

Disabling the Future: Disability, Tragedy, and the Imagination of
Possible Futures

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I. Introduction

“We live in tragic times.” This phrase, which bookends David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity*, serves a dual purpose.¹ Both diagnostic and prescriptive, it captures the sense of loss in the wake of the widespread failure of anticolonial revolutionary projects at the same time that it suggests avenues for thinking ourselves out of the political impasses of the present. That the present moment is tragic is, for Scott, evidenced not only by the failure of anticolonial projects in the post-war period, but also by the extent to which our radical political imaginaries remain tethered to a certain way of framing the problem of colonialism that has lost its critical purchase. When set against the backdrop of late capitalism, the financial downturn, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the European refugee crisis (to name only a few examples), the belief in the possibility of political revolution—anticolonial or otherwise—seems misguided, if not delusional.² It is not just that the anti-imperialist, socialist experiments that emerged out of the “Bandung Era”³ have collapsed, but that the geo-political terrain has shifted such that these and other radical political experiments are no longer intelligible as possible alternatives. What is more, our continued fidelity to the old narrative of emancipatory liberation has left us without an adequate mode for theorizing our present, caught as we are between the unfulfilled promises of revolutions past and the loss of the grammar in which these promises were articulated.⁴

¹ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); 2, 210. Hereafter cited in text as *CM*.

² David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 34.

³ David Scott, “The Aftermaths of Sovereignty: Postcolonial Criticism and the Claims of Political Modernity,” *Social Text* 48 (Autumn, 1996), 1-26, 11. The “Bandung Era” (1955-1975) was characterized by a number of socialist experiments undertaken by (for the most part formerly colonized) African and Asian states. “Bandung” is a reference to the Bandung Conference of April 1955, which convened 29 African and Asian states to discuss economic and cultural cooperation in the face of rising Cold War tensions.

⁴ Scott, *Conscripts*, 133. Here, Scott is influenced primarily by the thought of R. G. Collingwood, who viewed the task of historical interpretation as one of discerning the question(s) to which a particular

To refer to the present moment as *tragic* would seem to be in keeping with the broader concern expressed by thinkers across the political spectrum regarding the possibility of political revolution after the events of 1989.⁵ Whatever the reality of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union might have been, their presence gave credence to the belief that there could be viable political alternatives to liberalism and free market capitalism. And while not everyone has followed Francis Fukuyama in announcing “the end of history,”⁶ there remains a lingering uncertainty about what it might mean to imagine alternative futures absent the familiar discursive space within which these debates had previously occurred. For postcolonial theorists in particular, the crisis induced by the loss of “the political horizon of ‘actually existing socialism’” has less to do with the belief that socialism provided a viable political alternative than it does with the critical role that the “ideological *opposition* between capitalism and socialism” played in setting the terms of the (postcolonial) debate.⁷ “We inhabit,” writes Scott, “a historical moment of profound cognitive-political uncertainty. It is a moment in which the basic political categories that have, for the better part of this century, defined and animated the conceptual terrain of leftist oppositional discourse...appear to have lost their conceptual purchase on political problems.”⁸

What renders our particular moment tragic, then, is less the nature of the events that precipitated this disjunction than the way we have conceptualized the “relation between

work (or artifact) was meant as an answer. For more on this approach, see R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 31-32.

⁵ See, for example: Zygmunt Bauman, “Living Without an Alternative,” *Political Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (January 1991): 35-44; Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990); Richard Rorty, “The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism,” *Yale Review* 80, no. 2 (April 1992): 1-16; Scott, “The Aftermaths of Sovereignty,” 3-4.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), 3-18.

⁷ Scott, “The Aftermaths of Sovereignty,” 10, 11 (my emphasis).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

pasts, presents, and futures” in their wake. At issue for Scott is the narrative form in which we have told—and continue to tell—the story of revolution and radical political change.⁹ Against the romantic narratives of overcoming and vindication that drove earlier anticolonial projects, tragedy is more attentive to the ambiguities and uncertainties of the political present. “For tragedy,” writes Scott, “the relation between past, present, and future is never a romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies” (*CM*, 13). It is, in other words, more attuned to the limits of our political horizons and the problem of the past as it is invoked in the present. From the vantage point of postcolonial theory, it is tragedy, and not romance, that offers a way to “imagine new futures out of the uncertain [postcolonial] presents we live in” (*CM*, 50). And it is by cultivating this “tragic sensibility”—“this foreboding sense of the often chanciness of life”—that we can begin to address aspects of our current moment that have been elided or obscured by our (romantic) projections of possible futures. Tragedy, concludes Scott, “is a sensibility for our time.”¹⁰

