

At Odds with the Temporalities of the Im-possible; or, What Critical Theory Can (Still) Do

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ABSTRACT This essay engages with the question of critical possibility—or, the possibility of critique—and, more specifically, the political temporalities that sustain critical potential in the present and for the future. The essay asks whether and how the aesthetic can serve as a resource for making sense of the question of possibility and for developing a conception of critical subjectivity. To question what critical theory might still do in the present treats critique as an experience of the im-possible, and yet as a transformative force for shifting the conditions of possibility for knowledge production. In this way, this essay seeks to address the aporetic elements in the utopian thinking of critical theory.

KEYWORDS im-possible, utopian, temporality, aesthetics, critique, critical theory

My narrative begins in medias res.

—Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*

Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian.

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

I can't go on, I'll go on.

—Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

Troubling the Temporalities of Critique

In her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the social urgency of the humanities and affirms a hope—albeit a tentative and doleful one—for the transformative potential of reading, learning, and teaching (with) the literary, despite and against its current imprisonment in the apparatuses of neoliberal corporatization. She writes that on the ethico-political

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register of subaltern and postcolonial literary criticism, “perhaps the literary can still do something. Or perhaps not.”¹ She continues: “That any reader will waste the time to learn to parse the desires (not the needs) of collective examples of subalternity is my false hope.”² For Spivak, the act of reading can train readers toward new and critical articulations of imagination in ways that might expand the imaginable and “figure the impossible.” “The literary imagination,” she writes, “is programmed to fail but can figure the impossible.”³ In elaborating on this training of the critical imagination as a constant exercise in fallibility through which figuring the impossible can become possible, she explains why and how she teaches Virginia Woolf, an author who “takes us into the impossible possible of the ‘perhaps,’ only as fiction can.”⁴

I take Spivak’s aporetic hopefulness/hopelessness as a provocation to invoke critical genres as arts of the im-possible (where the *im-* does not denote just negative but rather the possible-impossible aporia).⁵ Her persistent attention to the political potentiality and urgency of what she calls the “impossible possible of the ‘perhaps’” reverberates through her take on deconstruction as an enterprise that operates “necessarily from the inside” and “always falls prey to its own work” (as she translated a phrase of Derrida’s in *Of Grammatology*⁶); an enterprise that implies “critiquing a structure that you cannot not wish to inhabit.”⁷ My question about what critical theory might still do in the present takes into consideration that critique is always already an experience of the im-possible. And yet, critique holds out the transformative promise of self-questioning, unlearning, and undoing the gendered, classed, and racialized epistemic violence, institutional boundaries, and divisions of labor that form the conditions of possibility for dominant knowledge production. This is a project that encompasses a range of positions, affiliations, disavowals, commitments, and resistances, which yield what Mark Sanders has called “the history of the intellectual—a history in which there is no responsibility without the troubling and enabling moment of complicity.”⁸

In what ways, then, might our critical epistemologies—operating necessarily from the inside and hopefully from the limit—induce potentialities for “our times” despite and against the power apparatuses that organize the present and future? To raise this question is to reflect on what critical theory can still do to produce possibilities for antifascist cultural criticism and political life in the present, despite and against the neoliberal doctrine according to which “there is no alternative” and its transformation into a normalizing affective paradigm of governance and self-governance that underpins a present structured through what Lauren Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness.”⁹ Rather than an uncritical embrace of the optimism-pessimism binary, this question calls for critical discourses of differing and defer-

ring temporality, capable of engaging the contingencies of the present, as they play out in the very meshes of subjectivation and knowledge/power.

And so this essay lingers on the question of critical possibility, or, put differently, the possibility of critique, and, more specifically, the complex political temporalities that sustain critical potential in the present and for the future. What is relevant to my concern here is whether and how the aesthetic (broadly construed) serves as a resource for making sense of the question of possibility and for developing a conception of critical subjectivity. In order to put the question of critical possibility to work, I seek to address the aporetic element in the utopian thinking of critical theory. Instead of reducing this inquiry to a simple categorical distinction between utopian and nonutopian thinking, however, I would like to approach it in a more nuanced fashion as an occasion to think the conditions of possibility of *both* utopian thinking as critique *and* a critique of utopian thinking. It has become commonplace for mainstream analysts of the neoliberal and neoconservative right to argue that any attempt to change our present social milieu, marked by injustice and inequality, is utopian, and by “utopian” they mean naive, impractical, impossible. On the other hand, the notion of utopia, as it is implicit—and has been historically imbricated—in colonialist, imperialist, and nationalist projects, is often posited in essentialist terms, as a means of attaining all-encompassing ideals of a “true” and “full,” “newly-founded,” and “well-ordered” society.

Gleaning insights from queer and postcolonial works as well as the postcolonial feminist critique of universalist utopian Marxist assumptions, I propose moving to a decentered and ex-centric conceptualization of critical possibility, beyond the entrenched dichotomies of affirmative versus negative, action versus contemplation, critique versus creativity, and, ultimately, optimism versus pessimism. How then can we reclaim an expansive space-time for imagining collective life otherwise amidst a present that limits and allocates unjustly the possibility of imagining differently? And how can we engage collective imaginaries and desires for political change not in terms of individualistic voluntarism and the universalist essentialism of a preemptive, untethered, pure futurity but rather in terms of situated, recalcitrant, and improvisatory agonistic relations with others? It is precisely the effort to problematize reified ways of defining political temporality in terms of a programmatic, universal, timeless time “freed” or “liberated” from the constraints of the present that allows me, instead of seeking to “relieve” political agency of the aporetic, to consider the aporetic as an inescapable site of political possibility.

My aim in this essay is thus to figure a problematic of critical possibility beyond the comforting ontological categories of negation or affirmation for their own sake. This gesture involves an acknowledgment that critical possibility, as a political poetics that entails constantly troubling and transforming the present

order of things, both presupposes and challenges the inherited conventions that inform our experiences of what can and cannot intelligibly appear in, or what disappears from, spaces identified as political or aesthetic. I would like to suggest that this acknowledgment calls for engaging with the particular ways in which “bringing something into being” (a formulation at once political and aesthetic) does not name a willed act of superseding the operations of power and creating something new out of nothing, with such an act’s religious and reproductive connotations. This might prompt reconsideration of the divergent ways the very possibility of “creating” is necessarily subjected to ongoing regimes and infrastructures of—as well as struggles against—violence, misrecognition, and injustice.

My thoughts here seek to account for the performative possibility of social, political, and ethical critique, by gesturing provisionally to a conceptual constellation of temporality, contingency, political subjectivation, and the horizon of impossibility. I write against the background of a tendency in recent anticritical or postcritical¹⁰ articulations to disavow negativity (perceived in such articulations, which rely on stereotype and conflation, as the operational trope of critique). Such anticritical articulations call for disengagement from the complexities of finitude, subjectivation, and contingency, while taking up the “creativity” of art as the decisive means to surpass the negative impulse of critique in the name of the “concrete” and the “affirmative.”¹¹ In order to trouble the drive to dismiss negativity (often made synonymous with poststructuralist and deconstructionist critique) as a matter of theoretical abstraction and political resignation, in this paper I trace a reconfigured perspective on the question of critical political possibility as a political-ethical-aesthetic question of making time otherwise.

