Inhumanism, Reason, Blackness, Feminism

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Paradoxically, it is perhaps the case that what makes us most human is our capacity for the inhuman, which is to say, reason forces us to confront all the many ways in which we are not such a special animal, and all the ways we can, for example, be carved up into chemicals and atoms and DNA, in the end not so far away from a piece of fruit. This sense of the inhuman has a highly complicated relationship with *inhumanism* understood as the desire for destruction or for the callous disregard for the lives of other human beings, but I will suggest that there is a sense, or several senses, of thinking about inhumanism that both take violence into account and move beyond it.

What we are dealing with in the 'positive' definition of the inhuman (which proceeds carefully, negatively, and with great difficulty) is the recognition that what human reason reaches for is something that may cause the human itself to be displaced. Humanism completes and incompletes itself because its inhuman drive perennially reopens itself to the universe and produces knowledge that potentially undercuts what it means to be human at any given historical moment. The sun and all the other planets do not revolve around the Earth. As Reza Negarestani puts it: "[i]nhumanism is the extended practical elaboration of humanism; it is born out of a diligent commitment to the project of enlightened humanism."[1] We are pushed to answer questions we cannot answer, as Immanuel Kant famously noted, and the answers we receive are frequently destructive to the image we have of ourselves: it turns out that we are not the center of the universe, we

are not special, we know an extraordinarily limited amount of things, we barely understand our own motivations for doing anything, and though we hope we might live forever, we are incapable of living for any more than a brief moment of time.

Jean Luc Moulène, Bouboulina, Paris, 2016, Coated and painted hard foam, magnets, 53x102x60 cm, Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery

And yet, we are capable of realizing *this* at least. In a sense, all collective human knowledge proceeds by negation and obstacle. What we think might cause us devastation and difficulty, and yet it is knowledge that links us to the entire history of humanity, to everyone that lives today, and to all those who might come after. The question of *who lives such that they might think* is, in fact, at the heart of the definition of inhumanism under discussion here. We do not have to individually know something to understand that collective humanity, and the current living portion of which we might optimistically and idealistically bracket under the banner of 'internationalism,' is an immense bearer of reason. Historically, and not only historically, however, vast swathes of humanity have,

for reasons of prejudice, acquisition, and other violent motives, been excluded from this image of the bearer of reason. Frantz Fanon's sardonic reflection on humanism and reason in *Black Skin, White Masks* makes this clear:

After much reluctance, the scientists had conceded that the Negro was a human being; *in vivo* and *in vitro* the Negro had been proved analogous to the white man: the same morphology, the same histology. Reason was confident of victory on every level. I put all the parts back together. But I had to change my tune. That victory played cat and mouse; it made a fool of me. As the other put it, when I was present, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer. In the abstract there was agreement: The Negro is a human being. That is to say, amended the less firmly convinced, that like us he has his heart on the left side. But on certain points the white man remained intractable.[2]

On March 29, 1968 in Memphis, Civil Rights marchers wearing placards reading "I am a man" face off U.S. National Guard troops armed with bayonet, Bettmann, Getty images.

Fanon's description in the same text of the "zone of nonbeing" offers serious challenge to the universalism that we might too quickly reach for in a bid to unify our image of collective humanity:

> *At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man. There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell.*[3]

More recently, Frank B. Wilderson III has pushed Fanon's experience and description of the exclusion of blackness from humanity and mankind further away from the existentialism that dialectically threatens to reincorporate Fanon back into a comfortable, albeit highly critical, narrative. In "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" Wilderson writes:

> *It is my conviction that Black people* embody (*which is different from saying are always willing or allowed to express) a meta-aporia for Humanist thought and action ... A Black radical agenda is terrifying to most people on the Left because it emanates from a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of redemption.*[4]

For Wilderson, the social death of black life entails no redemptive narrative, beloved of the humanities. Because Blackness cannot be "disimbricated from slavery," there is no temporality that makes narrative as development and redemption open to it, but only a "flat line" of time. Social death and the absence of narrative makes Blackness impossible to house under the aegis of the Humanities:

