and sentenced, Babo. I reflected on the power of refusing to talk and to make oneself understood as Babo knew that the biggest threat he could be, was the threat of refusal and appropriation into the Western (counter)discourse. But what Babo did was importantly a decision made by him. The forgotten girls of New York and Philadelphia that sing in Hartman's choir did not make this same decision. They are forgotten because they were deemed too unimportant to be remembered. Still, there is a power in the forgotten that Hartman shows by giving them the opportunity to teach their way of waywardness forward. That is the undercommon power in refusal. What Moten and Harney borrow from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2013, p. 124) and make the first right of the undercommons: "At the bottom, the first right is the right to refuse" (Spivak, 2016). Spivak is referring to her students in an interview talking about her teachings in villages in India, and how the first things she tells them is that they all have the right to refuse her and to hate her. Because she can never unlearn her own history as a high cast Indian with education from the US and global recognition as a decolonial academic. Thus, she cannot help but bring the (counter)discourse of the fort with her in her teachings. But by giving them the right to refuse, she gives them the right to keep in touch with the surround.

The unnamed girl of Hartman's choir has no rights but her right to refuse. She refuses the work of a well-known historian and stays in the shadows and cracks. She refuses to be seen as one, and by always being more, as part of the choir, she refuses to speak for herself. Her screams, murmurs, laughs, and songs can be heard all over in the undercommons, but you cannot hear one without listening to them all. The choir refuses to be broken down, transcoded, or understood. Their knowledge is theirs to keep, and only participants of the choir get access to the sheet paper.

In her research of the unnamed girl Hartman found what she thinks is a picture of the kitchenette the girl lived in. It is a small place with the furniture placed against the wall as to expose most of the floor, and a single window. The picture makes it into Hartman's list of pictures of small apartments. The list is too long to count and made her wonder about the life lived in and around these apartments:

You make do and try to thrive in what's nearly unlivable. It is the Black Belt: You are confined here. You huddle here and make a life together. In the hallway, you wonder

will the world always be as narrow as this, two walls threatening to squeeze and crush you into nothingness. So you imagine other worlds, sometimes not even better, but at least different from this. You and your friends hatch plots of escape and dereliction. This black interior is a space for thought and action, for study and vandalism, for love and trouble. (...) It is ugly and brutalizing and it is where you stay. It doesn't matter if you don't love the place; you love the people residing there. It is as close to a home as you'll get, it is a transient resting place, an impossible refuge, for those forced out, pushed on, displaced always. They stay but never settle. (Hartman, 2019, p. 23)

The apartments have infected Hartman with the surround and brought the shipped to the forefront of her writing as she willingly chooses to move her place of writing to the hold. When she states that this is as close to home as they will get, it is more than a reflection of their lives in New York and Philadelphia, it is also a statement about their original homes that have long been colonized and ruined after they were brought over in the hold of the ship. The apartments of the forgotten are the hold of the slave ships brought on land by the captures and appropriated by the taken. In the hallways and one-room apartments of love, sorrow, song, and crying you find “a space for thought and action, for study and vandalism.” These are the physical manifestations of the undercommons. They are filled to the brim with people who cannot help but live wayward and wild. The rooms, hallways, porches, and streets of the apartments are the choir benches where the gospel of home – the surround – is sung loud in wayward tones while the feet dance with wild intensions. In the small one-room apartments the sword of Damocles never got the chance to be erected before the choir sung aloud in dissonance: we give up. The choir is not naïve and knows that this is a desperate and dangerous neighborhood. It is a neighborhood of promises they know will never be resolved; thus, they cannot refuse it because it was all always a lie. They turn refusal into subversion, as that is all they can do. They take what they get and start planning and studying. That is the secret that Hartman knows and why she asks them for help in understanding how we can ever become the *what ifs* of the surround. This is also why we need the undercommons as it is the place where dead, living, known, and forgotten all are together. Already in deep study. Planning the end of the world.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

