"To love human beings in so far as they are nothing": Deracination and Pessimism in Weil

Anthony Paul Smith

Attending to the Unseen

Simone Weil was possessed by an austere and trenchant moral clarity. Yet in all of her criticisms of the structures and practice of oppression, in its varied modes spanning from capitalism to a failed Soviet communism, and amidst all her criticisms of organized religion, she gives so very little attention to the suffering and oppression of non-European peoples. We find only passing references to the genocide of indigenous peoples in the colonization of North and South America or to the enslavement of Africans whose labor was used to build the world as we now know it. She attended to suffering, but something about the conditions of her looking did not allow her to see. While, as we will investigate here, the figure of the slave is important for Weil, her understanding of the slave is blind to the anti-Black racism that produces the category of the slave and subsequently produces the category of liberty. The wager of this essays is that by attending to this blind spot in her work we can surface what is potentially useful to critical race theory and how critical race theory may allow us to understand Weil's philosophy in new and inventive ways.

It is therefore interesting and potentially elucidating to note that Weil and Frantz Fanon share a common analysis of the Christian Church. Weil writes:

> We must acknowledge that the mechanism of spiritual and intellectual oppression which characterizes political parties was historically introduced by the Catholic Church in its fight against heresy. A convert who joins the Church, or a faithful believer who, after inner deliberation, decides to remain in the Church, perceives what is true and good in Catholic dogma. However, as he crosses the threshold, he automatically registers his implicit acceptance of countless specific articles of faith which he cannot possibly have considered […]. How can anyone subscribe to statements the existence of which he is not even aware? By simply and unconditionally submitting to the authority which issued them![1]

And Fanon writes in parallel:

> [According to the colonizer the] customs of the colonized, their traditions, their myths, especially their myths, are the very mark of this indigence and innate depravity. This is why we should place DDT, which destroys

[1] Simone Weil, *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, trans. Simon Leys (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), p. 25.

> parasites, carriers of disease, on the same level as Christianity, which roots out heresy, natural impulses, and evil. The decline of yellow fever and the advances made by evangelizing form part of the same balance sheet. But triumphant reports by the missions in fact tell us how deep the seeds of alienation have been shown among the colonized. I am talking of Christianity and this should come as no surprise to anybody. The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen.[2]

What is common to these two analyses is that Christianity is marked as authoritarian and that authority is created by way of distinction and exclusion. Distinguishing authority from what is illegitimate and contemptible. Thus the Christian is marked through the scheme of recognition that locates them as not being a heretic in the same way that the colonizer is marked out by the recognition they are not the colonized. What does this common critique of Christianity do for us here? It illustrates a common understanding of what Fanon calls antagonism.

Simone Weil's writings operate according to various antagonisms that fit Fanon's phenomenology of the colonized world's antagonism: "The colonial world is a compartmentalized world. […] The colonial world is a Manichaean world" where the colonist treats the colonized as the "enemy of values […] absolute evil."[3] This is an antagonism precisely because the conflict cannot be resolved in a dialectic, but instead is only resolved through the obliteration of one of the positions.[4] As Fanon writes, using terms that will be important for our work here, "To blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject. […] To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist's sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory."[5]

In spite of the surprise that may come from bringing together Weil and Fanon (despite both being French subjects involved in the struggle against fascism during WWII who were alienated on the basis of racial and ethnic distinctions), we can still locate the way this structure of trenchant antagonisms organizes Weil's thought by considering the starkness of her condemnation of political parties. She claims, very directly, that the only way to unleash the general will with an attention for the good is the abolition of all political parties. This claim is based on the evaluation that these parties are corrupted at their root as they seek to propagate themselves rather than direct attention towards the Good:

> To assess political parties according to the criteria of truth, justice and the public interest, let us first identify their essential characteristics.

---

[2] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 7.
[3] Fanon, p. 6.
[4] Frank B. Wilderson explains the difference between a conflict and an antagonism by claiming a conflict may be resolved theoretically or in practice while an antagonism is "an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions." Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9.
[5] Fanon, p. 6.

