



Untying the Mother Tongue, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 155–63

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'I know you can cant'

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CITE AS:

Jeffrey Champlin, "I know you can cant': Slips of the Mother Tongue in Fred Moten's *B Jenkins*", in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 155–63 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_7>

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ABSTRACT: This article reads Fred Moten's collection *B Jenkins* as literalizing the poetic appeal to the mother tongue to reveal its mediated essence. Approaching its first and last poems in terms of Friedrich Kittler's techno-psychological history of the family casts Moten's de-tuning of natural language in terms of cultural mastery streaked with affirmative disfluency. With the 'cant', slang slides towards a broader awareness of the limits of knowledge. There, language may emerge for perceiving the role of the technological mother tongue in our post-national age.

KEYWORDS: Monolingualism; Derrida; Kittler; Globish; Palestine

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The poetry of Fred Moten has a way of putting you in your place while also calling to a better world. Fusing the Black Arts tradition with high theory, its appeal to freedom often operates with utopian tones, but rather than seeking transcendence it takes to the rhythms and breaks of language. In his collection *B Jenkins*, Moten literalizes the poetic appeal to the mother tongue in a way that opens it to an awareness of its mediated essence. Reading the volume in terms of Friedrich Kittler's techno-psychological history of the family allows us to cast Moten's detuning of natural language in terms of a cultural mastery streaked with affirmative disfluency. With the cant, slang slides towards a broader awareness of the limits of knowledge. There, language may emerge for perceiving the role of the technological mother tongue in our post-national age.

Framing my inquiry in a tradition of critical hermeneutics pressures metaphysical narratives in their political and technological form. This article, hedging closely to its source as a talk at the 'Untying the Mother Tongue' conference, can only begin to articulate a broader theory of rogue pedagogy that I am currently developing from a number of different directions. The specifics of this close reading of Moten, however, emerged from a seminar students and I referred to as 'Occupy

Poetics' that I taught at Bard College's campus in Palestine in 2015. Reading within a terrain of contested nationality, we began with the prophetic force of Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry's. We then turned to literary resistance in Moten, Mahmoud Darwish, and texts from the Arab Spring (including Amina Saïd and Nawal El Saadawi).¹ In each case, we asked how poetry casts bodies through specific spaces and in so doing recodes landscapes of power.

Who did we think we were, to try to read Moten under these conditions? The Palestinian, American, and European students of the seminar were multilingual and spoke English with varying degrees of fluency. One could object that we were not appropriately versed in African American culture and literature, especially in its most difficult, twenty-first century cast. But on the other hand, the students were not content to leave American Studies to itself. For them, African American literature offered an extraordinary lexicon of resistance, a library of freedom but also of continued bondage. Indeed, they often linked such writers as Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said to create hybrid canons of postcolonialism. With Moten though, we faced a challenge known to all teachers, indeed, all advocates, of the avant-garde. Who is really ever ready for what Charles Bernstein praises as 'the difficult poem', much less what Friedrich Schlegel affirms as the 'incomprehensibility' of literature?²

At the heart of *B Jenkins*, we heard a line that affirmed a poetics of deficiency: 'I know you can cant.' The secret code of the drifter may

1 For a foundational text on the relation between American Studies and postcolonial studies, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1989]).

2 Note that Bernstein's text moves directly from textual difficulty to a plural injunction: '[T]he first step in dealing with the difficult poem is to recognize that this is a common problem that many other readers confront on a daily basis. You are not alone!'. See Charles Bernstein, 'The Difficult Poem', *Harper's Magazine*, 306.1837 (June 2003), available at Electric Poetry Center <<http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/essays/difficult-poem.html>> [accessed 21 June 2017]. Friedrich Schlegel also manages to keep the focus in connection, even while circling around its possible failure: 'Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible?' ('On Incomprehensibility', in *Friedrich Schlegel's 'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, trans. and intro. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 259–71 (p. 259)).

not go so far as untying the mother tongue, but it promises ever more exquisite bindings.