In light of such challenges, a caveat is in order. To question the accusations that critique is by definition negative and *as such* dismissive and destructive is by no means to “side with” such a hypostatized negativity. This would be ultimately to repeat the reification that I seek to problematize here. Rather, my inquiry echoes Berlant’s question: “How does one go about defetishizing negation, while remaining critical?”¹² No doubt, some forms of critique are narcissistic and violent and thus are to be rejected. I have no sympathy with moralizing versions of critique that enact or disguise belligerently entrenched antagonisms and self-aggrandizing factional polemics. Moreover, the labor of critique reaches well beyond the confines of the Kantian legacy of deliberation and judgment, or the condescending modality of enlightened critical superiority. Although I want to take issue with the assumption that affirmative thinking invariably affords us the possibility of resistance and social change, I would not want to argue that it is instead the recourse to (an essential and idealized) negation that does precisely that. Instead, my point is to problematize ideas of resistance as a positive force immune to established powers. Running counter to enterprises that seek to provide providential blueprints

in keeping with ontological and teleological forms of historical temporality, this pursuit draws attention to the lingering contingency and the resistant capacity of historically conditioned, unfulfilled possibilities to articulate themselves anew. It asks us to attend to the vexations of what “becoming possible” means for those whose lives have been rendered “impossible.”¹³

I am interested in opening up the question of critical possibility as an occasion for reconsidering the genealogies of critical theory (understood, in its narrow sense, as the intellectual tradition of European Marxist social theory initiated in the 1930s and known as “the Frankfurt School”) through a broader perspective that encompasses the poststructuralist and deconstructionist countertraditions of the 1980s and 1990s, which have mobilized radical epistemologies of critique pursued in the domains of left cultural criticism such as critical race theory, feminist and queer theories, postcolonial/decolonial studies, theories of performativity, and new Marxisms.¹⁴

These left political epistemologies of difference and contingency—for all their theoretical, historical, and geopolitical plurality—have not been particularly welcome in the canon of mainstream institutional philosophy or that of conventional Marxism.¹⁵ They typically faced not only dismissal from the neoconservative gatekeepers of institutional knowledge production, but also accusations about dividing the left, promoting “weak” politics, and even being complicit in the cultures of global capitalism. Vehement hostility emerged also among figures identified with the second-generation variant of Frankfurt School critical theory.¹⁶ For various left-wing critics, political critique required the solid foundations of the modern humanist subject.¹⁷ In a broad sense, by way of a deconstructed and performative concept of critique, poststructuralist critical theories—in the intersecting modalities of feminist, postcolonial, and queer of color critique—embraced the aporias of subjectivation, contingency, and trouble as crucial means for theorizing potentially subversive possibilities and bringing about radical change in the contemporary world.

“Most utopias forget that utopia is nowhere and make the empirically representational move,” writes Spivak.¹⁸ Her ethics of aesthetic education have prepared us for a rethinking of the ambiguities of utopia, now defined not as an achieved or achievable hypostasis that “takes place” under conditions of power-free timelessness, but rather as a resistance to the foreclosures of present temporality; as a contingent and ghostly figure of critical performativity rather than a prescribed enterprise of essentialist unity.

Drawing inspiration from the genealogy of immanent negativity as it was developed by certain Frankfurt School thinkers, my perspective in this essay is motivated neither by a desire to restore affirmative utopian thought nor, conversely, to discredit utopianism. I draw on performative accounts of literary-critical temporality

in order to outline a configuration of critical possibility that is not reducible to self-transparent subjectivity, moral universalism, and temporally-fixed actualization. To that end, gleaning from epistemologies that question foundationalist claims to identity and temporality, I am interested in the operation of contingent temporalities in relation to a politics of the performative. What is politically significant about performativity, and makes it particularly relevant to my inquiry here, is that it does not entail an absolute rupture between possibility and impossibility, as it is receptive to the restless social temporality of dissonance and contingency.

Some may contend that such a performative account of critical temporality lends itself to melancholic framing. If so, however, why would one assume that melancholia is incompatible with critical agency? Under what conditions can melancholia be mobilized as a politically performative concept rather than reduced to a mere sign of self-absorbed and self-confirming, psychologized impasse? And how might evoking melancholia move us beyond liberal accounts of what counts as transformative agency? For those outside the purview of racial and gender/sexual propriety, melancholia is both a socially constituted, affective site of subjectivation and a performative modality through which to fashion world-making perspectives on everyday survival and resistance. As José Muñoz has put it: “melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. . . . It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. . . . It is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names.”¹⁹

Notwithstanding these resistant qualities of racial and queer melancholy, however, Wendy Brown is right to draw attention to the potentially conservative implications of left melancholy, which signals a left “more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness.”²⁰ Acknowledging Brown’s valuable critique, I ask what implications the performative formulation of the possible as always already partial, contingent, melancholic, and visionary at once has for the left politics of critique under present conditions, when critical thinking is discredited. What is at stake is how critical theories of performativity might enable the positing of a political imaginary that sustains—and is sustained by—a nonstraight, nonreproductive temporal framework. Such a conceptualization of political temporality would foster both the rehabilitation of the concept of utopia as a figure for critical political imagination and a critique of utopianism as a deterministic faith in inevitable successive progressivity. Frankfurt School critical theory inscribed a philosophical and aesthetic attempt to refashion critique so that it interrogates its own embeddedness in Enlightenment reason in the face of the rise of fascism. The

question is how this legacy, and even more specifically Adorno's negative utopianism, might be reappropriated in the present political and affective moment as a performative way to put forward what Foucault, apropos of his own critique of reason, called an "art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending."²¹

Mahagonny and "the Utopian Function of Art"

In this section, I explore the aporias of critique as im-possible by asking how the "aesthetic," defined as a critical mode of sensing, articulating, and performing worlds, figures in critical theory. One way of illustrating what is at stake in the question of whether critique can hold out a transformative promise without succumbing to the predicaments of universalization and totalization would be to evoke a historical philosophical scene, one that is distinctive to the history of Frankfurt School critical theory, even while it also exceeds this historical context in addressing questions that are still very much alive in contemporary critical theory. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz cites the 1964 public dialogue between Frankfurt School social theorists Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch on "the utopian function of art," in which they unraveled their theories on "the contradictions of utopian longing."²² Muñoz, for whom "to 'read' the performative . . . is implicitly to critique the epistemological,"²³ invokes the Blochian "principle of hope" and concrete utopianism (rather than Adorno's negative deployment of the utopian as critique of the present and reservation about futurity) to address the foreclosed potentialities of the past as a way to imagine and pose queer possibilities for the future in the present. At the same time, Muñoz, dazzlingly cruising an archive that ranges from poetry, dance, music, and queer of color urban sociality to critical theory, queer scholarship, and leftist thought, is "invested in Adorno's idea of an aesthetic that can suggest the otherwise."²⁴

Building on Muñoz's compelling analysis of queer futurity, ecstasy, and ephemerality, in what follows I call attention to the tensions and critical affinities between Adorno's and Bloch's perspectives in order to think of the different performative and political inflections that working under the sign of the utopian can assume. The conversation between Adorno and Bloch was premised on the idea that the utopian register had been depreciated: "There is something anachronistic about our theme," the moderator states. Adorno is quick to respond by praising Bloch for "restoring honor to the word 'utopia,'" referring to his book *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), written in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.²⁵ After presenting certain realized utopian visions, however, Adorno claims that there can hardly be a positive picture of utopia. "One could perhaps say in general," he notes, "that the fulfillment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same 'today.'"

