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Ligon's Hands; Or, Querying Frank's Sublime

Jason Frank's *The Democratic Sublime* (2021) is a fascinating and compelling account of the aesthetic-political stakes of popular sovereignty and manifestation as it emerges in the age of democratic revolutions. The work proceeds in distinctly Frank-ian fashion, committed to a historically situated method of political theorising, and blurring the boundaries between the canonical texts of political theory and forms of writing and legibility that exist at their fringes (in their surround). Tracing a path through historical archives, journals and diaries, images, art, memoirs and the defining texts of political theory from the period, Frank opens for us the central problematic that his work addresses: the staging of the People, or their self-presentation as constituting power, and the forms in and through which such self-presentation was enacted. Diverging from approaches that relocate the problem of popular sovereignty onto a metaphysical register of incarnation, Frank shows us how, in the age of democratic revolutions, the staging of the People was equally – indeed, more fundamentally – an aesthetic problem. It is a question always of appearance, manifestation and demonstration; of the aesthetic presentation of “the people as a collective actor” (5) as the ground and figure of political power. And Frank locates in such an aesthetic turn a shift, or he invites us to make a shift, in theorising popular manifestation not in terms of the emergence of The People (as a stable, determinate Subject), but precisely as the interjection by the people (that amorphous, supplementary part that is always excessive) into any such stable order of representation and identification. The problem of popular manifestation is the problem of the appearance of this supplementary part (the part of no part, following Rancière) in the interstices – or from within the interstices – of representation and its impossibility.

The Sublime is central to Frank's argument for precisely this reason. It becomes the aesthetic category *par excellence* to mark the experience of that which exceeds all sensuous apprehension but is nonetheless rendered sensually. The democratic sublime, more directly, marks the aporetic moment constitutive of popular manifestation. A dynamic tension between the “claim to represent the people while also signalling the material plenitude beyond any representational claim...the ineffability and resistant materiality of the popular will.” (10). The Sublime is that excess that is beyond and overabundant to the People, that is constitutively ineffable and transcendent. Throughout the book, Frank identifies and highlights moments where this dynamic tension is brought to the surface, where the staging of the People, as this sort of unruly *mis-en-scène*, is always re-enacting the constitutive tension of the presentation of the unrepresentable. The appearance of the part of no part, of the people as that ‘impossible object’ and vital supplement, is precisely the

manifestation of the tension between this People here, and the ungraspable/unpresentable excess that is the People (188). “The part that has no part proclaims against the constitutive wrong of the community, and does so in the name of the very community founded and established by that wrong.” (189), as Frank puts it.

Frank’s reading of Glenn Ligon’s work illuminates these Sublime aporias. The discussion on Ligon’s *Hands* is particularly instructive here. Taking the iconic newspaper photo from the Million Man March, cropping and enlarging it, and running it through multiple rounds of screen-printing with thick ink, Ligon fractures the original image to present us with an image that “emphasises the gap between the individual and the collective...juxtaposing the fragmented and decontextualised image of hands with the large expanse of black” (Ligon 1997). For Frank, these hands mark a powerful instantiation of the aporetic staging of the People. As he points out, “Ligon’s sea of disembodied hands offers an affirmation of democratic equality in their collective but impersonal visibility – the hands float in anonymous equivalence, they are a mass without qualities, without predicates.” (199). An impersonal visibility that makes visible a collective subject while simultaneously avoiding capture, sedimentation or identification. In other words, precisely that aporetic moment between representation and its impossibility, between this People here and the people as the supplementary part. A point driven home in Ligon’s work by that field of black distending the image – “drawing the viewer’s eyes upward from the outstretched hands...as if to say what is not happening is at least as important as the scene of action itself.” (199).

Yet, as much as these Sublime aporias are developed in the direction of a productive tension in Frank’s account, they also mark a process or operation that – as decolonial critiques have shown – grounds a whole orchestration of bodies. Proper and improper bodies, proper and improper subjects, and the distribution or apportioning of modes of saying, doing and being along these limits. A certain way of seeing that grounds a horizon/limit of the visible in terms of a distribution or schematisation of bodies; their identification as human and non-human, subject and non-subject (Lloyd 2018, 50-51; Jackson 2020, 13). The sublime subject rests on its others, its savages, its non-subjects, in order to establish and ground its own claims to fullness (Armstrong 1996). This image of the subject can only form itself by opposing itself to that which Spivak calls the not-yet-subject, or the non-subject (Chakravorty-Spivak 1999, 14; Fanon 1986, 160). The sublime is that category by which and in which such an elemental differentiation is at work. Sublime experience is that operation in which the boundaries of subject and object, body and flesh, sense and sentience – in a word a boundary of the proper – are first instituted. The sublime is that which enables the

articulation of a fully-human subject *and* the detritus that is excessive and external to this full humanity – the colonial other.

