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THEODOR ADORNO AND THE UNHOPELESS WORK OF THE NEGATIVE

Theodor Adorno is read, more often than not, as a somber theorist whose reflections on modern life lead to despair. According to this view, Adorno examines the world and can only see in it instrumental reason, domination, and cultural conformity. Although influenced by Marx, he refuses to place his faith in the proletariat or some revolutionary group that might alter these conditions.¹ He consequently ignores everyday forms of resistance that emerge from the “masses.” He only finds resistance to the status quo in occasional works of high art, a Beckett play or a Schonberg musical piece. For Adorno, our world is damaged, broken, and in ruins. There are no prospects for a different kind of future.

The image of Adorno as despairing and hopeless has been advanced by many contemporary thinkers, most notably Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* marks a radical break from Marx’s notion of ideology critique and an acceptance of Nietzsche’s radical skepticism toward reason. Whereas Marx’s notion of ideology exposes the “untruthfulness” of theories that conflate knowledge and power (thereby implying the possibility of knowledge that is not tantamount to power), Nietzsche reduces all forms of knowledge to the will to dominate. By adopting Nietzsche’s reduction of reason to power, Adorno’s thought turns into a debilitating form of despair.² According to Habermas, Adorno cannot see the promising aspects of an alternative form of reason based on inter-subjective

¹ On Adorno’s refusal to place hope in any collective revolutionary subject, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 24-42. As Martin Jay points out, part of this loss of confidence in the proletariat (which can be attributed to the Frankfurt School as a whole) has to do with historical developments in Germany (the rise of the National Socialist Party) and the Soviet Union (the dictatorship of Stalin). See Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of The Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 43-45. But this lack of confidence in a revolutionary collective subject also is related to Adorno’s concern about the “liquidation” of the individual within totalizing collectives. Adorno’s relationship to Marx is definitely complicated as many commentators have suggested. I agree with Frederic Jameson that, despite Adorno’s refusal to align himself with the proletariat, he does offer fecund resources for Marxism, especially in its late, “post-modern” form. See Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990). I also agree with Martin Jay that Marxism is one star within a constellation or forcefield (*Kraftfeld*) of traditions that animate his thinking. See Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11-23.

² For Habermas’ critique of Adorno and Horkheimer’s co-authored text, see *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 106-130.

communication and mutual understanding. He gives up on modernity; he jettisons hope in the modern project.

In this article, I challenge the standard interpretation of Adorno.³ I argue that the Habermasian claim that Adorno's thought leads to a hopeless "negativism" eschews the dialectical nature of Adorno's thought, particularly the relationship between melancholy, resistance, and hope. For Adorno, I argue, it is precisely our capacity to register and remember the intensity of the damages and modes of suffering in the past and present, that occasions hope for a more desirable world. While Adorno acknowledges that hope is often a set of desires and expectations that keep subjects attached to the status quo, he also acknowledges that an alternative kind of hope is possible, one that is marked by a greater vulnerability to the uncomfortable and dissonant features of our worlds. To flesh out this melancholic hope, a hope that relies on the possibility of refusing and thinking against rigid structures of power, I focus particularly on passages and themes in *Negative Dialectics*. In the concluding part of this article, I think about the relevance of Adorno's thought for contemporary discussions within queer theory, particularly the arguments advanced by Lee Edelman's *No Future*. While Edelman insists that our commitment to a determinate future reproduces the order of things, he does suggest that a better world has something to do with queer subjects embodying the proverbial negative.

The Vicissitudes of Modern Life: Power, Violence, and the Refusal of the Negative

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁴ is animated by a harrowing question: How is it that a project so dedicated to freedom and equality results in the horrific forms of

³ My alternative reading is of course inspired by a number of authors and commentators who have attempted to offer more generative readings of Adorno. See for instance Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 75-137; JM Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 371-414; Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2006). I also draw from other readings of Adorno. Drucilla Cornell, for instance, contends that Adorno's philosophy of non-identity reminds us of the relations of power and violence that are intertwined with abstract appeals to a collective "We" in the thought, for instance, of Gadamer and Rorty. See Drucilla Cornell, "The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics" in *American Continental Philosophy: A Reader*, ed. Walter Brogan and James Risser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 147-175. Another careful reader of Adorno is Gillian Rose. While mindful of the limitations in Adorno's thought, she contends that Adorno is not pessimistic. Rather his "melancholy science" is an "ethics of thinking" which registers the paradoxes and tensions involved in confronting capitalism in its latest "stage." See Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: MacMillan Press, 1978), 138-148.

⁴ Although this book is co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer, throughout the chapter, I will only refer to Adorno's contribution. I do this for practical reasons, not to obscure Horkheimer's contribution to this powerful text. It is important to note that there is some contention over which portions of the text can be attributed to Adorno and which sections to Horkheimer. For instance, Habermas contends that Horkheimer alone wrote the first essay, "The Concept of Enlightenment", while Adorno alone wrote the second essay on Odysseus. Robert Hullot-Kentor argues, however, that the text is co-authored throughout. On this disagreement, see Robert Hullot-Kentor, *things beyond*

domination and violence witnessed in the 20th century (The Shoah, Communist terror, and the World Wars)?⁵ Adorno has a provocative story to tell in response to this question. For Adorno, these events are not simply aberrations; rather these twentieth century atrocities are a culmination of processes, arrangements, practices, and modes of thought that shape and constitute modern life. In other words, there has always been an underside to the Enlightenment and the modern forms of life intertwined with this project, an underside that is covered over by narratives of progress and increased freedom. The Enlightenment project, he tells us, is motivated by a “fear of fear”; and consequently, a desire to eradicate fear. Insofar as the unknown, the other, or the mysterious is the source of fear, the Enlightenment responds with the dictum that “nothing is allowed to remain outside.”⁶ In other words, everything in the world must be illumined, rendered intelligible, and brought to light in order to be managed and manipulated. Therefore, a confession like that of Antigone in response to divine laws (“where they come from, none of us can tell”⁷) becomes an anathema for the Enlightenment because she acknowledges a mysterious source of authority and dependence that cannot be elucidated, scrutinized, and managed by human subjects. Similar to Plato banning the Homeric stories from his idealized Republic, “the Enlightenment’s program wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”⁸

Yet the attempt by the proponents of the Enlightenment to jettison all myths (and liberate humans from the fear that these myths elicit) is ironically intertwined with a new, more powerful set of myths. If myth, according to Adorno, is characterized by fate, repetition, and sacrifice, then the Enlightenment repeats these qualities in a less explicit manner. To begin to address this entanglement of Enlightenment and myth, Adorno identifies Francis Bacon as one of the progenitors of modern thought. For Bacon, according to Adorno, knowledge is a mode of power with the aim of probing the depths of nature in order to master and dominate it. Using knowledge as a method or a means to support or pursue various human ends (making life easier, enabling humans to live longer, or travel greater distances) is certainly not bad in itself. What Adorno resists is the

resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 25-27.

⁵ Adorno is understandably focusing on events and conditions in Europe and, while in exile, the more subtle forms of domination in America. Yet I would argue that modernity is born in the moving crucible of imperial expansion (supported by the production of colonies), rendering violence and terror a constitutive part of the lives of many non-European denizens of modernity. Paul Gilroy makes this point about the relationship between terror and modernity in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ Quoted from Sophocles’ *Antigone* in GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. AV Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 261.

⁸ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1. But of course Plato’s Republic relies on its own set of Myths including the fabricated story of the creation of social strata out of different metals.

pervasive, expansive impact of means/end reasoning, a tendency that he traces back to Bacon's reduction of knowledge to power. What he resists, therefore, is the way in which this form of reasoning increasingly forecloses other ways of understanding and relating to the world. Within the fold of instrumental reasoning, "what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly it and human beings. *Nothing else counts.*"⁹ In order to count, to be meaningful or significant, an object, event, or phenomenon must be useful; it must already conform to the schema of means/end reasoning. (A tree, for instance, is only meaningful because it provides paper or timber and has no importance apart from its utility for us). Since "nothing else counts", all the other aspects and dimensions of a particular thing (those that do not seem immediately usable) are rendered otiose, meaningless, and so forth. The natural world increasing becomes what Heidegger calls a "standing reserve", a mass of amorphous objects that acquires meaning only through human shaping, molding, and classifying. Another way of putting it is that concrete particulars are repeatedly subsumed and absorbed into ready-made concepts and rules. This is the place where myth and Enlightenment converge according to Adorno. Both deny particularity, difference, and newness, thereby leading to the repetition of the same. The following passage is telling:

The principle of fated necessity which caused the downfall of the mythical hero, and finally evolved as the logical conclusion from the oracular utterance, predominates, refined to the cogency of formal logic, in every rationalistic system of Western philosophy. In myths, everything that happens must atone for the fact of having happened. It is no different in enlightenment: no sooner has a fact been established than it is rendered insignificant. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because 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 incessantly states what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 2. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰Ibid., 8. This relationship between Enlightenment and myth is prefigured in the work of other thinkers that influenced Adorno. Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, suggests that both modern reason and mythological doctrines are forms of abstraction. See Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-86. The following line is telling: "The prevailing abstractness reveals that the process of demythologization has not come to an end" (p.82). Hegel also sees a connection between Enlightenment and myth, or Enlightenment and superstition. For Hegel, both superstition/faith and the Enlightenment ground authority in a subject that is detached/abstracted from tradition, social practices, and so forth. As Bernstein points out, the basic claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is really just a radical version of Hegel's discussion of the unacknowledged affinity between Enlightenment and faith in the *Phenomenology*. See JM Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel" in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-50. For Hegel's discussion of the dialectic of faith and Enlightenment, see Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 328-355. For a helpful interpretation of this section, see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 165-179.