In what follows, I consider how we might elaborate upon Scott’s turn towards tragedy and the tragic and its implications for political theory via an engagement with current debates in disability studies. This is, admittedly, an unlikely source, but one that I believe is generative both for disability studies and for political theory, especially insofar as both are involved in the project of imagining alternative futures in the absence of a guarantee that such futures will be good, or better, than the present. It is through an amplification of the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ David Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 134-153, 134.

relationship between disability and tragedy, I argue, that we can begin to explore what it might mean to imagine a future with disability—one that is more attentive to the complexities and ambiguities of disability as it is lived in the present.

By suggesting that we consider the relationship between disability and tragedy, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that disability is *in itself* tragic; rather, I am interested in how a tragic sensibility might “recast our historical temporalities” (to borrow Scott’s phrase) in such a way as to call into question both the prevailing assumption that to have a disability is to have “no future,” and the response by disability scholars, who have tended to emphasize that a future with disability is necessarily a “good” or desirable future.¹¹ While I agree that disability studies and activism absolutely *should* be directed toward securing a good future (or at the very least, a better future) for disabled people, to demand that a future with disability is *necessarily* good enacts its own closures and refusals. If we are committed to the project of “think[ing] disability differently,” the futures we imagine must be attentive not only to the ways in which disability is lived (both the positive and the negative), but also to who becomes disabled and how.¹² It is not incidental that certain populations, by virtue of their race, class, profession, and location, are more susceptible to disability than others (a fact born out most recently by the Flint, Michigan water crisis). Addressing the coincidence of disability, class, and race means providing a fuller account of both what it means to

¹¹ Scott, *Conscripts*, 210. While I will go into more depth regarding recent work in disability studies that has engaged with the question of what it means to imagine a future with disability, here I have in mind the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Alison Kafer, and Robert McRuer. See Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Shape Structures Story: Fresh and Feisty Stories about Disability,” *Narrative* 15, no. 1 (January 2007), 113-123; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “A Habitable World: Harriet McBryde Johnson’s ‘Case for My Life,’” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015), 300-306; Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2013); Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹² Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 18.

“desire” disability *and* what it means to aid in its prevention.¹³ And it is here that I think the perspective offered by tragedy is particularly helpful. Rather than emphasizing the value or desirability of a future with disability, we would do better, I argue, to focus our energies on securing *livable* futures for those with disabilities.

I will begin by situating Scott’s argument within the larger literature on tragedy from which he draws. While *Conscripts of Modernity* can be primarily read as an intervention into postcolonial criticism, Scott’s broader concern with “the conceptual problem of political presents” has implications for similar efforts to rethink the relationship between pasts, presents, and futures occurring within political theory (*CM*, 1). Turning to work by J. Peter Euben, Martha Nussbaum, Christopher Rocco, Charles Segal, and Raymond Williams (among others), I will examine the motivating forces behind the turn to tragedy, as well as the questions to which this turn is seen as a response. I will proceed by briefly considering the recent interest among political theorists in excavating the political resources of “the negative”—pessimism, loss, despair—seeing this as an expression of many of the same concerns that motivated Scott’s turn to tragedy—namely, the attempt to “grapple with a world that we now recognize as disordered and disenchanting.”¹⁴ Finally, I will explore how we might approach disability from the perspective of tragedy and the tragic, drawing upon recent work within disability theory that is engaged in the project of imagining (non-tragic) disabled futures alongside Laurence Ralph’s examination of disabled gang members in Chicago and their complex narrativization of their injuries. Approaching disability through the lens of the tragic, will, I argue, help us to see what has previously been missed or

¹³ This idea of desiring disability and “queer futures” is taken up by Alison Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. See esp. Ch. 1. I will discuss this approach in greater detail in the final section of the paper.

¹⁴ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), xi.

obscured by the refusal of the negative within disability studies. It will also, I argue, provide a bases from which to think more critically about the political implications of tragedy, many of which were only hinted at by Scott.

II.

