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Thwarted Possibilities and Subjunctive Moods

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What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. This can most readily be seen in art.¹

The problem of black actualization is often framed as a problem of recognition, a deficit to be addressed within the “order of politicality,”² a problem solved by more equitable representation in civil society. If we’re feeling optimistic, a war of position that, at best (for us), ends in an impasse; that terminates in a caesura of unpro-

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, “Bequest,” in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 151.
- 2 Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1980), 7. See Rei Terada, “Impasse as a Figure of Political Space,” *Comparative Literature* 72, no. 2 (2020): 144-158; and Frank Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225-240.

ductive contradiction, irresolvable under present socio-economic conditions (irresolvable under the, perhaps, perennial conditions of a world dependent on black liminality). The world of real possibilities, locked into closed actuality, as it is, cannot accommodate black orientation or is structurally incapable of diversification and transformation by way of vagaries beyond its historical dynamic. From the perspective of the white West, black humanity is not a “thwarted” or yet to be fulfilled possibility, but rather the “fantastic unreal possibilities of our imagination gone wild.”³ The ever-repressed potentiality of the colonized African and black slave might feature, alongside the worker (“deactualized to the point of starving to death”⁴), and could even be said to epitomize it. But as a way to world, a “structure...of the mind” established from the contradictory position of *willful thing*, black life is, furthermore and more significantly, a fantastic possibility.⁵ To make this point, I draw upon Iain Macdonald’s exploration of Adorno’s “modal utopianism.” An illumination of alternate realities, of possibilities that lie somewhere between formal and real, and whose coming to fruition relies on upturning the priority of the actual. This class of possibility is one that lays dormant within a world that has not progressed according to the openness of its dialectical promise. The reactionary bourgeois intransigence that Adorno identifies as native to such failings is not merely a personal shortcoming of the all-too-human philosopher who could “not resolve the contradiction between his dialectic and his experience.”⁶ More broadly, it reflects the gerrymandering of a society that in its flinty enlightenment maintains that there is “nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance.”⁷ Hegel, Adorno tells us, “stopped at that boundary [of what is real]

3 Iain Macdonald, *What Would be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 101-102.

4 Karl Marx, quoted in Rocío Zambrana, “Actuality in Hegel and Marx,” *Hegel Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2018): 6.

5 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 169. I have previously discussed this, drawing from Nahum Chandler’s seminal work. See Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018). See also Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).

6 Theodor W. Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 80.

7 “The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation—this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always

because he saw no real historical force on the other side of it.”⁸ The historical dynamic, with its dialectical impulse, is ridiculed by this constraint on its freedom of movement toward the more radical outcomes contained in the conditions available to it, such as a world in which no-one would go hungry, or be without health care and somewhere to live. These are real possibilities undone by the “false necessity...of contemporary reality,” possibilities denied by a “self-perpetuating actuality that has become an unquestioned and nearly unquestionable second nature.”⁹

But what about those sentient beings of ontological incoherence that I mentioned at the start? What of these descendants of willful things that feign “ontological resistance”? Of those things of the world that appear human? Things that act as though they could extend through the world, as though the conditions of their actualization could be marshalled, but have yet to find the mechanism for such. Willful things that are not (primarily) deactualized but, rather, patently unreal. What sort of possibilities emerge from such a profoundly aporetic state of being? These questions go to a founding predicament of black life, and its accompanying *Weltanschauung*. The “identity” or “identification” that moves by way of “double consciousness,” not simply a being “Negro” and “American” but, “the *sense of being* of the Negro... as richly and fundamentally double,” that throws into doubt the grounding certainties of the pre-speculative European outlook, namely the law of non-contradiction and self-same identity necessary for individuation. This common “sense of being” is what Frantz Fanon previews in his phenomenology of being “an object in the midst of other objects” rather than the anticipated meaning-maker—this denial ultimately setting him on the path of invention. This compulsion to “self-consciously pose [one’s] unreality”¹⁰ finds its contemporary exemplar in Frank Wilderson’s writing an autobiographical account of a position of/from noncommunicability.¹¹ As these instances and the writers who supply them show, the black thinker is an excellent site from which to observe this aporetic constitution. This figure registers the constraints or rather the impossibilities that mark their “position of noncommunicability,” even as they

was. Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience.” Quoted from Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

8 Adorno, “The Experiential Content,” 80.

9 Macdonald, *What Would Be Different*, 127.

10 Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 435.

11 Nahum D. Chandler, “Of Exorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought,” *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (2008): 367; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 82; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).

appear to leap across the abyss.¹² The black scholar writes *as though* they had the capacity for relation; they chart a path of thought *as if* this could be legible to the world, and *as though* their formulation might come to hold some authority (and let's keep the sphere of influence local: authority within, say, the seminar room). This subjunctive comportment of the figure, this being without standing that acts as though it had your ear, suggests a mode of possibility distinct from that inherent in Adorno's modal utopianism, although it *does* bear resemblance to what Jay Bernstein has called the modal anomaly of the artwork.¹³ Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, negotiating the irresolvable contradictions of being black is "necessarily an artistic undertaking."¹⁴ In the semblance of this human-like character, in it making "something appear that does not exist," in it not "fit[ting] into this world" (Adorno) but acting as though it did, black life is shown to be an exorbitance in a world of strictly determinate possibilities.¹⁵ We might say, at the risk of the charge of optimism, following Adorno on the artwork, that black life, in positing an unreality in the present, not only contributes a critique of what exists but, in that break with what exists, also embodies a promise of "what could be different."¹⁶

There is a convincing case for considering actualized blackness as only fantastic possibility, falling short of the required inherence. It is not only that the course of the world and its actualized reality cannot admit black life or black sociality or genuine black participation, it is also the case that no prudent European world could allow for the spread of possibility that this contradictory being and its social life generates. A blackened world would require more than actualization (if such were possible for black life in all its logical exorbitance).¹⁷ It would be the promotion of a full spectrum of possibility, from the real possibilities contained in the actual through to the fantastic. Macdonald characterizes Adorno's understanding of the task of philosophy as a "critique and unmask[ing] the general and particular structures of the ideological fiction of the 'force of the whole' in such a way as to open up the possibility of determinate alternatives."¹⁸ We might say that black study, while

12 The "meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated *identity* or as a conscious social actor [animated by legible political interests], but as a structural *position* of non-communicability in the face of all other positions." Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2008), 58.

13 Bernstein, *Disenchantment*, 437.

14 Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 4.

15 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: A&C Black, 1997), 82; 59; Alongside the Bernstein (*Disenchantment*), already referenced, see also Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

16 Adorno, "The Experiential Content," 83.

17 See Chandler, "Of Exorbitance?"

18 Macdonald, *What Would Be Different*, 2-3.

sympathetic to such, is more concerned with finding ways to share, model and perform the “cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material” (Adorno) that opens up the possibility of the non-determinate, showing how that which is not, can be.¹⁹

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19 Adorno, “Bequest,” 151.