The picture of the unnamed girl was found when movers emptied the apartment of photographer, painter and known art academic Thomas Eakins. Eakins is widely known as a major figure in the history of American photography, especially known for his black and white photos; he was, and is, a man of power. It is no wonder that a small photo of an unnamed Black girl no more than eight years old declining naked on a sofa while staring intensely into the camera caught the attention of Hartman. The picture is not taken by choice of the girl and makes one wonder as Hartman did: “did she tremble? Did the painter hover above the sofa and arrange her limbs? Were his hands big and moist? Did they leave a viscous residue on the surface of her skin?” (Hartman, 2019, p. 26). The picture is blown up to fit as the background of Hartman’s text. As a reader, it is impossible to not look at. But by making the picture the background Hartman invites the girl’s pain into her writing. The two pages that the girl sits across is an undercommons where the only truth is the commodity of Black girls, and where all knowledge production must battle with the (counter)discourse of the picture. Hartman is no longer able to simply ask what wayward virtue the girl can teach us. Because whatever wild knowledge the girl has within her is hidden behind centuries of slave trade, colonialization, and commodification. It demands Hartman to ask out loud: “How does one describe the life that oscillates among the categories of domestic, whore, slave, and corpse?” and “how does one make this violence visible when it secures the enjoyment, sovereignty, and bodily integrity of man and master?” (p. 27). The photograph makes it obvious that the girl is being taken advantage of against her will and that the picture was taken by a man who knew he was her master, and that she was his property. The piercing eyes of the girl makes one wonder whatever type of wayward or wild power can be found in researching her life? How can she contribute to the undercommons’ fight against the fort? Why not spare her the pain of contribution and let her rest in peace?

Hartman’s own reflections which I will discuss shortly answer the first two questions, but the last question I find to be particularly pressing as a student within the academic institution, seeking to find new knowledge of what can be. Although there are thousands of miles between The United States and Norway, and even though I live over one hundred years after the picture was taken, I am still participating in an institution who once employed the girl’s assaulter, and which has a history of securing its power with violence on others. The university is the institution that led to the forced oophorectomy of women in the late 1800s in order to find out if women, like dogs, could be made less hysterical by controlling their

menstrual cycle (Laqueur, 1990, p. 179). It is the same institution that decided to sell 272 slaves and keep the money (Georgetown University n.d.). And it is the same institution where women are found to be inheriting the majority of the “care” work in forms of using spare time to prepare for lectures or spending more time with their students as supervisors (Lund & Tienari, 2019) at a time where this type of work is paid less and less (Gunnes, 2018). How can I, Hartman or any person inside the academic institution justify the use of an unnamed girl’s pain to further our cause of research?

The first thing to remember about the undercommons of the university is that it is a place of subversion, not a place of salvation. That is to say that I am not looking to justify my use of someone else’s pain because it can never be justified. Instead, I give up on the university’s goal to “contribute to a sustainable future” (University of Oslo 2020) and in favor of using its resources to further contribute to a future defined by the surround – a future where sustainability is disconnected from policy and logistics of neoliberal capitalism. Because, in the undercommons the pain of others is the pain of all. I cannot justify using others pain for my own gain, but I can use our pain for our gain.

Hartman herself does not see herself as part of an undercommons in which said pain is shared:

I had to be mindful not to do damage of my own. Only the chorines, bull daggers, aesthetical Negroes, lady lovers, pansies, and anarchists supported her experiments in living free. She was their avenging angel. Only the wayward appreciated her riotous conduct and wild habits and longing to create a life from nothing; only they could discern the beautiful plot against the plantation she waged each and every day.
(Hartman, 2019, p. 34)

She does not fit her own definition of the wayward and thus cannot take part and appreciate her pain and riot. But what Hartman fails to see is that to be wayward is to be wild and that we are all wild beings policed into submission. Although her writing and research is done as an academic with a full paid salary, Hartman’s fabulations are an open door into the undercommons, an undercommons she is free to enter herself if she so chooses. All that is required is to give up and accept the pain that comes with, even momentarily, letting the wild and wayward side take control as one enters the hold of possibilities. The shipped are in Hartman just as it is within us all, and it is breaking free within her own fabulations. In her conversations with Esther Brown, the unnamed girl and all the riotous girls of the choir it is

the shipped that lets her connect with the *what if* of the choir's wayward life to find resistance and knowledge in the buried and forgotten.

