

Stephen Best, Berkeley Book Chats, October 16, 2019

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Stephen Best of the English Department discussing his book *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*.

He is joined by Damon Young of the Film & Media and French Departments.

Damon Young: I'm really happy to be here discussing with you, Stephen, your amazing book, *None Like Us*. I'll hold up your copy because mine is disfigured with marks. *Blackness, Belonging, and Aesthetic Life*, recently honored with honorable mention at the ASAP Book Prize, and I'm sure there are more prizes to come. This is a really stunning book. It's both polemical and anti-polemical. It's extremely bold in its arguments, but it's also subtle. It asks what blackness is, that's the scope of the question. What is its relation to the history of slavery? And if blackness is a *we*, a collective identity, then the answer to that question is no. The book refuses identity. It's about blackness, but it wants to refuse identity and identification, and therefore, also politics of affirmation. It questions the desire, and this is a quote, "for racial belonging rooted in the historical dispossession." It notes that desire and questions it, that is one goal.

Damon Young: But another goal, which is the part that owes more to queer theory, and this book appears in a queer theory series at Duke, is that in the book, you want to imagine, and this is another quote, "a black politics that is not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity." That, I think, comes from the anti-communal thrust, sometimes called the antisocial thesis in queer theory. I want to ask you about both of those things, if we get to all of it. The book is fundamentally, however, about method, about how we ask questions of the past, what we want from the past, what we want it to render, what we do with an archive that narrates a history of violence, or that is itself an enactment of violence in its silences and its elusions.

Damon Young: Because it's about method, it's not about a particular object. The four essays that make up the book deal with very different objects. The first chapter is on quite abstract art works by the artist Anatsui and Mark Bradford, as well as the literary works by Gwendoline Brooks. There's a chapter on Toni Morrison's novels, which I'll talk about. And then the last few chapters, the object evaporates even further. There's a chapter about mistaken historical accounts of a suicide bombing that wasn't in a Dutch colony in the 17th century. And then rumors that fueled insurrections in the Caribbean in the 19th century, and the false historical account in the ambiguous ontological status of the rumor. I'll draw out some of the strands that run through those chapters, but first I actually just want to ask you to explain, why did you write this book?

Stephen Best: I did one of these events, as you know, last week. I realized that you should have an elevator speech when you're writing your dissertation or when you're writing

your book, but you also need an elevator speech once you've finished the book because you have to sell it to people. I guess, I say in the book that the rumor chapter was the first chapter of the book. I was trying to address what we call in the text space disciplines the archival turn, right? Which, in my field, let's just say African American literary and cultural studies, took a particular turn that I was interested in or provoked by. That is that, like you say, in that archival turn, the thing that has become a primary point of interest is the way in which the archive itself is, as you put it, an enactment of violence in terms of the silences and exclusions that are ossified in the archive.

Stephen Best: Now, with respect to slavery and African American literary and cultural studies, African American literary and cultural studies isn't the only field that deals with the problem of the archive. These problems of trying to reconstruct the lives of people who didn't leave written records of their lives. That would be one way of phrasing it, right? There are other fields that deal with impoverished archives, right? Medieval studies, et cetera, et cetera. But what was unique in African American studies was that I felt that with a lot of scholars of color, so I would include here both postcolonial scholars, African American studies scholars who work on slavery, there was an added dimension which was a melancholy; their identities as scholars were somehow implicated in the struggle to recover the lives of the enslaved. So that there was a particular critical, what I call a critical disposition, or a critical comportment in my field, that I wanted to interrogate in the book.

Stephen Best: Now, that comportment rested, or rests, on what I think are four principles. These were the principles that I wanted to interrogate in the book. Some, I accept. Others, I really wanted to interrogate. The idea of middle passage as founding of some sense of American blackness, the idea that African Americans inherit a tradition and a subjectivity from those instances of violence and that this inheritance shapes the community in which African Americans or it shapes the sense of what an African American community is. But I guess the fourth principle is the one I really wanted to interrogate, which is that in our work as scholars, there's an extent to which we come to possess an identity and a sense of belonging to a community in the recovery of these lives that are somehow missing from the archive. That was the principle I really wanted to interrogate in the book. Should I keep going?

Damon Young: Yeah.

