

THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY:  
SERIOUSNESS, HUMOROUSLY

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*BOSCH'D*

Joan Retallack

Litmus Press, 2020

140 pages, paperback, \$20.00

*Magical Negro*

Morgan Parker

Tin House Books, 2019

95 pages, paperback, \$15.95

*all that beauty*

Fred Moten

Letter Machine Editions, 2019

136 pages, paperback, \$20.00

Depending on where you sit and what you've been reading, you could make a compelling argument that poetry has never been funnier than it is today.<sup>1</sup> Or, perhaps just as convincingly, you could make a case that the contemporary poetry world is suffering from a "collective loss of our sense of humor," much like the one Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas argue has occurred in the corporate world. In their book *Humor, Seriously* (inspired by a course they teach at the Stanford Graduate School of Business), Aaker and Bagdonas are not shy about catastrophizing: "We're all going over the humor

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<sup>1</sup> See *Seriously Funny: Poems about Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex, and Everything Else*, edited by Barbara Hamby and David Kirby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); and *Why Poetry Sucks: An Anthology of Humorous Experimental Canadian Poetry*, edited by Ryan Fitzpatrick and Jonathan Ball (London: Insomniac Press, 2014).

cliff together, tumbling down into the abyss of solemnity below.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing on their combined backgrounds in social psychology, marketing, and business consulting, they argue that white-collar workers increasingly leave humor out of their professional lives, principally out of the mistaken belief that “we have to be serious all the time in order to be taken seriously.”<sup>3</sup> This seemingly logical conclusion can be deeply counterproductive: paradoxically, to be taken seriously we often need to demonstrate that we have a sense of humor; moreover, “we don’t need to take ourselves so seriously in order to grapple with serious things.”<sup>4</sup>

To this end, Aaker and Bagdonas offer their students and readers a set of guidelines to help them confidently wield the power of humor and levity and to thereby transform their leadership styles, organizational cultures, and interpersonal relationships. For what it’s worth, I suspect this book is effective in achieving its stated goals for its stated audience—but since it has nothing whatsoever to do with poetry, *Humor, Seriously* isn’t one of the books under review here. Still, I think their central premise tells us something important about humor’s place in contemporary life. There is something remarkably safe—ideologically—about advocating for humor in the workplace—especially when it is qualified with the insistence that “what’s far more important than ‘being funny’ is simply signaling that you have a sense of humor.”<sup>5</sup> To be fair, I gather that in fields like marketing and management, ideological safety is the coin of the realm; in the perverse logic of humanistic inquiry, however, there is nothing more ideologically questionable than something which is ideologically unquestioned.

To put this another way, I’m fascinated by the way that Aaker and Bagdonas’s argument is presented not as a radically new idea but as a reminder of something we should all already know and do. Their advice may help us wield the “secret weapon” of humor

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2 Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life (And How Anyone Can Harness It. Even You)* (New York: Currency, 2021), 22.

3 *Ibid.*, front flap copy.

4 *Ibid.*, 13.

5 *Ibid.*, 29.

more effectively in job interviews and elevator pitches, but it's a secret weapon we're already required to carry with us everywhere we go. Although reasonable Americans may disagree about where and when humor is appropriate, it is a cultural given that a healthy, productive subject must have a sense of humor. This is not new; the historian Daniel Wickberg shows that since at least as the mid-1800s, "casual or incidental use of the term 'sense of humor'" has been so commonplace that we treat it as "neutral in meaning rather than as a value."<sup>6</sup> In this neutral denotation, having a sense of humor can mean that you deliver timely zingers among friends or that you can recognize a good meme, but it also signifies a particular way of seeing the world. This doesn't necessarily require optimism, cheerfulness, or mirth; most fundamentally, it entails a sense of proportion that enables us to laugh at ourselves, to laugh off being laughed at, and to avoid taking ourselves too seriously. In the twenty-first-century United States, such even-keeled resiliency might seem ever more essential as political discourse goes rancid around us and as social media amplifies our exposure to being made fun of—by friends and acquaintances, by public figures, and even by complete strangers. But this is really not so new either; if you feel like "we" need humor "now more than ever," it may be that you are only now experiencing something that people who don't share your privilege have lived with forever. Morgan Parker's poem "'Now More Than Ever'" exposes this phrase as one "used by Whites to express their surprise and disapproval of social or political conditions which, to the Negro, are devastatingly usual" (32). As Joan Retallack puts it in her poem "The Truth of Physics," women and people of color know better than to fall for Heraclitus's "presocratic error," for they "have slogged through the same damn stream / a shitload of times more than twice" (30).

