

Coffeeshop Discourse: An Exercise in Creative Writing in Search of Meaning

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Abstract

Academic writing can, at times, lead to more obfuscation than clarity for students, which this paper attempts to solve through using creative writing as a method. This experimental approach makes theories accessible by reframing the discussion in a more approachable format. It does so by relating Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of sound in "Text and Interpretation"

to Fred Moten's theory in *In the Break*, exploring how these theories generate a definition of Blackness as art. Apart from demonstrating how creative writing can be used with academic rigor, through reinterpreting theories of sound, the choice of alternative epistemology also contributes to the ongoing discourse around how to decolonize academic practice.

Prelude

As an inexperienced academic, I often struggle with understanding the various theories of my predecessors, and, even more so, how to synthesize and apply these theories to create new knowledge and understanding. After struggling with the traditional methods commonly found in academic practice, I found that reading and analyzing papers worked to a certain extent but that I was never able to transcend the barrier created by the written academic form. The materiality of these texts manifested as an intangible barrier that I could not break through. Over time I could interpret each text separately, but the barrier caused by its materiality made it a struggle to bring my knowledge of the text into a larger discourse that allowed for further contextualization.

While mulling this over, I realized that while these theories exist in a written format, they were still representative of opinions and moments that were part of a larger discussion. I started to imagine them as an online forum akin to a Reddit community, where I was reading a post about sound and the comments that came along with it. Once I latched onto this idea, it helped me visualize that these two texts are in active conversation with each other as representatives of their theorists rather than books that had no relation to each other, effectively reconnecting the writers to their texts. Building on this, I employ creative writing to reframe my analysis of both Fred Moten's and Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of sound into an active conversation between the two theorists. This choice is also informed by my positionality as an Asian-American scholar, working with the text of a Black scholar, Fred Moten. The decision to use an alternative epistemology for this paper builds on the tradition of Black Feminist scholars (Collins 770; Lorde 27) and seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how to decolonize current academic practices (Bhambra et al. 512; Ferri 382).

My goal with this approach is to show that creative writing can be applied in an academic way to further enhance learning and understanding when working with difficult and intricate theories. Here, creative writing is defined by Jon Cook's description in his article "Creative Writing as Research Method," which argues that

one way of giving substance to the notion of writing as research method, depends upon the idea that writing is a means of discovery. To conceive of writing as discovery or technique implies the necessity of rewriting, and it also calls for a practice of writing informed by extensive reading. (Cook 204)

Applying it here, while most of the conversation that is quoted and analyzed is taken from *In the Break* and “Text and Interpretation,” the bibliography clearly shows the necessity of doing extensive research into other papers, thoughts, and interviews to gain enough insight and understanding to allow for a successful reframing of Moten’s and Gadamer’s knowledge into this setting. Such a methodology requires the writer to search beyond the texts at hand to contextualize the two works. Reading interviews and watching videos of these theorists introduces the writer to these theorists’s standpoints and ideologies in ways that the conventional approach in academia would not encourage with its emphasis and focus on the texts at hand.

This method is also important in the discussion of decolonizing academia because, as Patricia Hill Collins argues in her article “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” it allows scholars to make “creative use of their status as mediators, their thought becomes an entity unto itself that is rooted in two distinct political and epistemological contexts,” which is especially useful because of the difficulty of synthesizing “competing world views that, at this point in time, may defy reconciliation” (773). For Collins, the task is “to point out common themes and concerns” (773). While written explicitly with Black Feminist theory and scholarship in mind, I found this to be extraordinarily relevant and powerful as an Asian-American scholar looking to reconcile two vastly different texts that represent a more classically trained academic German scholar of the European tradition, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Fred Moten, a modern African-American man raised in the tradition of Black Radical Arts scholarship, as it shows how relevant Collins’s arguments still are more than forty years later.

Before going further, it must be explicitly stated that all the words being spoken by Gadamer and Moten are direct quotations from their interviews, theories, and texts. While there may be some transitional verbiage and grammar employed to make the conversation run smoothly, academic rigor was applied in making sure that, where necessary, statements are accurately represented with appropriate references and credit given. The intention is not to put words in the authors' mouths or imagine that which is fantastical and unreal, but to create a setting that allows for direct conversation.