> There are three of these:
>
> 1. A political party is a machine to generate collective passions.
>
> 2. A political party is an organization designed to exert collective pressure upon the minds of all its individual members.
>
> 3. The first objective and also the ultimate goal of any political party is its own growth, *without limit*.
>
> Because of these three characteristics, every party is totalitarian — potentially, and by aspiration. If one party is not actually totalitarian, it is simply because those parties that surround it are no less so.[6]

It has to be noted that this bold argument was put forward by an individual who, as someone marked female, was not recognized by the French state at that time as having the right to vote for any of these political parties. This is a deep sense of antagonism that, even lacking the bourgeois right to vote for representation within a capitalist nation-state, Weil calls for the destruction of the very mechanism of that right in the name of some deeper principle. It is then surprising that this use of antagonism to drive forth her thought is not often examined. Readers of Weil invested in a simplistic folding of her work into a Christian movement may attempt to turn these instances of antagonism into a toothless form of paradox.[7] Such a transformation not only strikes me as a misreading of Weil, but a disempowering of what is powerful and challenging in her work. It effectively transforms Weil's work into simply a more poetic version of the "best of the Christian tradition", redirecting the reader to that tradition rather than to thinking through the challenges Weil presents.[8] Instead of following that misdirection, let's try here to understand what is happening in her thought and what challenges are raised by her stark vision of antagonism between absolutely everybody and everything on the one side and the Good on the other. Instead of T.S. Eliot's all too familiar English celebration of a third way in Weil's work, let us consider seriously that she is pessimistic about the work of radicals from the left as well as moderates and the extreme right. We can see this in her pessimism regarding those around the broad coalition that produced the leftwing government of Léon Blum, "All those who favour the increase of 'rationalization', on the one hand,

---

[6] Weil, *Abolition*, p. 11.

[7] Thus, for example, John Milbank's blithe reference to her as a Christian socialist in the tradition of others he marks as "thinkers of paradox". See John Milbank, interview by Luiz Felipe Pondé, "Appendix: An Interview with John Milbank and Conor Cunningham," in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 502.

[8] In distinction to these decidedly Christian readings of her work, I was inspired by the work of A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone in their *Simone Weil and Theology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) to look at the various concepts and figures Weil places in tension throughout her corpus. They too refer to this as paradox, but their unfolding of this paradox often moves to the destruction or impoverishing of some term. So, for example, the paradoxical nature of Weil's atheism destroys theism, creating instead a "theology that suspends itself" (p. 5). I take her focus on decreation and refusal of sense when writing of God as a form of antagonistic thinking in line with their description of paradox. Much of the work here is parallel to the reading presented regarding decreation in their chapter entitled "Human Nature and Decreation". Without claiming that they would agree with my reading here, in my view what I add to their reading here is the dialogue with critical race theory.

and preparation for war, on the other, are the same in my eyes; and they include everybody."[9]

To surface and explore this element of Weil's work I will focus upon a theme running throughout her work: the figure of the slave and the condition of slavery. The figure of slave and condition of slavery is found in all of her major work. Consider that the term slave or slavery occurs around 52 times in *Oppression and Liberty*, around 28 times in *Gravity and Grace*, and around 42 times in *The Need for Roots*. The figure of the slave and the condition of slavery is found at every major point in her intellectual development. Yet, this slavery is not conceptually filled out by Weil. Here fascination with the term appears to fall under the Neil Roberts' diagnosis, "The metaphor of slavery is a trope in the Western imagination that overextends itself, the metaphorical eclipsing the experiences of the real."[10] To delineate Weil's concept of slavery, bringing it back within the real, we will ask what exactly is the definition of a slave for Weil in the midst of her Platonism? We will see that the figure of the slave and the condition of slavery is also thought between the antagonism of gravity and grace, or between a worldly slavery and something like a spiritual one. It may be that such a distinction is problematic, for it allows Weil to condition the worldly form of slavery by the ideal form. So we may ask, why is Christianity proclaimed to be the religion of slaves without a subsequent analysis of how Christianity is also the religion that spread and intensified slavery into a whole world-system? In order to answer this question we have to consider the opaqueness of anti-black racism that Weil only obliquely makes reference to. Here I draw on the empirical and theoretical work of Orlando Patterson, Neil Roberts, and Frank B. Wilderson III on the figure of the slave along with the subsequent analysis of the political ontology built upon that figure.