Bloch responds to Adorno's reservations by invoking Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's political opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which was written in the midst of the Weimar Republic, was banned by the Nazis, and resurfaced in the 1960s. Bloch specifically quotes a statement made by the character Paul Ackermann, according to which "something is missing"²⁶ in Mahagonny, which figures an ambivalently utopian phantasmagoria of bourgeois alienation. For Bloch, Brecht's phrase "something is missing" implies a sense of lack in the lived moment that propels a search for another state of things.

The claim that "something is missing" carries a critical force for Adorno too, but not in ways that would guide him to see utopia as an affirmative project. Rather, reading *Mahagonny* as a project of immanent critique, he gestures toward negativity as a mode of undoing the present order from within the midst of "damaged life." Adorno's resistance to the substantiation of the utopian dimension in a positive image is predicated on his philosophy of history, which is positioned within and against limitations on the possibility of the future. To define or illustrate "concrete" utopia in advance and from the standpoint of existing, conventional time, and thus "to delineate the nature of postrevolutionary society,"²⁷ is impossible for him. Such an anticipatory conception of time is inconsistent with the potential of utopian thought to open onto a time radically different from the present and its registers of thinkability and knowability under fascist and capitalist conditions.²⁸

Adorno's idea of utopia is linked with his understanding of hope as fallacious. (We might recall at this juncture Spivak's "false hope," cited at the beginning of this essay). However, while hope is not a fixed axiom of existence or a figure of linear movement toward the future for him, he retains a critical engagement with it as a contrapuntal, counteracting force—the realm of possibility and impossibility alike. Elsewhere, Adorno claims that "only in traces and ruins is [reason] prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality,"²⁹ in a formulation that echoes Benjamin's thinking on "the debris of history" (to be detected in neglected and repressed histories). The intersection of hope and ruin that is encrypted in this claim is consonant with Adorno's notion of negative dialectic—a dialectics without (and against) synthesis, through which "the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers."³⁰ In Adorno's thought, social hope will always reside in the intractable remains of nonrealized promises, made in the face of historical catastrophe and despair. Any utopian resolution is thus answerable to the actually existing dystopian possibility of Auschwitz. In this sense, utopian vision always remains subject to the fraught dialectics of possibility and impossibility: "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."³¹

For Bloch, on the other hand, utopia becomes a guiding principle for critical imagination, for the overcoming of that which already is and the striving for what is yet unrealized. And yet utopian thought always carries a “melancholy of fulfillment” within itself.³² Bloch’s philosophy of history allows for a utopian openness that remains undetermined. Utopia, in a sense, is partially here in the present but also not quite here, and surely not fully accessible or foreseeable in the now. What matters about utopia is not really the completed realization in the future, but rather the articulation of its possibility—or, to put it differently, the actuality of the “not-yet” (*Noch-Nicht*), that is, the indefinite “utopian surplus” that exceeds the present parameters of signification and representation.

For Adorno, articulations of utopia in the now are unavoidably rearticulations of the present order. And so the task of the philosophy that “can be responsibly practiced in face of despair” is emphatically about the critical exposure of what presently exists, including the reassuring epistemic devices that sustain this existent order. Here is the much-cited finale of *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 . . . It is the simplest of all things . . . 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 all know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what it 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.³³

Redemption is not identified with the apocalyptic, but rather contradicts itself and involves self-reflective engagement with the subject of critique—always contaminated by the predicament that she seeks to dismantle. It is precisely those contaminated perspectives that “displace and estrange the world,” however, that become conditions of possibility for something that has not yet been attained. Not glossing over impossibility, therefore, the “standpoint of redemption” is called upon to ceaselessly rearticulate itself anew in the context of historical struggles for the negation of injustice. In Adorno’s hands, a persistent awareness of loss and despair becomes the residual element that defies impulses to universalize instrumental reason.³⁴

To be sure, Adorno was skeptical about what Bloch called his own “militantly optimistic”³⁵ utopian position, and Bloch criticized Adorno’s political ethos of despair.³⁶ Clearly, however, the complex critical interchanges between Adorno and

Bloch exceed the scope of mere polemics, and their differential positions do not easily fit into an oppositional schema that pits optimism against pessimism. The point for both is not to provide definitive answers to questions such as whether or not utopia is attainable, or what its time and timing would be. Rather, they are interested in the ways utopian thinking forges forms of political imagining. For Bloch, the rehabilitation of hope itself (including the rehabilitation of utopian hope as a neglected concept in Marxism³⁷) remains a restless and uneasy experience of the here and now, and involves a critique of the notion of homogeneous time: “Even a dash of pessimism would be preferable to the banal, automatic belief in progress as such.”³⁸ In fact, there is no assurance that hope will elicit sustainable forces of world-making: “Hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naive optimism. The category of danger is always within it. Hope is not confidence.”³⁹ Adorno’s notion of utopia, on the other hand, emerges from a constellation of despair and hope. In the third volume of *Notes to Literature*, writing a few years before his death, he praised Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*: “I took this motif so much as my own that I do not believe I have ever written anything without commemorating it, either implicitly or explicitly.”⁴⁰

The performative contours of this encounter might be delineated in terms of a tension between a pro-utopian “principle of hope” and negative dialectical critique. Without undervaluing the significance of this conflicted comradeship and its involvement in aesthetic modernism, I would suggest that we embrace the aporetic nuances that the performative-dialectical structure of this conversation entails. In this respect, the two readings of Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s political opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, for all their tensions, resonate evocatively with Spivak’s hesitant formulation, with which I opened this essay: “perhaps the literary can still do something. Or perhaps not.”

Crucially relevant to the evocation of literary and theatrical works in critical theory concerned with the utopian is the public performance of these works—whether onstage or offstage, or in contexts that complicate this distinction—as a response to crisis. The productions of Beckett’s plays performed in different contexts of political dispossession, precarity, and struggle, as in the staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Zuccotti Park as part of the Occupy Wall Street protests, resonating with earlier productions of the play in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement, in the gallows of San Quentin State Prison in 1957, in apartheid South Africa in 1976, and in besieged Sarajevo in 1993 during the breakup of Yugoslavia, are a case in point.⁴¹ Such productions speak to the ambivalent ways the Beckettian performance of stillness, unhomeliness, and negation, in the very process of failed or resisted referential articulation, retains an aporetic performative power: one that underlies the uncanny utopian implications of going on—that is, moving and

being moved with/by others—toward an impossible, unsettled, and indeterminate elsewhere.

