

The Adorno and Identity Seminars – January 29: “Adorno and the Ambivalence of Identity”

“Adorno, Du Bois, and the Wounds of Identity” – Jonathon Catlin – jcatlin@princeton.edu

“...The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line....After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

— W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (partly quoted in Okiji, pp. 39–40)

“Adorno wanted to save the nonidentical not because it stood between him and a full disclosure of Truth, but because he was convinced that silencing it plays a prominent role in very real suffering. Indeed, despite its elusiveness, the implications of the nonidentical—or more precisely: of its constant erasure—are utterly concrete. Adorno’s work reveals how social structures of domination, the withering of individual experience, social ills such as bigotry, racism, authoritarianism, political polarization, and ultimately even genocide, are more or less directly linked to identity thinking and the fate of the nonidentical, and with it to the most fundamental underpinnings of constitutive subjectivity.” (Oshrat Silberbusch, *Adorno’s Philosophy of the Nonidentical: Thinking as Resistance*, p. 2)

“Blackness may well be a thing not yet known, as Fred Moten tells us, and it is unclear how the world could ever know it without internal collapse. But black life *is* lived, and particularly where it comes up against its appropriated and sanctioned mainstream images and uses, where it misshapes the categorical smoothness of race, it provides invaluable insight. In its contradictory subjecthood—human enough for governance but too black for admittance to the “household of humanity”—such life rhymes with what Adorno understands to be the double character of radical art, rejecting what it is unable to rid itself of through critical immersion. It could well be argued that black life is necessarily an artistic undertaking... What is suggested here, however, is that black expressive work cannot but help shed light on black life’s (im)possibilities.” (Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*, p. 4)

Okiji’s thesis: “[B]lack life cannot help but be lived as critical reflection....Blackness is a mode of existence in which the disjuncture between the reality of one’s everyday living and the ways one is understood by society at large is so pronounced that the former must be considered an impossibility or a lie in order to preserve the latter.” (Okiji, p. 5)

“Black music is sociomusical play. It is not so much that it represents black life or an alternative human future; rather, it demonstrates to us how to acquit ourselves toward blackness (and toward another world). It shows us how we might go about dispositioning ourselves, so that we might know how it feels to be a conflicted subject—both human and inhuman...” (Okiji, p. 4)

Adorno: “Adequate performance requires the formulation of the work as a problem” (AT, 106)

Okiji’s critical imperative: “We should experiment with ways to become susceptible to the music. We should arrange our thoughts and actions to allow ourselves to be gifted, or messed-up, by it.” (p. 65)

Aimé Césaire, as cited by Okiji: “I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all” (p. 10).

“The familiar argument of tolerance, that all people and all races are equal, is a boomerang. It lays itself open to the simple refutation of the senses, and the most compelling anthropological proofs that the Jews are not a race will, in the event of a pogrom, scarcely alter the fact that the totalitarians know full well whom they do and whom they do not intend to murder. If the equality of all who have human shape were demanded as an ideal instead of being assumed as a fact, it would not greatly help. Abstract utopia is all too compatible with the most insidious tendencies of society. That all men are exactly alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left outside machinery, not quite determined by its totality. The technique of the concentration camp is to make the prisoners like their guards, the murdered, murderers. The racial difference is raised to an absolute so that it can be abolished absolutely, if only in the sense that nothing that is different survives. An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. Politics that are still seriously concerned with such a society ought not, therefore, propound the abstract equality of men even as an idea. Instead, they should point to the bad equality today, the identity of those with interests in films and in weapons, and conceive the better state as one in which people could be different without fear. To assure the black that he is exactly like the white man, while he obviously is not, is secretly to wrong him still further. He is benevolently humiliated by the application of a standard by which, under the pressure of the system, he must necessarily be found wanting, and to satisfy which would in any case be a doubtful achievement. The spokesmen of unitary tolerance are, accordingly, always ready to turn intolerantly on any group that remains refractory: intransigent enthusiasm for blacks does not exclude outrage at Jewish uncouthness. The melting-pot was introduced by unbridled industrial capitalism. The thought of being cast into it conjures up martyrdom, not democracy.” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, *Mélange*, aphorism 66, pp. 102-103)

“Over the years, Adorno’s reflections on Auschwitz have come to stand for much more than a judgment on poetry and instead have been taken to suggest the impact of extreme, socially sanctioned violence on culture in its broad, anthropological sense. Both Adorno’s 1949 dictum and Du Bois’s equally famous assertion about the color line testify to the effects of such quintessentially modern experiences as genocide, slavery, and colonialism on conceptions of

history, culture, and community. Adorno and Du Bois each link a conceptual problem (how to think about aesthetics or history) with a material reality defined and divided by categories of “race” (Auschwitz, the color line). With their rhetoric of “after Auschwitz” and the twentieth-century color line, both writers further link the problem of racial division to spatial and temporal caesurae.” (Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Era of Decolonization*, pp. 112–113)

“Today’s theorization of art in terms of negative identity—of art’s relation to unwanted or falsified identity—owes a great deal to Nietzsche, but not in the first instance through the influence of Adorno. Rather, it was the American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois who, whether through the direct reading of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or through his reading of Georg Simmel’s Nietzschean-influenced sociology, created a completely new and distinctly American interpretation of the “second sight” that the experience of race brought to the analysis of society. The career of “negative identity” as the social index of truth begins with the doubled relation between Du Bois’s sociohistorical view and his aesthetic views. As the first American theorist to make negative identity his main subject, Du Bois conjoined the topic that Nietzsche and Adorno both pursued—the universality of music—with the topic that they both eschewed: the concept of race. For Du Bois, the negativity of race and the color line was a kind of wound in the fabric of universality, but one that the most educated souls—“the talented tenth”—could see both inside and outside, and thus through and beyond. The scar of race was, in Du Bois’s understanding, to be transformed into its opposite: a higher consciousness—first for the wounded, but eventually for all of humanity.” (Oberle, p. 56)

Oberle’s critical imperative: “For Adorno, the central critical vision of this new historical situation offers a variant of Du Bois’s second sight: critical theory must not merely posit new utopias, new ideal subjectivities, but it must learn to perceive the world anew through the very things that terrify the critical mind” (Oberle, p. 64)

Questions: How might we re-conceive dialectics, with Adorno, as “nonidentity through identity”? How does critical theory and the politics of identity appear to us differently in light of Adorno’s claim that “nonidentity is the secret telos of identification”? Adorno conceded that “in the unreconciled condition, nonidentity is experienced as negativity.” What work might such negativity do to help us navigate present social and political impasses?