

Being Human Is an Occult Practice

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*Expression is the seed of resistance and, in its blooming,
the expression of our life force. Care for the unexpressed
is salvific.*

—Ben Friedlander
Twitter, 4/12/20

This essay is an experiment, an attempt to defend poetry on the simplest of grounds, a stance I feel compelled to take in opposition to neoliberalism's threat to my classroom and to the young poets who each semester enter it, intuitively seeking a particular experience of being alive. The argument I wish to make here is an obvious one, though in my refusal to legitimate poetry either in terms of exchange or use value, in my desire to defend literary studies in general and poetry in particular on the grounds of their potential as sites for an experience of *generative* and *necessary unproductivity*, I articulate a logic foreign to the machinations of neoliberalism, an ideology that reduces all human relationships to market relationships. This fact may make my position appear, despite its general recognizability, irrational. This particular irrationality I embrace.

I want to argue for and through FEELING. My simple position is this: neoliberalism is bad because it FEELS bad. Neoliberalism FEELS bad because it asks us to conform our living to an attenuated definition of what it means to be alive. It demands that we daily renounce numerous capacities, abilities, faculties, and desires because much of what FEELS good to us cannot be rationalized in terms of "getting and spending," to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth's sonnet.¹ Neoliberalism requires us to limit or suppress much of what is human in us because much of what is human in us serves no *economic* purpose. A social order structured by such an ideology is the opposite of freedom, though it is ironically the inheritance bequeathed to us by the French and American revolutions, as if liberty put into social practice could only manifest itself as market freedom.

My wish to articulate a defense in this way results from my time working with students at a public research university in the United States, who in my experience inhabit a socioeconomic order that makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to cultivate a form of life in service of intellectual and creative flourishing. With neoliberalism's transformation of public goods into private property, of corporations into persons, of citizens into consumers, as well as its understanding of taxation as a transgression against the individual rather than support for the collective, my students more often than not find themselves preoccupied with financial anxieties that in turn become existential ones.

The 2008 financial crisis brought the stress of neoliberalism's values into full relief, with the financial exploitation of our citizenry serving as an excuse to further underfund our university systems. No doubt the current pandemic and the U.S. government's refusal to mitigate economic collapse through sound policy will be used as an opportunity to continue starving those disciplines that refuse to view students as nothing more than future laborers. As American higher education becomes synonymous with debt, the pressure upon students to work more and study less converts college into an experience of wage labor and its accompanying anxieties, rather than a coming-into-being through the cultivation of one's abilities. The financial burdens and anxieties that accompany higher education in America naturally stoke in students the fear of erring in their choice of study, so that they view their path into the future as either one of financial viability at the expense of intellectual and creative possibility, or of personal

possibility at risk of financial peril. As I have seen firsthand, these choices FEEL bad. Their cost is often the physical and mental health of the student, a situation that further stresses our youth, given the lack of affordable and universal healthcare coverage in the States.

The humanities of course have their defenders. In recent years even business periodicals such as *Bloomberg* and *Business Insider*² have regularly argued in favor of a broadly educated workforce. The managerial class, having witnessed a generation narrowly trained in specific technical fields, understands the need for workers to be trained in “soft skills,” the critical, social, and emotional skills necessary for corporate creativity, cooperation, and communication. Conversely, scholars Martha Nussbaum and Wendy Brown have admirably defended literary studies against neoliberalism in their championing of a liberal arts education as a vital form of preparation for participation in a democratic republic.³ Both types of argument are valid, but each defends literary studies in terms of side effects. Most troublingly, the former argument adopts the cynical terms dictated by neoliberalism, in essence legitimating a society in which all values are converted into economic forms—something I hope my work as a poet and educator never does.

Eighteenth-century European aesthetic philosophy, though not guiltless in creating the ideological preconditions for neoliberalism, nevertheless provides us with a vital concept for overcoming the crisis of human life we find ourselves in, of which the student crisis is simply one symptom. In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant conceives of

aesthetic experience as a *purposeful purposelessness*. This term aids us in understanding precisely what FEELS bad about a life structured primarily by economic rationality. Aesthetic experience for Kant is defined by a particular kind of *play*, a *play* that reveals to us the powers of our own faculties, our own mind. Such *play* has no practical aim other than allowing us to reflect upon the abilities specific to us as human persons. This *play* instigated by aesthetic experience is *purposeful* in its *purposelessness* in the sense that it makes us aware of the powers inherent to our particular form of being. There is no practical end in such experience. It is, instead, “an exaltation in / the exercising,”⁴ much in the same way that athletics allow us to experience the physical possibilities and limits of the human body for their own sake.

If a student in my poetry class, for example, *likes* reading Gertrude Stein’s poem “Christian Bérard,” it’s because of the kind of thoughts the poem enables her to have. When she finds herself staring at the lines, “What was what was what it was what is what is what is is / what is what which is what is is it,” her mind begins to *play* with the semantic possibilities created by Stein’s repetition and lack of punctuation.⁵ Stein’s lines in their indefiniteness offer her mind the opportunity to generate potential meanings, to take pleasure in feeling her thought extend itself. The activity’s *purposelessness* is *purposeful* in that it reveals to her a strength of mind; it occasions the unfolding of a particular mode of her being that might otherwise remain occulted. She deems the Stein passage “beautiful,” according to Kant, because of the experience of herself it affords. Such *play* is especially exhilarating in a world where most *work*

requires us to use so little of what *is* us, to leave so much of our being unattended and dormant.