The title of Fred Moten's collection refers to his mother and pictures her prominently on the cover. Moten has described the book with a deceptively simple poetics that, while emotionally compelling in its own right, also implies a narrative of cultural fluency. He says that he composed the individual poems based on references to the work of writers and artists he came to know directly or indirectly through his mother. Scanning the table of contents one sees, for example, James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and Walter Benjamin. The poems sketch many small portraits that lead to a multidimensional image of the mother in language that would replace the actual cover photo.³

So it is easy to understand the collection as a moving elegy to B Jenkins, who died in the year 2000. On a broader level of cultural history though, Moten also engages the epochal relationship between poetry and the mother. The work of Friedrich Kittler can help us articulate this connection. In his study *Poet, Mother, Child*, Kittler elaborates the role that the mother played around 1800 in establishing a new regime of education in which reading with the mother initiates the desire to learn by speaking words aloud spontaneously rather than merely repeating present models.⁴ Learning in this way linked the child from the family through the body of the mother to the national language, German, which replaced the earlier emphasis on the international language of Latin.

Scholars most commonly go to Kittler for his work on the role of technology in discourse formation. Like Foucault, he sees history in terms of epochs, and here he emphasizes the shift from the extended family (*Sippe*) to the nuclear family that took place at the turn of

3 Here I draw on a discussion that Moten kindly held with my students in Palestine, beaming in from midnight in California, bearer of generosity and intellectual light. I by no means intend to minimize this statement of authorial poetics, which, combined with the artistic strength of the poems, made a lasting impression on myself and all the students in attendance. Instead, this article seeks to add an additional frame and scale of analysis.

4 Friedrich Kittler, *Dichter, Mutter, Kind* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1991). A selection of this text is available in English: Friedrich Kittler, 'Poet, Mother, Child: On the Romantic Invention of Sexuality', in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–16.

the nineteenth century. Importantly though, Kittler describes both the poet and the mother in terms of their mediating role. Within this historical narrative, he focuses on the move from the nurse, who merely teaches children to repeat the signs of an external system, to the mother, who encourages the child to talk to itself, and thus produce its interiority by talking to her. I quote:

the coupling of orality and poetry stems from a psycho-pedagogy that, since Locke and Rousseau, has prescribed that mothers themselves should nurse and speak to the being without language (*infans*) in their charge.⁵

Poetry became the operative technology for the creation of the child-subject.

From this point of view we can see *B Jenkins* as affirming a particular kind of identity. Though running counter to state power, the Black Arts movement so important to Moten did, in some of its modalities, call on cultural black nationalism. Moten writes to the mother as one who inspired him to become a poet — a poet as the epitome of the reflective, creative person. Right away though, we see that *B Jenkins* affirms identity only through an edit, or a scratch. Starting with the title of the book, Moten literalizes the question of the mother tongue by asking how to address not just what Kittler calls ‘the mother imago’: the metaphysical mother who naturalizes language. Going further, he employs his mother’s proper name. And more than that, he de-names her from the start, abbreviating with the ‘B’, and later de-capitalizing to ‘b’.

The collection begins with a poem titled ‘b jenkins’ and then ends with a different poem with the same title. The first one formally models the entire volume in three stanzas. Now these kinds of texts require that one speculate a bit even to get started. So I will suggest that the first stanza speaks of the mother, the second of culture, the third of the son. In addition to thorough readings of the poems, I strongly recommend the Moten’s own recordings of the poems that are accessible in the

5 Kittler, ‘Poet, Mother, Child’, p. 6.

University of Pennsylvania online collection.⁶ The poem starts with a happy memory, perhaps of growing up in the mother's house, and with a reference to a flower and the blues singer Bertha Lee. The 'territory sunflower' names a single plant, which I see as taken out of its own field to create a domestic centre.⁷

After the domestic set-up, the poem goes underground. The second stanza falls into a six-word pattern that matches the six sentences of the whole poem. The rhythm falters just once, with the line: 'between break and secret | vaulted'. The pair 'break'/'secret' holds together through the rhythm, then 'vaulted' marks a turn. We go down to where a secret might be held. Once there, the basement functions as a utopia, a liberatory space that overcomes racial divisions, as indicated by the hairstyles of the 'long-haired hippies and afro-blacks'.⁸ Moten brings us down to a light place of popular culture, to a hidden song. Certain readers will recognize the quote from James Brown's 'Get on the Good Foot'; this quote is later referenced in the Digable Planets song 'Jimmi Diggin Cats'. Without citation though, this all weaves into one sonic fabric.⁹

