

The Imposed Asocial Identity of Blacks

A case for a phantasmagoric agency

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What is Blackness? Furthermore, what does it mean to *be black* in an anti-black world? Is 'Black agency' in such a world mere nonsense? Scholars like Jared Sexton and Christina Sharpe explore the potential for a liberated Black future and robust agency, but their views fall short in addressing ongoing Black suffering. Similarly, Afropessimist thinkers successfully convey Blackness' intimate relationship with abjection and non-existence but in doing so foreclose Black social life. In this article, I will synthesize these two analytical lenses through proposing an understanding of Blackness as an asocial socio-ontological identity. This article explores Blackness and the challenges faced by individuals marked "Black" in an anti-black world. My discussion centers on the idea that Blackness is defined by abjection and nonexistence due to (socio-)ontological boundaries imposed by whiteness. These boundaries result in social exclusion, deprivation of rights, and oppression. Paradoxically, existing outside traditional social categories enables the Black to find agency and possibility within the margins of nonexistence. Further, I maintain, exclusion indexes the socio-ontological identity of blacks.

Introduction

Previous works focusing on Blackness, or otherwise those that are racialized and otherized by what Frantz Fanon calls "the white gaze," have suggested a relationship between blackness and abjection. Abjection is understood here as a kind of non-property possessed by those marked "black"—which situates Blacks outside of the category of "human" and amounts to an existence that is degraded by and dependent on whiteness. Critical race scholar, Cheryl Harris, insists that whiteness is to be understood as a kind of property—one that not only has attendant rights and privileges but also has been endowed with a capacity to define the boundaries of "social" existence. As a result, Black studies scholars such as Orlando Patterson and Fred Moten have questioned Black social existence and its possibility.

According to these thinkers, Blackness exists as a function (and extension) of the white gaze. While, Afropessimist thinkers like Frank Wilderson III have suggested that we are to understand Blackness as a negation of and analog to Whiteness, and thereby having its social life foreclosed, some worry that understanding Blackness in this way further subjects Blacks to various harms, injustices, and ultimately an unacceptable refusal of dignity. Furthermore, any semblance of agency or possibility

for a liberated future for Blacks is also denied since whiteness always/already determines the state of the Blackness.

Alternatively, Black writers such as Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman have maintained a kind of agency for those marked black. This agency involves “inhabiting and rupturing” the foreclosing notion of slavery’s afterlife through “our known lived and un/imaginable lives.” While these writers advance accounts of a more robust Black agency, they do so by dulling ongoing Black suffering in an anti-black world—obscuring the relationship between Blackness and fatalistic abjection.

Instead of denying a relationship between Blackness and abjection, this article aims to mitigate the negative implications of their relationship. I suggest that the position of Blackness lies outside of social life. This endows Blackness with agency that is socio-ontologically distinct from their white “counterparts.” Thus, in the same way that supernatural entities are understood as having an otherworldly existence that, although unseen, still allows them to act, black agency can be understood as phantasmagoric within this purview. In other words, Black agency survives what Orlando Patterson has termed “social death” in a way that showcases contemporary Black social life as a kind of afterlife [of slavery] and black agency alongside the supernatural.

One corollary of my account is that Blackness is characteristically different from other socio-metaphysical entities, such as a “free person” or “liberal subject” and occupies the liminal space between existence and non-existence. Blackness is both unfit for and is able to act and be acted upon in the “social” world. Through this understanding, Blackness exists in a manner that is socio-metaphysically different from Whiteness and also has a phantasmagoric agency that allows for the possibility of forging a liberated Black future.

To make my case, I have divided the article into parts. In Part I, I introduce the metaphysical and socio-metaphysical realm, positing that race and the racializing machine—both topics of socio-metaphysics—explicate Black’s asocial reality. In Part II, I elaborate what an asocial existence looks like in a social world and what the implications of existing outside the social world are. In Part III, I explore the fictional landscape of *Black Panther’s* “Wakanda,” to clarify my stance on “black agency”—the ability for bodies marked “Black” to act in society within our socio-metaphysical landscape. Finally, in Part V, I explore the implications of my account of Black agency and attend to objections regarding the legitimacy of claiming the Black as asocial.

The metaphysics of an asocial identity

The scope of metaphysics attends to questions regarding the nature of reality as a whole. This constitutes issues such as time and space, existence and nonexistence, and

mind and consciousness amongst other topics that frame our understanding of the world and beyond. By extension, as Charles Mills correctly points out, socio-metaphysics is sculpted by understanding of metaphysics and describes the nature of social reality as determined by social histories. Within this view, the concept of race and the racialization machine are of primary interest because of their ability to explain social dynamics along with their palpable relationship to “civic standing, culture, citizenship, privilege or subordination, and even designations of personhood.”