The Enlightenment becomes its other, myth, insofar as the meaning and significance of phenomena within the frame of the Enlightenment are predetermined by means/end reasoning, “fated” by ready-made schemes, rules, and concepts. The subsumption of particular bodies and objects into abstract, ready-made concepts has ethical and political implications for Adorno. This process perpetually enacts a certain violence on concrete particulars; it “sacrifices” the particular. Thus Adorno offers the following analogy: “Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings.”¹¹ This analogy suggests that the epistemic stance of the Enlightenment is intertwined with pernicious ethical/political habits and dispositions. Dictators stand apart from and manipulate subjects as the Enlightenment manipulates the contents of the natural world (which humans are a part of for Adorno). Hegel, to some degree, anticipates this connection with his discussion of absolute freedom in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Absolute freedom, according to Hegel, is freedom without constraints. It denotes an “abstract self-consciousness, which effaces all distinction and all continuance of distinction within it.”¹² This effacement of difference, according to Hegel, is historically manifested in the French Revolution as those who dissented from the so-called general will were violently purged. These dissidents experienced what Hegel calls the terror of absolute freedom, or the violence of a general will that is detached from the concrete, differentiated world.¹³

But if Hegel prefigures Adorno’s account of the Enlightenment, then Adorno supplements Hegel’s story with a Marxist understanding of the effects of capitalism on the shaping of modern subjects. As intimated above, instrumental reason and capitalism are intertwined. For Adorno, the treatment of others as a means to an end is a hallmark of capitalism, which, “aims to produce the exploitation of the labor of others.”¹⁴ In addition to and in connection with this exploitation of labor, capitalism is delineated by the pursuit of profit, the expansion of markets, the exchange principle, and the distribution of commodities. Adorno, as we will see, is concerned about what these modern conditions do to our structures of perception, our modes of attentiveness, or our in/ability to respond adequately to various dimensions of the world. In other words, since “the exchange form is the standard social structure, its rationality constitutes people.”¹⁵ And part of Adorno’s project is to show us what kinds of people are being constituted within this “standard social structure.” How do these constituted subjects respond to difference, non-identity, or the unfamiliar? How are we being shaped to encounter that which is dissonant and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² Hegel, 361.

¹³ I am not necessarily saying that Hegel’s notion of absolute freedom is the same thing as subsuming particulars under concepts. The concern here for Adorno is how difference or particularity is ignored or erased, how subjects hastily identify objects without experiencing the alterity and recalcitrance of these objects. Hegel’s absolute freedom is an extreme example of the means/end schema that Adorno is concerned about.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2.

¹⁵ Adorno, “Subject and Object” in *The Essential Frankfurt Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 501.

uncomfortable? If we are being shaped to respond to that which is dissonant and uncomfortable in certain ways, how does this “shaping” affect our propensity to be moved and unsettled by various modes of suffering? Similarly, how does it influence our tendency to remember/forget painful events, conditions, and arrangements?

Adorno begins to respond to these questions through his analysis of Homer’s account of Odysseus and the Sirens. According to Adorno, in this narrative we see “the intertwinement of myth, power, and labor.”¹⁶ The Sirens, as the story goes, are the winged sea creatures whose songs are both seductive and dangerous to travelers. When sea travelers hear these songs, they are captivated and lured by the enticing sounds of the Sirens, until their respective ships crash into the treacherous rocks that these mythic creatures inhabit. Odysseus, however, concocts a plan in order for him and his crew to escape the seductive creatures. He plugs the ears of his crew members with wax and ties himself to the mast of the ship. Odysseus therefore can hear and contemplate the beauty and terror of the songs, but is immobilized while listening. The crew members are rendered deaf to the songs, while their labor (rowing the ship) enables Odysseus to enjoy the Sirens. As many commentators point out, this segment of the Odyssey serves as an allegory for the divisions internal to modern life, particularly the division between intellectual and manual labor or the bourgeois and the proletariat. According to Rebecca Comay, for instance, “The sailors with their plugged up ears are like the factory workers of the modern age: busy hands, strong arms, senses dulled by the brutalizing boredom of wage labor. Odysseus strapped to the mast in solitary delectation would be the bourgeois as modern concertgoer, taking cautious pleasure in “art” as an idle luxury to be enjoyed at safe remove.”¹⁷ I take it that Adorno is suggesting that both conditions – brutalizing labor and enjoyment of culture at a safe distance – vitiate our propensity to experience and respond to various dimensions and aspects of the world. These separate conditions are therefore two sides of the same broken coin. The detached intellectual, who can critique the world and listen to the suffering and pain expressed by various forms of art, but from a safe distance, is just as confined and constrained as the factory worker whose bodily habits are increasingly determined by the qualities and ends of capitalist production – speed, efficiency, consistency, profit, and so forth.¹⁸

Adorno therefore evokes the story of Odysseus and the Sirens to serve as an allegory (a limited, incomplete allegory as I explain below); Homer’s story

¹⁶ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25.

¹⁷ Rebecca Comay, “Adorno’s Siren Song”, *New German Critique* 81 (Autumn 2000): 21-48. For a powerful explication of how Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens shapes Adorno’s understanding of modern aesthetics, see Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 127-154.

¹⁸ This is why it is difficult to levy the charge of elitism against Adorno. For Adorno, the detached intellectual or cultural theorist who claims he possesses the refined qualities of culture that the masses lack is also a product of the forms of alienation within modern life. His/her detachment from the substance of culture (cultural life) is indicative of reification. This is a central motif in *Minima Moralia*. His concerns about the detached critic are formulated powerfully in “Cultural Criticism and Society” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 19-34.

provides an image which disrupts the Enlightenment's "faith" in a universal form of reason disconnected from myth. It reveals the hidden affinities between the Enlightenment and its imagined other. More importantly, he employs this story to underscore how labor and power shape and animate modern practices, ideas, and dispositions. Adorno therefore wants to make us more attuned to the ways in which the aforementioned ends of capitalism shape our bodily habits; our structures of perception; our responsiveness to aspects of the world that we inhabit. These ends of capitalism also impact how subjects remember and relate to the past. The following passage is revealing as he draws parallels between Odysseus's crew and modern labor:

Anyone (of Odysseus's crew) who wishes to survive must not listen to the temptation of the irrecoverable, and is unable to listen only if he is unable to hear. Society has made sure this was the case. Workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge toward distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus the workers are made practical.¹⁹

The injunction to not listen to the "irrecoverable" (das *Unwiederbringliche* or "that which cannot be called back from the past"²⁰) is not necessarily referring to that which cannot be remembered. Insofar as the Sirens express the past and present suffering and anguish of humanity²¹, Adorno is making an allusion to painful, dissonant elements of the past that are rendered insignificant by progressive notions of history, or that become meaningful *only* by fitting within and going with the grain of progressive renderings of historical movement. Indebted to Walter Benjamin, Adorno is implicitly referring here to conceptions of time that stifle the "urge to rescue the past as something living, instead of using it as the material of progress."²² These conceptions of time "intend to liberate the present moment from the power of the past by banishing the latter beyond the absolute boundary of the irrecoverable."²³ Like Odysseus's crew members, these notions of time compel us to keep looking forward, to not be distracted by what Benjamin calls the shards of the past. These shards or ruins might disrupt the dominant rhythms and frameworks of the present and reveal aspects of our world that have been forgotten or neglected. In other words, these shards that don't quite fit within progressive accounts of history potentially prompt us to be more receptive to neglected stories, events, desires, and possibilities from the past that, through a difficult kind of remembrance, might contribute to thinking and acting differently.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26.

²⁰ This is Frederic Jameson's translation. See *Late Marxism*, 130.

²¹ I am indebted here to Nancy Love's provocative reading of Adorno's appropriation of Odysseus's journey.. See her "Why do the Sirens Sing?: Figuring the Feminine in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", *Theory and Event* 3.1 (1999). Love seems to answer the question posed by the title in the concluding sentence of the essay: "Through image and word - they (the Sirens' Songs) remind us of sound - and sound - crying, laughing, and singing reminds us of a suffering humanity, differently embodied together."

²² Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*

Remembrance of the past is connected to awareness and consciousness in the present. For Adorno, the modern push toward efficiency, profit, and accelerated production shapes how and what subjects see, hear, and feel in the present. This push, in other words, works on our capacity to sense and respond to facets of the world, particularly those facets which are dissonant, opaque, and ambiguous. Subjects are compelled to avoid “what lies to the side”, to ignore those pressures, forces, and tensional pulls that might reveal possibilities beyond the ends of profit and control. According to Adorno, the cultivation of this heightened attentiveness is strained because modern denizens are shaped to “look ahead with alert concentration and ignore that which lies to one side”. To be sure, Adorno would insist that we all have blind spots and, with Gadamer, that any horizon is limited and shortsighted. Yet we can also become aware of these blind spots; we can become more attentive to those hazy, partially visible, and partially audible others that reside at the periphery of our fields of vision. We might also become more open to the ways in which these “distractions” which “lie to the side” can influence the course and direction of our Odyssean journey(s), opening up routes and possibilities that promise different modes of relating to and living with others.

Adorno is skeptical, however, that this can happen under the prevailing conditions of capitalism, within which bodies are integrated and used to further the interests of power and profit. He therefore claims, “The more complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanism, to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which the body is capable. The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not already been grasped; it is the new form of blindness which supersedes that of vanquished myth.”²⁴ For Adorno, our bodily experiences become more impoverished as mechanisms (culture industry, market expansion, other modes of power) that bring about conformity and consistency get more entrenched in the modern world. Modern subjects *increasingly become* like Odysseus’s rowers – unable to speak to or engage one another, but yet collectively “harnessed to the same rhythms.” This “harnessing” produces consistency, or at least the semblance of consistency, but only by denying difference, or by rendering us less receptive to dissonance, ambiguity, and the unfamiliar. The increasing influence of instrumental reason, which enables us to hastily incorporate the unfamiliar into our familiar projects and ventures, prevents us from engaging the unfamiliar, from responding to those aspects of the world that don’t quite fit within our frameworks. This fastening to the tempos of capital, in other words, shapes how our bodies are affected/moved by the actions, events, and conditions of the world we inhabit. The push toward coherence and efficiency specifically tends to undermine our vulnerability to suffering insofar as this mode of receptivity entails an openness to dissonance and ambiguity, an openness to qualities and features which might alter and interrupt our everyday courses and trajectories.

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

As intimated above, this mode of attention also requires “slow time”, a temporality that is out of joint with the accelerated speed of capitalism. “Slow time” enables us to linger, to adjust our dispositions and perceptions to the suffering and pain of others in addition to their joys, aspirations, and general concerns. On the importance of tempo, Adorno suggests, “One might almost say that truth itself depends on the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular.”²⁵ With Levinas, the particular here might be the face of the hungry other, a face that resists being assimilated into means/end schemas or projects.²⁶ Truth, according to Adorno, depends in part on our capacity to develop slow, patient relationships with particular others, enabling us to be more attentive and responsive to the unique qualities, dimensions, and concerns of these others. Lingering in this case is associated with waiting, tending, taking time; this mode of being potentially defuses the desire to grasp and control the world or determine the quality of the relationship with the exterior world prior to the encounter(s). “Lingering with the particular” is a relevant image insofar as being responsive to the suffering of others requires habits of patience, receptivity, and vulnerability. These habits run counter to the practices of domination and control associated with war, empire, and unrestrained market expansion.²⁷ These habits similarly challenge what Adorno alludes to as the principle of self-preservation or “the fear of losing the self and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life.”²⁸ Similar to an author like Georges Bataille, Adorno suggests that the pernicious relationships between self and other have something to do with our desire to preserve a coherent sense of self, a self that requires a “safe” distance from uncomfortable forms of difference, non-identity, and materiality.

²⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. EFN Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 77.

²⁶ For Levinas’s understanding of the singularity of the other indicated by the transcendence of the face of the other, see *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University, 1969). Although there are similarities between Levinas and Adorno, Adorno might worry that Levinas’s ethics eschews mediation by the concept. Although Adorno’s negative dialectics attempts to get at the non-conceptual, the tension or paradox is that any relationship to the non-conceptual is conceptually mediated. Levinas, at times, places the ethical relationship to the other outside of conceptual mediation. For a critique of Levinas’s attempt to formulate an immediate ethical relationship with the other, see Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153. I think Adorno would share Derrida’s concerns.

²⁷ For a recent, fascinating account of the political and ethical possibilities associated with receptivity, patience, and vulnerability, see Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008). Exploring the practices and theoretical resources that emerge from SNCC, Industrial Areas Foundation, Jean Vanier’s L’Arche, and other radically democratic communities, Coles and Hauerwas attempt to trace and develop lines of flight that promise something different than what they call a “politics of death” (which includes both a reproduction and denial of death by the megastate and the vehicles of global capitalism).

²⁸ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26.

Before making the passage into Adorno's negative dialectics, we must address several questions concerning the persuasiveness of Adorno's reading of modern life. I imagine three related questions: Isn't Adorno's depiction of modern life (driven by instrumental reason, violence, and a general denial of suffering) too all encompassing, too excessively somber? And because of this totalizing critique, isn't Adorno, as Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, and others suggest, compelled to find redemption or hope "elsewhere" - in a Utopian realm outside of language and rational discourse? Isn't his totalizing critique a result of using Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens as *the* allegory for modern life just as Weber uses the "iron cage" as the dominant image for modernity?

Adorno in-famously exaggerates his claims. He uses excessive rhetoric, in part, as a strategy. Among other effects, it is a way to inventory and illumine the intensity of the damages of the past and present. More importantly, this strategy resists the frequent denial and forgetfulness of conditions, practices, and dispositions that enabled the extermination of six million Jews, the release of the atomic bomb on Japanese citizens, or the death of eight million Congolese under Belgium's rapacious pursuit of copper, glass, and rubber. Yet Adorno also acknowledges the limits of totalizing, somber assessments of modern life expressed in claims such as: "Life lives no longer", "The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry"²⁹, and "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."³⁰ He is often vigilant of the dangers of (his own) excessive rhetoric. For instance, in the middle of "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", an essay which traces the residual elements of Fascism in post-war Germany, he admits: "I have exaggerated the somber side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth. Do not mistake my fragmentary and often rhapsodic remarks for Spenglerism; Spenglerism itself makes common cause with the catastrophe. My intention is to delineate a tendency concealed behind the smooth façade of everyday life."³¹ In this passage, Adorno connects the tactic of exaggeration with the intention of "delineating" features and tendencies that are concealed and ignored to maintain the appearance of peace and well-being.³² Yet he also distances his thought from

²⁹ Ibid., 99.

³⁰ Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", 34.

³¹ Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 99. The reference here is to Oswald Spengler who wrote an influential book, *Decline of the West*, in 1918. For Adorno's interpretation of Spengler and the latter's theory of cultural decadence, see Adorno, "Spengler after the Decline" in *Prisms*, 51-72.

³² This discussion of exaggeration and excessive rhetoric conjures up discussions between Jeff Stout and Romand Coles over radical democracy. In Stout's masterful *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2004), he suggests that the excessive rhetoric in thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Richard Rorty has "outlived its use." Stout suggests that this excess tends to obscure and cover over what these thinkers mean to say. Coles responds to Stout in "Democracy, Theology, and the Question of Excess: A Review of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*", *Modern Theology* 21.2 (April 2005): 301-321. In this review, Coles reminds Stout that the rhetorical excessive is an important device for thinkers, such as Emerson, that Stout uses to articulate his understanding of democracy. Coles, drawing from Adorno and Freud, claims that this excess can challenge and disrupt "troubling

that of Spenglerism – which, according to Adorno, pronounces the inevitability of cultural decay and decline. Spenglerism, according to Adorno, “makes common cause with the catastrophe” by denying the possibilities and hope that emerge from the “protest of the powerless.”³³ The very term “protest of the powerless” suggests that individuals and communities that are typically stifled by social arrangements simultaneously provide some friction against the smooth flow of things.