What does it mean to imagine possible futures out of the “dead-end present” (*CM*, 1)? Or, perhaps at a more basic level, what does it mean to refer to the present as a “dead-end”? For Scott, the fact of our “dead-end” present is expressed both by the widespread failure of anti-colonial revolutionary projects and by the loss of the familiar signposts that had, until recently, oriented our imagined futures. At issue is not so much the *content* of these futures, but the way they were constructed in relation to the pasts out of which they were imagined as alternatives. If, for anticolonial nationalists, the future was imagined as the hard-fought for release from colonial domination and the eventual realization of national sovereignty, it is not surprising that the postcolonial present has induced a sense of disorientation and loss. Relative to this longed for—and for the most part, unrealized—future, the present can only be appear as a dead-end.

To describe the present as a “dead-end,” then, is to index a temporal disorientation—the sense in which the anticolonial pasts out of which we imagined possible futures no longer answer to the demands of the (postcolonial) present. This, I take it, is what Scott is trying to capture when, citing Hamlet’s famous phrase, he describes our time as “out of joint” (*CM*, 2). However, it is not simply that these imagined futures are no longer sufficient, but that they emerged as answers to particular set of questions that were themselves reflective of the historical and ideological context (or what Scott refers to as a

“problem-space”) in which they were originally articulated.¹⁵ “It is our postcolonial *questions* and not our answers,” stresses Scott, “that demand our attention” (*CM*, 3). Drawing upon the work of R. G. Collingwood, who viewed the task of historical interpretation as one of discerning the question(s) to which a particular work (or artifact) was meant as an answer, Scott calls attention to the way in which an increased attentiveness to these “postcolonial *questions*” can illuminate the impasses of the present. “A body of knowledge,” writes Collingwood, “consists not of ‘propositions’, ‘statements’, ‘judgements’, or whatever name logicians use in order to designate assertive acts of thought...but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer; and that a logic in which the answers are attended to and the questions neglected is a false logic.”¹⁶

Regardless of the success or failure of the emancipatory political projects that emerged out of the problem-space defined by anticolonialism, the questions to which they were imagined as answers are no longer our own. The issue is not, in other words, with whether there are “logically adequate answers to the questions” posed by anticolonial nationalism, “but with whether or not these questions themselves continue, in the [historical] conjuncture at hand, to constitute questions *worth having answers to*.”¹⁷ Put simply: we occupy a different problem-space that demands both different questions *and* different answers. And, to the extent that we inhabit a “dead-end” present, this is at least in part because we are still

¹⁵ While Scott continues to employ the concept of a problem-space in *Conscripts* (see pp. 2-6), it is more fully elaborated in his earlier book, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 7-9. “Criticism,” writes Scott, “must understand itself self-consciously as a practice of entering an historically constituted field of ongoing moral argument...It is only by understanding criticism in this way that we can determine the contingent *demand* of—and on—criticism in any conjuncture. These conjunctures are in effect ‘problem-spaces’; that is to say, they are conceptual-ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are generative of objects, and therefore of questions” (*Refashioning Futures*, 7-8).

¹⁶ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 30-31. For more on the way Scott employs this logic of question and answer—particularly by way of Quentin Skinner’s engagement with Collingwood’s work—see *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 5-9, and *Conscripts of Modernity*, pp. 51-55.

¹⁷ Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 7.

asking questions which no longer have a critical purchase on the problems with which we are currently confronted.

While the concept of a problem-space and the Collingwoodian-Skinnerian logic of question and answer upon which it is based may aid in understanding the origins of the “paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination” that characterizes the present, it is deceptive in its analytic simplicity (*CM*, 2). If we agree with Scott that it is our “postcolonial *questions* and not our answers that demand our attention,” coming up with new questions—especially “questions *worth having answers to*”—is no easy task. Furthermore, to the extent that the problem-space of anticolonialism and the questions it generated were themselves “defined by the demand for political decolonization, the demand for the overthrow of colonial power,” the task of generating new questions is likewise dependent on the prior step of defining the contours of the problem-space we currently inhabit.¹⁸ “The way one defines an alternative *depends* on the way one has conceived the problem,” explains Scott. “And therefore, reconceiving alternatives depends in significant part on reconceiving the object of discontent and thus the longing that stimulates the desire for an alternative” (*CM*, 6).

And yet, it is not immediately obvious what the object of our present-day discontent is or what its reconceptualization would entail. Having been so defined by the demands of earlier political moments and the problem of colonialism, the most we seem to be able to say is that we are living “after”—“after Bandung”, “after postcoloniality”, after the fall of the Soviet Union, after 9/11, etc.¹⁹ The result is the “seeming erasure *as such* of what could count as a plausible political alternative to our present” and the associated loss of the familiar “normative vocabulary” with which we had articulated prior alternatives.²⁰ Drawing upon

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ Scott, *Conscripts*, 1; Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 10.