To answer the first two questions about what power can be found in the story of an unnamed girl whose only certain historical fact we know is that she was taken advantage of in order for a nude photo to be taken of her I will reflect on Hartman's own fabrications. Gayle Rubin told us about the traffic in women (Rubin, 1975) and this unnamed girl becomes Hartman's traffic guard. Her place in the choir is that of both soloist, background singer and conductor. When Hartman imagines her life, she imagines the life of the whole choir of unnamed Black girls:

I envisioned her not as tragic or as ruined, but as an ordinary black girl, and as such her life was shaped by sexual violence or the threat of it; the challenge was to figure out how to survive it, how to live in the context of enormous brutality, and thrive in deprivation and poverty. The state of emergency was the norm not the exception. The only difference between this girl and all the others who crossed her path and followed in her wake was that there was a photograph that hinted that something had happened, that enabled everyday violence to acquire the status of an event, a forensic picture of an act of sexual violence not deemed a crime at all. (p. 32)

She was an ordinary Black girl who was given the privilege of being photographed such that her commodification could forever be trapped in black and white. Still, in its need of subjugation as the tool of the veil, the fort can never afford to look its subjugates in the eyes. Had it looked the unnamed girl in the eyes it would be forced to its knees. Because in those eyes that stare back intensely from the small picture is the true power of the wild and wayward. It is the knowledge of subversion and possibility. It is the knowledge that the *what if* is the weapon of the hold and its general antagonism—a hold we are all still in, and a hold we are no longer looking for a way out of. We have been taught by the unnamed girl that there is no justice and that the only option is to let in the water and go down with the ship. And, as the captain drowns, the sound of fabrications becoming reality, of policy becoming waywardness, and logistics becoming wild can be heard playing as the choir of riotous Black girls are singing, screaming, and laughing.

I started the chapter by wondering what wildness could contribute to the imaginations of the undercommons. I have found wildness in Hartman's subjects working as wayward fractals that by definition cannot be contained. The wayward nature of Esther Brown made it

impossible to incarcerate her fantasy of what could be. No amount of punishment could keep her in check as she was entering the state of the shipped becoming the uncontainable flesh that refuses to be logisticized. As the shipped she refused to be held as a commodity, choosing to be held as flesh in the hold where she found solidarity with her fellow inmates, who also could not be held by the machine. Esther Brown made visible the physical and material toll of choosing to live the vagrant life of the wayward, yet also made visible the possibilities that became available by letting her desires lead her into the imaginations of the hold.

The unnamed girl became Hartman's uncontrollable fractal: speaking for all and speaking for non, at the same time. She was captured in a picture almost lost to time, and still refused said capture by rejecting to be captured by Hartman in a state of idiom that would partition up her fractal being of infinite knowledge. Through fugitive listening I tried to let her speak without making sense, to let boundless of lost semiotic systems of knowledge speak without transcoding into idiom. By letting the unconscious system of translation that makes nature into culture work I studied the unnamed girl by letting her fractured, dispossessed, and wild being speak on her own terms. I cannot succinctly state what I have learned. I can only hope to communicate her agency and resistance in refusal.

5

Undercommon Entanglement

The purpose of my thesis has been twofold. Firstly, my aim was to explore the critical potential of the undercommons as a space that shares many of its concerns with feminist traditions within the field of gender studies. Secondly, my aim was to argue that, through showing how, an undercommons of the dead can serve as a bridge between the living and the dead in which one can get access to systems of resistance, agency, and life evaluation that is lost to the discursive hegemony of logistical capitalism. Through the works of Melville, Delany, and Hartman I have investigated ways to imagine what could be and what once was. I have sought alien systems of imaginations and found the value and agency in not interpreting unknown semiotic systems into hegemonic idiomatic imagery. How can one resist what is irresistible, and how can one imagine agency inside a machine without agency? I have used fugitive listening as my communication tactic, seeking a method that enables listening without interpretation. Throughout the different texts I have found a history of resistance that is entangled with our own present world, and what is to come.