By exploring the figure of the slave and the condition of slavery in Weil's work we will begin to understand better her "Platonic" or absolutely ideal understanding of liberty. For, as Patterson argues, it is not until the existence of slavery that conceptions of liberty emerge.[11] Or, as Saidiya V. Hartman complicates this dialectic, "Slavery was both the wet nurse and the bastard offspring of liberty."[12] This dialectic of liberty and slavery is what produces the world. It is from within the conditions of this dialectic that we have to evaluate Weil's claims regarding "the need for roots".

This essay attempts a creative reading of Weil's work, tracing largely invariant structures in that work that persist through all the various permutations of her thought. In order to carry out this reading, putting Weil in dialogue with theorists she has not normally been linked with before, I have decided not to focus on her religious metaphysics.[13] Rather, this essay assumes that metaphysics as a background and examines where that metaphysics meets social ontology. By social ontology I mean the way in which our conception of being and existence frame how individuals are allowed to inhabit space and time, according to the names given to that geographical space (nation-states) and

---

[9] Quoted in David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990), p. 110.

[10] Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 28.

[11] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 334-42.

[12] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 139.

[13] In addition to Roselle-Stone and Stone I have benefited from Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014).

the ways in which time is conceived (teleologically or technocratically). In other words, I mean the reality of the world and its metaphysics by other means, i.e. politics. Furthermore, I intend something specific by this term "world". This term does not refer to the physical planet, to the earth as such. The world refers to the system of social and political relations of human beings to one another as well as their relations to other creatures, whether those creatures are living, dead, or never-living. The world is constructed through a series of frames of recognition and the antagonisms which emerge from these frames of recognition, either being dialectically brought within these frames or, as I think Weil hopes for, unilaterally breaking those frames. This distinction between world and earth will be important in our final section when I advocate decreation as a form of the end of the world. But it is this conception of unilaterally destroying recognition, of being generically deracinated, that allows us to make sense of the grace implied in Weil's definition of charity: "to love human beings in so far as they are nothing".[14] For to love a human being in this way is to refuse to recognize them within the schema of worldly recognition. To refuse to place them within a world, as a creature, freeing them from their createdness in decreation. If this is grace, then how could we not follow Weil in taking her pessimistic line towards politics, towards even principled, radical forms of politics. And it may be that the answer to such pessimism is not "a need for roots" as the English mis-translates *L'Enracinément*, Weil's last political work, but a deracination or "rootedness" in something other than the world that conditions the concept of rootedness.

The Figure of the Slave and the Condition of Slavery

As we saw earlier, the figure of the slave and the condition of slavery haunts Weil's corpus. In this section we will first explore the way the figure of the slave and the condition of slavery mark the limit experience of oppression for Weil. At this point I will compare her work to theorists of the figure of the slave in social ontology, before then looking in the next section at her casting of the slave as a positive figure via her own heterodox vision of being a Christian. There are many statements throughout Weil's work that appear contradictory, this being an understandable consequence of publishing her notebooks posthumously. However, the consistency with which the figure of the slave is found throughout her writings suggests that the contradictions we see in her discussions of the slave and slavery are similar to her contradictory and paradoxical statements regarding God. The importance of this will be borne out in this section.