²⁰ Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 134.

Hayden White's understanding of modes of historical emplotment²¹—according to which the anticolonial story is best thought of as “a romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm” towards emancipation—Scott suggests that part of the task of imagining “plausible political alternatives to the present” involves “rethinking the narratological relation between colonial pasts and postcolonial futures” (*CM*, 13, 34, 9). If anticolonialism authorized a certain *kind* of story (a romantic one) about the relationship between the past, present, and future, this is a story that “no longer yields the critical insight it once accomplished” (*CM*, 32). What is demanded is a new narrative form, and for this, Scott turns to tragedy.

For Scott, tragedy is seen as offering a unique perspective on the impasses of the political present and the nature of the human condition—one that highlights the fragility of action and the uncertainty of our political projects. “The strategy of tragedy,” writes Scott, “is not to dismiss out of hand the claims of reason, but to honor the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs in such a way as to complicate our most cherished notions about the relation between identity and difference, reason and unreason, blindness and insight, action and responsibility, guilt and innocence” (*CM*, 13). But insofar as tragedy can be said to have a “strategy,” it is often unclear what, exactly, is said to result from “honor[ing] the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs.”

Here I want to suggest that Scott's invocation of tragedy be read as operating on two distinct—though not unrelated—levels. The first is at a conceptual-historical level in which tragedy enables a certain perspective on the relation between the anticolonial past and the

²¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). [say more here]

demands of the postcolonial present that has profound implications for postcolonial theory and criticism. That is, insofar as the turn to tragedy can be seen as “enabl[ing] a critical rethinking of the present we inhabit,” we might think of it in terms of what Scott has elsewhere referred to as “a strategic practice of criticism” by which we “determine at any conjuncture what conceptual moves among the many available options will have the most purchase, the best yield.”²² If the “old languages of moral-political vision and hope are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize,” then it is worth asking whether tragedy offers a plausible alternative (*CM*, 2). By analyzing the shift in narrative style between the first edition of C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938, and the revised edition, published in 1963, Scott illustrates the way in which tragedy can be employed “to contain and represent ambiguous moments of historical transformation, moments when possible futures seem less certain than they once did” (*CM*, 20). From the perspective of postcolonial criticism, tragedy provides a new “language of moral-political vision” that offers, if not a way out of, then at the very least a way through the conceptual impasses of the present and the problem of the future. “Perhaps part of the value of the story-form of tragedy for our present...is not merely that it raises a profound challenge to the hubris of the revolutionary (and modernist) longing for total revolution, but that it does so in a way that reopens a path to formulating a criticism of the present” (*CM*, 135).

²² Scott, *Conscripts*, 50; Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 7. According to Scott, “criticism must understand itself self-consciously as a practice of entering an historically constituted field of ongoing moral argument, of gauging that argument’s tenor, of calculating the stakes (what might stand and what might fall as a result of a particular move), of ascertaining the potential allies and possible adversaries, of determining the lines and play of forces (what might count and what might not as a possible intervention), and so on.” This, he continues, “is the problem of strategy for criticism.” *Refashioning Futures*, 7.

Less obvious from the standpoint of the tragic re-employment of the *The Black Jacobins* is the way in which Scott's analysis gestures toward the possible *political* implications of tragedy and its role in "reorienting our understanding of the politics and ethics of the postcolonial present" (CM, 21). If the larger question animating the turn to *The Black Jacobins* is the question of what it might "mean to imagine new futures out of the uncertain presents we live in," tragedy offers a way of taking up this project. From this perspective, the failure of imagination that characterizes the postcolonial present is in part the consequence of the way in which we have told the story about "the past's relation to the present and to possible futures" (CM, 42). Against the romantic narratives of overcoming and vindication that drove earlier anticolonial projects, tragedy provides a way of orienting ourselves toward an uncertain and indeterminate future in which our success is not guaranteed. This, in turn, will "open up new ways of thinking about possible futures" that can move us out of the impasses of the postcolonial present (CM, 50). "For tragedy," observes Scott,

history is not leading us *anywhere* in particular. And if the past is a wound, it is one that may not heal; it cannot be evaded or cleanly overcome. It doesn't go away by an act of heroic agency. Nor is there a rational calculus that will guarantee the navigation of the contingencies that inevitably appear in the tragic hero's path. History, in short, is not a series of neat resolution; the future does not grow triumphantly out of the wicked turmoil of the past. (CM, 166)