On Melville's slave ship I was able to listen to the lack of voices and the echoes left behind by the refusal of speech. Babo, one of the captains of the mutiny, refused to become part of the hegemonic archive, actively choosing to enter the undercommon archive of the break. Through fugitive listening I found the power of screaming and mumbling, as well as the power of the undercommon archive. The shipped must always be seen as our own connected history to past, present, and future systems of keeping us in the hold. The shipped are our repressed cultural freedom from being held as flesh; our refusal to be containerized.

In the porn theaters of Delany, I battled with the tension between the static state of his subjects, caught in the moment of contact with Delany, and the subversive and fluid lives I heard screaming out from the undercommons. The patrons of the porn theaters became examples of how to find agency within the machine, and how to subvert without being seen. I was introduced to a history enmeshed with hegemonic discourses on sexuality, gender, race, and class, while learning about the possibilities enabled by finding places to play with the general antagonism. The porn theaters are long gone yet echo a history of bodily freedom within the repressed body of flesh, connected to the long history of sexuality and gender

conformity, as well as possible future ways of subverting hegemonic containerization of flesh.

Lastly, I listen to the choir of Hartman's riotous girls. In her choir I heard the multiplicitous voice of plurality that cannot be partitioned into the individual. Esther Brown showed us the possibility of new valuations enabled by being wayward, and the unnamed girl made agency into refusal. The history of resistance and agency found in the choir of Hartman is a history of a specific time and place, yet it refuses to lose its material agency to the hegemonic archive that wants to strip it away from its always connected history. Hartman's choir sings out to Babo and his fellow slaves, and to the visiting gay men in New York decades later.

In all of the texts I have found voices that intra-act with their own past, present, and future history of resistance, agency, and life evaluation. As a final discussion of the critical potential of the undercommons I will explore the undercommons' inherent characteristic of intra-action through historic entanglement.

Entangled

In physics, quantum entanglement describes the connectedness of two particles. This connection is kept even at great distances since entanglement is a joining of particles that refuses individual properties. The particles are neither singular nor plural. Karen Barad uses the properties of entanglement when she theorizes intra-action as the always ongoing interaction between past, present, and future. There is no beginning or end, just the continued intra-action of entangled living (Barad, 2007). The concept of entanglement lends itself to the undercommons and Harney and Moten's understanding of history. In the undercommons, history is entangled with all lives and all future possibilities. There is no escaping the hold of the ship. Furthermore, undercommon justice is the entanglement that makes all forms of resistance connected to the original fight against our commodification into flesh and our inherent refusal of being held in the movement of logistics. That is to say that resistance in the undercommons is resistance against being held as flesh in the hold: past, present, and future. The hold is at the same time always the physical hold of the first slave ships, the present hold of logistics and policies, and all future holds seeking to containerize that which cannot be contained.

To speak of undercommon entanglement also makes clear the boundaries of the undercommons. The undercommons is a fluid and porous concept, but it requires an understanding of history, resistance, politics, and agency that does not lend itself as an end all for resistance. Thus, as I wind down and reflect back on my thesis, I will not only discuss the possibilities that become available as one plays with the general antagonism and undercommon entanglement, but the opportunities lost. Some of these opportunities are lost in the relatively small scope of my thesis, others are lost to the endless depths of the undercommons' historic and political entanglement.

The Fault in our Stars

At the end of August, 2022, NASA posted a tweet with a sound clip of a black hole at the center of the galaxy cluster Perseus (NASA Exoplanets, 2022). The sound clip, which is made from soundwaves extracted from the center of the black hole, sounds like thousands of voices speaking at the same time under water, like a whale caught in time. It made me reflect on the infinity of voices lost to time, and how I long ago learned in mathematics that there is no way to capture the infinite. The massiveness of the universe and its many lost voices made me wonder about fugitive listening in the undercommons: is that not an act of making sense of countless lost voices, to capture infinity in the hold of the flesh?

