

Identity produced by negation – Freedom after Adorno and Hartman

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Quotes

“The elegant dwellings lined up along the seacoast reminded me of the mansions built in Liberia by ex-slaves from North and South Carolina and Mississippi, which replicated the world from which they had migrated, except now they were the new masters.” (Hartman, LyM, 102)

“The only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was this loss, and it defined the tribe. A philosopher had once described it as an identity produced by negation.” (Hartman, LyM, 103)

“Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’, if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally ‘unmade,’ thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that ‘exposed’ their destinies to an unknown course.” (Spillers 1987, 72)

“How does one survive the common atrocities of slavery yet possess a sensibility, a feeling, an impulse, and an inexplicable, yet irrepressible, confidence in the possibilities of freedom?” (Hartman, SoS, 64)

“It entailed a great effort to remind myself that the destruction of the holding cell hadn’t been absolute and that I was part of what had lived on. Ghana was as good a place as any other to think about the afterlife of slavery and the future of the ex-slave. Secretly I hoped that it wasn’t too late to believe in freedom dreams.” (LyM, 107)

“A causality produced by freedom corrupts freedom into obedience.” (Adorno, ND, 232)

“Freedom can be defined in negation only, corresponding to the concrete form of a specific unfreedom. Positively it becomes an “as if.”” (Adorno, ND, 231)

“Freedom is a moment, rather, in a twofold sense: it is entwined, not to be isolated; and for the time being it is never more than an instant of spontaneity, a historical node, the road to which is blocked under present conditions.” (Adorno, ND, 219)

“Freedom and intelligible character are akin to identity and nonidentity, but we cannot clearly and distinctly enter them on one side or the other. The subjects are free, after the Kantian model, in so far as they are aware of and identical with themselves; and then again, they are unfree in

such identity in so far as they are subjected to, and will perpetuate, its compulsion. They are unfree as diffuse, nonidentical nature; and yet, as that nature they are free because their overpowering impulse—the subject’s nonidentity with itself is nothing else—will also rid them of identity’s coercive character. Personality is the caricature of freedom.” (Adorno, ND, 299)

“When the assumption is that freedom is a thing and that the autonomous subject is moving towards that thing, I don’t hear my subjects a lot talking about freedom. And I could presume that they have false consciousness and they just don’t know how great freedom is, I could presume they don’t think freedom is possible for them. And I have started to presume that they don’t think freedom is relevant to them. Not that it’s good or bad or that they can’t have it, but that it’s just not the organizing principle of their lives. There are other organizing principles of their lives.” (Owens 2019)

“Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance—there is its freedom.” (Adorno, ND, 17) / „Freiheit ist dort, wo der Gedanke über das hinausweist, woran er sich gebunden hat.“ (Adorno, ND, 29)

“And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. Mattie was desperate not to be a servant or drudge, but there was no ready blueprint for another life that she could follow besides the one she crafted, an inchoate plan and radical thought in deed were her resources. If she could feel deeply, she could be free.” (Hartman, WL, 60)

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