It is important to keep in mind that while Adorno employs terms like “system” and “totality”, he uses these terms with a tinge of irony. Certainly he wants to make us more attentive to totalizing processes and tendencies, to unjust arrangements that are becoming more pervasive and obstructive of freedom, creativity, solidarity, and general flourishing. He worries about the ways in which the world is “becoming like an open-air iron cage.”³⁴ Yet, as he points out in his essay on Kafka, “There is no system without its residue.”³⁵ Any movement toward totality necessarily fails to reach completion insofar as the identity of that totalizing movement would have to be mediated by something other than itself. In other words, any arrangement of power generates resistance, exclusions, and ways of being that trouble and destabilize that arrangement. Consequently, part of Adorno’s problem with Spengler is that the latter formulates a conception of history that “in the end everything is taken care of. Nothing is left over and all resistances have been liquidated.”³⁶ I am not concerned with the accuracy of his reading of Spengler. What is significant is Adorno’s fidelity to resistance, his commitment to residual “left overs” that “slip through” and challenge totalizing frameworks and arrangements. As Martin Jay points out, Adorno’s break with previous Marxist thinkers is animated, in part, by his fidelity to non-identity and his “animus towards totality”, closure, and universal accounts of history.³⁷ This enables an initial response to critics like Habermas and Seyla Benhabib who claim that Adorno can only find hope in some redemptive sphere outside of rational discourse because of his totalizing critique, especially of modern reason. Adorno, especially in his later writings, seems to find flickers of hope in everyday discourses that might challenge and resist domination, forgetfulness of suffering, and so forth. He points, for instance, to philosophy as a tradition that cultivates habits of critical reflection, careful attentiveness to the world around us, and resistance to the status quo. He also skeptically endorses education and

affective commitments lodged in our disciplined flesh.” It can counter the pervasive incapacity to be affected by troubling conditions, practices, and arrangements. For Stout’s response, see “The Spirit of Democracy and the Rhetoric of Excess”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35.1 (Feb 2007): 3-21. I take it that for Stout, the excess can blind us to possibilities; it can hinder us from thinking that things can get better. For Coles the excess actually brings to light dimensions that have been blocked from view, obscured, and so forth. A voice that is excessively loud can either deafen/impair one’s ability to hear or render that voice audible to those who have trouble hearing. I take it that we have to keep both tendencies/possibilities in mind.

³³Adorno, “Spengler after the Decline”, 72.

³⁴Adorno, *Cultural Criticism and Society*, 34.

³⁵Adorno, “Notes on Kafka” in *Prisms*, 257.

³⁶Adorno, “Spengler after the Decline”, 62

³⁷Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 241-275.

psychology as domains that might help people confront and work through the catastrophes of the past and present, defusing the tendency to deny, repress, and thus reproduce these catastrophes.³⁸

Finally, the allegory of Odysseus and the Sirens is only one model or lens that Adorno uses to think through the features of modernity. Although this allegory, along with Weber's image of the iron cage, is significant, it doesn't exhaust his imagination. And Adorno would be the first to claim that the configuration of images, models, and concepts that he constructs to think about modernity is in no way definitive. In fact, his configurations are designed to "furnish models for a future exertion of thought."³⁹ Another image that Adorno offers, for instance, is "the child at the piano searching for a chord never previously heard. This chord, however, was always there; the possible combinations are limited and actually everything that can be played on it is implicitly given in the keyboard."⁴⁰ This image, according to Adorno, expresses a subject's longing (*Sehnsucht*) for the new. But notice that the chord "never previously heard" was "always there" and the "possible combinations" that can be played are "implicitly given in the keyboard." Adorno is suggesting that the new is located within the mundane; that which is potentially transformative is immanent to our everyday practices and interactions. Perhaps this image should be juxtaposed, with tension, to the Odysseus allegory. Perhaps our heightened awareness of pernicious practices and arrangements, which are sustained in part by reducing our awareness, is connected to the possibility of something new and more desirable. Put differently, hope might be generated by our heightened capacity to register, contemplate, and respond to the damages and forms of suffering that beset our world. In the next section, I trace this possibility.

Negative Dialectics as a Practice of Unhopeless Tarrying

Negative dialectics, among other possibilities, is a philosophical response to the pernicious features of modernity and social existence more generally. In this section, I tease out elements within Adorno's dialectic that resist the tendency to deny death, suffering, and loss. His thought, in other words, attempts to make us more responsive to these conditions. But this is not all it offers. Negative dialectics, in opposition to instrumental reason, remains faithful to what Adorno calls the non-identical or the excess that slips through concepts. This fidelity to a "More" indicates a desire for a better world; it denotes a certain kind of hope. It is important, I argue, that both moments be held together, in tension.

³⁸ On the possibilities and virtues that Adorno sees as inherent to the philosophical tradition, see Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy?" in *Critical Models*, 5-17. For his suggestion that teachers and psychologists might, in a limited way, help subjects deal with the lingering traces of Anti-Semitism and Fascism and also encourage them to confront the ideologies and mechanisms that generate hate and violence, see "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", 102-103.

³⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 18.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 32.

As we work through Adorno's philosophy, we must keep in mind that negative dialectics is an activity, a practice, a mode of being in the world. It is not an expression of "self-satisfied" contemplation. Gillian Rose insists on this connection between thought and activity in Adorno's dialectic. She claims that for Adorno, "thinking is a form of praxis. The title *Negative Dialectic* is intended to cut across the conventional theory/praxis distinction by delineating theory as a form of intervention which combats prevalent modes of identity thinking."⁴¹ Romand Coles similarly contends that we must think of Adorno's negative dialectics as a "performance, a happening, a textual practice. It is not a practice whose meaning would lie in some transparent presence utterly incommensurable with itself, but rather whose meanings lie largely in the ways its very movements exemplify ethical engagement."⁴² As a performance and movement, negative dialectics does something to the reader. It animates and gestures toward different ways of interacting with others. It cultivates different habits of attentiveness, alternative ways of perceiving the world we live in. It compels us, for instance, to be more attuned and receptive to ambiguity, contradiction, and dissonance. This mode of thinking and engaging the world prompts us to resist closure, complacency, and comfort especially when these states are sustained through denial. In a world suffused with suffering that many ignore or turn away from, negative dialectics endeavors to register, traverse, and articulate this general condition of suffering.

According to Adorno, negative dialectics "says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy."⁴³ This initial definition sounds familiar. Like Kant, his philosophical predecessor, Adorno is suggesting that our concepts are limited. He seems to be reiterating Kant's idea that concepts don't fully correspond to their designated objects. Therefore Adorno is indebted, to some degree, to Kant's distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves (the difference between objects as they appear to the structures of the mind and the object as it is apart from conceptual mediation).⁴⁴ Although Adorno contends that "the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived", he also acknowledges that thinking necessarily seeks to identify. We therefore have to actively resist the inherent tendency within thinking to absorb and exhaust the objects of thinking. In other words, "To think is to identify. Conceptual order is

⁴¹ Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 147. Of course Adorno wants to maintain some distance between theory and praxis; the two are therefore never identical just as subject and object are never identical. Yet this distance does not foreclose a relationship, a relationship fraught with tensions and ambiguities no doubt.

⁴² Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 80.

⁴³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

⁴⁴ Kant's critical enterprise recognizes the limits of human thought. It acknowledges the tension that haunts human reason – reason is beset by questions that, by its very nature, it cannot answer nor ignore. Kant's claim that the "things-in-themselves" exceed the clutches of our thought is a testament to the "slippage of being", the slippage that animates negative dialectics. The problem, from an Adornian perspective, is that Kant's acknowledgement of the world's alterity very quickly turns into a yearning to overcome it. Thus Kant imagines a subject whose concepts and categories are impervious to a recalcitrant world, a subject that imposes its self-given laws on an inscrutable world without receiving any content from the world.

content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend..Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity."⁴⁵ The term "totality" here refers to thinking, ways of being, and dispositions that tend to absorb or integrate various modes of non-identity. It refers to conceptual schemes, narratives, and practices that deny difficult, unwieldy forms of difference. When Adorno claims that thinking can only break immanently "through the appearance of total identity", he is suggesting that any attempt to think beyond totalizing frameworks will necessarily occur within those frameworks. Prefiguring the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Adorno is suggesting that resistance to any arrangement of power necessarily relies to some extent on that arrangement. More specifically, Adorno acknowledges that any attempt to counter the tendency of concepts to subsume particular objects without registering the alterity of these objects, will require the use of concepts. Negative dialectics is therefore always subject to the problems, limitations, blindnesses, and erasures that accompany identity thinking.

If the alterity that exceeds the concept is designated as the non-identical, then negative dialectics expresses the fraught relationship between identity and non-identity. Even as Adorno "sides" with the non-identical or the heterogeneous (that which cannot be totally grasped by the concept), he acknowledges the necessity of conceptualizing, or the importance of finding the familiar in the other. In fact, the excess that slips through the concept prompts further conceptualizing, including the creation of new concepts. Adorno calls this fraught relationship between non-identity and identity a "contradiction." He writes, "Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity."⁴⁶ Contradiction intensifies the more desperately we strive for unity and order. The non-identical, according to Adorno, "appears divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity, as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it."⁴⁷ In other words, things, ideas, people, desires, and events appear more out of place and dissonant the more we are shaped to desire unity, order, ease, and comfort. Because these aspects appear out of place, dissonant, and unfamiliar, we tend to repress or repel these aspects to maintain the semblance of order. Similarly, we tend to overlook the ways in which the desire for order and comfort produces dissonance, suffering, and pain for those who inhabit the underside of various orders and arrangements. To strive for unity is not bad per se. Yet a striving for unity that neglects, covers over, or represses the dissonance that thwarts this striving can be pernicious. A desire for unity that becomes too comfortable, too at ease with it itself, can produce a blindness to the dissonance, ambiguity, and unease that this desire for unity generates.