Main Article: In the Break of Interpretation

On a street in the misty, smokey ether of knowledge there exists a coffeeshop nestled beside famous literary names, old shops full of books and the smell of ink, and bright digital technologies that advance so rapidly that each day the shop looks different. Somehow the old, soft, satiny book pages with the yellowed spines and the inkblot stains coincide with the laser burned words of standardized fonts and scrolling page breaks. It is not important to know why or how, but just that they do. The inside of the coffeeshop is a jumble, pleasantly dark with walls covered in bookshelves. It is a go-between place.

Two men are sitting at a round table in comfortable nondescript chairs. One is an older white, German man wearing a comfortable cardigan over his white shirt and tie. On the table next to his drink "Text and Interpretation" lays open, and across from him sits a younger Black American man dressed casually in a black collared shirt, *In the Break* lying next to his pastry. The only other person in the room is the barista who serves as cashier, waitress, and anything else necessary to the running of the business. It is slow and she has nothing to do, so she tunes into the discussion happening between the two, her usual mode of passing empty time. The regulars do not mind her casual eavesdropping, sometimes even asking her to pitch in.

Fred Moten speaks softly, radiating affable and approachable energy, as he addresses the older German professor sitting across from him: "It seems that the place we come from philosophically is ideologically

opposed, and not just because my foundations were in the teachings of Derrida” (Moten and Fitzgerald). Hans-Georg Gadamer chuckles, amusement in his eyes as he leans back. He is no less approachable than his colleague, with a certain kindness of age about him. The barista knows that he is wondering if he will ever escape the infamous debates he had held with Derrida (the discussion of whether they could be called ‘debates’ is still up in the air). Gadamer’s expression is more serious, not out of any type of threat, but he simply approaches everything with deliberation: “Nonetheless we may still be able to reach a fusion of horizons. This is simply a larger challenge to overcome, at least for me, as I believe that understanding is a fundamental endowment of man” (Gadamer 21).

“Our ideologies don’t connect but it is possible that our horizons will fuse,”¹ Moten smiles, and the barista absentmindedly wipes the counter as she ponders the discussion at hand. She understands what Gadamer is referencing—he has been in often and she has heard several of his talks, lectures, and debates. The ‘fusion of horizons’ is something of a trademark of his, and from what she understands, any type of successful communication would result in that fusion. Even if Moten and Gadamer were ideologically opposed, as long as both were authentically seeking to understand the other, there would be a moment where they would reach understanding. It does not necessarily mean that their ideologies would fundamentally change, more that the current understanding of the subject being discussed would reach another level of understanding made up of the combination of the two. She likes this idea, it allows room for growth in both the interpreter and the ‘text’, while allowing for continued growth upon each meeting. Its intention is not to seek to impose a right way of interpretation.

She returns her attention to the conversation, discovering that it has moved on. Moten is speaking: “My focus, when I look at art, is on the performance. I don’t believe you can be Black and say that you’ve never felt like you were on stage. Referencing Saidiya Hartman’s fundamental work and phrasing, I’m interested in the convergence of blackness and

¹ Fictional dialogue used by author to create conversational flow.

the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection” (Moten 1).

The barista is completely lost and a bit overwhelmed. She supposes it comes with the territory of academics. Often, she has wondered if the language of academia is akin to a secret code developed by friends so that only the people in the know can possibly decipher the entangled words. Thankfully Gadamer has asked for further clarification and she is given another opportunity to grasp what Moten is saying.

“[Hartman] allows us to ask: what have objectification and humanization, both of which we can think in relation to a certain notion of subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity, of black performance?” (Moten 2). She remembers hearing a group of students once criticize Moten’s almost too poetic prose that at times made his texts indecipherable (Nishikawa 2), and cannot help but agree with the critique. Objectification, humanization, and a certain notion of subjection. She finds it curious that he dances around the explicit use of the word slavery but then questions why she has that expectation in the first place. Another term he has previously used comes to mind: hypervisibility. She understands this to mean “between looking and being looked at, spectacle and spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed” (Moten 1). Putting that together with his earlier argument of how being Black means always being on stage, she starts to see the connections forming. To be hypervisible is to always be looked at, and it is the subjection of the Black body to being hypervisible that has made Blackness simultaneously object and human. She sees the paradox in simultaneously being both.