Weil's social ontology is difficult to parse because all her discussions of the social appear as compromises within her broader metaphysics pitched between gravity and grace. Rozelle-Stone and Stone summarize this radical Platonic and generically gnostic view well when writing of her understanding of Christianity (one such site of compromise in Weil), "Her conceptualization of Christianity is Platonic in the sense that the individual is the site of what we might call an existential schizophrenia: a material existence (the body) that is drawn toward the world and a spiritual existence (the soul) that, though tethered to the body, is drawn toward truth. What we *really* want—that is, in the soul—is absolutely good (God). However, due to our bodily presence, gravity pulls us

[14] Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 77.

to the earth."[15] So, for example, her understanding of complete freedom is grounded upon a comparison with the abstract purity of mathematics, "a completely free life would be one wherein all real difficulties presented themselves as kinds of problems, wherein all successes were as solutions carried into action. All the elements of success would then be given, that is to say known and able to be handled as are the mathematician's signs; to obtain the desired result it would be enough to place these elements in relation, thanks to the methodical direction the mind would impart, no longer to mere pen-strokes, but to effective movements that would leave their mark in the world."[16] Such liberty is not possible within a corrupted world, however, and so there are various forms of compromise running throughout her work. We will return to this notion of compromise in the next section.

For now, it suffices to posit that the limit of compromising one's liberty is collusion with oppression. The limit of this collusion with oppression, even one's own, is slavery. Weil's understanding of slavery is clearly dependent upon her own understanding of Greek and, even more importantly, Roman slavery. It is remarkable how little attention she gives to the institution of slavery propagated by Europe in the so-called "New World" that enslaved millions of Black Africans and, through natal alienation, their children.[17]However, this focus upon Roman slavery does elucidate certain elements of her thought. Both liberty and oppression (or slavery at its outermost limit) take place within the realm of the world and so are subject to gravity. Thus in her attempt to understand true liberty she comes up against the Roman problem that Neil Roberts locates as the grounding of Roman republicanism upon the phenomenon of enslavement: "Slavery, the antonym of *libertas*, is the tradition's quintessential unfreedom."[18]

This lack of freedom, a complete domination of one's will by another, also characterizes Weil's understanding of slavery as a general form (even if we understand that it is determined ultimately by the historical experience of Greek and Roman slaves). She is clear about this when she writes, "Man is a slave in so far as between action and its effect, between effort and the finished work, there is the interference of alien wills. This is the case both with the slave *and* the master

---

[15] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, pp. 18-9.

[16] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 82. Hereafter OL.

[17] In my focused reading of her major works, attuned to the conceptual constellation of slavery and blackness, I only found reference to European colonialism in *The Need for Roots*. There the reader will find her excoriating in her remarks about European colonialism, though the strength of that rhetoric belies a deeper analysis. Instead we are given snippets of what a Weilian analysis might look like when she writes, for example, "It is obvious that a depopulation of the countryside leads, finally, to *social death* [my emphasis]… The first is that the white man carries it about with him wherever he goes. The disease has even penetrated into the heart of the African continent, which had for thousands of years, nevertheless, been made up of villages. These black people at any rate, when nobody came to massacre them, torture them, or reduce them to slavery, knew how to live happily on their land. Contact with us is making them lose the art." Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 77). Hereafter NFW.

[18] Roberts, p. 40.

today."[19] Here Weil marks a major difference between her understanding of slavery, again determined as it is by Greek and Roman examples, and the understanding of someone like Frank B. Wilderson who understands the figure of the slave as the subject position forced upon the racial identity "Black". We will turn to this notion shortly, but first let us consider the ways that Weil's understanding of slavery fits with that of Roberts as well as Orlando Patterson, who Roberts is critical of.