For the individual, the ability to "take things in stride" feels necessary for survival. But we might wonder, at what point does this become a barrier to real societal change? In innocuously demanding this trait—from fellow citizens, employees and co-workers, significant others, and ourselves—are we complicit in an ideology that valorizes

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 82–3.

pliancy, accommodation, and submission while stifling dissent and protest? The theorist Alfie Bown compellingly argues that our positive views of laughter (especially its associations with constructs like innocence, childhood, freedom, and nature) make it easy to underestimate the potency of laughter, which “operates on us carefully and unconsciously, often appearing innocent, harmless and light while it subtly and powerfully configures how we see ourselves and who we are.”<sup>7</sup> For Bown, every laugh is ideological, and this cuts both ways: the status quo “is often erected and supported by laughter, but it can also be threatened and challenged by the process of laughing.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, precisely because a laugh “repeats or rehearses aspects of ideology, ... it can also reveal these mechanisms and show us how our way of thinking is put together.”<sup>9</sup> But flipping this switch—turning a laugh against its ideology—is also not as simple as making that laugh an object of critical analysis. This is where Bown’s argument gets especially bold, for he proposes that we also underestimate the power of our interpretations of laughter. We’ve always known that explaining why something is funny ruins the joke, but Bown proposes that the real danger lies in the explanation’s power to retroactively revise the meaning of our laughter: “If laughter is interpreted in such and such a way, it begins to function in exactly that way, also seeming ... to have always already had that function.”<sup>10</sup> This makes sense as part of the mechanism by which the stories society tells us (and sells us) about humor become so engrained in our thinking and come to feel so natural. It also helps to explain how so many different theories of laughter and humor—including Bown’s!—can all seem comparably persuasive.

However, it is equally crucial to extend this analysis to seriousness. If anything, seriousness is even more innocently, perniciously ideological than humor. Why do we want so badly to be taken seriously? And what exactly does it mean? The nature of seriousness is a blind spot; even the field of humor studies scarcely theorizes this

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7 *Alfie Bown, In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Comedy (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 144.*

8 *Ibid.*, 2.

9 *Ibid.*, 20.

10 *Ibid.*, 139.

key counter-concept. We value seriousness implicitly and without question, presuming to “know it when we see it” even if we cannot define it. It’s true that we rarely extol the virtues of seriousness as effusively as we do the virtues of humor and laughter; our culture has no clichés about seriousness being “the best medicine”—but what if that’s just because they aren’t necessary? What I mean is that we don’t need to celebrate seriousness because we already take it for granted as the default state of our being and communicating in the world. (And, oh, by the way, we might be wrong about that.) We need to scrutinize our habitual, unwitting performances of seriousness to confront the ways they reproduce oppressive hierarchies, normative distinctions, and other mechanisms of power.<sup>11</sup> But aren’t serious modes—inquiry, critique, reflection, analysis, protest—our primary means of combating and disarming ideology? Are these “the master’s tools,” which Audre Lorde warns “will never dismantle the master’s house”?<sup>12</sup> What about poetry? Perhaps this is part of what Morgan Parker is grappling with when she writes, “The master’s tools—/ / I have them. / The house is getting too big” (49).

Part of the answer might lie in recognizing that none of this can ever be as simple as a poet or poem “being serious” or “being funny”; rather, humor is latent in all human communication. Sometimes it is as if an author put it there on the page, sometimes it’s more like the reader brings it to the scene of reading, and other times context seems to intervene—to introduce humor or to neuter it. But the potential for humor is always there. Humor is neither the medium nor the message; it is not a feature of the text but a feature of the mind. I think the British modernist writer Wyndham Lewis said it best when he described laughter as “all that remains physical in the flash of thought, its friction” and defined laughter as “the mind sneezing.”<sup>13</sup> If humor is rooted in mind-body “friction,” then finding something funny means recognizing that friction in (or imagining it in) another mind. Accord-

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11 See Gavin Butt and Irit Rogoff, *Visual Cultures as Seriousness* (London: Sternberg Press / Goldsmiths, University of London, 2013).

12 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 112.

13 Wyndham Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, edited by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 152, 151.

ing to a recent cognitive theory of humor, “Only a mind is furnished with the necessary components of humor. Either you are laughing at something in your mind, or you are laughing at something that has a mind or to which we might counterfactually attribute a mind”—and this is why “we only laugh at humans or anthropomorphized objects.”<sup>14</sup> This would mean that to find a poem funny, we have to be laughing at the poet, at the speaker, at someone depicted in the poem, or at ourselves. Poetic humor “makes us let us look for ourselves, and through ourselves, till we’re beside ourselves”—as we’ll see below, Fred Moten isn’t thinking about humor when he writes this (3). But then again, maybe he is—