Is this what Gadamer means when he says *umschlag*? In the midst of pondering Gadamer’s choice of words, she finds sudden clarity to the way Moten uses prose, and wonders if the difficulty of his prose is not simply his way of performing the truths he is discussing. Why should she expect his acknowledgement of the scene of the crime? What is there left to say about the insidiousness of slavery that Black people are not aware of? A few winters back, another Black Arts scholar, Kinohi Nishikawa, visited and discussed a graduate seminar he had just taught on the subject. It had struck her when he said that “revealing the

insidious operations of white supremacy is either not the point (because that is not the art they focus on) or beside the point (since revealing as much to black people would be redundant). Instead, Black Arts criticism is more concerned with making an affirmative case for the aesthetic object's resistant qualities" (Nishikawa 2). She supposes that this means that the theory found in the Black Radical tradition does not care to adhere to the standards of classic hermeneutical criteria. The way Moten describes Blackness and thereby the theory of Black Art is of being in a space of paradox. If this is the case, then it would make sense to assume that the adjoining theoretical prose is full of obfuscation in its own way. This is a literary tradition created outside of standard white institutional theory, so the needs it is answering are inherently different as well.

"...I noticed that you brought up the concept of the 'irreducible sound'."² Gadamer has taken over the discussion now. The free jazz that Moten requested earlier is playing softly in the background. "Sound is also important in my theory of hermeneutics, so I'm glad to hear it holds such an important place in your critical work. Often scholars overlook the importance of *listening* to what a text is saying. "Texts must not only be read, [they] must also be listened to—even if only mostly with our inner ear [...] not only does the work make what is said present; it also makes itself present in its radiant actuality as sound [...] Sound [is] always indissolubly bound up with the transmission of meaning" ("Text and Interpretation" 43).

Moten shifts and leans forward in interest now that they have reached an intersection where their approaches to theory might connect. Momentarily the barista pauses to wonder what Gadamer means exactly when he says 'meaning'. Perhaps it is the *idea* that the texts themselves are trying to communicate. In a room that is lined with books filled with written text, she pauses to think about the necessity of listening as opposed to reading and how these two literary scholars believe in its necessity. Does listening even mean the same to both scholars? Moten mentioned the "irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance" (Moten 1), and Gadamer echoed a similar thought about how sound is "always indissolubly bound up with the transmission of

² Fictional dialogue used by author to create conversational flow.

meaning” (“Text and Interpretation” 43). The words ‘irreducible’ and ‘indissolubly’ signify the importance of sound to Moten and Gadamer by saying it is impossible to separate sound from the moment and event of what is happening. Moten states that performance is always visual, but what does he mean by visual performance? There is the obvious visual performance of dance and of protest marches, but what about the letters and words on a page that make up a protest pamphlet or a novel? The words must be visible to be a performance which allows the act of reading. This does not function much differently from a dance or protest march. In this case, paintings and books are another genre of visual performance. If books and paintings are visual performances, then do they have an irreducible sound? Following Gadamer’s line of thinking the answer would be yes. He writes that even soundless words have sound when listened to.

Her thoughts are interrupted when she sees Moten signaling for a refill of his coffee, and she quickly picks up her pot to do so. Gadamer is in the middle of speaking as she pours Moten’s coffee: “The concept of ‘text’ has entered into modern speech essentially from two fields. On the one hand, there is the text of scripture, whose interpretation was carried out in sermons and church doctrine [...]. The other natural use of the word ‘text’ is found in connection with music. Here it is the text for song, for the musical interpretation of words, and here too such a text is not so much a pre-given as it is a residue of the performance of the song. Both of these natural ways of using the word ‘text’ point ...” (“Text and Interpretation” 31).