Fugitive listening as a multiplicitous sensory act of translation, not transcoding, in the catachresis sense of Spivak, is a strategy to be with one's entangled history of lost semiotic systems. I used fugitive listening in order to study the resistance found in Hartman's riotous choir and in the unnamed girl photographed against her will. In the eyes of the unnamed girl, I found resistance against the subjugated flesh, and the call to be with the fantasy of the hold. I did not seek to transcode her into idiomatic knowledge produced for the sake of production, instead choosing undercommon study by letting her speak for herself. I also chose not to ponder on whether she was speaking for herself, or if fugitive listening is another name for the violent transcoding it seeks not to be. This was my way of playing with the general antagonism of possibility and desire within the confines of academic writing.

Still, the undercommons is not a magical place of biological resurrection. Its fluidity of deadliness and aliveness is discursive and epistemic, not ontological. The undercommons cannot balance the scales of justice, even as it reinvents justice on the terms of the unjust. The dead are still dead, and the pain of wayward living does not disappear as it intra-acts with the

senses of future academics through fugitivity and study. The porn theaters that Samuel Delany visited are all gone, and although the fate of his many spontaneous contacts are unknown, the gentrification of Times Square was certainly of no help. No amount of fugitive listening can bring back the voices lost to the violent machinery of gentrification.

The undercommons is a place of dangerous solidarity where the safety of the logistical machine is declined in favor of the powerful fantasy of the hold. The goal of my thesis is not to right wrongs, but to find resistance in the break of (counter)discourse. By playing with the general antagonism and collapsing the binary of alive and dead, I sought after lost semiotic systems in the in-between.

While reading Melville's story, the memoirs of Delany, and Hartman's critical fabulations there is an overarching sadness over lives lost to the violent punishments of the logistical machine, but there is also hope. Delany and Hartman wrote with the goal of communicating the love and laughter that is erased by the hegemonic archive. Hartman's undercommon archive of a riotous choir unveiled the resistance and agency in wayward living. Delany positioned the theaters as places of valuable spontaneous intra-class contact where knowledge of the world was detached from hegemonic knowledge production, instead of looking at them as centers of aids spread, narcotics, and homeless people.

I used the undercommons as a place where the power of spontaneous meeting places and wayward lives never were decoupled from the structures and institutions that policed and governed them. To play with the general antagonism is to pursue the possibility of desire within the structures that police said desire; to subvert the logistical machine from the inside. Still, undercommon justice and fugitive listening are not producers of a communist haven or the first steps towards a wayward utopia. The undercommons does not meet in the streets, knock on doors, or shout at the powers that be. The undercommons is the revolution already begun, but not the revolution exploding into the streets. As I have written my thesis, I have sought an undercommons in line with the space theorized by Harney and Moten, a space for study and planning. I cannot make right that which is wrong, but I can, as Delany and Hartman did in their own way, seek out and study the power of the break, of being left out. The undercommon archive, found within the hegemonic archive, does not try to rewrite but sees the beauty already there. Through fugitive listening I have built on the work of Hartman's wayward fabulations to search for resistance and agency that entangle us all in the undercommons.

By its own nature, the undercommons, as it becomes visible and takes the fight to the streets, dissolves into appropriated assembly. The power of the undercommons is its biggest

fault, it is forever relegated to the hold and is doomed to live the rest of its life invisible in the break. It is unable to seek out comrades and friends, only welcoming in those who have found it on their own. The undercommons is refusal of assembly for the sake of assembly, an incomplete space that dreams of the entangled utopia of tomorrow and yesteryear.

Avengers, Assemble!

In the days after the shooting outside London Pub in June 2022, a queer nightclub in Oslo, I was left wondering about the undercommons' refusal of assembly and the void of possible actions that came with my undercommon understanding of politics. When all forms of gatherings and marches become symbolic of the continued power of homonationalism and the othering of the Muslim world, what type of action is available to an undercommon revolutionist?