At the same time that I want to suggest that we read Scott's turn toward tragedy as offering both critical and political resources, I also want to acknowledge that the political implications of this turn strike me as somewhat insufficient. In offering tragedy as an alternative to romantic narratives of emancipation and overcoming, Scott is interested both in the way that it calls into question "the hubris of enlightenment" *and* the way it attunes us

“to the intricacies, ambiguities, and paradoxes of the relation between actions and their consequences, and intentions and the chance contingencies that sometimes undo them.” Tragedy, Scott continues, “recasts our historical temporalities in significant ways” (*CM*, 210). To the extent that he is primarily interested in tragedy as a way of recasting the narrative relation between past, present, and future, Scott can perhaps be forgiven for not offering a more fully fleshed out vision of how tragedy might operate as a *political* (as opposed to a critical) resource. And yet, if part of what is at stake in this exercise is an answer to the question of how we ought to “imagine new futures out of the uncertain presents we live in,” then tragedy’s political valences are far from insignificant (*CM*, 50).

In what follows I want to consider how we might push beyond the invocation of tragedy as an alternative to enlightenment rationalism in an attempt to clarify its political implications for the present. In suggesting that we read *The Black Jacobins* as a tragedy of colonial enlightenment, Scott draws primarily upon the work of J. Peter Euben, Martha Nussbaum, Christopher Rocco, and Charles Segal, all of whom to have turned to tragedy, and Greek tragedy in particular, not out of a nostalgic longing for an “imagined past” that never was,²³ but in an effort to distill its “resources” for present-day debates (*CM*, 12). “In this work,” writes Scott,

tragedy is seen as offering a literary-philosophical genre in which a number of the consequential theoretical shibboleths of our time are challenged. For these writers, tragedy offers the most searching reflection on human action, intention, and chance, with significant implications for how we think the connections among past, present, and future. Tragedy questions, for example, the view of human history as moving

²³ Michael Ignatieff, quoted by J. Peter Euben in *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 12.

teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent...Above all, tragedy is troubled by the hubris of enlightenment and civilization, power and knowledge. (*CM*, 12-13)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider this work in any great detail, my focus here is on how we might chart another course for tragedy than the one set by what Christopher Rocco refers to as the “struggle over the legacy of the Enlightenment.”²⁴ For Rocco, as for Nussbaum (and others), the turn to tragedy is motivated at least in part by a broader dissatisfaction with (if not outright rejection of) enlightenment ideals of rationality and historical progress. Against the “heroic attempts of enlightened reason to fix the identity of the rational, autonomous, emancipated, and fully self-constituted subject,” tragedy is more cautious, more cognizant of the limits and constraints within which we act and the “contingencies to which human relationships are liable.”²⁵ We live, as Nussbaum says, “at the mercy of luck.”²⁶

In the preface to the revised edition of *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum acknowledges that her attention to luck and contingency as aspects of our condition that have been omitted by philosophical texts leaves her open to the accusation that she is “endors[ing] the romantic position that vulnerability and fragility are to be prized in their own right.” “We can grant,” continues Nussbaum,

that anyone attached to political action runs thereby a risk of loss (for example, in wartime), without concluding that a state of constant political upheaval is a thing to

²⁴ Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.

²⁵ Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment*, 34; Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 111.

²⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

be prized. Clearly, it is not... For if one thinks at all well about the vulnerable elements of human life, one sees that a lot of human vulnerability does not result from the very structure of human life, or from some mysterious necessity of nature. It results from ignorance, greed, malice, and various other forms of badness.²⁷

However, while it may be obvious “if one thinks at all well about the vulnerable elements of human life” that vulnerability is the result of human “badness,” and that a heightened attention to vulnerability and contingency is not, therefore, something to be valued for its own sake, this is not always evident in Nussbaum’s analysis. Nor, I would add, is it always evident in similar texts that, like *The Fragility of Goodness*, have turned to Greek tragedy out of a concern with the foreclosures and omissions of our ethical and political debates, thereby “throwing into relief those practices and beliefs that routinely go unnoticed and unchallenged.”²⁸

III.