Stephen Best: Because that last turn felt to me like, rather than working as a critique of American racial logic or race thinking, it seemed to endorse the assumptions about how one performs race. In the sense that American race thinking demands that we black people constantly perform our blackness, and paradoxically, in that coercion is the mandate of a self-reflective choice, that we choose to perform it, right? We're choosing to perform it for whatever—the eyes of power, et cetera. I just thought I wanted to interrogate the way in our work we are performing our blackness, or our sense of belonging. I don't know if that makes sense.

Damon Young: Oh, yeah.

Stephen Best: Anyway, that's just in the back of my head, one of the things that was motivating me.

Damon Young: Going back to the first of those four things you mentioned, chapter two begins, "Currently it passes for an unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready

prison for apprehending the black political present." That's a stunning sentence to begin the chapter. In fact, that's the unassailable truth that you want to assail.

Stephen Best: Right. I guess, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Damon Young: Can you say more about that?

Stephen Best: That was crucially in a chapter where I was trying to explore my sense that Toni Morrison, who in some ways is the personification of that premise, in her own work seems to raise the specter that there might be trouble in that formulation.

Damon Young: Right. In that chapter, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, you find a literary prototype, this is a quote, "for a drive to recover death for knowledge as a means of articulating how the past structures our present." So *beloved* functions in the mode of, as a literary text, functions in the mode of what you call melancholic historicism. The melancholy is the melancholia of the writer or critic or researcher, one that invites that transference of the reader. Morrison provides literary prototype model for melancholic historicism, but then she also turns out to provide an alternative to it in her later novel *A Mercy*.

Damon Young: In that book, that book disorients the reader and forestalls transference under the trope of abandonment. There's abandonment within the plot, and then there's the abandonment of the reader by the author. There's a refusal of the child, and of the future and of kinship in the book, which you associate with text like Lee Edelman's *No Future*, for example. And then you write that, "in *A Mercy*, Morrison touches down at the moment before slavery acquired its legacy, that is, its power to claim us." That before opens something. And then you wrote quite poignantly, "In *A Mercy*, once the filial bond is broken within the novel, it's affiliative form racial kinship," again, across history, "appears no more ready to hand as a substitute. We seem less held together by race here, and more held together in our abandonment."

Damon Young: This trope of abandonment is a surprising one that comes up throughout the book in different registers in relation to visual art, here in the literary text. I think it's the queer part of the book. Okay, so, go ahead-

Stephen Best: Can I say?

Damon Young: Yeah.

Stephen Best: The thing I meant to say, thank you for bringing the phrase melancholy historicism back for the conversation. I was really motivated to write this book because I don't feel melancholy is my critical comportment. I needed to figure out a way to, how am I going to write in this field and not reproduce the structure of melancholy? Because I don't feel melancholic when I'm ... you know what I mean? Sometimes I do when I'm writing, but that as a critical comportment just didn't. That's right, I was trying to find in queer theory other comportments.

Damon Young: It's not the gay science, it's not joy necessarily. Instead of melancholic historicism, which reappears throughout the book and is a very fascinating account of the critical comportment, as you say. Instead you propose a historicism that is not melancholic, but that accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it. It's a very interesting and complex formulation. There's our desire for the past, but it many of the things that you talk about in the book, the past doesn't render itself. It turns away. And that's not a reason to just be

presentist and ignore the past and say the past is never [inaudible 00:13:30] us, but rather to accept the inherent alienness or opacity or unknowability of the past ... or inability to identify with what we find there.

Stephen Best: Yeah. I guess another way I would have of phrasing it is that what I was striving for in trying to articulate this different relation to the past was I was trying to formulate across a range of materials. Like you say, from contemporary art to my trips to the archive, a structure in which it becomes possible for us to acknowledge that sometimes the past purpose is to withdraw from purpose.

Damon Young: Right.

Stephen Best: That it cannot be conscripted to our political agendas.

Damon Young: Right. It can't be conscripted to our political agendas, it can't satisfy our desire for identification, even in the form of grieving and suffering. You say what the suspicious historian finds is another critical compartment you want to avoid, suspicious readings. What the suspicious historian finds is always what she or he was looking for. Proto-revolutionaries, proto-peasants, proto-politics. This is all part of what you call the recovery imperative. One of the modes of recovery, what do you want to find in the past that is a history of violence? One of the things is sings of agency that have been faced or forgotten. But in that desire, there is this, you suggest that we begin already knowing what we're going to find. We want to find proto-political subjects. You actually say, what if we can't find that and that is not available? The other mode is the attachment to the scene of injury as the foundation of the black political present. That's the melancholic historicism. Both fall under the recovery imperative.