One way to make sense of the tensions and ambiguities inherent in poetic humor is to focus on what I consider the two fundamental techniques or mechanisms at play in humor: *debugging* and *humoring*. They aren’t mutually exclusive but rather tend to phase into each other. Identified under various terms by different theorists, *debugging* refers to the corrective mechanism of humor, by which an epistemic error—a mistaken assumption—is resolved and its cognitive and affective frictions are relieved; the term *debugging*, which the cognitive scientist Matthew Hurley and his co-authors borrow from computer science, suggests that humor removes such errors or “bugs” from our cognitive schematics of the world—as if expelled by the mind-sneezes of laughter.<sup>15</sup> Laugh-out-loud humor typically requires the resolution of debugging, but in some respects the most powerful mind-sneezes are the ones that never explode, in which we experience instead a kind of irresolution and in which we humor “the care with which” something “is wrong.”<sup>16</sup> Compared to debugging, *humoring*—a kind of hesitant or resistant tolerance—may yield a less immediate degree of pleasure or satisfaction, but dwelling in its confusion can yield the possibility of more radically new insights. This distinction can help illuminate the contrasts—and the contiguities—between the forms of

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr., *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 293.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–121.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, edited by Leonard Diepeveen (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2017), 68.

humor that dominate our daily media consumption and the shades of humor we encounter in contemporary poems.

To “get” a joke—to debug it—we need to be confident enough about what’s going on that we can turn out to be mistaken: the setup usually instills in the listener some sort of false assumption. But poetry readers usually know better than to assume we know what’s going on in a given poem. Without active assumptions to debug, it can be challenging (for poets or for readers) to make a poem funny. We can still be surprised by poetry, and that surprise can be weaponized to humorous effect. It’s just that poets often have to rely on more deeply rooted assumptions, both topical (about the nature of subjectivity, race, gender, sexuality, faith, love, death, nature) and mechanical (about what words mean, about how language works, about how we read, about what a poem is and does). And since having these nontrivial assumptions uprooted can be traumatic, poetic humor often involves finding creative ways to humor them or more indirect ways to push us toward debugging them. Each of the books reviewed here unpacks or unsettles such nontrivial assumptions, carefully tapping into poetry’s humors without diminishing its seriousness. Ultimately, the balance each text achieves doesn’t merely signal that the poet has a sense of humor; rather, it has more to do with taking care of readers willing to take the poems seriously.

### *BOSCH'D*

Why do we need to be unserious to be taken seriously? How might poets take advantage of this paradox? Joan Retallack begins *BOSCH'D*, her most recent collection from Brooklyn-based Litmus Press, with a provocative aphorism that offers at least a partial answer to these questions. Attributed to “Genre Tallique” (a homophonic pseudonym for Retallack herself), this epigraph sets the tone for the book when it declares, “Humor without gravitas passes through the mind with little effect. Gravitas without humor is death.” The poems that follow, then, aspire to a balance of humor and seriousness—more substantial than the “light” mass-media humor we consume to fill time but also steering clear of the “abyss of solemnity” that Aaker and Bagdonas warn us about.

*BOSCH'D* takes inspiration from Hieronymus Bosch, invoking the Dutch Renaissance painter and his masterpiece *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as guides to help us navigate the Anthropocene; Retallack admires how in Bosch “devastation and redemption are illuminated by humor that blindsides despair, as the sun at noon illustrates all shadows” (4). The first poem “Human [hyu-muhn]” immediately defamiliarizes its subject, providing the pronunciation as if the audience has never encountered the term—or the species to which it refers. Like an entry in a posthuman encyclopedia, this prose poem begins:

The human is one of many humorous creatures rolled out in the evolution of this planet. Wholly animal, charismatically self-conscious, intellectually ambitious, emotionally feral. Prone to abstraction, estrangement, hubristic fantasies, bitter depression. Psychologically lethal while imaginatively promising. The “we” that are human are no more, no less than part of nature. Nature is the whole of us. Denial of that has been our greatest folly. (3)

Several poems frame themselves comically with witty titles, including “Anthroposcenes Anthroposcenities” (18), “Jimbo’s Inferno” (67), and “My Evil Errant Irrational Twin” (70). Poems like “Rational Numbers Peace Initiative” parody the language of logic, math, and science with mocking attempts to address issues of social justice and diplomacy through quantitative prisms (22–23). In “The Long and Short of It Thought Experiment,” the speaker attempts to express injustice as an algebraic formula—“let any long or short life-span equal / exactly the same function of x divided by the violence / of zero”—even though “the heart of cruelty continues to / elude our metrics” (15).