I have hopefully showed the undercommons' revolutionary potential as a space for planning and study. With its inherent subversive nature comes the potential of playing with desire and possibility unveiling the agency and resistance found in the break. Yet, as a space entangled with the hegemonic realities, these forms of undercommon agency and resistance become distant memories as the continued subjugation of minority subjects by the logistical machine involves taking lives. While the shooting at London Pub was the first terrorist attack against queer people in modern Norwegian history, it is far from the only shooting the queer community has had to endure globally. Feminist academics have long argued for the logistical machines as the producer of differences that lead to extrema points where life is lost: Jasbir Puar showed how homonationalism is a tool of western governments that simultaneously others the rest of the world, and puts queer people on the frontlines (2007, 2013), Wendy Brown argued for the colonial implications of tolerance as a requirement for inclusion into the civilizational discourse of the West (2008), and both Alyosxa Tudor and Saba Mahmood reflect on how agency in the west is soaked in discourses of racism and relies on the binarity of gender and sexuality (Mahmood, 2001; Tudor, 2017). Does the undercommons work as a space that can reckon with the aftermath of the logistical machine's extrema points of subjugation in the present?

The lack of assembly is not an argument against undercommon reactions to events in the fort, it is an argument to better understand the aim and goals of the undercommons. The undercommons as understood by Harney and Moten was never a space for the revolution at

large, and not a space for solidarity in assembly. The undercommons is the space hidden in the break because the logistical machine is built on the impossible axiom of total appropriation. It cannot therefore be a space that marches in the streets, arms bound together, shouting slogans, and singing songs. To assemble is to gather as flesh out in the open and allow oneself to be policed and logisticized. Often such an assembly can be important and a necessary part of sorrow, anger, and rage, but no assembly can avoid appropriation into the machine it is already appropriated by. Instead of assembly, the undercommons inhabits, and instead of acting out of the human need for gathering post traumatic events, the undercommons stays as a sorrowful and lonely place. It is a place for the present, but only a present entangled with the past and future. It cannot give up its entanglement for the here and now and thus cannot give refuge. The only refuge for the helpless in the undercommons is the open arm to stay in the state of helplessness as one begins to plan and study. The undercommons asks “is it possible to want what you have become in suffering, both in the absence and in the depths of suffrage, without wanting what it is to suffer?” (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 24).

The marches and gatherings in the days after the shooting at London Pub was a show of people’s need for solidarity in anger and sorrow. The undercommons can never be that place, but it can be the place for critical examinations of homonationalism, civilizational discourse, western agency, flesh, and assembly. Such a place requires one to enter the hold, to play with the general antagonism, and to accept one’s fate as the shipped. The toll of the undercommons is the toll of accepting life in all its glory and misery. It is a big price to pay and can stand in stark contrast to the feeling of solidarity found in assembly. Still, if one dares to pay the price one is welcomed into the revolution already begun, where assembly lines are disrupted by jay-walkers, where resistance is found by giving up, and where the fantasy of the hold enables the planning of revolution at large.

An Undercommon Gender Studies

In my topology of how the undercommons has been used in academic writing since Harney and Moten first published their article on the university undercommons in 2004, I showed the new critical avenues of subversive spaces and archives enabled by undercommon thinking. I have myself used the undercommon archive and its subversive nature as I listen to alien semiotic systems of resistance, agency, and life evaluation. As a Gender Studies student, the

undercommons has allowed for a critical inquiry into already critical archives of hegemonic (counter)discourses.

Looking forward, the undercommons beckons for further study and research, both within Gender Studies and outside. As a space that refuses knowledge production it naturally makes the academic question their own position inside the fort ruled by the logistical machine and opens up new lines of inquiry. It will forever be a space in line with Gender Studies' wish for self-reflection and scrutiny.

I have reflected on how the porn theaters of Delany were spaces that enabled its visitors to play with the general antagonism and showed how it became materially possible for the visiting men to subvert and distort the heterosexual matrix. Staunch heterosexuality was replaced by the desire to be watched by other men, and a micropenis became the possibility for gender fluidity. I have only scratched the surface of the undercommons' possibility to study specific and material ways of resisting, through subversion, the hegemonic discourses on sexuality and gender. Halberstam has written on the trans/queer undercommons, but his work too, beckons for further research and study. The undercommons as a place in but not of the systems it seeks to dismantle welcomes both new materialist and post-structuralists to discuss and study, since it knows the sad truth about (counter)discourse's inescapable power and the fluidity of material ontologies.