Damon Young: That's the question of historical method. But there's this idea of the collectivity that isn't a collectivity that emerges. Blackness isn't a collectivity. You say you want to imagine you would like to be freed from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, as tradition legitimacy, and of history as inheritance memory and social reproduction. And freed from conceptions of diaspora as kinship, belonging and dissemination. Many of those things orient a lot of the ways we think about any identity.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: What does that leave us with?

Stephen Best: I can go a number of different paths. I'll start with the introduction. In the introduction, I write about James Baldwin and his very almost infamous relationship with his stepfather, which was a relation of non-reproduction. He very much felt like his father despised his children for embracing a world that would not embrace him, the father. That structure of non-identity was fascinating to me precisely because I felt like it was reproduced in my own relationship with my father who was incredibly proud of me. But still, there was that sense of somehow, an intergenerational gap, or absence or non-relation. We are kin, but in a non-identitarian way.

Damon Young: Yeah, because your success in the-

Stephen Best: Is me entering the world that he prepared me for, but that-

Damon Young: Prepared you for, but couldn't enter.

Stephen Best: Would not accept him.

Damon Young: Exactly, yeah.

Stephen Best: Same thing, right?

Damon Young: Yeah.

Stephen Best: Love and — I don't know in the Baldwin case what we want to call it. But I was just interested in those intergenerational short circuits. They are real. They're part of the structure of blackness. I wanted to think about both what use can be made of those instances as a kind of aesthetic life, but also how that might provide a structure for me to think about or rethink the way we in our field think about scholars and their relationship to the past?

Damon Young: Yeah, that figure of the genealogy that isn't one.

Stephen Best: The genealogy that isn't one, right.

Damon Young: A kinship that's based on mutual non-belonging where the father can't recognize the son. The book begins with these two parallel stories of fathers and sons, James Baldwin and his father and you and your father, the biographical moment. It said in both cases, the non-belonging is marked as queer because that's part of the disaffiliation is that the father can't recognize, or doesn't know how to recognize the son's queerness. But it's also this sense of that the father has prepared the son for a world that couldn't have him. That's the significance of the title, *None Like Us*.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: The subjective voice of the book after that carries this queerness that comes from Baldwin and your anecdote about your father. But beyond that queerness seems to be not sexuality, certainly not identity, not even homosexuality, but something about the social bonds formed through negativity or through non-recognition and non-relation. Is that why you published it in a queer theory series?

Stephen Best: Yes.

Damon Young: Okay.

Stephen Best: Yes. But I did want to, at another book event, I was introduced to this quote by Richard Thomas Ford. I'm interested in, a recent interest, in queer theory black studies, and the disillusion of traditional identity categories, right?

Damon Young: Right.

Stephen Best: That's my general interest. This quote from Ford, I want to read it because I would love it if it were part of the conversation. It just really gets at the afterlife of race. I'll read it and we can talk about it. It's a great quote. Richard Thomas Ford, who is a law professor across the bay at Stanford. He writes, "It may be that the price of providing our descendants with a world free of social stigma and oppression of identity, such as race, a world we could be proud to call more just, is that they would not share our identities. That they would be our heirs, but not our descendants." That's a vision of, well, what would the politics of a... it's not

post identity, but it's like, if the world we created were one in which the identity categories that operate today no longer operate.

Stephen Best: I feel in a way like that's what I was trying to think through, think about, along a variety of arcs, right?

Damon Young: Yeah. We are disaffiliated from the future.

Stephen Best: We are disaffiliated from the future.

Damon Young: And from the past, even while we exist in this disjunctive relations boat.

Stephen Best: That's David Walker at the beginning of the *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* saying "I pray God that none like us ever may live again." It's the same thing, that he's imagining a world in which the categories that operate today no longer operate. That's the world we bequeath, but it's not an identity that we hand down to the future.

Damon Young: It's a very abstract conception because it can't be grounded in representation. It's not about representing your identity or identifying with a figure in the past.

Stephen Best: Or mutual acknowledgement of being seen by the other, yeah.

Damon Young: Instead it seems like you're looking for figures or objects to ground the elaboration of that conceptual thought. What you turn to, surprisingly, is abstract art. I wanted to ask about that too. What is visual art, especially in non-figurative art, doing for you in this way of thinking about blackness?