Political Aesthetics and Critical Potentiality

The dissonances between Adorno and Bloch on the im-possibility of utopian thinking have suggestive implications for the question of political aesthetics and its critical potential. To put it in rather crude terms, while Adorno bemoans the oppressive ideological effects of a commodified culture industry, Bloch and (in different ways) Benjamin seek to trace the emancipatory potential of art in times of its “technological reproducibility.”⁴² But again, this tension can be more fruitfully read in terms of complementarity rather than mere opposition.

As we saw in the previous section, Bloch invokes Brecht in order to elucidate the “utopian surplus” in art. Benjamin also praises Brecht’s project for putting forth the potentiality of another humanity’s coming into existence. Benjamin, who was indebted to Bloch’s utopian philosophy, endorses Brecht’s poetry in contrast to Kästner’s left melancholy: “To create is the task of all political lyricism, and today this task is most strictly fulfilled by Bertolt Brecht’s poems. In Kästner, it has to give way to complacency and fatalism.”⁴³ Adorno, on the other hand, sees Brecht’s “committed” theatre as didactic and maudlin: “A journalistically minded Westerner could well praise *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a hymn to motherhood, and who is not touched when the splendid girl is finally held up as an example to the querulous lady beset with a migraine? Baudelaire, who dedicated his work to the coiner of the motto *l’art pour l’art*, would have been less suited to such catharsis.”⁴⁴ For Adorno, who refuses to grant any essential potentiality to art and instead seeks ways for it to undermine moral self-certainties and the epistemologies of representation, it is Beckett’s literary works that are best able to convey the critical pulsation of what is not yet in a time of despair: “to Beckett . . . the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet.”⁴⁵

In his late work *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno returns to the question of art’s utopian investment: “Art’s utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black, it goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real: it is a kind of imaginary restitution for that catastrophe, which is world history. . . . It is the possible, as promised by its impossibility. Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken.”⁴⁶ Illustrating Adorno’s aesthetic negativity, the formulation “art’s utopia is draped in black” introduces hints of distress, disenchantment, trouble, but also obscurity and spectrality, into the realm of utopian reflection. The critical state of “darkness” emerges as a dialectical outcome of enlightened, utopian promises for reparation. On these grounds, if art might prefigure a world “yet-to-come,” this promise (as well as premise) is interminably

doomed to be broken; this is not to exalt despair, however, but rather to register the need to constantly redesign and nuance the promise.

Adorno takes Beckett's *Endgame* as a paradigmatic artwork capable of performing the utopian operation of art, precisely by unsettling the conceits of the self-centered and volitional subjectivity implicit in philosophical humanism: "The catastrophes that inspire *Endgame* have exploded the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was the common element between Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and the Sartrean version of existentialism. Even to the concentration camp victims, existentialism had attributed the freedom either inwardly to accept or reject the inflicted martyrdom. *Endgame* destroys such illusions."⁴⁷ For Adorno, subjects in *Endgame* do not adhere to the humanist mandates of individuation and independence: "Even the outlines of Hamm and Clov are one line, they are denied the individuation of a tidily independent monad. They cannot live without each other."⁴⁸ The dissolution of the subject's universalized, ahistorical abstraction, and the subject's transformation into a historical category imbued with ineluctable precariousness and encumbered by social limitations, are politically urgent, according to Adorno's nonexistentialist readings, especially in light of the historical experiences of fascism and postwar capitalist commodification. In Beckett's work, the ominous historical circumstances of absurdity and ruination are put on display through repetitive tropes of exhausted and decaying bodies caught in history and held in abeyance as literal residues stripped of possibility—including the very possibility of life and death. In Beckettian temporality, an exhaustive concern for finality intersects with a failure to end and an open-ended impossible task to go on, as one of my epigraphs indicates.

For Adorno, Beckett's work offers a political aesthetics that matters to philosophy although, or precisely because, it seems barely to sustain directly recognizable political causes.⁴⁹ In Beckett's work, an explicit political vision, like the eternally elusive Godot, never arrives despite the subjects' long and eager anticipation. In the first line of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon, one of the play's two dispossessed characters, utters the famous words "nothing to be done," while engaged in the banal but laborious act of struggling to get his boot off. As depicted in *Endgame*, characters are trapped in compulsive loops of "moments for nothing": "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished."⁵⁰ As Adorno's reading posits, Beckett's drama attends to the crushing historical circumstances that complicate the possibility of generating effectual political alternatives to the horrors of the present. Vladimir's question, "Where are all these corpses from?" and the response, "A charnel-house! A charnel-house!," in *Waiting for Godot*, a play written immediately after World War II and the Nazi extermination, indicate that Beckett's key motifs of internment, displacement, and affliction are not depictions of a disengaged artist's existential angst; rather, they are situated in contemporaneous political coordina-

tes, notably circumstances of war, fascism, unfreedom, and postwar commodity culture. And yet, although Adorno reads Beckett's oeuvre as suggestive of post-Auschwitz literary remembrance of historical events which precluded their own witnessing, he resists the reduction of Beckett's aesthetic project to transparent referentiality: "Admittedly, as nonsensical as it is to attribute to Beckett — as Lukács does — an abstract, subjectivist ontology and then to place it on the excavated index of degenerate art because of its worldlessness and infantility, it would be equally ridiculous to have him testify as a key political witness."⁵¹

In Beckett's work, the literary textures of absence, deferral, irony, unfreedom, and undecidability are intertwined with those of duress, brokenness, exhaustion, failure, and antiheroic courage. It is these distinctive themes that are often considered not to be politically referential, but, if viewed from a different perspective, they can be seen to be attuned to the political aesthetics woven into various strands of critical theory and the global histories of the Left.⁵² From Adorno's perspective, the critical force of Beckett's writing resides precisely in its dislodging of the fantasies of immediate referentiality and unambiguous figuration. In this regard, the political is not reducible to neatly identified narratives of intentionality, salvation, and resurrection. And yet, elusive glimmers of hope for disentanglement emerge precisely from this resistance to the definition and affirmation of the given world. Beckett writes: "What to do now, what shall I do now, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later. Generally speaking. There must be other shifts."⁵³