Therefore Adorno claims that negative dialectics is "the consistent sense (*Bewusstsein*) of non-identity."⁴⁸ Negative dialectics animates an attentiveness to qualities, relations, and conditions that the various drives toward unity might

⁴⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5..

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

screen from view. It cultivates a heightened sense of ongoing tensions and conflicts that shape our world. The basic movement of the dialectic endeavors to make us more receptive to these conflicts and tensions. In fact, it compels us to think within and from the wounds produced by these conflicts. As Adorno moves back and forth between various binaries such as subject and object, idealism and materialism, the conceptual and the non-conceptual, or theory and practice, he refuses to privilege one side of the binary. As Adorno puts it, "Dialectics does not begin by taking a standpoint."⁴⁹ Negative dialectics, in other words, does not offer a stable, comfortable position that enables a subject to interpret the world from that position. It does not begin with a secure subject who confers meaning on the world. Negative dialectics is always embroiled in the messy, contingent, tension-filled world. Experience, according to negative dialectics, always occurs in the precarious space between subjects and objects; between ideas and the concrete world; between selves and others.

My formulation thus far might suggest that Adorno is attached to a defunct subject/object dualism, a dualism that post-Hegelian philosophy has left behind. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel refutes the assumption that the subject or mind is on one side of a boundary and objective truth is another side. What Hegel offers in this influential text is a story about the historical development of a third, mediating term that always already enables and shapes the relationship between subjects and objects, selves and others, thoughts and the world. Hegel calls this third, mediating term *Geist*; we can think of *Geist* or Spirit as naming the primacy of social practices which shape and constitute the interaction between subjects and objects. Adorno is not so confident about the unifying quality of this third term; although he agrees that there is no fundamental split between subject and object or mind and world, he does suggest that the proverbial subject/object split reflects divisions and conflicts that pervade modern life. According to Adorno, "the separation of subject and object is both real and illusory. True because in the cognitive realm it serves to express real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development. False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant."⁵⁰

As I take it, Adorno is claiming that we cannot ontologize the separation between subject and object or, in a Kantian manner, declare that there is an invariant demarcation between things in themselves and things as they appear to a subject. At the same time, historical processes and conditions associated with the expansion of capital have produced concrete divisions and ruptures. For Adorno, Kant's solution might leave us with a subject whose norms and rules are detached from the material world, yet Hegel leaves us with a collective subject that too easily resolves the tensions and modes of non-identity that mark our interactions with the world. If Adorno is somewhere between and beyond Kant and Hegel, the following formulation expresses Adorno's critical piety toward his predecessors: "The difference between subject and object cannot be simply negated. They are neither an ultimate duality nor a screen hiding ultimate unity. They constitute one another as much as – by virtue of such constitution – they

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Adorno, "Subject and Object," 498-499.

depart from one another."⁵¹ This mutual constitution, at its best, is marked by a tension-filled, back and forth movement between self and other, a movement (not predetermined by a unifying "third" term or framework) in which both participants are affected, enriched, and transformed.⁵² At the same time, a proximate distance is maintained between self and other and this distance is pivotal to the quality of the interactions.

If Adorno's dialectic teaches selves to move in between and trouble binaries, this mobility is coupled with a willingness to linger, to tarry with the other. As described above, when thought lingers with the particular, concrete other, our thinking becomes more receptive, patient, and less inclined to hastily determine its relationship with that other. Thus Adorno claims, "If thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye."⁵³ The point here is not that we can relate to others without categories or concepts. The point is that we must "strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept."⁵⁴ Even though our relationship to others is always conceptually and linguistically mediated, Adorno's hope is that through careful attention, patience, and a willingness to linger, these others might transform our prefabricated concepts, thoughts, and dispositions. They might express or reveal facets of the world that cannot be fully anticipated by familiar, "ready to use" concepts. By lingering with the suffering and pain of others, we might become more attuned and responsive to their conditions. We might, for instance, become more willing to listen to and register stories that both disconcert us and offer new meanings and possibilities. Similarly, we might be less inclined to hastily render these stories intelligible, lucid, and consistent with previous thoughts.

For Adorno, a heightened awareness of suffering is related to the capacity to think and experience contradictions and antagonisms. In a passage at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno professes that philosophy must express "the voice of the contradiction which otherwise would not be heard, but would triumph silently."⁵⁵ In *Negative Dialectics*, he claims that "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject."⁵⁶ Giving a voice to suffering is for Adorno related to the expression of contradiction, the expression of conflicts that disturb neat, consistent theories, perspectives, or narratives. As Lambert Zuidervaart points out, when Adorno speaks of contradictions, he is "not simply referring to logical incongruities that could be cleared up by more careful thought. Instead his

⁵¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 174.

⁵² Mutual constitution certainly requires something like the social practical plane to enable this interaction. Yet Adorno would be worried about appeals to the social world, community, language games, or tradition that did not take into account the violent dimensions of the We with respect to the shaping of selves. See for instance Judith Butler's illuminating interpretation of Adorno's distinction between morality and ethos in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 3-9. Also see Drucilla Cornell, "The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics," 170.

⁵³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 28.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 203.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-18.

reference is to unavoidable conflicts in a historical society."⁵⁷ Adorno also describes the articulation of suffering/contradiction as an expression of the weightiness of the world on subjects – the pain involved in inhabiting a world always already riddled and burdened with conflict, poverty, and hunger, world that can be overwhelming for subjects. This articulation, in other words, is a response to the often-denied “coercive state of reality”, the antagonistic quality of the world. A kind of hope for Adorno lies in articulating the contradictions of the world, which if not expressed, “would triumph silently.” Thus, explicating the contradictory relationship between freedom and domination within modernity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (the ways in which the flourishing of some has been intertwined with and predicated on the suffering and agony of others) becomes a site of possibility by confronting the conditions and practices that “silently” sustain misery and prevent flourishing for many people. In addition, by refusing to easily resolve opposing claims and arguments within *Negative Dialectics* (such as the injunction that we must strive to get beyond the concept even though our relationship to the world is conceptually mediated), Adorno works on and against the reader’s expectations and desires. The dialectic thwarts the expectation of resolution and closure. It exposes the desire to keep moving forward without being haunted by conflicts and tensions that one would prefer to “leave behind.”

Is Adorno’s tendency to linger in antagonism and contradiction simply an excuse for not being clear, for not making a sustained, coherent argument? Is Adorno confined to this lingering because he cannot find anything positive or affirmative to hold on to, because he has no coherent goods or ends to endorse? These questions provoke Adorno’s detractors. According to Raymond Geuss, for instance, Adorno’s negative dialectic is simply incoherent. Geuss suggests that part of Adorno’s problem is that he celebrates contradiction without the possibility of resolution. Adorno’s dialectic remains too negative, too incomplete. Geuss therefore juxtaposes Adorno’s thought to Hegel’s dialectic because the latter offers a more coherent, productive way of dealing with contradiction and conflict. Geuss claims that Hegel’s dialectic “is precisely an attempt to understand how our initially vague concepts gain content and become more ‘adequate’ to the reality they purport to describe. A “logic” that wants to understand this kind of conceptual change must countenance contradictions – they are the force that pushes toward increased adequacy. However, since Adorno’s dialectic is negative, this kind of justification for the use of contradiction in philosophy is not open for him; his contradictions don’t get us anywhere, least of all an improved conceptual scheme in which the relevant contradiction can be avoided.”⁵⁸ Habermas supplements Geuss’s critique by suggesting a reason for Adorno’s inability to think beyond contradictions. According to Habermas, after Adorno accepts a totalizing critique of modern

⁵⁷ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 51.

⁵⁸ Raymond Geuss, “Review [untitled],” *The Journal of Philosophy* 72.6 (March 27, 1975):170-171. I am not concerned with Geuss’s reading of Hegel here. What is important is the contention that Adorno’s dialectic gets us nowhere; that negative dialectics leaves us stuck in contradictions, and without a resolution or a more adequate set of concepts to describe the world around us.

reason, his thought is animated and haunted by a glaring contradiction – how is it that he can defend his own position if there is no position outside the realm of instrumental reason and domination. According to Habermas, “Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* reads like a continuing explanation of why we have to circle within this performative contradiction, and indeed even remain there.”⁵⁹

To claim, as Geuss does, that Adorno’s dialectic “gets us nowhere” presupposes a certain understanding of where we are. If, as Adorno thinks, we live in a world that is increasingly becoming insensitive to suffering and violence, then Adorno’s reflections and inquiries might contribute to “getting us somewhere.” In other words, if we live among people who tend to avoid contradiction, ambiguity, and unease, then the movement, style, and content of Adorno’s thought is doing something significant and even productive. At the same time, Adorno is not averse to the idea of improving our concepts and offering more accurate descriptions of the world. In fact, he is calling for the active creation of concepts (the process of conceptualizing always exceeds the concept) which, among other effects, “lends a voice” to the contradictions that remain silent and ignored. What both Geuss and Habermas seem to miss is what Joshua Cohen calls the “morality of contradiction”⁶⁰, the ethical dispositions and stances that are intertwined with Adorno’s thought. As Cohen points out, “The more contradiction remains unvoiced, the more violently it will come to impose itself. ... Against society’s unconsciously willed forgetting of the violence by which its rationality has been forged, Adorno seeks to develop a mode of thought and action which always begins from recognition of its implication in that violence.”⁶¹ Adorno’s “persistent sense of the non-identical” or the contradictions that constitute modern life resists the pervasive forgetfulness of violence, that general condition that all human selves participate in but tend to deny. If amnesia is a problem, then giving a voice to contradiction, conflict, and suffering “gets us somewhere”; cultivating a heightened awareness of these painful aspects of life enables us to begin to confront, work through, and potentially reduce them.