While one can read *Conscripts of Modernity* primarily as an intervention into postcolonial criticism, Scott’s analysis—and his engagement with tragedy in particular—resonates with similar debates occurring within political theory regarding how we ought to orient ourselves toward the future and the limits of utopian thinking in the present. At the same time that postcolonial criticism has been forced to rethink some of its foundational assumptions “after Bandung,” political theory has undergone a similar reassessment amidst what Romand Coles, Mark Rheinhardt, and George Shulman refer to as a “general shrinking

²⁷ Ibid., xxx.

²⁸ Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment*, 27.

of political horizons” in the decades following the 1960s.²⁹ What concerns me here is less the content of these associated critiques, but the way in they grapple with what it means to imagine a future absent the grammar of progress that had previously secured our emancipatory-utopian political projects.

Calling into question many of the beliefs (in progress, in the autonomous and rational subject, etc.) that formed the basis of the emancipatory political projects of the 1960s, many thinkers on the left have been forced to reassess the very grammar in which political claims had previously been made. The ensuing debates regarding the putative “deaths” of the subject and of history at the hands of Poststructuralism (particularly as they occurred within feminist theory) prompted anguished reflections on the impossibility of achieving radical political transformation absent the familiar categories and concepts that had organized earlier movements.³⁰

My interest in recalling these debates is in understanding the origin of a particular constellation of responses to the question of political action and the possibility revolutionary change that I see as of a piece with Scott’s turn to tragedy. Here, I have in mind recent work by Diana Coole, Joshua Foa Dienstag, Heather Love, and Robyn Marasco (among others) who are engaged in what, following Love, I refer to as a “turn to the negative.”³¹ Far from

²⁹ Romand Coles, Mark Rheinhardt, and George Shulman, “Radical Future Pasts?: An Anti-Introduction,” in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, ed. Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 8.

³⁰ This stakes of this debate are perhaps best captured by the heated exchange over the relationship between feminism and postmodernism that occurred between Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser in *Feminist Contentions*. See Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The phrase “the death of the subject,” is attributed to Jane Flax (although Flax refers to it as the “death of man”). See Jane Flax, *Thinking in Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), Ch. 6.

³¹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2. While it is beyond the scope of this project to provide a comprehensive overview of how this “turn to the negative” has played out in political theory and queer theory, here I have in mind work that sees the negative as providing unlikely resources for politics. See, in addition

closing off the possibility of political action, the negative—whether understood as pessimism (Dienstag), loss (Love), or despair (Marasco)—prompts us to consider what it means to continue in our political projects without a guarantee of their success. To the extent that pessimism, loss, and despair ought to be understood as distinct states, Dienstag, Love, and Marasco all see themselves as responding to a similar set of conditions; namely, how to recover a space for agency—however attenuated—while remaining alive to the constraints and uncertainties of the political present. More accommodating of “the conflictual, contingent negotiations and adversities of collective life,” this turn to the negative shares with tragedy an awareness of the fragility and uncertainty of action and the limits of our attempts at self-mastery.³² Against what Nikolas Kompridis sees as a “resignation to the thought that our possibilities might be exhausted, that the future is no longer open to us, no longer welcoming,” theorists in this tradition take a slightly different view, finding in these “expression[s] of normative despair” not a sense of resignation, but rather a space of possibility within which to imagine new forms of—and approaches to—political action.³³

to Love’s *Feeling Backward*: Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Dienstag, *Pessimism*; Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

³² Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 8.

³³ Nikolas Kompridis, “Disclosing Possibility: The Past and Future of Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 325-51, 325. According to Wendy Brown, this fixation on loss and disappointment is evidence of a “melancholic logic” animating the Left. “What emerges,” argues Brown, “is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left...whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.” Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 19-27, 26. Heather Love sees in Brown’s critique of melancholy as evidence of a broader “anxiety to draw a *cordon sanitaire* around politically useful affects,” by way of which one might be able to drive towards a brighter future (*Looking Backward*, 150). “Tarrying with...negativity is crucial; at the same time, the aim is to turn grief into grievance—to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such pain. But real engagement with those issues means coming to terms with the temporality, the specific structure of grief, and allowing these elements of negative affect to transform our

In seeking to overturn the prevailing assumption that these and other negative states are inimical to, and even destructive of, political agency, these attempts to “preserve the possibility of something radically different,” run the risk of engaging in the very efforts at recovery (of hope, of the promise of a better future) against which they were initially forged.³⁴ As mentioned above, this often entails drawing attention to those aspects of despair, loss, and pessimism that promote an alternative orientation towards the constrained, indeterminate, and contingent nature of political action. Here the worry is not so much that efforts to mine the political efficacy of these conditions expose our continued attachment to the promise of historical progress; but rather that, in so doing, we risk evacuating these concepts of their critical purchase. While I find these reassessments provocative, it is not always evident what they offer that previous critiques of the Enlightenment did not succeed in capturing.