In “Elliptical Ice Terriers,” Retallack borrows the language and rhetoric of consumerist advertising, satirically urging the reader to discard the recycled wit and wisdom of poets like Rilke for the latest model in next-day, “custom-fitted” performatives:

My child, why repeat what some poet or another  
has already said—*we live our lives forever taking  
leave*—when a custom-fitted speech act can be  
yours within 24 hours. With it you can perform  
rites and ceremonies, weddings, baptisms,  
extreme unctions, forgiveness of sins, funerals—  
visit correctional facilities, start your own church. (17)

Here Retallack slyly calls out the language philosopher J. L. Austin’s



influential theory of the “performative,” an especially powerful variety of speech act; promises and the ritual utterances of a marriage ceremony (“I now pronounce you...”) are among the classic examples. As Retallack likely has in mind here, it is in introducing this concept—explaining that performatives only work if they are “spoken ‘seriously’ and so as to be taken ‘seriously’”—that Austin famously excludes “joking” and “writing a poem” from the category of “serious” utterances.<sup>17</sup> The sarcasm of “Elliptical Ice Terriers” elliptically debugs the assumption that poetry is diminished by this exclusion. Lines like “More / reciprocal alterity, more biomimicry, less blood / sausage fealty, explosions of sweetest beauty” may lack any directly performative power to bring about their reality (17); but just as quotation and allusion are not quite the same as the ritual recitations, the seriousness with which you “start your own church” isn’t the same kind of seriousness the poet seeks.

“Notes from the Sappho Colloquium” directs a bit of loving satire at literary studies. Another “Genre Tallique” epigraph asks, “Would Sappho be so beloved if she were a whole woman—more than a puzzle of scattered fragments?” (35). The joke of the poem is that these “notes”—allegedly from a conference about the ancient Greek’s poetic fragments—are themselves only fragments ripped absurdly out of context:

“in accordance with your countless oars”  
“a strong wind blows them in the right direction”  
“you just can’t pin down a Pindar”  
“she doesn’t have to rub it in again”  
“an accomplished poet can always manage to change the subject”  
(35)

Like what remains of Sappho’s poems, each line of Retallack’s “Notes” can spark insight, either as its own gnomic witticism or as a prompt to imagine what its original context at the Colloquium might have been. Instructively, by inviting us to fill in the gaps, these fragments make the Colloquium appear at once more and less interesting than it really was. But instead of mocking the scholars in question, Retal-

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17 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 9.

lack humors the erotics of the fragment, a performance that prods all readers to reflect upon their fixations and gazes.

But “The Truth of Physics” might be Retallack’s most successful experiment toward an alchemical mixture of humor and seriousness. The first two sections of this poem ponder entropy and quantum particles, respectively, before the third addresses climate disaster. I doubt I am the only reader to laugh upon encountering the first lines of the third section: “Drought-combusted flames lick the ass of paradise. / Do you find this an embarrassingly erotic image?” (30). The sheer shock of this metaphor might account for our laughter, but Retallack’s question ensures we at least acknowledge the tangle of “embarrassment,” guilt, and discomfort it evokes—about the erotic image, about the dire reality it depicts, and about the unsettling juxtaposition of sex and destruction. The next lines seem to suggest that if titillation (a common thread shared by the erotic and the humorous) can’t persuade climate-denying “elites,” it might at least knock them off their “pinnacles”:

For stalwart elites teetering on a few remaining  
pinnacles excitation is key. Come on folks, as history’s  
detritus morphs into ash, let us recall great eras  
of romantic portent as they and we slough off to sea. (30)

Although the subject matter could scarcely be more existentially serious, Retallack’s humor staves off the “death” of pure gravitas.

### *Magical Negro*

Morgan Parker’s third poetry collection challenges the all-too-common Hollywood trope in which a Black character with magical powers or uncommon wisdom functions purely to help white protagonists. White audiences may find these characters uplifting (which is to say, guilt relieving), but as the phrase (coined by Spike Lee) implies, the exploitative figure of the “magical negro” is ultimately defined by dehumanizing tokenism and instrumentalization. Throughout the volume, Parker wryly refers to herself and other Black Americans with the archaic, offensive term “Negro”; the effect of doing so, I think, is not so much to reclaim that word as to continually confront her readers with a sense of just how little has changed since its use was common.

This also helps explain why the volume opens with an epigraph

from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novella "Melanctha": "It was summer now and the colored people came out into the sunshine, full blown with flowers. And they shone in the streets and in the fields with their warm joy, and they glistened in their black heat, and they flung themselves free in their wide abandonment of shouting laughter." This passage draws a simplistic, demeaning caricature of Black laughter, which it nonetheless reveres and celebrates. It is plain to see why Stein's novella is regarded as having "set the tone" for American modernism's ambivalent fixation with "laughing primitivism," through which writers like Stein held up racist stereotypes as positive traits that whites should emulate in order to rediscover "the secret of the primitive."<sup>18</sup> Invoking a literary icon of white American modernism, Parker's epigraph humors the conventions of academic seriousness, performing its rituals with pointed, subversive irony. *This* poet giving *this* passage pride of place in *this* context—even if all the reader knows at this point is the title of Parker's book—has the effect of holding a mirror up to today's "magical negro"; the century-plus of historical distance between these two images refracts their resemblance just enough so that, because we can so clearly see the racism in Stein's rendering, we can more clearly see its harmful perpetuation in the contemporary trope.