Another aspect of Adorno’s thought that these detractors overlook is the relationship between the dissonance expressed in negative dialectics and physical, bodily pain. As JM Bernstein points out, the ethical thrust of negative dialectics should be understood as an alternative to “ethical coldness” which is characterized by a stance of indifference toward the materiality and concreteness of the pain of others.⁶² Ethical coldness is a correlate to instrumental reason or the efficient, hasty integration of concrete particulars into abstract, ready-made concepts. Being attuned to the sensuous pain of others, on the other hand, marks a break or interruption from our familiar courses, structures of meaning, and sensibilities. Thus, for Adorno, the movement and contour of negative dialectics is animated by the body’s unrest. The movement of negative dialectics, in other words, resists closure in part because of it is motivated by the consistent pain

⁵⁹ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*, 119.

⁶⁰ See Joshua Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 36-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

⁶² Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 396-414.

that the body experiences. We might think here of the bodily pain caused by a lack of food. Think of the pain caused by a whip lashing the back of a black slave. Or the pain involved in current practices of torture. According to Adorno, "It is the somatic element's survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge."⁶³ If pain and suffering are "moving forces of dialectical thinking", then our ways of thinking and being in the world "advance", in part, by contemplating and registering the "unrest" that bodies experience in a world riddled with violence. For Adorno, concrete bodily suffering undermines endeavors to render the world neat and coherent, to explain away dissonance and contradiction through our languages and discourses. As he puts it, "The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering."⁶⁴

But the body is not only susceptible to pain. Bodies also resist violence, torture, and hurt. The body cries out as an initial form of resistance to pernicious arrangements and conditions. The body's resistance expressed in a cry of pain opens up the possibility that the world could be better. People don't have to be hungry; prisoners don't have to be tortured. The cry of pain can be a "no" to prevailing conditions and an implicit "yes" to something better, to a state in which pain is not so widespread. Or as Adorno writes, "The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things could be different."⁶⁵ The "physical moment" of suffering endured by an individual expresses to us that, at the moment, something is wrong. It is a signal that something is out of joint, that the body is being affected in a harmful manner. A cry, in response to the "physical moment", is the body's expression of and resistance to pain. At the same time, a cry beckons toward another world where the conditions that produce anguish are less pervasive.

Negative dialectics doesn't only induce dispositions toward the present. It also offers powerful resources to think about suffering, loss, and missed opportunities in the past. In response to conceptions of world history, for instance, the "consistent sense of non-identity" encourages us to be more attuned to facets of the past that trouble and undermine sweeping narratives, aspects of the past that are nevertheless always under the threat of erasure. The sense of the non-identical similarly compels us to think through the tensions and conflicts of the past, tensions that linger in the present and hinder us from constructing neat, smooth narratives to "connect the dots" throughout time.

This work of the negative resists what Adorno calls "universal history", constructions of history that gather and unify the moments and events in time according to the idea of progress.⁶⁶ Adorno is not against the idea of progress per se. He is against the idea that somehow progress is inscribed in the

⁶³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Adorno is indebted to Benjamin's understanding of empty, homogenous time. See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-264.

movement of history. He is concerned about what aspects of the past are being denied and foreclosed by these narratives of progress. Thus he writes, "Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it."⁶⁷ Notice that the cynicism, the lack of hope, is associated with denying the catastrophes and ruins that constitute history. Lack of hope is attributed to accounts of history that privilege unity, thereby obscuring the fragmentation, dissonance, and tension inscribed within the unfolding of history. Lack of hope, in other words, is associated with accounts of history that deny or downplay the violence and terror that these accounts are implicated in. According to Adorno, "The unity of world history which animates the philosopher to trace it as the path of world spirit is the unity of terror rolling over mankind; it is the immediacy of antagonism."⁶⁸ Adorno is well aware that conquest, war, and empire have historically been intertwined with universal narratives that: locate truth and meaning on the side of the powerful, on the side of the victors; that imagine the present as the acme of historical development and the past as indicative of a less developed phase; that legitimate violence and terror by either placing the victims of conquest outside of history and truth or locating them in a lower phase of historical development. Adorno's dialectic underscores the "terror" connected with universal history, to the catastrophes and suffering produced by the "march of progress." As I explain below, it also compels us to retrieve discarded and forgotten possibilities within the ruins produced by historical catastrophes.

The process of connecting the past and present, of imagining the relationship between different moments/events in time is always riddled with myopia and selectivity. Even if we deny the pretensions of universal history, we are still vulnerable to its blindnesses and vices. As finite, limited beings, we necessarily forget aspects of the past and present; we tend to remember what is useful and expedient for our everyday ventures; we remember the past in light of present concerns, desires, and frames of meaning; yet we also revise previous understandings of the past (and present) as new information comes in, as new stories are presented to us. In addition, through education, holidays, and public rituals, we are perpetually shaped to remember and forget various dimensions of the past and present. Adorno's "sense of the non-identical" resists the specific tendency to deny aspects of the past that might disrupt and trouble our sense of the present. This heightened sense of non-identity compels us to be patient with

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320. It is important that universal history must be both "construed and denied." It must be construed because one must still connect the dots of history, one must still discover levels of continuity among the fragments, ruins, and discontinuous events of history. For Adorno, violence is a unifying category through which he understands and reads history. Thus he writes, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb" (p.320). I take it that by imagining continuity between the slingshot and the megaton bomb, Adorno is not only suggesting that violence is a unifying principle within the movement of history. He is also inscribing discontinuity, fragmentation, and ruin into the interval between "the slingshot and the megaton bomb" insofar as this space is constituted by catastrophe and suffering. It allows him to imagine history as "the unity of continuity and discontinuity" (p.320).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 341.

dimensions of the past that don't quite fit within prevailing narratives and frameworks of meaning. It makes us more aware of those facets that extant structures of meaning code as irrelevant or outmoded. Consider the following passage from *Minima Moralia*:

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which are not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – which might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also that which does not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such from the start has an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.⁶⁹

Adorno is not suggesting here that we venerate the past or those facets of the past that seem obsolete. He is not claiming that what has been “defeated” in history *necessarily* offers us insurgent meanings and possibilities. In America, for instance, the historical proponents of chattel slavery or the disenfranchisement of women have been defeated to some extent.⁷⁰ Certain practices and ways of being are obsolete for good reasons. Certain defeats have enabled more people to live better. What Adorno is resisting is the tendency to declare a practice, idea, or commitment irrelevant simply because it doesn't seem to fit into or accord with the present state of things. He is challenging the idea that “that which does not fit properly into the laws of historical movement” should be completely discarded and considered insignificant. He is similarly challenging the idea that the past is only useful if it reinforces the present and its dominant modes of being.

To tend to the “blind spots and waste products” of history is to remember both the suffering of those who “didn't fit” and the hope generated by their dissonant desires, practices, and ways of being. This form of attentiveness reminds us that our narratives, horizons, and fields of vision are always producing blind spots, violent exclusions, and injustices that we cannot always see, hear, or respond to. Yet beyond these limits, beyond these blind spots, lie possibilities and not yet realized meanings that, with a different kind of attention and openness, might transform us. “Waste” signifies that which can be discarded, or treated as insignificant and expendable. It also signifies excess or slippage. It can refer to the bodies that have been the detritus of imperial regimes, the waste products of violent exertions of power. Yet when interpreting waste as slippage or excess,

⁶⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 151

⁷⁰ I say to some extent because slavery still exists (human trafficking of young women for sexual labor) and women, as the human trafficking example shows, continue to confront the effects of patriarchy.

this term registers the ways in which those who have suffered these arrangements of power have generated practices of resistance, practices that are out of joint with these arrangements, habits and ways of living that “transcend the ruling society” and promise us something more desirable. The waste or trash of history refers to “that which still remains”, the leftovers of history. These “leftovers” may be ideas, meanings, and possibilities that have not been fully considered or realized. These “remains” might contribute to thinking differently about the present and resisting the present’s pernicious features. This of course depends on how these gathered remains are juxtaposed and combined with present desires, hopes, and concerns.⁷¹ Thus negative dialectics, according to Adorno, is “not only an advancing process but a retrograde one at the same time. The concept’s unfolding is also a reaching back.”⁷² The advancement of concepts and ideas is enabled in part by the capacity to remember and “reach back” toward dimensions of the past that have been neglected, forgotten, or that have yet to be discovered.