Stephen Best: In the same way that as the historian or cultural historian, we don't always find what we're looking for in the archive. I think as writers, the books we produce aren't the books we thought we were produce. In this case, I actually wrote a version of this book that had, each chapter was about a different kind of conundrum of the archive. There was a chapter on witchcraft, there was a chapter on rumor, there was a chapter on suicide. When I finished that draft of the book, I was really disappointed. I just felt like, is that what I really set out to write? At that time, I was writing about Morrison and *A Mercy*. This is not an explanation for why abstraction is in the book. It's an explanation for why these particular contemporary artists are in the book.

Stephen Best: I'm thinking about the problem of the archive trying to have non-melancholic relationship to the past in the archive. In the midst of my whatever writing days, I'm walking over to SFMOMA and just looking at art because I live across the road. This was years ago when SFMOMA did the first major retrospective of the work of Mark Bradford. I just found Mark Bradford's canvases incredibly good to think with in this project. I said, well, the project actually then has to be about that. It has to be about the materials that are helping me to think about the conceptual problem that I wanted to explore in the book. Whatever, I was also an art history major who likes writing about art. I was like, just do that. I don't have to be a literary critic, I can just write about whatever.

Damon Young: There's something about the way form renders concepts in this book that's amazing. In one piece, there are these beautiful creations made from bits of trash, right?

Stephen Best: Yeah, yeah.

Damon Young: You're reading this about the trompe l'oeil between opulence and trash, an oscillation which resonates with certain configuration of blackness in the way that you think about it. I think I understood a lot more from reading this book what you mean by surface reading in your earlier work, in that it's not that the archive hides hidden truths, but that the indeterminacy's ambiguity's on the surface of the archive, or on the surface of the artwork themselves are what we have to work with.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: I want to let the audience get involved in the Q & A. We've covered a lot of ground here, so feel free to jump in on any point, or something else, if anybody has questions for Stephen.

Stephen Best: Or you.

Damon Young: Yeah? Oh yeah, you. Oh, right, you've got to wait for the microphone.

Speaker 3: Thanks so much. It was really exciting. I'm sitting next to someone who also had this experience of studying 19th century African American literature with you at a time when you were working out this critical position. I have two questions. Maybe you can just answer whichever is more interesting. First, just a question about the writerly process of some of the rhetorical challenges of writing a book which announces a critical position which may not already be conceptually available, and therefore may risk being oversimplified when it's read. Just a question about the challenges of writing that almost from a sentence to sentence basis. The second question is just, I find that this work is really challenging for me personally in terms of challenging my conception of how I think about belonging and community. One of the premises in particular that it challenges for me is a premise held dear by me, which is that the experience of trauma, and racial trauma in particular is associated with the standpoint of privileged knowledge. I'm wondering if you think that's a position, that's something that needs to be given up if a melancholic position is given up.

Stephen Best: Say the second again — the second is more interesting to me. I want to really understand.

Speaker 3: Just the idea that the experience-

Stephen Best: You're saying you're attached to a conception of trauma?

Speaker 3: Yeah, that there's a link between the standpoint of... let's say the experience of trauma, with a standpoint of privileged knowledge.

Stephen Best: Yup. I wanted you to repeat it because I think the first time, I heard what I wanted to hear, which was the idea that somehow, you're attached to a belief or a sense that trauma is related to privilege. Which for me is like, yeah, that's one of the things I try to say in the book, which is that melancholy is an elite affect, right? People who are suffering trauma are not being melancholic about it. They're just living. Yeah. But you said privileged knowledge, and that's slightly different. I can't think or babble my way to further insight, but that is an interesting thought.

Stephen Best: Anyway, yes. Anita Sokolsky, in the melancholy persuasion, says yeah, melancholy is a bourgeois affect. Yeah. That's the point I was trying to make in

just identifying a compartment in my field that I felt like it was the compartment of the scholar who, in his or her work, is trying to forge their bond to a larger body. Yeah. It is something I'm trying at least myself to abandon.

Damon Young: Also, belonging and community are not the terms that you want to ... you mention those terms as, which is how we all experience identity is belonging and community. But in fact, you're trying to understand blackness. It's not about belonging or community.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: Those are terms that are bracketed, or put under erasure in the book. Yeah, Katherine?