The titles of the first two sections—"Let Us Now Praise Famous Magical Negroes" (an irreverent allusion to another modernist text: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans) and "Field Negro Field Notes"—effectively signal the ambivalence, pain, and irony that will complicate Parker's playfulness at every turn. Well beyond the epigraph, *Magical Negro* repeatedly thematizes laughter, jokes, and humor. The last of the book's three sections is called "Popular Negro Punchlines," among which Parker includes poems like "Preface to a Twenty Volume Joke Book" (80–84) and "Magical Negro #89: Michael Jackson in Blackface on a Date with Tatum O'Neal, 1970s" (68–69). But the poems themselves can't be mistaken for jokes; it is hard to single out a poem and say, "This is funny." Nonetheless, the *gestalt*—this book's attitude, its personality—conveys an ambivalent

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<sup>18</sup> Anca Parvolescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), 61, 64.

but palpable, droll sense of humor.

Parker explains in a 2019 interview that as the poems in *Magical Negro* juxtapose “magical” stereotypes with realities of Black life in the United States, the specter of violence (past, present, and yet-to-come) “haunts” her book with a sense of “unease and doom.”<sup>19</sup> One of the most striking aspects of Parker’s account is how she conveys the sense that living in a Black body (and “being a hashtag”) means simultaneously struggling with “the feeling of being marked for death” and the “fear of becoming a product”—all of which adds up to a “dissociation of self from body.”<sup>20</sup> This crystallizes in what might be *Magical Negro*’s most breathtaking line: “My body is an argument I did not start” (11). In the same poem, titled “AND COLD SUNSET,” the speaker also declares, “I’m funny because I know nothing matters” (11). Yet although we must accept the reality of this voice and recognize that it speaks to and for many who feel cornered into such nihilism, I don’t think it speaks for Parker or her poetry; throughout *Magical Negro* there is much more at stake in the way Parker deploys humor. In “Nancy Meyers and My Dream of Whiteness,” the speaker responds to the white protagonists of filmmaker Nancy Meyers’s romantic comedies, “If it seems like I desire you / you’re right. I want my whole / mouth around your safety” (14). Even if we are startled into laughter by the surprising appearance of the word “safety” here, this turn doesn’t feel comic exactly. But perhaps we could say that the poet co-opts the mechanism of humor—its shocking mind-sneezes—to serious ends.

Another poem, simply titled “Matt,” is built on the comical premise that, “For all intents and purposes and because the rule applies more often than it doesn’t, every white man or boy who has entered and fallen away from my particular moderate life has been called Matt. Not Dan. Rarely Ben. Never Matthew” (46). The poem proceeds to mash up an unspecified number of past boyfriends into a single portrait of “Matt,” who “knows he’s a white man but doesn’t think of himself as a white man” (47). Parker plays this conceit to comic

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19 Maya C. Popa, “Complicated Magic: PW Talks with Morgan Parker,” *Publishers Weekly*, 18 Jan. 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/79041-complicated-magic-pw-talks-with-morgan-parker.html>.

20 *Ibid.*

effect: “Matt doesn’t have a condom so we can’t. Matt also doesn’t have a condom so we can’t” (46); “Matt, Matt, Matt, Matt. Each one more beautiful than the last. Each one with more intricate ennui” (48). But these touches of humor are scattered throughout a text suffused with the painful reflections of the speaker, who confesses, “I can’t tell if he’s into me because I’m black or because I’m not that black and either way I feel bad” (48). In the end, it appears that the seemingly farcical exercise of adding together all these Matts has actually helped the speaker move on, as the poem concludes, “Matt can’t want me. I am not forever. Matt has kissed me hundreds of times and he kissed my ancestors, too. He held them down and kissed them real good. He was young and he could afford it. When he touched them, they always smiled, almost as if it had been rehearsed” (48). Exaggerating the homogeneity of these white men allows the speaker to identify and remove herself from a pattern of serial Matt-ogamy. One can imagine how this poem might be revised as a stand-up bit: the set-up collides a common assumption (that a person’s name fails to encapsulate their individuality) with a lived observation (that sometimes names feel like brands, such that even the occasional Ben can be a total “Matt”); the audience laughs when the caricature rings true but also as we humor the cracks in the conceit—the comic seemingly unfazed by all the contradictions that build up along the way. But where the comic might have settled for making us laugh *at* the Matts and *with* the speaker (at her pesky habit of falling for them), the poet refuses to sustain the deadpan or to simply laugh it off. Instead, Parker confronts the tragic, self-destructive perpetuity of the speaker’s humoring (the way she tolerates the Matt-ness of her relationships), and she disrupts it: not with a comic debugging that lets the contradictions unwind the conceit—but with a redemptive recognition that sees the truth of the pattern through the noise of insignificant differences.