Negative dialectics, as intimated throughout this section, registers the excess or “more” connoted by the term “waste product.” The sense of the non-identical therefore doesn’t only cultivate a heightened attentiveness to contradiction, pain, and suffering. It also draws attention to the fecundity of meaning in the world. It reminds us that there is always “more” to be discovered, sensed, experienced, and thought in the world. Our concepts never exhaust the objects of thought; the world retains its heterogeneity in our ongoing interactions with it. Adorno writes, “What is, is more than it is. This “more” is not imposed upon it but remains immanent to it, as that which has been pushed out of it. In that sense, the non-identical would be the thing’s own identity against its identifications.”⁷³ Adorno suggests here that life is always exceeding itself. The world is always offering us more; it is always pregnant with meanings and possibilities that slip through and evade our extant horizons and conceptual frameworks prompting us to interpret and engage this world in new ways. This “more”, however, is not attributable to a transcendent realm outside of time and experience. The “more”, in other words, is not “imposed” upon “what is” from a source that is exterior to the world. The “more” is internal to “what is”, immanent to a world that is always in flux and incomplete.⁷⁴ Because we live amidst a world that is in flux, in a perpetual state of becoming, the non-identical is “the thing’s own identity against identifications.” Against attempts to fully capture or exhaust the meaning of objects in the world, the non-identical excess internal to life consistently remains; it sustains its primacy over our identifications. Hope, Adorno suggests, is cultivated by the persistent awareness of this “more”, the consistent attentiveness to that which exceeds, resists, and potentially undoes totalizing arrangements. He writes, “It lies in the definition of negative dialectics

⁷¹ For a helpful interpretation of how this idea of the remainder operates in Adorno’s thought, see *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: State University of New York Press), 10-11.

⁷² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 157.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁷⁴ I am indebted to my conversations with Dan Barber on this issue. His dissertation, *The Production of Immanence: Deleuze, Yoder, and Adorno* develops the idea of an immanent “more” in a powerful, rigorous way.

that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were *total*. This is its form of hope."⁷⁵ Hope for Adorno lies in the capacity of our thinking to constantly challenge, refuse, and think beyond rigid concepts, exhaustive definitions, and congealed frameworks of meaning. At the same time, selves must be aware of the material conditions and practices that tend to block the movement of thought and screen the "more" from view. Hope must confront subjugative mechanisms that increasingly pervade lifeworlds and prevent individuals from imagining possibilities within and beyond the existing order.

Some commentators have accused Adorno of locating hope or the possibility of redemption outside the realm of discourse, time, and experience. Albrecht Wellmer, for instance, argues that redemption for Adorno "is not only not of this world; it issues from a world that lies beyond space, time, causality, and individuation."⁷⁶ Adorno must draw his hope from somewhere else because he assumes that our world is so thoroughly damaged. I won't deny that Adorno is at times susceptible to this critique. Yet I suggest a more productive reading of Adorno's hope in the non-identical.

Adorno offers pithy descriptions of what a reconciled world might look like. He provides clues to what constitutes his utopian vision. He claims for instance, "Reconciliation would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconciliation would be thought of the many as no longer inimical."⁷⁷ Here Adorno contends that a reconciled state would be one in which difference and multiplicity would flourish freely, even free from dialectical thought. In other words, the "more" that is internal to the world would flourish without the imposition of concepts, without the violent imposition of order and unity. The non-identical would no longer suffer the pervasive thrust toward identity. Adorno's utopian state is one in which "people could be different without fear."⁷⁸ This emancipated state "would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) of differences."⁷⁹ Here one model for Adorno is atonal music, a genre that supposedly allows harmony to emerge in and through the different musical materials; structure is not imposed externally. Yet how could we relate to the world, others, difference, and so forth without the use and imposition of concepts? How can we relate to the non-identical without forms of identification – forestructures, horizons, familiar concepts, and language in general? Adorno himself claims we must use concepts to reach the non-conceptual or non-identical. How do we solve this apparent contradiction in Adorno's thought? How can he claim that we must

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

⁷⁶ Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 11. I don't want to portray Wellmer as one of Adorno's detractors. He provides a very charitable reading of Adorno that attempts to build on Adorno's strengths and think through and beyond Adorno's blind spots. I simply want to take one aspect of his powerful interpretation in another direction.

⁷⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

⁷⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 103.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

strive by way of concepts/identity to reach the non-identical, to reach a state in which the non-identical is released and difference flourishes without coercion?

I don't think the contradiction can be resolved easily. Yet we can attempt to read this contradiction in a fruitful way. For one, Adorno is not doing away with the importance of concept creation. We cannot have an immediate relationship with the world (or in order for that an immediate contact with the world to be meaningful, we need concepts). Relating to "the more" will always involve the construction and use of concepts. The "more" prompts us to actively construct constellations of concepts that are more attuned to non-identity than previous concepts.⁸⁰ A constellation is a configuration of concepts; it is the juxtaposition of concepts that are related through dissonance and tension. The gathering of different concepts to actively interpret the world (concepts that are fluid, dynamic, dissonant with one another) resists the tendency to subsume objects into ready-made, rigid categories. As Shane Phelan emphasizes, constellations are constructed to articulate the diverse, complex, and messy relationships among elements in the world.⁸¹ Constellations might be ordered but they are not systems; they do not endeavor to exhaust meaning in the world. Adorno claims that "constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the "more" which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being."⁸²

I take it that Adorno is suggesting that our sense of the non-identical "more" should incite the construction of concepts, which in turn should register and reflect our awareness of the non-identical. Constellations should express the difference and dissonance in the world, even as this difference is ordered, gathered, and assimilated to some extent by the configuration of concepts and ideas. The creation of constellations elicits hope insofar as these configurations counter ways of thinking that are linked to domination and an aversion to difference. Adorno's faith in constellational thinking suggests that by juxtaposing different perspectives, narratives, and conceptual frameworks, and by tending to the tensions and the affinities between these perspectives, a richer understanding of the world might emerge. Dimensions of the world that were previously neglected might come into view through the relating of these different stories, perspectives, and interpretations of the world. At the same time, constellational thinking compels us to acknowledge the limits of our concepts, the inability of our conceptual configurations to fully capture the "more." The hope is that in the process of making constellations, we become more open and attuned to ambiguity and dissonance. Even as we *actively*

⁸⁰ See *Negative Dialectics*, 162-163. Adorno gets the idea of the constellation from Walter Benjamin. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), 34. According to Benjamin, "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars." Although Adorno rejects the Platonic quality of Benjamin's "Ideas", the former does borrow the idea of configuring concepts (that shift, overlap at times, clash at other times) to illumine and interpret the world. For a fascinating account of Adorno's constellative thinking, see Shane Phelan, "Interpretation and Domination: Adorno and the Habermas - Lyotard Debate," *Polity* 25, no. 4 (1993): 597-616.

⁸¹ Phelan, 603.

⁸² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 162.

produce, juxtapose, and apply concepts, through the activity, we might become more *receptive* and *patient* toward that which doesn't completely fit within our familiar conceptual frameworks. As Phelan writes, "It is in non-identity that Adorno places his hope for the future."⁸³

Yet even if the world is always conceptually mediated, Adorno is clearly willing to offer a picture of a state in which non-identity would be "released" from the imposition of concepts. For Adorno "utopia would be above identity and contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity."⁸⁴ If a reconciled state is characterized by a peaceful, non-dominating relationship between self and other, Adorno affirms the value of imagining and desiring this reconciled state (even as we acknowledge the impossibility of this state). Consider the concluding passage to *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contacts with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at least comprehend for the sake of the possible.⁸⁵

This is a difficult passage with many possible interpretations. Here I focus on two important steps in the movement of this passage. First, Adorno is claiming that a utopian vision enables us to see our world differently. This vision compels subjects to look more closely at our world's "distorted" and "indigent" features. It renders these features more horrifying, less consistent with everyday courses and dominant ways of seeing, and potentially less tolerable. Of course one might argue that it is precisely by using utopia as a measure of this world that our world seems so thoroughly damaged. The world we live in looks so imperfect because we are using an ideal, perfect world as the benchmark. I suggest, however, that Adorno urges individuals to take the indigence of the world more seriously. He wants us to be more uncomfortable with poverty, hunger, war,

⁸³ Phelan, 608.

⁸⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 150.

⁸⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

and so forth. The utopian vision brings the intensity of suffering into view; this vision amplifies the pain and misery that characterizes its opposite - the contingent, fallible world. This amplification works to challenge the tendency to deny and ignore the severity of human suffering.