Adorno's appreciation of Beckett's work illustrates his idea of the politics of "autonomous art": a dialectically unresolved position of the artwork in the context of the worldly machinations of modernity in the aftermath of Nazism and in the era of postwar capitalism. In this sense, art's autonomy is not about claiming an artistic space devoid of history and sociopolitical meaning, but rather evinces a critique of modernity that challenges conventional understandings of the world. The possibility of aesthetic freedom suggests an antinomy: art can neither be subsumed under the regime of realistic representation nor disengage itself from its sociopolitical context. Art's mode of resistance is inextricably linked with its tenuous critical positioning both within and despite and against the unfreedom of capitalist society.⁵⁴ In this sense, it is precisely the Beckettian resistance to the established orders of intelligibility and sensibility (as in the simultaneous impossibility of language and impossibility of silence) that is echoed in articulations of feminist (and) Black aesthetics, which, in bearing witness to political despair and dispossession, disturb the normative modes of signification and reclaim alternative ones. For Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, Adorno's theory of art's "heteronomous autonomy," as embodied in Beckett's aesthetics, offers a possibility for feminist aesthetics pre-

cisely by enabling an intertwined reading of art and politics without reducing one to the other. At the same time, troubling the limitations of Adorno's aesthetic theory, Ziarek thinks through the heteronomous autonomy of art from the perspective of foreclosed possibilities haunting histories of Black and women's writing. Thus a precarious convergence between impossibility, possibility, melancholia, and transformation comes into view in this account of "how the haunting history of destruction and the ongoing exclusion of women from politics and literary production can be transformed into inaugural possibilities of writing and action."⁵⁵ In reading Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*, and in particular the heroine Helga Crane's suffocating sensation, which encodes the memory of lynching, Ziarek asks: "How is it possible to write from within such suffocation? How is it possible to transfer, or transpose, that sensation that destroys not only subjective expression but also language itself and its musicality into writing? How can the novel inscribe the trace of that violence and death buried in the female mouth into its own language?"⁵⁶ Liberatory possibility speaks to this ecstatic, negative-utopian sensation of writing and acting from within the suffocation of the haunting past's presentness.

Influenced by Bloch's utopian thinking and at the same time engaging with Adorno's conception of negative dialectics, Paul Gilroy has delineated a Black Atlantic cultural-political critical formation in which the inheritance of the racial terror of the Atlantic slave trade and the plantation system in the Americas is recuperated in the context of an intercultural and transnational Black utopian aesthetic.⁵⁷ In this critical utopian formation, which articulates a politics of simultaneous social memory and transfiguration "that projects beyond the limits of the present,"⁵⁸ the possibility of death as agency in slave cultures—a salient theme in the literature of the Black Atlantic—speaks to the capacity of Black expressive cultures to redeem modernity through their living memories of suffering, loss, and exile.

Taking this work in critical Black thought further in his own way, Fred Moten has traced the emergence of liberatory critique in Afro-diasporic art, especially the aesthetics of Black radical literary and musical performance that performs the conditions of its own possibility by dismantling racial categories, and thus becomes a site for the critical possibility of resistance and freedom. As a mode of art and politics, improvisation—along with resistant aurality, dissonance, broken language, opacity, and the vocality of pain—animates the poetic-deconstructive limit experience that Moten calls "the break": an unrepresentable and nonrepresentational but generative temporal-spatial differentiation and suspension marked by the possibility of disrupting self-possessed subjectivity and representational thinking. The (non-)passage between sound and meaning shares a relation with the untranslatability of experience into logocentric and masculinist cogitation, in Moten's feminist critique of the Black radical aesthetic tradition. In figuring the lived experience of Blackness as constitutively bound to the irrecoverable political

trauma and dismemberment of enslavement, he asks: “what does it mean to suffer from political despair when your identity is bound up with utopian political aspirations and desires? How is identity reconfigured in the absence or betrayal of those aspirations? What’s the relation between political despair and mourning?”⁵⁹ The relation between incommensurable despair and mourning, but also the resistance to enslavement and the yearning for resurrection remain, for Moten, improvisational, aporetic forces at work in Black performance: the impossibility of therapeutic redress (as well as the resistance to consonant, fixed, and transparent referentiality) is repeated and repurposed as the very condition of possibility—“tragic, hopeful, fallen”⁶⁰—for performance itself.

In performing the conditions of its own possibility, the aesthetics of Black radical literary and musical performance is enabled, in “tragic, hopeful, fallen” ways, to make other futures, and to make futures otherwise, out of the failure to recover, represent, redress, or redeem the immeasurable political traumas of enslavement and racism. In Moten’s work, as in Muñoz’s, an aesthetics that performs the transformative powers of brokenness and dispossession allows for a potentiality that is utterly uneasy, wounded, and aporetic. In other words, the utopian (defined as a nonplaced field of possibility in the face of its impossibility) is thought through the representational breaks occasioned by accumulated experiences of displacement, captivity, fugitivity, and loss.

Ultimately, in their different ways of drawing on critical theory to explore the potentiality of critique, such readings of aesthetics through sustained attention to the poetic genres of unlivable life tarry with the qualities of performative impossibility. They take the risk of utopianism as a critical methodology that enables them to bring the utopian into focus in the ghostly lived experience of the everyday. Hence a sense of openness, however indeterminate and ephemeral, beyond straight presentism registers a certain kind of political imagination and possibility as claimed, desired, and enacted by those whose lives and futures have been rendered senseless and unworthy. What has been violently excluded, repressed, or foreclosed might be reworked and transformed into what (else) art, critique, and politics might be and become. This is about an uncanny sense of expansive temporality not reducible to the assimilationist imperatives of white, nationalistic, reproductive futurity. This demands a shift in the way the arts of critique are typically conceptualized within the time-bound binary schemes of possibility-impossibility and mourning-melancholia.⁶¹

I am interested here in the ways in which desperate recourse to utopian formulations, in the inappropriate aesthetic and aesthetics of interlocking race, class, gender, and sexuality, hold open the question of what enables a confrontation with unaccountable loss and suspends (temporally, politically) the impossibility of mourning that we find in Beckett’s work. Indeed, it is through this question that

we might attend to the aesthetic genealogy that inter-articulates Clov's reverberating hum, which interrupts the still time of unspeakability in Beckett's *Endgame*, and Moten's account of the irreducible aural and phonic materiality that animates Black performances. The improvisation at work in humming, moaning, and screaming becomes a device that resists the totalizing legibility of wording and meaning—through a resounding performativity of repetitions, replays, deferrals, dissonances, and disidentifications. In seeing the slave as a figure of radically objectified corporeality that remains beyond the reach of Marx's theory of the commodity form, Moten claims that the history of Blackness is "testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."⁶² Extrapolating from Moten, then, we might think about impossibility as a condition of possibility for resistance. This would be to think about politics as the art of the im-possible.

What does the impossibility of ending an exhausted, unlivable life in *Endgame* require as its own condition of possibility, then? And how does the critical possibility of other worlds that are not-yet inflect performances of Blackness in the midst of histories of subjection and abjection? From Adorno's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* to Moten's engagement with Black performance, the utopian vision can only be addressed as a remainder and reminder of irrevocable pain and injustice (or as the scream, in Moten's terms), and thus remains interminably the place and time of poetics, critique, memory, dissent, and what Moten terms *objection*.

As I elaborate in what follows, a queer deconstructive concern with the indeterminations of temporality emerges as an auspicious means for improvising through and moving beyond the opposition between resurrection and mourning—towards each other's mutual conditions of possibility.