Let us keep going. When reading the third verse with my students, one held up on the phrase 'born way before you was born'.¹⁰ Is the grammar correct? Is this a typo? In short: 'am I getting this right?' The difficult poem assumes the fluency of the reader to reconstruct, or at least to contrast, artistic speech with normal speech. Familiar since modernism, yet still trying our wits, and our patience, this type of poem defers our quest for meaning. Here, the poem seems to connect, to speak from the heart, at least if one knows the code. In the instance of 'dialect', also sometimes called an 'ethnolect', Moten generalizes the use of 'was' to the second person singular ('you'). He makes an art of

6 Fred Moten, *B Jenkins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Readings can be accessed at PennSound <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Moten.php>> [accessed 21 June 2017].

7 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

9 James Brown, 'Get on the Good Foot (Parts 1 & 2)', *Get on the Good Foot* (Polydor Records, 1972); Digable Planets, 'Jimmi Diggin Cats', *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)* (Capitol Records, 1993).

10 Moten, *B Jenkins*, p. 1.

code switching, exaggerating from vernacular to the near-idiolect, the completely personal language, of the poem.

Down and down. With the reference to a 'slip' of the tongue in my title I am veering off into the unconscious. But for the reader this registers more as a skip than a slip, a mini break of a jump on the record. As Moten's first theoretical study reveals, the jazz break stops time in time, while also rolling towards what comes next.¹¹ In terms of the reading with Kittler that I proposed above, this line would mark the integration of the mother tongue with the language of the poet. The poet slips fluently into his native speech. Yet in the next poem we will see a declaration that critiques this idea of unity.

When he assigns the final poem of the collection the same proper name, 'b jenkins', Moten further disassembles the propriety of the mother tongue. This poem shifts technological scenes, transporting us from the phonograph to the telephone. This phone also repeats though, skipping and wearing into old tracks. I envision a conversation, with the poet older in life. To me, it sounds like the poet begins and his mother responds.

It is as if there is a sort of homecoming, though one marked by loss and distance. On the phone there is always an absence to be mourned, as Avital Ronell teaches us in *The Telephone Book*. Ronell emphasizes the disconnect instead of the identity-forming mediation, though in another sense she and Kittler engage in a common task of critiquing metaphysics through technology.¹² Moten's poem engages both of these dimensions.

On the line, a single line stands out as both encouragement and awareness of deficiency: 'I know you can cant.'¹³ In the recording of the poem, Moten reads the line with a rhythmic run that then lands with emphasis on the last word.¹⁴ I initially read *cant* in terms of 'slang', in

11 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

12 Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). Drawing on another dimension of Ronell's work, we can also think how the call of the mother in Heidegger is set up so you cannot get out of it. See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Perennial Library, 2004).

13 Moten, *B Jenkins*, p. 95.

14 This can be heard in the University of Pennsylvania recording recommended above.

terms of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry 'to speak in the peculiar jargon or "cant" of vagabonds, thieves, and the like'. In relation to theory, another valence is: 'to use the special phraseology or jargon of a particular class or subject'.¹⁵ Canting relates the thief to the theorist.

Now, according to the lens that Kittler offers, this could be the mother affirming the poet-child's fluency in the dialect. As if to allay a fear: 'I know you understand our minor language.' At the same time though, we can also hear *cant* as 'cannot', as negating what Derrida calls the monolingualism of the other. It brings down the self-assumed speech of power. Something shifts in the originary occupation of the mother tongue. In a sense, all culture colonizes, but we still must describe its specific enunciations. An imperative to speak the one, non-native language of the other emerges from Moten's poem and Derrida's text, precisely to dispossess the master of his claim of a monopoly on meaning.¹⁶

Who can approve the cant, who would claim to regulate it? The other Kant, Immanuel, though pushing imagination far in an experience of the sublime, would land us safely back at the shores of reason. But we know by now to be wary of poetry that claims to speak its limit. Perhaps, as rogue language, the cant even affirms the error. But can one really go on with language gone wrong? Can we successfully perform it?