What is important to note here is how the Sublime enacts a differentiating operation. It marks a line of division; indeed, it is that line of division, that divergence or gap or chasm, between proper subjects and their improper excesses. The aporias of the Sublime between the sensible and the ineffable, between representation and impossibility record the *écart* between subjective wholeness and non(not-yet) subjective detritus. Differentiation is central to and internal to the Sublime. It is what makes possible an experience of Sublime pleasure. Kant's theorisation is illuminating here. Sublime pleasure is a negative pleasure, felt in the moment of sensuous frustration in the encounter with the ineffable (Kant 2007, 89). And yet, this experience of failure (of imagination, of our sensuous faculty of apperception) is pleasurable because in it we recover 'ourselves'. That is, we recover, or we come to recognise, a capacity or a faculty of reason that extricates us from, that differentiates and elevates us from our being beholden and subservient to the object. We come to recognise, that is, as Kant points out, the mind's "own vocation even over nature" (Kant 2007, 92). Consider how a differentiating operation is at work here: a separation that removes the subject – the subject of reason – from everything in which it is embedded. And, of course, the point is that this is not a capacity available to all – only some bodies possess the capacity that enables this escape, that makes possible Sublime pleasure. Others are too close to it all, too like the object to extricate themselves. The Sublime marks the difference between a mind or a capacity, or faculty that can account, that can count, or take stock of this impossibility, and a body, a 'subject' that cannot. Colonial imaginaries and the sublime subject as an aesthetic anthropology are co-constitutive (Gikandi 2001). In the aporias of representation and impossibility, fullness and incoherent excess, determinate bodies and indeterminate flesh, what is unfolded is a whole colonial schematisation in which the difference between the subject that can be named, seen, heard, that can speak and listen, and the brutalised life beyond its fences and borders is first inscribed.

The very aporias in which Frank wants to locate the appearance of a radical excess, of the part of no part, are those in which that supplement is tamed and brought to its knees, dominated and captured in the "infinite of an infinite subjectivity" (Adorno 2018, 27). And it isn't clear how far a democratic augment to the Sublime can move us away from this colonial-anthropologising operation. Which is to say, holding open that aporetic terrain between representation and impossibility, resisting identification, subjectivation and recognition appears to be already and constitutively a differentiation of the proper subject and its others. An immediate consequence here is that even as it attempts to resist and refuse identification, representation or recognition,

this democratic augment, this democratic Sublime – the appearance of the part of no part – embeds itself in a subjective schematisation, or more pointedly, a colonial body-schema. Not just a collective subject – proclaiming in the name of the whole – but a particular form of the subject, or a shape of the body grounded in a metaphysics of the human and an anthropology of the colonial encounter and differentiated from the rabble that is the ‘low frequencies’. Why are Ligon’s *Hands* not at once also the emergence of, or the staging of an experience of differentiation, of the formation of a particular image of the subject from that whole invisible detritus, or that whole black materiality that is excessive to them? Indeed, why can we not see in the disembodied hands themselves that elemental Sublime differentiation between the subject that can be named, that has a name, a face, a body, a fullness, and the flesh that is simply the impersonality, the invisibility of calloused hands? In other words, the concern is not only with the form of the Sublime subject, but with the aporetic terrain of its emergence. Frank wants to show us how we can hold open a space of that boundary between representation and impossibility – in which the people first manifest, in which their democratic potency or force is first visibilised – but in what ways is the aporia he opens not at the same time the very chasm from which a whole anthropological order of the human has first burst open.

So, the question is one of navigation. How do we – how does Frank – navigate this terrain, or this line? How does a democratic Sublime both anchor itself to that Sublime aporia and resist the colonial-anthropological order of the subject made possible in that aporia? Which is to say, how far does a democratic supplement, how far does thinking about a specifically ‘democratic Sublime’, allows us to navigate our way away from the colonial operations internal to the Sublime. Ligon’s *Hands* are instructive here again, though in a different (perhaps contrapuntal) way. Frank shows us the first panel, the panel in which the aporia is opened, but what is equally important is the second panel of the *Hands* diptych: a field of blackness, where black bodies, black hands, disappear into that amorphous sea of thick ink screen-printed over and over. Ligon shows us one navigation of the Sublime aporia, to point us in the direction of appearance, of manifestation precisely as disappearance, as a receding depth (and perhaps then the important dimension here is not verticality, but this depth). To problematise the Sublime aporia by way of a problematisation of that very boundary of the visible and the invisible. A fugitive third space to the side of these games of visibility, and so not simply straddling that contradictory moment, but taking flight from it, receding from it into something else entirely. An in-between that, as Moten argues, is not in between (Moten 2017, 8). The people are here, have always been here, in the surround of that second panel, they make visible precisely by being invisible, manifesting as disappearance (Harney and Moten 2013, 19). And it is this undercommon presence that can help us problematise the

Sublime, because it makes indistinct that aporia by way of an escape from it to some other level, another zone, or a whole other thing. The question of subjects and their others is side-stepped in a visibility, a form of appearance or manifestation that puts into question the very distinction between visible and invisible, representation and impossibility. A fugitive staging of the people.

Of course, this is not Frank's way, nor perhaps his project in this work. But in raising it here, and in raising more generally the question of the Sublime and its democratic supplement – in querying Frank's Sublime – my aim has been to extend an invitation. The point is not to dismiss the Sublime, for as Frank makes clear throughout his book, the category provides a powerful way to grasp an experience of the aporias of representation and impossibility that are central to the aesthetics of radical democratic politics. The point is to open a reflection and inquiry into the ways in which a democratic Sublime can help us navigate – indeed, help us redeem – the Sublime.

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