> *Foundational to the labors of disciplines housed within the Humanities is the belief that all sentient beings can be emplotted as narrative entities, that every sentient subject is imbued with historicity, and this belief is subtended by the idea that all beings can be redeemed. Historicity and redemption are inextricably bound. Both are inherently anti-Black in that without the psychic and/or physical presence of a sentient being that is barred,* ab initio, *from narrative and, by extension, barred from redemption, the arc of redemption would lack any touchstones of cohesion. One would not be able to know what a world devoid of redemption looks like. There* would, *in fact, exist a persona who is adjacent to redemption, that is, a degraded humanity that struggles to be* re-redeemed (*i.e., LGBT people, Native Americans, Palestinians). However, redemption's semiotics of meaning would still be incoherent because adjacency is supplemental to meaning; contradistinction is essential to meaning and coherence—and for this, redemption requires not degraded humanity but abject inhumanity. Abject inhumanity* stabilizes *the redemption of those who do not need it, just as it* mobilizes *the narrative project of those who strive to be re-redeemed.*[5]

Might not the broken, non-narrative of reason that the human paradoxically engenders, have some parallels with the non-narrative that Wilderson identifies? Can the philosophy of science learn something from Afro-pessimism? When Gaston Bachelard writes that "abstraction does not proceed uniformly"[6] and that "we know *against* previous knowledge, when we destroy knowledge that was badly made and surmount all those obstacles … that lie in the mind itself,"[7] we might feel that these points have nothing to do with the "abject inhumanity" that Wilderson's text describes. And yet, just as Wilderson's positing of non-redemptive Blackness completely destroys the happy narratives of the Humanities, at the same time as it posits the role that abject inhumanity plays in stabilizing and mobilizing the redemption and narratives of others, Bachelard's negative image of science and scientific anti-narrative presents another type of inhumanism that allows us to turn away from scientific knowledges own narratives and towards the uneven, inhuman abstractions of reason itself: "Nothing is self-evident. Nothing is given."[8]

Let me try to be clear. There is nothing remotely positively analogous about slavery and science, and the latter is historically complicit in ideas that actively contributed to the material destruction of the lives of black people, just as humanism and the humanities often provided cover-stories for white expropriation under the guise of and inclusive exclusion that reinforced racial hierarchies and inequalities of all kinds. Yet, we can say that there are various conceptions of inhumanism, each operating at different levels, each of which hollows out redemption, and each of which proceeds by negation. Bachelard's depiction of reason and science as proceeding by negation rails against counter-intuition, against 'facts': "Reason alone can dynamise research for it is reason alone that goes beyond ordinary experience (immediate and specious) and suggests scientific experiment (indirect and fruitful)."[9] Against the pile-up of 'facts,' Bachelard proposes something completely contrary: "Historians of science have to take ideas as facts. Epistemologists have to take facts as ideas and place them within a system of thought. A fact that a whole era has misunderstood remains a *fact* in historians' eyes. For epistemologists however, it is an *obstacle*, a counter-thought."[10] The racism and sexism of historical manifestations and practices of science can be recognized as obstacles to forms of inhumanism that are not themselves inhuman in practice, and indeed, actively work against the inhumanity of historical 'facts.' As the Xenofeminist Manifesto puts it with regard to patriarchy and rationality:

> *To claim that reason or rationality is 'by nature' a patriarchal enterprise is to concede defeat. It is true that the canonical 'history of thought' is dominated by men, and it is male hands we see throttling existing institutions of science and technology. But this is precisely why feminism must be a rationalism—because of this miserable imbalance, and not despite it. There is no 'feminine' rationality, nor is there a 'masculine' one. Science is not an expression but a suspension of gender. If today it is dominated by masculine egos, then it is at odds with itself—and this contradiction can be leveraged.*[11]

Other recent work has even more practically called for a kind of feminist universalism, that is at the same time an internationalism, and a Marxism:

> *The internationalism we propose will ultimately be in need of a reinvented feminist universalism that will hopefully be grounded in new forms of realism and (Marxist) materialism for feminist theory and political practice.*[12]