Somehow, the book maintains a sense of humor, even though that sense tends to dissipate by the end of each poem. The humor of these serious poems doesn’t function as “comic relief”; if anything, there’s something more like a bait and switch at play here. In a sense, many of Parker’s poems subtly invert the conventional structure of jokes: titles that read like punch lines draw readers in, but the poems that follow pummel us with painful truths. To bathetic effect, Parker’s “Ode to Fried Chicken’s Guest Appearance on *Scandal*” laughably proposes to

apply the high seriousness of the “Ode” to something as (seemingly) trivial as a piece of food appearing on a network television drama. Of course, “fried chicken” is not merely a piece of food because it comes loaded with the weight of racist stereotypes. The poem isn’t funny, but its seriousness is humorously deployed; note the way that Parker humors the toxic symbolism of “fried chicken” and the racist dog-whistle of “gun violence” in the beginning of the poem:

Everyone likes it.  
That’s not the point.  
In America the ocean isn’t rising.  
I allow the chicken to be my stand-in.  
For argument’s sake, I encompass  
all chicken. All guns.  
The thing about guns  
is everyone is dying.  
That’s not the point.  
On *Scandal*  
the white President says  
gun violence.  
He is fucking a black woman  
secretly. That’s when  
the chicken enters. (43)

Parker plays with the way that stereotypes, tokens, and symbols purport to “stand-in” for real people, conceding to them—“For argument’s sake”—but also reversing them, so that the speaker represents “all chicken” and “All guns,” not the other way around. The speaker’s interpretation of chicken’s “guest appearance” is most clearly outlined in the enjambed lines in the middle of the poem—the chicken is “the wedge / between someone’s / forefather’s, crispy hot threat / to sanctity. A monument” (43). But by the end of the poem, end-stopped lines begin to pile up again, channeling a kind of paranoid mania that somehow culminates in a startlingly lucid vision of slavery’s living legacy:

Everybody wants a taste.  
Everybody’s dying.  
Everybody wants a taste.  
The chicken is sacred Black pussy.  
The chicken invades your homes.  
The chicken circles the truth.  
The chicken can fly.

The chicken is how we riot.  
The salt, the terror.  
They should have never  
brought us here. (43–44)

As you can see, this poem, like many in *Magical Negro*, builds to a punch line but ends with a punch.

### *all that beauty*

Fred Moten's *all that beauty*, from Seattle-based press Letter Machine Editions, will stick out on your bookshelves—literally: it's an oddly shaped book that nonetheless feels vaguely familiar in your hands since it is printed on 136 landscape-formatted 8½" x 11" pages. I mention these details because one of the effects of the book design is to defamiliarize the everyday, making something as humble and mundane as printer paper feel newly significant, almost experimental. The large pages also have an immersive effect; some poems take advantage of the extra space by constellating across the page, but most are presented in dense prose blocks with lines that stretch the full width of the page yet leave considerable white space below. These poems are dense, both visually and conceptually, and this is their great strength. These are not light poems that can be read casually, and this is not a book that can be read in a single sitting; rather, I found myself reading a page or two at a time. In their density, these poems are endlessly rewarding to the reader who is willing to put time and care into reading them. Paradoxically, although the pages turn slowly, Moten's words flow with the rapid-fire pace of the comic, "Arranging shit a mile a minute so you can see and walk around in it—talk it, so to speak, with a gaudy, common, spiky swerve" (102).

Like Parker, Moten weaves a rich intertextual tapestry of names into his poems, but Moten's references do a different kind of work. Moten presents each poem as a conversation or collaboration with the artists, musicians, and writers who inspired them. For instance, below the title of Moten's "resistances, impromptu" is a note that reads "with Tania Bruguera and Fernando Zalamea'n'em" (70). The "n'em"—i.e., "and them"—at the end of each attribution indicates that these intertexts are never reducible to "impossible monogamy," never

content with “the chaste satisfaction that’s said to live in one-to-one relation” (2–3). Indeed, most poems include longer lists of a dozen or so names. The way a musical recording might “feature” another artist or as a bandleader introduces his band, Moten’s use of “with” discloses a sense of affinity, gratitude, and intimacy (some interlocutors are listed by first name only), productively blurring the lines between dedication, citation, and invocation. Recognizing some of these names provides the reader with alternative angles of approach, but one need not know all these references to read and enjoy each poem. The same goes for the names dropped in the body of most poems—from Sun Ra to Phillis Wheatley to Hannah Arendt to Aretha Franklin to Nate Mackey—and the song lyrics that often slip unannounced into the text (e.g., “Feeling sweet feeling drops from my fingertips. The tips imagine autoexcessive caress and come from that imagining” [53]). Without ever stooping to footnotes, Moten builds into his book an archive of references that we can take as recommendations about what to read, view, or listen to after—or alongside—*all that beauty*.