There are many frameworks in which scholars have understood race; however, I adopt Charles Mills’ perspective in defining race as a social construction. The concept of race as a social construct is such that race “is a contingently deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of our particular history.”¹ In this way, race is not “real” because there are “natural kinds” as demonstrated by a shared essence or genetic basis, but rather that it is real in the way that it is crafted in the social world and confers social implications. In my view, Blackness (particularly for those marked Black in the United States) is marked by a particular history where their ontological standing is degraded and removed from the category of Whiteness and humanity at large.

Because Blackness is characterized by the experience of metaphysical ostracization, an estranged socio-ontological identity as well as social participation follows. This conception is voiced by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as he develops the lived experience of the black man. He explained “The Whites objectively cut sections of my reality... I see in this White gaze that it’s the arrival not of a new man, but a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!”² The social world and identity are thus categorized and imposed by whiteness not with the goal of emulsifying these distinct identities but rather maintaining historical trend of black exclusion.

I submit that because of this understanding of a conscious impossibility of black acceptance in the social (white) world, Blackness and Black social identity should be understood as being asocial. The asociality of the Black is one that is obtruded by the white gaze and helps establish the notion that Black existence is positioned outside the bounds of the social world. Blacks’ unfitnes for belonging and participation in sociality, as I discuss in a bit more detail later, is evident in the Black’s ability to be physically and socio-ontologically acted upon in the world. Additionally, it also evidenced in how we come to understand black social suffering that stems from the violence of unaccepting attitude towards blacks within the social world.

¹ Mills, 48.

² Fanon, 424

The asocial experience: Asocial suffering in the social realm

Although those marked black are situated outside of what some think of as “social life,” positioning them as a kind of asocial entity engrossed in a social world, Blacks face persistent debarment from participation in the same social world that their white counterparts occupy. Expulsion from the social world is enabled by and evident through historical and ongoing white resistance to black social participation. For example, Blacks still occupy a disproportionate number of people in poverty and who are incarcerated in America.

Projects that work to exclude Blacks have a long history in the US including both slavery and mass incarceration. These projects ensure the asocial position of blacks as they exclude blacks from participation in the social world, having impacts not only on black bodies but also, their identity-based social presence. Those marked black physically experience the implications of the actions of the white and are unjustifiably violently acted upon as to maintain social exclusion. Within society, especially American societies, due to a belief which holds that those marked black have no trace of humanity and kinship, the Black distinctively occupies a subordinate status socially.

This subverted social status further translates to subversion in spheres such as the economics and politics. The Blacks’ participation in physical social life is hindered by economic pressures such as wage gaps and job discrimination which debilitate and destabilize Black prosperity. Traditional economic prosperity for those marked black is thus entrapped in a political system which has facilitated the disenfranchisement of Black people, as evidenced by the disproportionate numbers of black people in prison and in poverty. Moreover, it is foreclosed civically as the Black deals with being eliminated from the ability to affirm their individuality and liberties that arise from being an individual, a citizen, and social participant at large. This is evidenced by voter suppression efforts and other means of democratic disenfranchisement in areas densely populated by those marked black.

In addition to social participation being acted upon through the withdrawal of rights, the Black experiences unnecessary violence, especially when in proximity to white social life. This violence is not logical nor justifiable due to misgivings and wrongdoings but solely because of existing in the world. Most clearly, this unnecessary violence is understood in the United States’ history of lynching which became a prominent means to socially subordinate and terrorize the entire Black community, especially successful Black men who were grasping a semblance of white social success during the historical Nadir of Race Relations in the U.S.³ This illogical violence serves

³ The Nadir of Race Relations in the U.S. refers to the period of time from the end of Reconstruction through World War I, around 1877 to 1920. During this time period, racial dispute consumed the nation

to maintain the barricade around white social life and provides the foundation for the prosperity of white social life at the expense of the Black. Furthermore, more than being physically terrorized and violently acted against as to dissuade black engagement in social life, Blacks' asocial identity is also marked by the conveyance of an innate socio-ontological unfitness. This is seen in the fact that the Black, although often acted against, is conflated to being the source of terror and violence. In a similar way, other characteristics speaking to socio-identity traits such as laziness, dishonesty, and crudeness amongst others are also thrust upon the opaque, unbounded social identity of the Black by the white. As a result, both the Black's natural social body along with their social identity are acted upon affirming the Black's asocial status.