Queer Contretemps, Arts of the Im-possible

Rereading the dialogue between Adorno and Bloch on "the utopian function of art," Muñoz, in his book *Cruising Utopia*, has developed a critical methodology for approaching queer performativity as indefinite creative affirmation. For those outside the racial and sexual mainstream, queer futurity is enabled by a world-making capacity in cultural performances that disrupt the normative social scripts of whiteness and heteropatriarchy, and open possibilities for other ways of being in the world. Queer futurity, in this respect, is a mode of endurance and critique that resists the "evidentiary logic"⁶³ of what Muñoz calls "straight time," by shifting the perspective from the "here and now" to a "then and there." Queerness, he writes, "is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough." He vividly articulates this gesture of reorienting the world to "what is missing"⁶⁴ by drawing on what Bloch has termed "utopian surplus," where the "utopian" does not refer to a transcendental function but rather is immanent in the quotidian flows and struggles of the actually existing present. At the same time, the transformative political imagination remains exces-

sive with respect to the exigencies and deficiencies of the present. Surplus, in its utopian modality, indicates a nonidentical “residue” that is not captured by the epistemic regimes of the present and propels history toward a different future.

Considering the film *Strella: A Woman's Way* (dir. Panos Koutras, 2009) through the lens of queer archival temporalities that have made its own present possible, Dimitris Papanikolaou (2018) captures the ways doing queer history in the present is indelibly marked by the ethical, aesthetic, and political claims of queer agonistic futurity but also critically haunted by long and demanding pasts of disavowal and suppression. Queer collectivity, history, and camaraderie are performed in aesthetic works of the past and the present (which importantly include ephemeral gestures and performances) in ways that evince a temporal dialectic, at once a critique of what is and a gesturing toward what could and should be. This way of defining queerness as “not yet here” illuminates how the criticality of critical theory rests upon multiple indeterminate temporalities, remaining at once timely and untimely, in time and out-of-time. Its time is now, but also past as well as not yet. Defying rigid distinctions between possible and impossible, as well as between hope and despair, it is never at one nor at ease with the present time. Rather, it is to be construed as a restless transformative attentiveness to injurious social worlds, hopefully through theoretical and activist alliances.⁶⁵

What is at stake in my argument here is how to do justice to the temporalities of critical thought by not letting the utopian erase or assimilate the aporetic. In this context, I acknowledge Gillian Rose's insistence upon the antinomies and uncertainties of agonistic political actuality as opposed to both utopianism and realism. Rose rejects the utopian notion of redemption and embraces in its place the unsettling perspective of aporia, turning to Rosa Luxemburg's political thought as a figure of aporia.⁶⁶ On these grounds, I would suggest that critical reflection on the possibilities and limitations of critique should engage with a spectral notion of temporality, an uncomfortable notion of dialectics that resists closure and finality, and a performative understanding of the embodied and situated subject that is not the atomized, self-transparent source of intentionality.

This is about reconfiguring the agonistic temporality of living, acting, and thinking with others in the precarious interstices of what Hannah Arendt calls “no longer” and “not yet.” In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt comments on Franz Kafka's short parable “He” (1920), in which a nameless “he” (a figure of unfixed identity) is desperately caught in the moment, between the antagonistic forces of the past and future: “He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both.”⁶⁷ As he is seemingly about to lose the battle, “he” envisions that “some time in an unguarded moment—and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet—he will jump out of the fighting line.”⁶⁸ In turning to literature

and Kafka, Arendt registers a concern with a thinking of temporality that is not premised upon a “timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm as the proper region of thought.”⁶⁹ She proposes instead that we situate the lived experience of embodied intersubjectivity in temporal breaks, thus contesting the notion of indifferent and continuous temporality. As she writes, “‘his’ standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which ‘his’ constant fighting, ‘his’ making a stand against past and future keeps in existence.”⁷⁰ In her insightful reading of Arendt’s text, Ziarek has captured the significance of keeping this agonistic hiatus in time open for a feminist and decolonial politics of temporality, through the insertion of racialized, gendered subjectivity. She suggests that it is precisely this discontinuous, contested time that serves as the temporal medium for such situated knowledge: “If we reread Arendt’s ideas of the gap between the past and the future and the body in feminist terms, then such discontinuous temporality provides an alternative not only to linear, progressive historicism or to the refusal of the future, but also to the recursive temporality of repetition.”⁷¹ Ziarek’s feminist interpretation of Arendt points to the aporias underlying the apparatus of performative iterability, where repetition does not necessarily entail the continuist calculability of recursivity, but rather implies alteration and rearticulation. Taking place within power relations, constrained and regulatory repetition of the terms of subjection is the condition of possibility for the subject’s agency, which does not presuppose the idea of a sovereign judging and acting “s/he.” Consequently, the situated knowledges of feminist and critical race theories put forward a critical articulation of a multidimensional historical present as at once already constituted and underway, durable and mutable, constantly brought about and deferred, always subject to the context-specific lived operations of power/knowledge and transformative forces.

This connection between critique and temporality, which has been examined here in multiple configurations of critical theory and political aesthetics, is suggestively at work in contemporary scholarship on queer temporality, which, as Jack Halberstam’s work has indicated, opens possibilities for reimagining the future in ways that resist and undo normative frames of time.⁷² Central to this scholarship is a concern with the queer chronopolitics enacted by a range of improvisational figures for un/timeliness, such as the as-yet-unrealized utopia, the specter, and productive failure.⁷³ To line up some examples, let me once more evoke Muñoz, who has deployed queer utopia drawing on Bloch’s “not-yet.”⁷⁴ Carla Freccero has delineated the long history of association between ghostliness and homosexuality that haunts the living present of those who have an eccentric relation to temporal propriety.⁷⁵ Heather Love has argued for a queer politics of feeling backward as a way to recognize and reclaim historical legacies of shame, pain, regret, loneliness, and despair that bespeak the “impossibility” of queer desire.⁷⁶ And Gayatri Gopinath, in *Impossible Desires*, which

suggestively opens with an evocation of the Zapatista rallying cry, “Demand the impossible,” has unraveled the ways in which queer South Asian communities in the diaspora imagine and enact “impossible” modes of belonging beyond the injurious heteronormative strictures of both nationalist and diasporic discourses.⁷⁷

The queer politics of temporality indicates an incalculable sense of the possible practiced in the interstices of the everyday and propelled by an incommensurable relationship between politics and aesthetics, beyond the entrenched antithesis between imitation and creativity. Contemporary critical situated knowledge, which includes poststructuralist, postcolonial/decolonial, and feminist queer strands of contemporary critical theory, grapples with transformative perspectives on temporality, attending to contingency, trouble, injury, failure, counter-memory, anticipation, affirmation, timeliness and untimeliness, as well as their potentially subversive possibility. Such critical genres of rethinking temporality and temporalization, which are indebted to earlier critical approaches to linear and accumulative historicism, point to the complex ways in which transformative critique offers occasions for reconfiguring, or queering, identitarian and reified temporality; at the same time, critique in this context functions as a “queer moment” in Sedgwick’s sense, a time of and for “recurrent, eddying, troublant”⁷⁸ resistance to the hypostatization of temporality. In a sense, this essay follows the elusive and nuanced way in which Sedgwick’s “eddies of queer time” resonate with Beckett’s path “in the sand flowing between the shingle and the dune”⁷⁹ in order to pose anew the question of critical possibility, or, the possibility of critique.⁸⁰

In this perspective, critique takes place as a queer performative way of inhabiting, imagining, knowing, sensing, and sharing the world anew, otherwise. Critique takes place out of place, in the out-of-placeness enacted by the knowledges, desires, and troubling affects of displaced and spaced-out bodies. The collective poetics of displacement, loss, falterings, and failures is unavoidable and crucial to the register of critical temporality that plays out in the interface between queerness and critical race. Failure here issues possibility—the possibility to “fail better” (in Beckett’s words).⁸¹ In this context, and in a Butlerian sense, critical agency is about the contretemps emerging from within the unfulfilled and unfinished processes of subjectivation. Normativity is never temporally fixed, but rather produced over time, time and again, “permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time.”⁸² And so the conceptual framework of gender performativity is indispensable to a critical reconsideration of the reifying impulse informing both utopian and antiutopian schemes. The notion of temporality implied by the performative register, which includes citability, incompleteness, indeterminacy, and temporal differentiation, entails displacing the universalist and phallic chronological motifs of teleological procession, univocal linearity, progression, and belatedness—all indelibly marked by racial, gendered, sexual, and class subjection.