I have been thinking about these questions in terms of a pedagogical exploration of the concept of the 'rogue reader' that I originally elaborated in response to the terrorism depicted in works of Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist. Drawing on the figure of the fortune teller in *Michael Kohlhaas*, I sighted a uniquely transformative role for minoritized figures in periods when standard protocols of political representation fail. In the classroom, I have found that generative writing in response

15 'Cant, n.3,' in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/27198>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

16 Perhaps surprisingly, for a thinker so associated with a courageous defence of difference, he tells of how he felt compelled to speak French with a perfect Parisian accent. Instead of meaning to harm the language he wanted to 'make it do something'. In this regard one might say that deconstruction works like poetry, in that it does to concepts what poetry does to language more broadly. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

to traumatic texts of literature and political theory can affirm hybrid crossings between students' intellectual analyses and their personal experience.¹⁷

Barbara Cassin's critique of 'globish' has become something of a touchstone for those that fear that English may just pave the way for assimilation into global markets.¹⁸ I recognize that in our current era, learning English means speaking-for-and-to capitalist power. Standards of language acquisition do police work. However, in the face of instrumentalization, I suggest not backing away, but pushing forward. Students who engage culture broadly and critically open the possibility of creating new approaches to the dominant code. The comparative perspective developed in language classes, when placed in a much wider context, may well lead to language both *more* useful and *more questioning* of definitions of use.¹⁹

As a noun, *cant* also means 'border', 'side', 'brink', 'edge', and 'corner'. Attacks on 'globish' can obscure actual new linkages between cultures. Instead of a vague total English, we have varieties of hybrid speech that create new ties of resistance. 'Cantish', then, if one must, but not 'Globish'.²⁰ Technology plays a key role in this process. As we read through the entire volume of Moten's poems, we sometimes began class with small groups that collectively investigated texts. Cell-phones out, the classroom buzzed in a symphony of proper names, hip

17 See Jeffrey Champlin, *The Making of a Terrorist: On Classic German Rogues* (Northwestern, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015) and Jeffrey Champlin, 'Rights, Revolution, Representation: Thinking Through the Language of the French Revolution', in *Teaching Representations of the French Revolution*, ed. by Julia Douthwaite, Catriona Seth, and Antoinette Sol (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2019), pp. 69–77.

18 See the conversation with Cassin in 'The Power of Bilingualism: Interview with Barbara Cassin, French Philosopher and Philologist', e-flux conversations (March 2017) <<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-power-of-bilingualism-interview-with-barbara-cassin-french-philosopher-and-philologist/6252>> [accessed 21 June 2017]. Note that 'globish', for all its faults, at least indicates an alternative to 'broken English'. The real question though, would be how to combine these formulations in a way that fuses brokenness with the global.

19 See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013). In my view, Apter's justified concerns about untranslatability offer an opportunity to articulate an embodied planetary literature.

20 We can also recall that the verb 'cant' comes from *cantâre*, 'to sing, chant'. The word can also mean 'to slant' something, such as a board. See the *OED* for the fascinating full range of meanings for 'cant' as both a noun and a verb.

hop music, the blues, and the particular Arabic-English that the students call 'gharra-bezee'.²¹ Screens large and small displayed paintings and portraits.

In terms of Kittler's historical projection, such a scene suggests a move away from the nurse/mother opposition and in the direction of a technological mother tongue. For a generation 'raised by the Internet', the stakes are no longer romantic subjectivity (which was allied for a time with Cold War individualism). And we are also not going back to rote repetition, but onward to a practice of citationality that rewrites language in specific confines and establishes new cultures.

Finally, one could once also say: 'to become "cant" as meaning "become well" or "recover your strength"'. Moten writes: 'I know you can cant. I know you can make it if you try.'²² As I hear Moten, through Sly and the Family Stone, 'it' is language.²³ And language is power.

21 A portmanteau that fuses the words *Arabic* and *Inglizi* (for 'English' in Arabic); Arab-lish (also known in Palestine as 'Arabezy').

22 Moten, *B Jenkins*, p. 95.

23 Sly and the Family Stone, *Stand* (Epic/Sony, 1969).

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