Moreover, in addition to the experience of being acted upon physically and socio-metaphysically, another characteristic challenge which further showcases black asociality stems from a disjointed understanding of Black social reality from those who "belong" to the social world. The social world summons the Black to engage and seemingly promises the chance for full acceptance as is seen with the many historical and current arguments surrounding integration and assimilation of native peoples. However, this vision of an accepting social world is one that is deceptive as it does not intend to welcome or integrate those marked black into the social, but rather keep them within a distinct social existence. The social world denies Black participation in it and as Fanon points out, "It demanded of me that I behave like a black man—or at least like a Negro. I hailed the world, and the world amputated my enthusiasm. I was expected to stay in line and make myself scarce."⁴ Therefore, this firm disjunction of the Black's social reality to that of those who belong to the social world paired with its hopes to eventually be accepted confers a two-folded effect upon the Black—an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and burden along with an anxiety that results from a multilayered understanding of a complex self and existence.

Black asociality continually experiences a social reality centered on the idea of burdened individuality. This "burdened individuality," as Saidiya Hartman puts it, is most clearly seen in black people's non/participation in social life after an "expansion" of legal rights through the monumental Civil Rights Movement. Following this event—that is under the view that history proceeds in a linear manner and under a perception of the tangibility of social change—it is often argued that these changes marked a definite paradigm shift for how black people function in society. It is thought that black people are allocated rights and freedom and are uplifted from their previous

as black communities faced increased violence in the form of lynching and police brutality along with the abandonment and ceased protection of their rights in federal government.

⁴ Fanon, 94.

subordinate position. However, the reality of the black experience in both a pre- and post-civil rights era is one of overwhelming inadequacy, both substantiated in the social imagination. Society has provided a means for the Blacks' notions of inadequacy through the refashioning of slavery which affirms Black self-ineptitude. Slavery can thus be understood here as an ongoing relational experience. While formal legal slavery ended with the emancipator event and freedom and self-determination were secured de facto for racially categorized black people with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, on the other hand, de jure black people experience what is described in black scholarship as the afterlife of slavery. As Christina Sharpe has argued, thinking about the present moment as being within "the afterlife of slavery," draws a "continuity between slavery and freedom" and sets the emancipation project (rather than the mere legal event) as incomplete. This incomplete emancipation therefore has allowed for different forms of slavery such as redlining and the prison system to exist as well as avows black social inadequacy in the present. Most importantly, there is also a deep sense of ineptitude stemming from the mind as black people are constantly trying to justify their position of deserving rights that are supposedly secure while trying to strive to maintain their unwanted presence in the social world. The Black, because of its drive to belong to a deceptive social world but unending failure to fully integrate as made possible through the unattainable nature of whiteness, finds only anxiety in what seems and is a deplorable existence, social and otherwise.

With this overarching burden that leaves the Black in a constant state of tension, comes an anxiety that finds its roots in having an awareness of a complex sense of (a) social self that is inherently different compared to those who belong to the social world. The Black within this asocial state as not being seen as human yet existing in the physical social world, thus arises into the minds of those who socially exist through an understanding of negation. The white comes to understand the Black through the white gaze in which it imposes its natural, social existence onto the presumed social non-existence of the Black, further subordinating the Black. Due to the fact that the Black constantly inhabits white determined spaces, the Black develops and maintains a secondary sense of ontological and socio-ontological self that takes the white into account. The Black watches oneself as oneself but also as Black. The white gaze disrupts the Blacks' psychological self and body schema as the Black is concerned with the ideas and preconceptions of others rather than just being able to exist and experience the world. The Black maintains an objective gaze of oneself as in their minds, through a physical experience of being acted upon and acting in a subordinate position, they are in essence only a derivative of whiteness but not apart of the (white) social world. The property of Whiteness seeps into the unconscious mind of the Black, creating an

overwhelming sense of isolation within the Black as they are consistently socially otherized and degraded. The Black feels responsible for the attainment of their rights and is constantly surveilled not only by the white but also by themselves establishing a cautious, conscientious mindset controlling their deeds, actions, and presentation within the world.

Overall, because the social existence of the Black as dominated by anxiety and invalidity, does not resemble experiences had by those a part of the social world, the Black must therefore be postulated to exist in this altered, asocial state.

The asocial agent: Wake work

As much as the asocial status of the Black disarms the black as their entire socio-ontology can and is acted upon, it does not render the Black agentless but rather presents to it the ability to work within the world. In the space of the separated yet bounded asocial reality that the Black experiences, is a unique, otherworldly, and phantasmagoric sense of agency which emerges through the wake of violence and suffering.