Here, I want to suggest a certain affinity between what Scott diagnoses as the tragedy of the postcolonial present and a similar state of affairs within disability studies and activism. While disability studies as an academic discipline to be thriving,³⁵ there is a growing recognition of the insufficiency of current approaches to disability, particularly when confronted with disabilities that resist the prevailing narratives of empowerment and independence that have so constituted the field.³⁶ That is, there seems to be a disjuncture

understanding of politics. We need to develop a vision of political agency that incorporates the damage we hope to repair” (Ibid., 151).

³⁴ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 16.

³⁵ Simon, “Disability Studies: A New Normal.” According to the most recent data (collected in 2014), more than thirty-five North American colleges and universities offering academic programs in disability studies. A complete list of academic programs (compiled by Syracuse University’s Disability Studies Program) can be found at <http://disabilitystudies.syr.edu/programs-list/>.

³⁶ See especially James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Tom Shakespeare, “This Long Disease, My Life,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2011); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press); Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on*

between the “fresh and feisty stories” of disability provided by disability scholars and activists and the overwhelming inequality and discrimination still experienced by disabled individuals.³⁷ In making this claim, I do not mean to underestimate the crucial role that positive stories of disability have played (and continue to play) in calling into question what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to as “the usual stories of misery, diminishment, and calamity” that accompany disability; rather, I gesture to this disjuncture out of a desire to find a way of accounting for those aspects of disability that, while they may not be calamitous (though they can also be that), are not recognizably positive.³⁸

This exercise, in turn, gestures at the possible *political* uses of tragedy—uses which are only hinted at by Scott. Drawing out the political implications of tragedy by way of disability can help to illuminate what it might mean to “live through” tragedy (to borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams), not as a meditation on the universality vulnerability or precarity, but as a struggle with and negotiation of the world that continues beyond the moment of crisis. “A particular evil in a tragic action,” writes Williams, “can be at once experienced and lived through. In the process of living through it, and in a real action seeing its moving relations with other capacities and other men, we come not so much to the recognition of evil as transcendent but to its recognition as actual and indeed negotiable.”³⁹

IV.

The question of what it means to imagine a non-tragic future with disability is at the heart of Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Injured in a fire, Kafer’s inquiry is in part

Disability (New York: Routledge, 1996); Susan Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities,” *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (Autumn, 2001), 17-33.

³⁷ Garland-Thomson, “Shape Structures Story,” 113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1979), 60.

motivated by her own experience. “People have been telling my future for years,” she notes. “Of fortune cookies and tarot cards they have no need: my wheelchair, burn scars, and gnarled hands apparently tell them all they need to know. My future is written on my body.”⁴⁰ Written against the popular figuration of disability as the “sign of no future, or at least no good future”—indeed, a fellow rehab patient advised suicide—*Feminist, Queer, Crip* is an effort to think through what it might mean to imagine livable or “accessible futures”—futures, that is, “in which disability is understood otherwise: as political, as valuable, as integral.”⁴¹ Explains Kafer,

If disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid. A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed, it is the very *absence* of disability that signals this better future. The *presence* of disability, then, signals something else: a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable. In this framework, a future with disability is a future no one wants.⁴²

In her exploration of how we might go about imagining a future with disability that does not adhere to this “tragic” framework, Kafer enters into a nuanced and provocative discussion of the many ways in which “the future,” and particularly the “good,” or “desirable” future “has been deployed in the service of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness.” In other words, our imagined futures (insofar as they are *good* futures) are predicated on the prior exclusion of disability from consideration. To the extent that disability *does* play a role in these futures, it is primarily in the service of a hoped-for treatment or cure (what Kafer

⁴⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

refers to as a “curative imaginary”).⁴³ “The task” for disability studies, argues Kafer, “is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disabled futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future.”⁴⁴

However, in her effort to “imagine [disabled] futures otherwise,” Kafer moves to the opposite extreme, countering disability’s exclusion from the future with the assertion that disability can be both “valuable” and “integral,” “desired and desirable.”⁴⁵ On the one hand, this is understandable. In a world in which a man can be convicted of second-degree murder and serve only seven years in prison for the death of his disabled daughter (which he believed to be a mercy killing),⁴⁶ academic quibbles over whether a future with disability should be desirable or merely livable would seem to miss the point. At the same time, it is worth asking what (or, rather, *who*) gets left out of the accounting when we insist on imagining disabled futures as necessarily *desirable* futures.