Kant argues that this kind of aesthetic *play* gives the subject (the reader in my example) a sense of belonging to a larger human community. Though aesthetic experience may be a private event, the subject understands that the powers of mind it reveals to her are not hers alone, but rather abilities she shares with human persons in general. Through any isolated aesthetic experience, she knows all human persons would take pleasure in the experience because they too share with her these faculties of mind. Aesthetic experience is a site of species recognition, a *sensus communis*. It brings a person into a community beyond the common economic and social relations that normally define daily life.

As productive as Kant's conception of *play* has been for me personally in relationship to the ideas I wish to elaborate here, my embrace of his aesthetic theory needs to be severely qualified. His concept of *freedom* exemplifies the theoretical error at the heart of Enlightenment thought, which ultimately equates liberation with domination. Because the power of the faculties revealed through aesthetic experience ultimately testify to the subject's ability to transcend a world that threatens her, *freedom* in Kant's paradigm is synonymous with the subject's realization of her superiority to the empirical world. The world becomes a place to be conquered and controlled by the subject. The historical legacy of this conception of *freedom* is a European modernity defined by imperial and colonial violence, including slavery, which still violently defines

the sociopolitical landscape of the United States today. The impending environmental catastrophe, of course, is also the result of a modern subjectivity bequeathed to us by Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, a subjectivity that understands herself as separate from the world, rather than as another form of life woven into a complex ecology.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* offers us a radical recalibration of Kant's concept of *freedom* through her model of aesthetic *play*, and by doing so makes it possible for us to reclaim this concept while also countering its Enlightenment legacy. Hurston's text is an anthropological study, the culmination of her several visits to collect the folk culture of her native Eatonville, Florida, an African-American town that supplied the labor for the region's turpentine and saw mills. Hurston's study shows aesthetic *play* as a collective practice meant to defend against the particular socioeconomic forces threatening Eatonville's community members, who as Black men and women working in the Jim Crow South, as "laborers who were commodities before," are treated by the mill bosses as the beasts of burden referenced in Hurston's title.⁶

Hurston's decision to include a frame narrative to display the social contexts in which folklore emerges in the course of daily life establishes aesthetic *play* as a collective tactic meant to resist the dehumanization inherent to mill labor, a kind of revised egalitarian Kantianism. Rather than position the subject against and above the world as such, aesthetic *play* in *Mules and Men* recuperates the laborer against *work* that limits and thwarts her being and

becoming. Through aesthetic *play* the human person does not emerge superior to the world, but rather superior to *work*. In the following passage, we see how *play* reclaims the freedom that *work* has taken from a group of laborers:

“No loggin’ today, boys. Got to send the train to the Everglades to fetch up the track gang and their tools.”

“Lawd, Lawd, we got a day off,” Joe Willard said, trying to make it sound like he was all put out about it. “Let’s go back, boys. Sorry you won’t git to de swamp, Zora.”

“Aw, naw,” the Foreman said. “Y’all better g’wan over to the mill and see if they need you over there.” And he walked on off, chewing his tobacco and spitting his juice. The men began to shoulder jumper-jackets and grab hold of buckets.

Allen asked: “Ain’t dat a mean man? No work in the swamp and still he won’t let us knock off.”

“He’s mean all right, but Ah done seen meaner men than him,” said Handy Pitts.

“Where?”

“Oh, up in Middle Georgy. They had a straw boss and he was so mean dat when the boiler burst and blowed some of the men up in the air, he docked ‘em for de time they was off de job.”

Tush Hawg up and said: “Over on de East Coast Ah used to have a road boss and he was so mean and times was so hard till he laid off de hands of his watch.”

Wiley said: "He's almost as bad a Joe Brown. Ah used to work in his mine and he was so mean till he wouldn't give God an honest prayer without snatching back 'Amen.'"⁷

The verbal *play* in this example is instigated by the lack of control the men have over their day. The few elaborate comparisons above precede a much longer tale in the text about Ole Massa and the enslaved John, where John is a trickster figure, outsmarting the slave owner, but because of their brevity these particular examples easily illustrate some of the social and psychological functions of folklore in the community. Unable to directly refuse the white foreman, the Black men instead take their time walking to the next potential job site, transforming their unpaid labor time into an occasion to display their imaginative prowess. The situation yields a poetic form, a comparison that drives them to imagine "a boss so mean" in progressively ultimate terms, so that soon in the men's wild elaborations the bosses have cheated both time and God, a sublime rhetoric where even the absolute is in danger of being cheated by white bosses.

The stories the men share underline the racism of capitalist labor practices and, as an intro to the folktale of John and Ole Masser, position their contemporary situation as the legacy of slavery. Their aesthetic *play* is communal, each man displaying his own talent for poetic comparison before encouraging the next to surpass him. In their content, these poetic contributions ultimately situate the workers as mentally superior to their overseers, those to whom the men must continually defer in work life. The poetic act is an act of improvised *freedom*, one that allows the men to