

“Onstage They Ain’t Got No Roots Rock Rebel”:
Kierkegaardian Despair and the Aesthetics of Black Suffering

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Kevin Gary’s use of Louis C.K.’s anxiety concerning technology, overcome with the transience of aesthetic objects and all too aware of the emptiness that lies beneath, remarkably reflects and provides contemporary context for Soren Kierkegaard’s account of despair. Nonetheless, C.K.’s response to the emptiness of aesthetic pursuits demonstrates a failure of ethical life by Kierkegaard’s exacting standards. C.K.’s humor, as a partial solution to his anxiety, falls under the lowest category of Kierkegaardian ethics, namely, irony, or continuing to live in the world and accept its demands while refusing to be implicated by it, claiming exception to human flaws simply by taking up the position of critic.

C.K. indicates a problem of modern life rather than resolving it, leaving us with the harder question: how might suffering be seen as an educational phenomenon? While the search for extradiscursive elements in educational scholarship has led to more interest in issues such as suffering, recent research on suffering in education has demonstrated remarkable diversity not only in the sources of our understanding but in its potential educational import. This variety suggests that we view Gary’s juxtaposition of Kierkegaardian despair and African-American blues a site that begs for further inquiry into their differences.¹

To begin, Kierkegaard’s account of despair cannot be fully extricated from its place in his larger project of demonstrating ties between Judeo-Christian ethics and irrational faith. Despair trails behind each of Kierkegaard’s stages, always providing the foil of nothingness to the variously heroic, nonetheless human attempts to stand above the void. One can live aesthetically, throwing oneself into one’s things, the materiality of the world, but the finitude of materiality will always come up short in relation to our infinite desires and the infinite interiority that Hegel diagnoses as an illness and Kierkegaard seeks to reclaim. No matter how sincere are our desires for new phones, plastic surgery and hotel comforts, materiality as such will always disappoint, leading the subject back into despair and setting the stage for a newer phone, newer body parts, a better vacation.

Enough disappointment with the world may lead to ethical resignation: founding one’s project upon the solid ground of abstract principles rather than the shifting sands of time-bound things. But the knight of resignation ends the aesthetic cycle of anticipation and disappointment only by accepting a world that is already bitterly lost — deliberately emptied of its pleasures through the refusal to give in to aesthetic satisfactions. Illustrating the lost world in which the knight of resignation resides, Kierkegaard imagines the outcome had Abraham been marked by ethical resignation rather than faith, scolding Sarah into a similar state of resignation in relation to Isaac: “Did you yourself not laugh when it was announced.... was it not in your old age that you had him; were not both of us decrepit. It is not our child but a phantom.”²

Kierkegaard's dialectic between subjectivity and materiality may only be fulfilled through the impossible leap into faith, in which the world retains its fullness and sweetness even in perpetual loss through the subject's irrational affirmation of materiality in all its shortcomings. Faith's moments are fleeting, and giving oneself over to faith is rare; for the better part of our lives, we vacillate between aesthetic naiveté and ethical resignation, and only struggle for that more perfect, paradoxical position. Even the struggle is inexplicable; from a Kierkegaardian standpoint, the end result is hardly distinguishable from ordinary human despair: "The instant I first lay eyes on him, I set him apart at once; I jump back, clap my hands and say half aloud, 'Good Lord, is this the man, is this really the one — he looks just like a tax collector!'"³ In our time, the knight of faith might appear like the plastic surgery junkie or the happy death doctor: thrown into the mundane materiality we have ethically rejected and betraying nothing of the infinite in which he moves.

Kierkegaard's understanding of despair as a universal characteristic of human experience begins with a naive sense of the subject's possession of an object, the world, or one's relation to others. The hollowness of the world felt in despair is, as Gary says, a reflection of the self's emptiness, a desire to be filled and fulfilled by the substance of the world. The primary question raised by Gary's essay is where we are left by connecting the historical particularity of African-American blues with the broad, humanist understanding of despair drawn from Kierkegaard. Granted, Kierkegaard's ideas have their own historical record, namely the ancient suffering of Abraham, later incarnated in the person of Jesus and distilled through Lutheran asceticism. But Kierkegaard's despair is a universal claim, part of the human condition. The blues, according to Gary's paper, seems to describe a far more historically-bounded ethics, premised upon the cultural inheritance of slavery and racism. Implicit in our understanding of the blues is that it does not make a claim on all people at all times.