There are many terms used in Black scholarship to refer to this space in which immense death yet possibility inhabits. For Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman, this place of possibility is termed the period of latency and afterlife of slavery which is “a matrix of social, political, and economic relations surviving the era of abolition.” For scholar Eve Dunbar, a reconsideration of slave plantation in what is called Plantation future blues is where we find the “opportunity of holding terror and possibility simultaneously.” For Christina Sharpe, this place of possibility is found in wake work—or the “re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining” of black resistance, art, and life in order to create a future despite the ongoing afterlife of slavery. All of these depictions and more call upon the strength of existing in these in-between, liminal existences and times. As a result of understanding the Black as asocial that is being outside the bounds of the social world, it is clear that the asocial standing of the Black is not one that is desolate but one that is potentially ripe with possibilities and allows for agency and a liberating future.

Considering specifically the idea of wake work, Black agency can be found within our socio-metaphysical landscape. Existing in the wake refers to the often thought of a state of Black entrapment and subjection, however, Sharpe suggests that it is this space that allows for Black agency to be conveyed despite social death. The wake thus has multiple meanings as it relates to agency. It speaks to a disruption of a natural flow as a means to indirectly cause chance, the ontological power found in consciousness, and the celebration of death and a new life. Further, wake work “declare[s] that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us,

with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there.”⁵ As a result, in considering an asocial Black reality that inhabits this space of the wake, the Black can exercise agency in the social world through a newfound consciousness of their particular asocial identity, escaping their previous state of socio-ontological damnation while imposing its existence in a socially hostile world. It is this acknowledgment but firm refusal to be denied social life, despite its characteristically different orientation from their white counterparts, of being geared towards death that Black agency is conveyed in this space of social limbo.

This idea of asocial agency working in the wake within a social world is seen, for example, in the film, *Black Panther*. Many proponents of Afrofuturism, a field of thought in which reimagines the future of black art, politics, and life in general, believe that Wakanda is a visualization of this Afrofuturist society. I extend that Wakanda is also a clear visualization of the asocial status of the Black. In the beginning of the film, Wakanda is thought to be a downcast nation in Africa to the world stage. However, as the film shows, Wakanda is anything but that as this is a nation with immense culture, economic, and technological success. Wakanda, out of a knowledge of social history which has trends in the exploitation of African nations, willingly forfeits their influence in social world affairs. It is not until later in the movie that Wakanda decides to willingly join the social world in order to aid it with its rich resources and knowledge. The Wakandan’s awareness of how others viewed their asocial identity allowed these people to assert their agency, especially as they were able to make deliberate choices to engage or disengage from a social world that is unwelcoming to them. As a result, the asocial identity of the Black allows the Black to be an agent in the social world.

The case of Mr. Oreó

In response to the claim that the Black is asocial, it may be argued that not all people thought to be racialized as the Black displays the previously explored characteristics of having an experience in the social world centered around burden and anxiety due to the white and/or being an actor and acted upon in society. An example of one that may not accept and display the experience of the Black as asocial but yet are racially categorized as the Black is Mr. Oreó. is a racially categorized black man that believes that he is in effect a white man in the way that he refuses to grapple with the implications of being black. Although Mr. Oreó may not display the psychological preconception physically of feeling anxious or burdened due to the white gaze, Mr. Oreó very

⁵ Sharpe, 42.

much operates within the idea of the Black as asocial. In this desire to effectively refute Blackness and accept whiteness, Mr. Oreo has both consciously and subconsciously equated the Black to having a twisted agency, acting in a subordinate position, and essentially functioning as both socially existent and non-existent. His attempt to grasp at whiteness is motivated by first an understanding that the Black is socially distinct and does not have rights. However, at the same time he understands that the Black has an unbinding, existing social life outside the social world that allows for a special type of agency which even allowed him to conceive that he has the possibility of acting and becoming white. Therefore, the status of the Black as asocial transcends individual belief systems and exists as an overarching position that encapsulates the experiences of the Black.

Conclusion and implications

Overall, in explicating the Black as asocial, the complex experience of the Black is validated. In the previously believed position of the foreclosure of Black social life and agency, it is determined that the Black's existence was at odds with the possibility for a liberating future.

Additionally, positions exploring Black social possibility without heed to Black suffering failed to attend to the full reality of Black social life. As a result, in positing the Black as asocial the once held tension between an acknowledgement of the suffering, degradation, and exclusion of the Black in the social world and a desire to create a space for possibility in living in this socially distinct reality is resolved. Additionally, through this understanding, agency that is conferred to the Black within its liminal social existence, the Black's ability to work in the social world affords it an opportunity to attain rights, reinstitute a sense of humanity, and most importantly offers the possibility for a liberating future. Whether a liberating future looks like Wakanda or not and what it would take to attain it is unsure but nonetheless it is possible.

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