She returns to her position behind the bar, docking the coffee pot at its warmer while mulling over Gadamer’s words. Perhaps she has an inherent prejudice towards viewing texts exclusively as written words. In his statement he made it clear that the word ‘text’ was also historically tied to music and if that was the case then it would make absolute sense that ‘text’ be used to describe both written and musical literature. This also becomes apparent in another of Gadamer’s statements about the definition of ‘text’: “the text is a mere intermediate product, in German we would say *Zwischenprodukt*, a phase in the event of understanding that, as such, certainly includes a definite abstraction,

namely, the isolation and reification involved in this very phase” (“Text and Interpretation” 31).

There is a lull in the music that Moten’s voice cuts through, and she realizes that yet again the conversation between the two has moved on without her. “We can both agree on sound as art, literature, and text, but there seems to be some difference in application. My interest lies in visual performance as a scene of objection, or the resistance of the object, particularly of the Black person, whereas your theory relies heavily on the concept of understanding” (Moten 1).

“Not necessarily, that would be a narrow scope with which to apply my use of the word *understanding*.”³ Gadamer meditates after sipping from his coffee. She glances at the clock and calculates how much longer into the day it will be before the afternoon turns into evening and he will switch to wine, one of the drinks he takes pleasure in (see Bowie 52). “My theory relies on the interpreter of the text seeking understanding of the truth of a text, with the focus on *truth* rather than *meaning*. If the truth of the text is in how it actively resists, then a person who has correctly utilized my method of interpretation should understand that. I do not believe in imposing, but in serving a text as ‘our understanding understands not only what is said about the beautiful and what is expressed there about the autonomy of the work of art, which does not depend on any context of use; our ear hears, and our understanding takes in [...] its true nature. The interpreter, who gives his reasons, disappears—and the text speaks’” (“Text and Interpretation” 51).

Moten responds before she has completely comprehended what Gadamer has said: “The text speaks. I like that, would you say the text is an object then? An object that speaks? It brings me to Marx, and his theories of commodities. I used it in my introduction to *In the Break* where I emphasize the importance of sound in the Black Radical Tradition by writing ‘the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist’ (Moten 1). Marx argues that ‘what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, must be made to say. It is, more precisely, the idea of the commodity’s speech that Marx

³ Fictional dialogue used by author to create conversational flow.

critiques, and this is because he believes neither in the fact nor in the possibility of such speech. Nevertheless, this critique of the idea of the commodity's speech only becomes operative by way of a deconstruction of the specific meaning of those impossible or unreal propositions imposed upon the commodity from the outside" (Moten 9).

The barista is trying to keep up with the big ideas being thrown around her. It had seemed odd to focus on Gadamer's statement that "text speaks," but with Moten's use of Marxist theory she can now see the connection between the two. Sound is important to Moten, specifically the sound of the Black voice, so he utilizes the objectification of Black people to strengthen his argument. She cannot deny the statement of Black people as objects, the history of the enslaved is built on that fact, but to use Marx as the framework for this argument is striking.

Moten argues that the Black voice is itself a paradox because objects should not be able to speak. In doing so it furthers the aforementioned identity paradox, but according to Gadamer texts have always been able to speak. One way to link these two objects that speak is to suggest that when Blackness is made an object by society it is also made into a text. Then, when Blackness speaks it becomes literature and art because they are texts that speak. Sound is important to both these critics: it is when literature has its own voice and can hold its own in conversation with its interpreter that Gadamer believes text becomes literature, and for Moten the sound of Blackness resisting is inherently tied to the fact that objects should not be able to speak but do. When these two are put together it creates a beautiful and powerful argument for the inherent art of Blackness that comes from their status as objects/texts that speak.

Before the barista can continue her train of thought the doorbell jingles and a group of young philosophers come in. She no longer has the quiet nor the free time to listen in on the discussion that is still ongoing between Moten and Gadamer, but at this point she has reached a fusion of horizons with regards to Moten, Gadamer, sound, and texts; one that has further ignited her curiosity about the inherent beauty and art of Blackness. Perhaps at some point she could speak to

Moten to ask for more clarification and his opinion on her interpretation of his work—but there is time for that later, as she now has to attend to her new set of customers.

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Biography

Yuqi Khoo is an Arts, Media, Literary Studies Research Master’s student at the University of Groningen. Her interests lie in the intersection of literature, stories, and the audience, particularly in how literature can shape the way in which people see the world.