In *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*, Laurence Ralph is similarly concerned with the “ways people imagine possible futures” out of the injuries (both physical and social) inflicted in the present.⁴⁷ Like Kafer, he sees himself as responding to those who would assume that the “sobering realities of coming of age in a poor community under a persistent cloud of violence” would preclude the ability to dream of a future in which things

⁴³ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; 3, 13.

⁴⁶ Here I am referring to the case of Roger Latimer, who in 1993 killed his 12-year-old daughter, Tracy, who had cerebral palsy. Latimer has persisted in arguing that it was a mercy killing; indeed, an earlier conviction (later overturned) exempted him from the mandatory sentence for second degree murder, the judge arguing that “Mr. Latimer was motivated solely by his love and compassion for Tracy and the need, at least in his mind—that she should not suffer any more pain.” See Anthony DePalma, “Canadian Gets Light Term in Child’s Death,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1997. <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/02/world/canadian-gets-light-term-in-child-s-death.html>

⁴⁷ Laurence Ralph, *Renegade Dreams: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xvii.

could be, if not better, then at the very least different from the present. How, Ralph asks, does one maintain a “forward-looking and future-oriented” stance in the midst of “obstacles—mass incarceration, HIV, gun violence—that are often discussed by reporters, government officials and scholars in terms of the ways they incapacitate people?”⁴⁸

If a desirable future is unimaginable with disability, part of what is entailed in imagining a different future for the residents of Eastwood, Chicago (the name Ralph gives for the area in which he conducted his research) is simply insisting that such a future—*any* future—is even possible to begin with. In the words of one Chicago city commissioner: “With the large population of ex-offenders—who often struggle with drug addiction, poverty, low rates of education, unemployment, and unstable housing—Eastwoodians simply don’t have the necessary resources to improve their community.”⁴⁹ Against the belief that to live in Eastwood is to be “immobilize[d]” by a recurring cycle of “drug addiction, poverty, low rates of education, unemployment, and unstable housing,” Eastwoodians instead called upon their injuries as way of rethinking their relation to possible futures. That is, they “transform[ed] injury into another way to dream.”⁵⁰

In examining the pervasive experience of injury in Eastwood, Ralph pays particular attention to the way that ex-gang members disabled by gun violence relate to and narrate their injuries (the vast majority of which were sustained in service to the gang). Focusing on the way in which these accounts of injury depart from the narrative provided by disability studies, Ralph powerfully illustrates the way in which these men “insist on the defectiveness of their own bodies” as a way of arriving at different visions for the future and “alternate

⁴⁸ Ibid.; 16, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; 8, 18.

interpretations of how life could be.”⁵¹ These Eastwoodians, observes Ralph, “address the forms of injury that plague their community by other means—not by subjecting bodies to violence or sanctioning brutality through verdicts of exoneration; they do so by dwelling in a space of injury and refusing to budge.”⁵²

In considering what it might mean to imagine disabled futures—desirable or otherwise—we might begin by taking up this “alternate frame” by which to “transform injury into another way to dream.”⁵³ This exercise in reimagining the future *through* injury and disability is, I think, part of what Raymond Williams has in mind when he observes that the narrative arc of tragedy also includes the “new distribution of forces, physical or spiritual” that follow what we often think of as the determining event (the death of the hero, for example).⁵⁴ Rather than insisting that a future with disability must be a *good* or *desirable* future, we would do better to argue for the importance of *livable* futures—futures that do not determine in advance how one ought to relate to disability, but instead secure the means to “live in the world,” to use Jacobus tenBroek’s famous phrase.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., 121, 16.

⁵² Ibid., 176.

⁵³ Ibid.; 169, 18.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 54.

⁵⁵ Jacobus tenBroek, “The Right to Live in the World: The Disabled in the Law of Torts,” *California Law Review* 54, no. 2 (May 1966): 841-919.