Beyond the question of universality, it is also difficult to imagine how Kierkegaard's sense of ethical agency and struggle, or even his idea of the subject's relation to the world upon which that agency is premised, might apply to a people whose right to the pleasures of material life, even to the pleasures of their own children, has been historically denied and never comprehensively restored. While in some ways West's description of the blues, quoted in Gary's essay, seems to match up with Kierkegaard's ethics of resignation, the differing causes of that resignation — one stemming from disappointment, the other from deprivation — leaves the two more difficult to reconcile. We might be tempted to respond, following Bebe Moore Campbell, "Your blues ain't like Kierkegaard's."⁴

Yet Gary's essay does not merely set despair and the blues side-by-side for purposes of comparison; it "explores the transition from despair-avoidance to a blues sensibility," suggesting that the blues might serve as a solution to Kierkegaardian despair, or at least offer a way of living with despair's abiding presence. Taken in this way, we are left with the question, How does the "African-American experience" of abduction, slavery, oppression, and exclusion as a permanent underclass solve the Judeo-Christian problem of alienation from the material here and now? Strictly speaking, the only answer to this question is that it doesn't. If the blues are

a local existential phenomenon, they cannot be shared with others who do not also share their horizon of interpretation, their violent history, or their diminished sense of possibility in the world. Yet the insight of Gary's connection between the two is remarkable not for its prescriptive possibilities but for the descriptive outline it suggests of the relationship between European, "universal" despair and the promise of salvation in the historically-bounded suffering of the other. The aestheticizing of black suffering by white artists and audiences alike has been enough of an American institution to inspire George Carlin to remark that "if white people are going to burn down black churches, then black people ought to burn down the House of Blues."⁵

Writing about the history of rock 'n' roll, Simon Frith has noted a longstanding tradition of white interest in "the 'liberating' possibilities of black music — its rhythmic emphasis, its physical expressiveness, its spontaneous account of emotion."⁶ Frith uses The Clash's first single, "White Riot" as an example of white music's fantasy of the other, citing the chorus line: "White riot, I wanna riot / White riot, a riot of my own." Frith could have easily resorted to the lines of the first verse:

Black man gotta lot a problems
 But they don't mind throwing a brick
 White people go to school
 Where they teach you how to be thick⁷

In The Clash's lyrics, and through the prism of West Indian colonial oppression and its aftermath, black suffering is transformed into a revolutionary potential that is impossible for the white poor of England due to their alienation through the ideological control of the state.

The obverse side to this redeeming fantasy of authenticity and liberation in black music is an accompanying disappointment when the fantasy fails to materialize. The Clash's later single, "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais" expresses a critical disappointment on the part of a white visitor to a black music venue who hopes to experience some material analogue to his feeling of liberation in listening to black West Indian music. Instead, he comes to the conclusion that "onstage they ain't got no roots rock rebel."⁸ Repeating the phrase a second time, Strummer pauses after the word "roots," suggesting that not only the fantasy of violent rebellion but even that of authenticity has been lost.

The same projection of liberation in black music described by Frith and expressed by The Clash leads Theodor Adorno, in a similar mood of disappointment and critique, to conclude that jazz — the commercialized black music of his time — offers only a false resolution of human suffering: "the use value of jazz does not sublimate [*aufhoben*] alienation, but intensifies it."⁹ Despite his critique of the medium, Adorno still seems to hold out hope that somewhere the authenticity of emotional expression falsely expressed in jazz finds true expression in something more primal, less commercial. His complicity with the lure of realness is expressed in a gesture toward the "African interior," in reference to which he draws careful distinctions between music derived from "true vitality" and that like jazz, which stems from "bondage."¹⁰

Neither The Clash nor Adorno allow the disappointment of the concrete artwork to displace the fantasy that gives primacy of authenticity to the aesthetic expression

of the minoritized other. Instead, it is *this* particular expression that fails to convey or *that* genre that fails their standard of authenticity. Both express their disappointment in the voice of Kierkegaard's aesthete — condemning the material world rather than realizing the despair that looks to the world for fulfillment. From a Kierkegaardian standpoint, the aesthetic products of slavery and oppression, whether in the form of Maya Angelou's autobiographical writing or blues music, will always disappoint, precisely because they are finite aesthetic products. Yet a disappointment with authentic aesthetic expressions of suffering may not be the worst outcome of white fantasies of the other. Disappointment may provide the conditions by which the aesthete comes to see her own desires in a new light, perhaps leading to the resignation that Kierkegaard views as a partial and imperfect response to despair — an attitude of distance whose contribution to the pedagogy of suffering may have already been most succinctly articulated by John Dewey: "A burnt child dreads the fire."¹¹

1. Scholarship on suffering in education includes Rosa Hong Chen, "Bearing and Transcending Suffering with Nature and the World: A Humanistic Account" *Journal of Moral Education* 40, no. 2 (June 2011): 203–216; Avi Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student? Rousseau's Emile and the Path Not Taken in Progressive Educational Thought," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (June 2012): 249–265; James Stillwaggon, "Inviolable Laws, Impossible to Keep: Orwell on Education, Suffering, and the Loss of Childhood," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 1 (February 2010): 61–80.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, eds. and trans. H. Hong and E. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 255.

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

4. Bebe Moore Campbell. *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 1995).

5. George Carlin. *Napalm and Silly Putty* (New York: Hyperion Press, 2001), 181.

6. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981). 21.

7. Joe Strummer and Mick Jones. *The Clash*. Copyright 1977, 1978, 1979 by CBS Records, manufactured by Epic Records. Thanks to Gabriel Aciri for providing publication data.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. R. Leppert, trans. S.H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 473.

10. *Ibid.*, 478.

11. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 13.