But if gender is recognized, not as eternal essence, but as oppressive historical imposition, can we also say that science "is not an expression but a suspension of race," given that there is no scientific basis for racial division, only pseudo-sciences that purport to justify violence and division? Again, we must be wary of mappings, of too-neat overlaps. What we can defend, minimally, is the fact that there is a theoretical inhumanism, or forms of theoretical inhumanism, that mitigate *against* practical inhumanism. Reason is not the friend of the racist or the sexist, though it has frequently been illegitimately invoked by them. Wilderson argues that even the typical separation/putting-together of gender and race may lead us to misunderstand the fundamental non-redeemability of Blackness, very particularly. As Wilderson states:

> *[W]e come to think of our oppression as being* essentially *gendered, as opposed to being gendered in important ways. This, I believe, gives us a false sense of agency, a sense that we can redress the violence of social death in ways which are analogous to the tactics of our so-called allies of color … By parceling rape out to women, castration to men, our political language offers Black Humanist scholars, Black radical insurgents, as well as the Black masses a sense that our political agency is something more than mere "borrowed institutionality."*[13]

None of this is simple. Those groups of people who have been inclusively excluded (slaves and women from the *polis*), and continue to be excluded not just from social, cultural, scientific and political life, *but from life itself*, are not treated inhumanly, or regarded as non-human, in the same way. Banishment to the realm of non-being, or to the position of 'second', or even 'second' and 'last' at once, are positions of great

specificity whose only commonality is the oppressive structures that entail these dominant forms of oppression, and even then, one is often a fractured and split subject, pinned by the multiple identifications of the other. If there are resources in the documentation and identification of irrational and violent inhumanisms for the sake of a rational inhumanism of the future that is *at the same time* the complete and total *recognition* and *negation* of racism and sexism, it can only be simultaneously minimal (proceeding by negation and with the recognition of thought itself and 'facts' as obstacles) and completely expansive (capable of not only recognizing the historical harm done by 'reason,' 'humanism,' 'man,' etc., but of making reason truly free, or reason making *itself* free, for everyone, such that everyone is a scientist—we will of course need to transform what that word means too). As Negarestani puts it:

> *The force of inhumanism operates as a retroactive deterrence against antihumanism by understanding humanity historically—in the broadest physico-biological and socioeconomical sense of history—as an indispensable runway toward itself.*[14]

Leonid Rogozov operating himself, Novolazarevskaïa Station, Antartica, April 1961.

Inhumanism as a starting point is the simultaneous recognition of the lack of humanism (and humanity) as imposition, and of inhumanism as absolute, collective, shared human capacity for reason. Inhumanism may tell us things that we do not like to hear, but it does so to us *collectively*. Via obstacle, negation and the overcoming of ideology, it creates an empty image of collective thought that is nevertheless crystalline in its brilliance. The insights into inhumanism afforded by those practically excluded from the life of the mind and from politics are today the best positioned to reinvent reason, universalism and the positive inhumanism at the heart of humanism itself.

Footnotes

1. Reza Negarestani. "The Labour of the Inhuman, Part One: Human.' e-flux 52, February 2014. Available here: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/52/59920/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/

2. Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks* (orig. French, 1952). Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 1986. 90-91. Print.

3. *Ibid.* 1-2.

4. Frank B. Wilderson III. "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption." *Humanities Futures*. Franklin Humanities Institute: Duke University, 2015. Web.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Gaston Bachleard. *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* (orig. French, 1938). Trans. Mary McAllester Jones. Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002. 18. Print.

7. *Ibid.* 24.

8. *Ibid.* 25.

9. *Ibid. 27.*

10. *Idem.*

11. Laboria Cuboniks. "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation." ⏷www.laboriacuboniks.net/20150612-xf_layout_web.pdf

12. Katerina Kolozova. "Preface." *After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism*. Eds. Katerina Kolozova & Eileen A. Joy. Earth, Milky Way: punctum books, 2016. 15. Print.

13. Wilderson. *Op. cit.*

14. Negarestani. *Op. cit.*

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