The archival undercommons I play with when listening to Hartman's riotous choir unveils the hidden power in the break of the hegemonic archive. Other academics have found undercommon archives in Malaysia and within movement studies. The potential of undercommon archives should be especially interesting for academics connected to gender studies, who have a long history of heroic work in uncovering lost history and archiving the stories of minoritarian subjects. The undercommon archive sees no difference between critical fabulations and past realities. Rebecca Hall does not use the undercommons, but her graphic novel, drawn by Hugo Martínez, is an example of the power of the undercommon archive (2021). Her research on women-led slave revolts and the lack of the archive leads to her to producing a graphic novel that functions as a study of what they might have looked like. Her fabulations are presented as fabulations, in contrast with Hartman's blending of reality and fantasy, yet still present the value in playing with the general antagonism of desire and possibility. The fantasy of the hold enables a living archive that instead of ignoring its porosity makes porosity its core characteristic.

Fugitive listening has been my strategy of communication and is only possible as an undercommon tool of studying. As a strategy it combines Spivak's search for new epistemic

ways to deconstruct our own hegemonic traditions, with gender studies' inherent call to give a voice to those without listeners, and the Black optimism of Blackness and Black Studies. Together with the rise of Performance Studies, fugitive listening, can contribute to understanding how dependent we are on transcoding through hegemonic semiotic systems, and thus be a starting point to study the unknown.

The undercommons is not done. Its inhabitants continue to plan and study. I have talked to Larry and Arly and learned about the residues left on us by post-politics, as well as the resistance in not playing by the logistical machine's rules. The theaters of Delany were amazing spaces of intra-class contact, but more than that they were dangerous. They were dangerous to the machine that made sure they were all demolished in favor of the capitalist symbol of today's Times Square. The biggest threat of the theaters was never the danger of dirty homosexuals and drugs, but Larry and Arly's ability to play with the general antagonism. Their play unveiled the many ways post-politics works its invisible hand of power, and why there is resistance in giving up the fight. Neither Larry, Arly, Hoke, the warning queens, or the absent-minded doorman made any visible sign of fighting the system that relegated them to the status of others, yet their subversive lives inside the theaters resisted the logistical machine's valuation system and found laughter, orgasms, sorrow, and solidarity in the break of being othered. The theaters were undercommon spaces of planning what could be and should be further studied for their already revolutionary ways of being.

Saidiya Hartman's choir of riotous girls, found in her wayward critical fabulations were already a wild archive of resistance and agency. Through fugitive listening I sought to find lost semiotic systems of power in the screams of Esther Brown and her fellow inmates' sound strike, and in the silent voices visible in the eyes of an unnamed girl whose only material residue is a picture taken against her will. I connected waywardness with its criminal counterpart vagrancy and found the undercommon criminality of living. Ester Brown was a jay-walker who disrupted the assembly lines by talking to a male friend in a stairwell, and from her punishment followed the screams of an entangled history of slavery too dangerous for the fort to accept. The unnamed girl became Hartman's idiomatic symbol of countless lost lives, yet through her eyes I was able to envision an undercommon justice too threatening to ask for. The undercommons is a place where the entangled future utopia becomes possible and where desire meets alien semiotic systems it can only learn through being with. I have only started the impossible project of studying, through being with, the unnamed girl, and the countless voices speaking through her, and her semiotic systems of resistance and agency

guarded by her refusal to talk. The undercommons is filled with voices that beckon further exploration and study.

The undercommons is a space that enables communication with the dead. It is a space where the fluidity of aliveness and deadness works to make the corporeal and dead world one again. It is a space where the entanglement of history involves the resurrection of dead, and the killing of the alive, to again be able to see the intra-action of the fort's history. One cannot dismantle what one does not understand, and the undercommons is the revolution already begun, where constant study of the fort and its surround is coupled with constant planning for its demise. To play with the general antagonism of desire and possibility is to be in the undercommons. And, to play with the general antagonism is to work towards our wild and entangled future.

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