Speaker 4: I have a question related to that actually because it's really interesting, or it's so moving to read Richard Thomas Ford about just your future, in which particular identities are lost. They're dissolved in these greater, better conditions. But I wonder too if this disaffiliation and this setting against a collectivity through identification with past suffering is also very interesting scholarly methodology in that maybe people come together to disagree with one another in the present. So that it becomes much more about a vibrant and maybe conflictual relation to others that is actually possibly more meaningful because it is dynamic and dialogic.

Stephen Best: Yeah. I was about to say we're not mic'd up, but we are mic'd.

Damon Young: And broadcasting. Recorded for posterity.

Stephen Best: Yeah. I would say the evidence is not that this conceptually unprecedented thesis has been welcomed as an invitation to disagreement, community in disagreement.

Speaker 4: Yeah. I think I feel how brave it is. It's very brave to come out with something that runs so against the mainstream. But the payoff is the one we should all be looking for, which is really about meaningful communication, not just reiteration of the norm.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: You're looking for a figure of togetherness that will redeem.

Speaker 4: Yeah, and that it is a togetherness. People are actually paying attention and responding to one another.

Damon Young: There is a togetherness in the book, that's the thing. It just doesn't take any of the forms of identification of transference or community or belonging. But it's not a book about solipsism in isolation either.

Stephen Best: No, no, no.

Damon Young: There's a community of people who have nothing in common.

Stephen Best: I very much try to structure that sense of community that is non-identitarian in the prose of the book, right?



Damon Young: Right. It's so referential. You're in dialogue constantly in the book with other scholars. Even while there's this bold refusal of dominant stances, there's a performance of a community in disaffiliation enacted within your own method.

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: Sorry, I interrupted you. Yeah? Oh, you'll be next.

Speaker 5: My name is Lisa Bloom. Hearing you talk makes me think strangely of a book that I wrote in the mid 2000s called *Ghosts of Ethnicity: Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art*. I wrote a book that did not put the Holocaust as the main point of return. I also tried to deal with ethnicity outside of religion. It wasn't a melancholic book. It dealt with contemporary art, but it was also a feminist book. I didn't take identity completely out of the equation in the way you did. But trying to imagine this post feminist art production 70s and on going against the abstract expressionist, and the older history of a Jewish art that came out of the Holocaust that was deliberately abstract to get away from identity.

Stephen Best: Interesting, yeah.

Speaker 5: You're doing another turn on this. Not that the two are comparable, but many of the issues, like genocide and all these things are continuous and artistic response to this. One of the issues I was grappling with, and this might pertain more to your work, was how Jewish identity became ossified in terms of an ethnic nationalism that connected religion with culture. And it was inseparable. I mean, this is not the case in what you're doing. So I wanted to free it of the ethno-nationalism in a certain sense, and think about shifts in generation where we're not reproducing the same, or we're at a distance, or we're disagreeing, literally, as you were saying, generationally. So I don't know. I just thought that there were some parallels or things to think through. You might not want to take queer and some of these things completely out of the picture because I think it's a really important perspective that is important.

Speaker 5: I mean, I have to bring in the feminist perspective because it was a critique of abstract expressionism. And of course, it was located in a specific post World War II history that was peculiar to the United States. But anyway, I just think you might want to think through the parallels.

Stephen Best: No, no. Thank you for that. I, listening to you, Lisa, wanted to bridge back to the earlier question about the occasion for a scholarly community. I think that's right. I think that if there's a conviction in this book, it's a very cosmopolitan conviction in the sense that I really believe that the cultivation of... this is why I wanted to write about, say, Anatsui. These works that, they're not representational, but they're a frame or an occasion for a kind of aesthetic. In my case, it's just analysis. My conviction is that the cultivation of curiosity and attentiveness is the appropriate tool for fostering connection between people, you know what I mean? Across identities rather than, I don't know, claiming a genealogy or putting yourself within a specific genealogy. I don't know if that makes sense.

Damon Young: But the book also is about queerness and blackness. That's what's paradoxical about it. And it is about the slave past. At least three of the four chapters deal with the archive of slavery. It's not an attempt to escape identity in the sense of being post identitarian, color blind at all. It's as committed to feminist, antiracist, queer theorizing as any book that's more explicitly identitarian. That's the paradox that you work with in the book that's quite fascinating. Thank you. You had a question over there.