One of the defining features of this book is its investigative wordplay. In a poem titled “semblance,” Moten adds another “a” to the word *semblance* to achieve “semblance resembling but reassembling imbalance,” a coinage that elegantly conveys “how relation pre-exists itself, sets itself beside and before itself, as resemblance does to semblance” (108). At once improvisational and intricately thoughtful, Moten’s wordplay is always too substantive to feel like mere punning. In another poem, “photopos,” Moten asserts that “Art and ethics derive from one another. They drive through one another” (92). It is a challenge to summarize or excerpt from the poems that compose *all that beauty* because they tend to present long trains of thought; making sense of one page often depends on recalling a coinage or etymological link from a previous page. These poems are ethico-aesthetic inquiries that build critical arguments on twists and turns of phrase.

The volume begins with an “aprefatory note” (*pre-*, before; *après*, after—a sign of the word-playfulness to come), in which Moten discusses the inseparability of poetry and criticism. But first he presents nearly a full page of epigraphs, all passages written by James Baldwin. One of them is a passage from *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which provides the origin of Moten’s title: “When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways,



something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not yet know it yet, are very beautiful" (2). The poems that follow cohere, however obliquely, as meditations on this phrase in which Moten seeks to follow the example of Baldwin as "more + less than either critic or poet or both" (3):

The truth to which criticism has access fades to a blur and we're sorry for its reckless scrutiny. But the study that soils transparency, in the rightful belief that it reveals an opacity that's always there, need offer no apology to James Baldwin since it's he who teaches us to look so closely that we see all dark through what we see. Criticism is supposed to let you see (through) that. Criticism is poetry, in this regard and, in this regard, Baldwin is more + less than either critic or poet or both. He makes us let us look for ourselves, and through ourselves, till we're beside ourselves. (2-3)

The present volume successfully exemplifies this more-than-fusion of poetry and criticism; if Moten's mixture "soils transparency," it does so only in order that we may "see (through)" the "opacity that's always there."

Moreover, in blurring these genres, Moten is able to shed many of the conventional trappings of "seriousness" that adhere to both poetry and critical prose. The predominant voice running through these poems is certainly that of an inquiring critic, but his inquiry is unabashedly personal, without the epistemic pretenses of "objectivity" or "critical distance." There is distance, of course, between the reader and the poem, the viewer and the work of art—the very mediacy that makes criticism productive (if not quite necessary). But in these poems, Moten's critical voice proceeds from the recognition that this distance is organic and inevitable; this distance need not be performed or exaggerated because it is always exaggerating itself. Note the way Moten strings together verbs in describing what Baldwin does to his readers: "He makes us let us look for ourselves." A work of art, criticism, or poetry cannot directly make us do anything; it can only push us to *let ourselves* see.

For me, the brilliant wit of Moten's writing is best exemplified in "mess and mass and (" , an earlier version of which was published as "mess and mass or pain and care" in the Tufts University Art Galleries exhibition booklet for the artist Harry Dodge's 2017 collection *Works of*

*Love*.<sup>21</sup> This prose poem investigates the care and work that Dodge puts into making a mess—and what that work can do to/for the viewer. First, Dodge’s work leads Moten to wondering whose pain is taken by “painstaking” work: “Is what it is to take pains separable from what it is to take pain? Is pain absorbed, or reassigned, or can art just take it all the way away?” (101). If art can take away pain, Moten asks,

Would that be both a kind of bridge and a kind of break, not-in-between the work and the witness but in their separation’s overflow, which the maker joins in the making, having disappeared in the curacy, the taking of pain become the taking of care, where taking care in the making, working all the way through the work’s unworking, is unbearable pleasure’s uncountable continuum? Is the give and take of pleasure and pain what, finally, serially, neither art nor artist nor audience can withstand? There’s a dispossessive empathy that makes me stop the world and melt with you. It crushes us, turns our solidities into discharge. Such loss of composure is the work of love that *Works of Love* compose. (101)