While the performative account of the subject as passionately attached to the terms of its subjection might seem to diminish the possibility of critique, it is precisely this ambivalence at the heart of subjectivation that becomes the condition of possibility for critical performativity. To understand the act of critique as an incalculable process of subjectivation, one enabled and restricted by formations of power/knowledge, is to mobilize critical potential without assuming a primary locus of critique. For Foucault, critical work derives from the lived praxis of desubjugation (*désassujettissement*), and is entangled in processes of self-making and an “aesthetic of existence.”⁸³ “Critique,” he writes, “will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability.”⁸⁴ In her essay “What Is Critique?” Butler responds: “If it is an ‘art’ in his sense, then critique will not be a single act, nor will it belong exclusively to a subjective domain, for it will be the stylized relation to the demand upon it. And the style will be critical to the extent that, as style, it is not fully determined in advance, it incorporates a contingency over time that marks the limits to the ordering capacity of the field in question.”⁸⁵ As she writes elsewhere, however: “These styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities.”⁸⁶

So, according to Butler, critique is about troubling the terms of intelligibility and livability that are constitutive of sedimented categorical structures that “foreclose the possibility of thinking otherwise.” Critical practices are not grounded in the pre-existing solid foundation of a self-same and self-contained subject, but rather are brought about through relational modes of subjectivation and desubjugation: “the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be a subject here, and what will count as a life.”⁸⁷ Engaging with Foucault, Butler theorizes the possibility of critique as “an act of *courage*, acting without guarantees, and risking the subject at the limits of its ordering.”⁸⁸ Such a conception of “critical de-subjectivation”⁸⁹ delineates an account of critical agency as always already complicated by opacity and fallibility, where “courage” does not denote a privatizing logic of invulnerable self-mastery, but rather points to the performative intricacies of relationality and collective belonging. In this regard, the transformative and subversive possibilities of critique are matters of concentrating on the differential conditions that determine how the present is constituted as the only possibility, how presence is made differentially present, and how forms of becoming present to one another can trouble authoritative terms of proper presence.

To conclude, then: throughout this essay, I have asked how we can rethink the utopian along the lines of aesthetic worlding practices. I pursued this inquiry by referring to the figure of the im-possible, attending to a critical form of disjointed and furtive temporality as a way out of the grand narratives of reified and reproductive time. Encompassing that which is ephemeral, quotidian, and contingent,

and remaining resolutely within historically situated relations of power, the time of performativity works to queer the teleological chronologies of critique, including those forming the conditions of possibility for utopian thinking as critique. Performing the politically enabling critical force of im-possibility is one of the tasks of contemporary critical theory. Im-possibility, in my understanding, pertains to the subjection of lives and desires to the status of the impossible, unimaginable, and illegible by colonialist, capitalist and other modes of dispossession, but also to structural limitations, whether material, discursive, embodied, psychic, or inter-subjective, that come to trouble the normative lures of fulfillment, by enabling a rethinking of the very notions of “power” and “agency.” In this sense, the im-possible performs a critical move beyond the reification of the existing present and toward interstitial and liminal qualities of making time (and taking one’s time) otherwise in the interlocking realms of ethics, politics, and aesthetics.

“If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible,” Butler declared in her speech, amplified by a human microphone, at Occupy Wall Street. And in *Parting Ways*, in the context of her reading Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading,” written on the occasion of Said’s death, she discusses how the poetic issues a persistent demand for the impossible (a demand imbued with deferral and critical political imagination) and thus keeps open the possibility of a refigured future that breaks out of the conditions of impossible life under which Palestinians are forced to live.

Butler’s compelling invocation of poetry as a way to hold out the impossible and necessary possibility of ending colonial subjugation and to address a political future of cohabitation in Israel-Palestine chimes with Spivak’s question, with which I began this essay, about whether “the literary can still do something.” In various, intersecting contexts of situated knowledge production (such as the political collective, the street, the university, the aesthetic, the literary), critical theory, rather than reproducing the order of the possible, glossing over the messiness of uneasy aporias, or referring back to a liberal-voluntarist perspective on “free will,” tarries with the incalculable experiences of political subjectivation, violence, dispossession, struggle, resistance, and camaraderie that render the political along the lines of the im-possible. The im-possible then can be seen as the condition for the possibility of bearing witness and taking a stand. In the essay “Deconstructions: The Im-possible,” Derrida writes: “Deconstruction, if there be such a thing, happens; and this is what happens: it deconstructs itself, and it can become neither the power nor the possibility of an ‘I can.’ I insist here on the ‘it happens’ because what I would like to make clear . . . is this affirmation of the event, of the arrival or the future at the beating heart of a reflection on the im-possible.”⁹⁰ I can not think of anything more *hopeful* than pursuing these ongoing critical temporalities, which reckon with the contingent circumstances of the im-possible as they play out in

ever changing collective political visions and struggles for social change. In this sense, it is perhaps fitting to give the last word of this essay to Beckett, who wrote: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”⁹¹

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Notes

1. Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 30.
2. Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 34.
3. Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 116.
4. Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 116.
5. This word, as I use it here, draws on Jacques Derrida’s thought of the im-possible. See especially Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 121–35. But the word also recalls Adrienne Rich’s *Arts of the Possible*, an attempt to reclaim possibilities for imagining and living otherwise through a poetic vision inseparable from a politics of location. Such a redefinition of the possible runs counter to Otto von Bismarck’s dictum—the famous cornerstone of Realpolitik—that “politics is the art of the possible.”
6. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.
7. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 284.
8. Sanders, *Complicities*, 18.
9. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10, 81–82.
10. For a comprehensive presentation of the postcritical stance, see Felski, *The Limits of Critique*.
11. Noys, “Skimming the Surface.” For an example of anticritique, see Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”
12. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 123.
13. Butler, in Butler and Connolly, “Politics, Power, and Ethics.”
14. I would like to acknowledge here Amy Allen’s compelling project to decolonize the normative foundations of critical theory by working through (and opening up a sustained dialogue between) different traditions of critical theory: Frankfurt School critical theory, Foucauldian genealogy, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial theories. She offers a critical account of “progress” (by delving into two distinct conceptions of progress: one oriented toward the future, the other oriented toward the past) that draws on Adorno and addresses the post- and decolonial critiques of progress. See Allen, *End of Progress*.
15. See Butler and Braidotti, “Out of Bounds.” See also Braidotti, introduction.
16. Thomä, “German Philosophy after 1980.” For an incisive exploration of the contentious debate and also possibilities of dialogue between these traditions, through the prism of the question of violence, and by way of Benjamin, Arendt, Foucault, and feminist theory, see Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*.
17. On the argument that deconstruction leads to the “paralyzing” of linguistic immanence, see Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure*. Ziarek traces the affinity between poststructuralism and

modernist aesthetics through readings of literary texts by Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Witold Gombrowicz. As she puts it: “the interpretation of the failure of the subject-centered conception of language is not an end in itself (although it has been frequently misread as a dead end), but a preliminary, and risky, step in articulating those aspects of signification that are incommensurate with the coherence of rational discourse” (7).

18. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 318.
19. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.
20. Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” 26.
21. Foucault, preface, xv.
22. Bloch and Adorno, “Something’s Missing,” 1.
23. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.
24. Muñoz, “Living the Wrong Life Otherwise.”
25. Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia*.
26. “*Aber etwas fehlt*” (“But something is missing”). Brecht, *Rise and Fall*, act 1, scene 8.
27. Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 130.
28. Hamacher, “The Messianic Not.” As Hamacher puts it, the messianic time brings with it another temporality “and perhaps something other than temporality” (223).
29. Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy,” 120.
30. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 7.
31. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.
32. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 299.
33. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 299.
34. Many critics, ranging from György Lukács and Jürgen Habermas to the members of the student movement, have faulted Adorno’s critical project as a whole for embracing the political implications of despair. In his *Der Spiegel* interview (1969), he implicitly responded to these criticisms by referring to “the noisy optimism of immediate action.” From 1967 until the time of his death in 1969, Adorno was subjected to a series of personal attacks from parts of the student protest movement: his university lectures were disrupted by activist interventions, including the circulation of leaflets proclaiming that “Adorno as an institution is dead.” The attacks were often linked to students’ impatience with their teacher’s theoretical engagement, which they considered to be a quietist turning away from praxis and from “concrete” political causes. In his interview, reflecting on the relation between theory and praxis, Adorno notes that he has participated in demonstrations against the Emergency Laws, but criticizes the antitheoretical and dogmatic fervor of what he calls “actionism” (*Aktionismus*). See Adorno, “A Conversation with Theodor Adorno.”
35. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 206.
36. See Neupert-Doppler, “Critical Theory.”
37. Levitas, “Marxism, Romanticism, and Utopia.” See also Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*.
38. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 199.
39. Bloch and Adorno, “Something’s Missing,” 6.
40. Adorno, “The Handle,” 212.
41. Duerfahrd, “The Road.”
42. Benjamin, “Work of Art.”
43. Benjamin, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” 426. See also Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy.”
44. Adorno, “Commitment,” 188.
45. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 381.
46. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 196.

47. Adorno, "Trying to Understand," 126.
48. Adorno, "Trying to Understand," 144.
49. My point here is not to outline Beckett's involvement in politics as was manifested, most notably, in his intelligence work for the French Resistance during World War II and his defense of Jewish friends who were persecuted by the Nazis in Paris. At issue rather is the particular interrelation between literature and philosophy that is made visible by Adorno's engagement with Beckett's political aesthetics. For an illuminating analysis of the political contexts to which Beckett's writing responds—notably, the memory of the Algerian war—and the ways these contexts but also his commitments to international political causes—such as anticolonial politics, the Black Panthers, the Irish Left, and the struggle against apartheid—leave traces in his texts, see Morin, *Beckett's Political I*. See also McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett*.
50. Beckett, *Endgame*, 12.
51. Adorno, "Trying to Understand," 126.
52. Consider, for example, Rosa Luxemburg's vision of revolution, in which failure is a necessary component of social struggles. See Michaelis, "Rosa Luxemburg"
53. Beckett, *Unnamable*, 331.
54. As Jay Bernstein explains this double bind, art's autonomy arises as "art's expulsion and exclusion from everyday life and the (rationalized and reified) normative ideals, moral and cognitive, governing it," and thus finds itself being "forced to interrogate what is left to it" (*Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 3).
55. Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 5.
56. Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 77.
57. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.
58. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 68.
59. Moten, *In the Break*, 93.
60. Moten, *In the Break*, 124.
61. Moten has insightfully engaged with the way "black mo'nin'" disrupts the temporal regime that sustains the opposition of mourning and melancholia. See Moten, *In the Break*.
62. Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
63. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.
64. Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing."
65. In this vein, Eirini Avramopoulou has proposed the concept of hope as an ambivalent and aporetic "performative affect" in the context of her anthropological account of a silent feminist protest in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2008. Feminist activists' broken or sustained as well as suspended hopes for social transformation become the occasion for reorienting the limits of language and for avowing the critical performative force of political articulations in their intimate relation to affective dispositions. See Avramopoulou, "Hope."
66. Rose, *The Broken Middle*.
67. Arendt, "Preface," 7.
68. Arendt, "Preface," 7.
69. Arendt, "Preface," 11.
70. Arendt, "Preface," 10.
71. Ziarek, "Shall We Gender."
72. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.
73. Freeman, *Queer Temporalities*.

74. In one of queer theory's most animating disagreements, Muñoz's utopian queerness is contrasted with Lee Edelman's "antirelational" perspective and polemical critique of collective investments in reproductive futurism, a critique that particularly targets assimilationist and homonormative LGBTQI+ claims. See Edelman, *No Future*. What is at stake here, however, is fostering a vision of queer theory that does not repeat and reify the relational and antirelational divide and its concomitant temporal splitting. See Ruti, *Ethics of Opting Out*.
75. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 78.
76. Love, *Feeling Backward*.
77. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*.
78. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*.
79. Beckett writes:

my way is in the sand flowing
 between the shingle and the dune
 the summer rain rains on my life
 on me my life harrying fleeing
 to its beginning to its end
 my peace is there in the receding mist
 when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds
 and live the space of a door
 that opens and shuts. (*Collected Poems*, 57)
80. For an exploration of the intersection between queer theory's recent work on time and the experiments of literary modernism, which have challenged narrative conventions of temporality, see Haffey, *Literary Modernism*.
81. Regarding the connection of queerness with failure, I have already referred to Halberstam's analysis on the queer art of failure. Beckett's work as a topos of failure appears—unexpectedly?—on the last page of Leo Bersani's *Homos*. See especially the concluding chapter on Gide, Proust, and Genet. See also Thomas, "Cultural Droppings."
82. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.
83. Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 251.
84. Foucault, "What Is Critique?" 47.
85. Butler, "What Is Critique?"
86. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.
87. Butler, "What Is Critique?"
88. Butler, "What Is Critique?"
89. Butler, *Psychic Life*, 130.
90. Jacques Derrida, "Deconstructions," 20.
91. Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 7.

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