Speaker 6: Yeah. It moves in the realm of the thoughts that are being had, I guess. It's a question actually that stems from the articulation, Stephen, of the disaffiliation between you and your father against Baldwin and his stepfather, or that you see in spaces of black study where Spillers gives, and then Cruz disaffiliating from his. I'm wondering about how much of those disaffiliation's in any of the registers occur across experience, experiences that are had. And that you're a part of the new method, or what might be proposed, especially in the chapter on art, for example, is that somehow, there might be a new place where something like identity could come out if it was in experiences that can actually be had by the critics or scholars. So that you can keep returning to the artwork, and that experience, all the scholars could return to the artwork. And somehow in that experience, there would live a capacity for maybe a more fugitive identity than one that kept having recourse to the apparently stable past.

Stephen Best: Yeah, yeah. I had a conversation with a friend recently about this piece on the blackness of Rachel Dolezal, right? You remember Rachel Dolezal?

Damon Young: How could we forget?

Stephen Best: Well, some people in the room may not know who Rachel Dolezal was. Rachel Dolezal, she is the woman who is running a branch of the NAACP in Washington State, I believe. Her parents outed her as actually being a white woman and not a black woman, which she was passing as black. She was pilloried for this moment. Marquis Day, who's this professor at Northwestern, begins with the premise of, why don't we begin with the question of why did this person see blackness as an escape from the white femininity that was being imposed on her? Why don't we begin the question that way, that blackness is a fugitive identity that she felt could free her from a vision of white femininity that she did not want to occupy? Why is it we don't ask the question that way? Why is it that we pose the question in terms of cultural appropriation, as if she has a genealogy that's proper to her, and one that's improper.

Stephen Best: That's for me why it's like, blackness is here, but it is not here in the form of traditional identity categories that are properties, that are to be owned. They're standpoints. They're positions. Blackness is, yes, a fugitive identity. I'm much happier with that formulation, I support, given my first book with the sense of it as cultural property.

Damon Young: We have time for one more question from the audience.

Stephen Best: Yeah, it's time for one more.

Speaker 7: I just want to say thank you. I'm coming here as someone with a comportment of deep gratitude. I haven't read your book. I haven't been exposed to it at all until today, but your work is really important. I'm really glad that you're doing it. So thank you.

Stephen Best: Oh, wow. Thank you.

Speaker 7: Secondly, I was at the 400 Year Symposium that was held at I House about the 1619 project. I was introduced to the work of Christina Sharpe. I'm assuming that you're already her conversation partner intellectually, and I want you guys to collaborate on something.

Stephen Best: Yeah, she's great. Yeah, yeah. No, thanks.

Speaker 7: That wasn't a question.

Stephen Best: Yeah, yeah.

Damon Young: There is a question up in the back. We have a few minutes. We have three minutes.

Speaker 8: Hi. I was curious more about the affects that you see, or affect of postures or comportments or stances that critics could take, but also maybe that these certain texts might also take, or certain artworks might also take, in conceiving of a kinship that's not based on identity. I wrote down your curiosity, attentiveness, finding the comportment that would find kinship in abandonment. But also, you speak of a negativity as being maybe a negative affect, perhaps, that could still find a place for this kind of non-identitarian kinship. I was wondering if you could maybe speak more about the postures or comportments that you would like to encourage among scholars, and also maybe that you would like to celebrate in art.

Stephen Best: Yeah. Well, your question's reminding me of...I don't know what name I would apply to this comportment, but one of the things that I think is just brilliant about Mark Bradford's canvases is that his canvases are made up of all these layers of paper. He glues layers of paper on top of one another. And then at a certain point in the process, he belt sands the surface. So parts of the underlying material reveal themselves, but you don't actually know what's underneath the surface of those paintings. I'm fascinated by the work precisely because it both triggers a perceptual curiosity as to what is enured within its surface. But then it just rigorously forecloses any possibility of gaining access to that. For me, that was the overriding critical comportment in the book, was trying to deal aesthetically with the problem of-

Damon Young: Non-knowledge.

Stephen Best: Curiosity and curiosity... I don't know. Frustrating isn't the right word, but denying.

Damon Young: Which requires a modesty, right?

Stephen Best: Yeah.

Damon Young: An ability to encounter something without making a knowledge claim-

Stephen Best: About it, right.

Damon Young: Yeah. And thereby asking it to render something that you in fact give it in advance.

Stephen Best: Right, right, right. Yeah.

Damon Young: Go ahead.

Stephen Best: I don't know what to call that, but...

Speaker 8: Well, that's beautiful.

Stephen Best: Thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in the series.