Much of the poem’s musing dwells in the etymological confluence where curation (the care with which one organizes and displays works of art) meets curacy (the care of souls) meets curing (in the chemical sense, the hardening of a polymer, such as the urethane paint Dodge uses). Dodge’s sculptures create suspense by suspending drops of paint, by drying paint mid-drip; Moten helps us see this careful curation of curing as the practice of a curate, with the audience as Dodge’s parish:

Consider the pain in the ass of watching paint dry, which is boredom’s metaphor of choice. Harry takes on the pain of boredom for the sake of our excitement. But he doesn’t really watch paint dry. Rather, in the painstaking shaping of the paint’s drying, in the care infused in color’s metastasis, in the activation of the surface’s dimensionality, in the slow cultivation of surfeit, *Harry lets us watch paint dry*, forcing upon us some menacingly chromatic fun because *he makes us watch it melt, too*, our fun cut up with subecstatic fretting.” (101)

Part of what makes this piece especially captivating is the way that the “poetry” of Moten’s writing embodies the tones and styles of Dodge’s work at the same time that the “prose” of Moten’s writing

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21 [https://artgalleries.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/TUAG\\_Dodge\\_booklet\\_web.pdf](https://artgalleries.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/TUAG_Dodge_booklet_web.pdf).

describes them. When Moten identifies “the delicate balance with which Harry’s shit be all off center on the pedestal, all off center and rough-hewn and strewn all over the room, all thrown all over the place with extreme precision” (102), Moten puts his finger on what makes Dodge’s work *work*. But Moten’s critical discussion—his account of how “the careful arrangement of mess, the painstaking taking care of it, is a deviant sacrament given in the transubstantiation of turds and dicks and hotdogs, or drapes and straps and buckets”—also achieves that same precise, messy “sembalance” (102, 108). For instance, just as the poem seems to reach a conclusion and voice this Dodge-Moten aesthetic in a series of manifesto-like imperatives—“We need to take messy care of our shit. Let’s sculpt dripping. Let’s walk around (through) painting. Let’s talk through it till we find the truth, which is the shit, in messi, messi, messi”—it detours into a chant about the Argentine soccer star Lionel Messi (102). Remarkably, Moten’s poem continually does the work it ascribes to Dodge’s art. Replace “Harry” with “Fred” in the passage below and you’d have a compelling description of the way Moten’s poem operates: “Carefully, painstakingly, Harry makes you worry, lining up all these worried, dripping lines all but against the wall, to let you worry the limits of some terms: mess and mass and (care and pain and make and let and line and melt and come and go and work and worry worry worry / and paint)” (101–102). Moten carefully, painstakingly worries the limits of terms and unfolds the layers of delicacy implicit in *Works of Love*—especially the layers of Dodge’s *Pure Shit Hotdog Cake*. And Moten has no qualms about wading waist-deep into the scatological humor of this work’s title: “This is the shit and, in this regard, Harry is a doo-doo chaser, doing, working, all up on pleasure’s irreducible nastiness, its essential messiness, its melting little mountainous massiveness, like George Clinton and Doug Kearney’n’em” (102).

One of this poem’s central insights is the realization that “casting pigment is a language problem” (102). As a three-dimensional object, we could call *Pure Shit Hotdog Cake* a “sculpture,” but since paint accounts for so much of the work’s material substance (and so much of its dynamism) we might be inclined to call it a “painting.” But that word’s “mess” has already been “stilled” (101); as a noun, *painting* has become so stiff and motionless that we can’t feel the gerund: “The activity of ‘paint’ is all but suppressed in the shift from verb to noun. ‘Painting’

works, or doesn't work, this way as well. 'Work' works this way, too, so that art and its terms are just replete with this restless tendency to be still" (102). The humor here functions in a kind of observational mode but applied to language, pleasurably revealing truths hidden on the surface of our words. But Moten goes beyond merely observing the way these familiar words fail us; his defamiliarizing impulse leads him to a better, livelier word: "if you say that Harry urethanes, or if we call *Pure Shit Hotdog Cake* (which is where I'm looking out from to the rest of this world he works and messes up and cares for) a urethaning, then you might move back into some of that motion. Come mess the noun up, so you can see what's happening." (102).

As so often happens while reading *all that beauty*, in this passage it's hard to decide which exciting idea to focus on. There's a lot to unpack in Moten's delightful invitation to "Come mess the noun up, so you can see what's happening"; for one thing, it reminds us that even as Moten is worrying and theorizing art, he's also talking about poetry. What lingers longest in my mind, however, is the way Moten regards *Pure Shit Hotdog Cake* as a "where" rather than a "what." This proposes that criticism should approach a work of art not as an object to be looked at but as a place from which to look outward, a perspective we can humor and, if need be, debug. Criticism, then, is trying to see the world from where the work sits, from where and how the work *works*: "These are works of love, after all, and messing you up is the work love does" (103).