Secondly, Adorno is suggesting that utopia or a redeemed state must be understood as both a possibility and an impossibility. It is always a possibility or "the simplest of things" because a utopian vision is always already intertwined with critique (even if only in a subtle manner); it is always animating the refusal to accept things as they are. We refuse undesirable arrangements because we can imagine something more desirable, a place or condition that enables more people to flourish and live well. Thus Adorno claims in the above passage that "consummate negativity delineates the mirror image of its opposite." Our assessment of the world as damaged clings to the remote possibility of a world that is not damaged, that is not suffused with suffering, pain, and conflict. At the same time, Adorno claims that this redeemed world must be thought of as an impossibility. If we cling too tightly to "a standpoint removed from existence", then we succumb to the conditions that this standpoint attempts to escape. We fail to confront and engage the problems of the concrete, contingent world. With Foucault, Adorno is also claiming that any vision beyond the present order is constrained, tainted, and shaped by the problems of the present order. In addition, the impossibility of a world without suffering is a result of our finitude, mortality, and fleshly existence. To have a body is to incarnate a life always already susceptible to suffering and disappointment; to live in the flesh entails an incessant confrontation with the possibility of death as if anticipating the loss of self is already inscribed in the self's lived experiences.

Adorno therefore ends up suggesting that we linger in this fraught space between possibility and impossibility. As Joshua Cohen points out, Adorno wants to take seriously both contingency and the (im)possibility of redemption.⁸⁶ They must be held together in tension. Even as Adorno acknowledges our conditioned nature, he leaves open the room for radical transformation. Openness to the possibility of the impossible should be interpreted as an openness to that which cannot be anticipated, to that which might transform our horizons. Yet this transformation will occur immanently, within and through conditioned categories, concepts, and practices. Or as Adorno puts it, "What would lie in the beyond (redemption, reconciliation, a world in which people related to each other without violence) makes its appearance only in the materials and categories within."⁸⁷ Adorno, in other words, retains the idea of redemption as one star in his conceptual constellation.⁸⁸ This star illumines the contours of a transfigured world, a world characterized by "togetherness of diversity." At the same time this star is constantly being checked by another star, the idea of human contingency, which reminds us of conditions that will always thwart the realization of utopia, the fulfillment of a reconciled world. Perhaps, as Cohen argues, the promise of a better world lies precisely in the deferral of reconciliation. Perhaps "the more" that is internal to human interactions enables

⁸⁶ Cohen, 26.

⁸⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 140

⁸⁸ Coles develops this point powerfully in *Rethinking Generosity*, 109-119.

perpetual transformation precisely in its resistance to closure. This possibility of perpetual transformation, however, depends on how we relate to the various modes of non-identity in the world. To return to the above image of the child and the keyboard, this transformation depends in part on how individuals search for, discover, receive, and relate to chords that have always been on the keyboard, but have yet to be touched or heard.

Queer Affinities: Adorno and Edelman

It might seem strange to make a transition to Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* immediately after highlighting Adorno's trope of the child at the keyboard. Edelman's provocative text argues against the figure/metaphor of the child and the desire for a reproductive future that the child signifies. According to Edelman, "For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner child."⁸⁹ While Edelman insists that he is not averse to "real" children, he does reject the ways in which the image of the child functions in our culture as a site that reinforces fantasies of fullness, completion, and fulfillment. In opposition to both liberals and conservatives who claim to be "fighting for children," queerness for Edelman names "the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism."⁹⁰ For Edelman, queerness marks a space that refuses to accede to the social order, an order that can only be replicated by collective investments in futurity and hope.

Drawing from Lacan and Freud, Edelman suggests that queerness has a special relationship to the death drive. While there is a part of human subjects that desires to preserve life, accumulate objects, and sustain meaning, the death drive registers "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability..., a will to undo what is thereby instituted, to begin again ex-nihilo."⁹¹ The death drive, according to Edelman, unravels coherent frameworks of meaning and congealed forms of identity. It is a kind of excess or surplus, akin to Adorno's *More*, that the Symbolic produces but that threatens to undermine the realm of language, meaning, and signification. Queerness therefore encompasses those desires, attachments, sites, and subject positions that constantly "muck up" the system, that thwart the fulfillment of any social order. (One should recall Adorno's aforementioned claim that any system necessarily leaves a residue.) Although Edelman's focus on the "negativity of the drive" is indebted for the most part to Lacan and Freud, he does explicitly cite Adorno. Edelman writes, "In contrast to what Adorno describes as the "grimness with which a man clings to himself, as to the immediately sure and substantial," the queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves and hence of knowing our good."⁹² Similar to Adorno's negative

⁸⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 5.

dialectic, which cuts against reassuring identities, ideas, and frameworks of meaning, Edelman defines queerness as a kind of severing, a figurative cut to identity that renders self, world, and social goods/ends strange and uncertain.

But Adorno might push back against Edelman's particular use of the negative. While the labor of the negative for Adorno certainly names modes of being and thinking that destabilize coherent frameworks of meaning, Adorno suggests that utopian desires constitute a form of negativity. Utopian longings can both expose and reduce the tendency to cling on to the immediate present. In other words, a hazy vision of a radically different world, a world defined by generous and vulnerable relationships, a world that allows for a wider proliferation of difference and pleasure, can be a reminder that the current order of things does not exhaust all possibilities, that it is contingent and revisable. Things could be different. As the late Jose Muñoz points out, in response to the arguments made in *No Future*, one might think of queerness through a Blochian register of the not-yet, as a dawning horizon that promises something better and more desirable.⁹³ But of course Edelman might respond by identifying the ineluctable limitations to endeavors to think and bring about this more desirable world. Even though Edelman endorses the term "better" instead of the more determinate "good," he is reluctant to delineate the features and qualities of this better world. To do this would be to affirm a structure, to accede to the pressures of social intelligibility and viability; queerness for Edelman finds its possibilities by aligning itself with the force of the negative, with the drive that cannot be fully integrated into systems of meaning. For Edelman, any social order will require and produce bodies, desires, and positions that do not fit and that pose a threat to the reproduction of that order. Therefore, hope for a more perfect world/order "would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer...[hope as affirmation] is always an affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, and inhumane."⁹⁴

I take it that Adorno would think more dialectically about the relationship between structure and anti-structure, order and negativity, determinacy and indeterminacy. He underscores more than Edelman the importance and value of conceptual mediation, construction, and play in the face of non-identity. In addition, while Edelman underscores the pitfalls of the desire for a more perfect world or structure, Adorno holds onto the idea of redemption/reconciliation as one star in a constellation of concepts and images; while this star beckons a brighter alternative, it is always constrained and in tension with qualities and conditions that will always render utopian longings broken and incomplete. At the same time, both authors agree that hope is conservative when it simply affirms the status quo or when it clings to reliable forms, practices, and frameworks of meaning. Hope is therefore re-imagined as a set of expectations and un-doings that are mediated and informed by melancholy, loss, dissonant desires and memories, irremediable rifts and fissures within the social order, and

⁹³ See Muñoz, *Cruising utopia: the then and there of queer futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁹⁴ Edelman, 4.

a risky openness toward features of the world that appear strange and out of place.

Concluding Remarks

Adorno is not the first person to be thought of in conversations about critical theory and hope (Marcuse and Bloch for sure, maybe Benjamin, but certainly not the pessimistic Adorno). Adorno's corpus seems to be replete with despairing statements about the futility of trying to imagine or construct a less violent and cruel world. His focus on the so-called "negative" produces a litany of contradictions and tensions in his writing that can be tortuous and dizzying. Yet as I have tried to demonstrate, Adorno suggests that a better and more vulnerable hope lies in our openness to the dissonant and uncomfortable features of our social worlds. By taking the reader through a tortuous path of tension-filled and fragmented claims, queries, and gestures, Adorno endeavors to undo the reader's attachment to stable identities and coherent frameworks of meaning (especially when this stability and coherence relies on denial of suffering and violence). Linking the possibility of a better world to melancholy, contemplation, and a heightened awareness of the violence of mundane life is important in a culture that typically musters hope and optimism—especially in response to tragedies and crises—by clinging to familiar narratives, arrangements and symbols—Progress, American exceptionalism, American Dream, free market capitalism, spreading democracy to the rest of the world, and so forth. While clinging to these kinds of narratives is understandable and somewhat unavoidable, Adorno suggests that a different kind of hope involves a greater vulnerability to those non-identical experiences, objects, bodies, struggles, and sufferings that triumphant frameworks and tropes attempt to erase, assimilate, or explain away.

In the middle of the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Adorno is delineating how Enlightenment thought mimics and repeats certain features of myth, Adorno writes: "It is not existence that is without hope, but knowledge which appropriates existence as a schema in the pictorial or mathematical model."⁹⁵ Notwithstanding Adorno's reductive understanding of math and science, the "mathematical model" signifies modes of thinking and relating to the world that are indifferent to and unaffected by concrete particulars, material suffering, and contradiction. Existence, therefore, is not hopeless; yet a better existence depends on our capacity to encounter, receptively engage, and critically reflect on life's excessive and coherence-undermining qualities and features.

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⁹⁵ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21.

and loss. He is also interested in locating discourses and practices (religious, aesthetic, political) that articulate and respond to these all too human conditions.

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