In Patterson's wide-ranging comparative analysis of global slavery he defines slavery "on the level of personal relations" this way, "slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."[20] In other terms, the slave is treated as a nonhuman without any inalienable rights and so lawfully and morally subject to horrific violence. Patterson notes that those who claim the slave has no legal recognition are mistaken, since they have recognition precisely as property. He goes on to note that treating persons as property or having some property quality is not particular to the slave, just that the usual politesse of not bringing attention to this strange objectification (as in marriage, for example) is not necessary with the slave.[21] This is because the slave is more accurately identified as distinct from someone recognized as containing full humanity and attendant human rights by virtue of always being the *object* of property and never the *subject* of property.[22] While a husband and wife may upon the dissolution of their marriage may realize their status as property to one another under the law, they both may operate as subjects as well. There may be a conflict between the two former partners and that conflict will be determined by various forms of power indexed to gender, but there is not in this relationship the same level of antagonism that exists between the slave and the enslaver (or that person who has classically been given the theodical name "master"). Slavery is thus a paradigmatic form of social death, meaning that the living beings are not recognized as having any social standing within the civil society. They lack even the potentiality to enjoy the forms of freedom that the freeman may potentially enjoy: personal freedom, sovereignal freedom, and civic freedom constitutive of what it might mean to be the subject of property and law.[23] This elucidates the meaning behind Patterson's description of slavery as "secular excommunication".[24]

Neil Roberts ultimately disagrees with Patterson's notion of social death as he thinks it does not recognize the agency that exists in the slave.[25] This is not the place to detail my disagreement with this particular criticism of Patterson's conception of social death and those who build off his work, but it suffices to remark that Roberts is in not ultimately concerned with a theory of slavery so much as he is concerned with a theory of freedom as marronage (or flight away from slavery) that emerges from the experience of slavery. This notion of attending to slavery as a condition for the

---

[19] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 155. Hereafter GG. Emphasis in original. Cf. OL, p. 75.
[20] Patterson, p. 13.
[21] Patterson, p. 22.
[22] Patterson, p. 28.
[23] Roberts, p. 18.
[24] Patterson, p. 6.
[25] See Roberts, pp. 18-21.

emergence of the concept of freedom owes much to Patterson and helps surface what is distinctive about this line of thought concerning slavery and freedom. For prior to Patterson's theoretical articulation of slavery and empirical study supporting that articulation, the most radical understanding of slavery was found in Marxism.[26] Patterson's shift from political economy to what we have been calling social ontology does not radically diverge from Marxism, but it does require we consider other aspects of life other than work to make sense of the difference between the free worker and the slave. It is clear in Marx's discussion of slavery that there is implied convertibility of slave and free worker precisely because of the attention to work as what ultimately determines human identity.[27]

It is here that Weil's understanding of slavery as the paradigmatic condition of oppression coalesces with that of Patterson, Wilderson, and, to a lesser degree, Roberts. Her critique of Marxism is in part a critique of this narrow vision. As she writes,

> As a rule, it is only the economic aspect of this oppression that holds our attention, that is to say the extortion of surplus value; and, if we confine ourselves to this point of view, it is certainly easy to explain to the masses that this extortion is bound up with competition, which latter is in turn bound up with private property, and that the day when property becomes collective all will be well. Nevertheless, even within the limits of this apparently simple reasoning, a thousand difficulties present themselves on careful examination.[28]

As she goes on to delineate those reasons we see surface a certain pessimism regarding Marxism's claims to a progressive end to oppression because such progress is carried out, in Weil's view, through the same struggle for power as capitalism.[29] This pessimism is given more shape in Wilderson's similar rejection of the Marxist grammar of suffering when he writes:

> Once the "solid" plank of "work" is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notion of "claims against the state"— the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position— disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, No slave, no world. And, in addition,

---

[26] By radical I intend not to speak to the political radicality, but the radical nature of its ability to articulate social ontology. For those concerned with articulating a social ontology that is unflinching in its rejection of all forms of theodicy, as I take Weil to be, then what must be constructed is a "grammar of suffering". This concept is taken from Wilderson's work and refers to the theoretical practice of more adequately theorizing and understanding the suffering produced by the dominant social ontology as well as the suffering that constitutes that social ontology in the last instance.

[27] See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 1032-34. Moreover, when dealing with the problem of labor and human flourishing, Marx is still dependent structurally upon the conception of slavery. Weil locates Marxist advocacy for automation within the realm of a fundamentally nonhuman slavery. "Aristotle admitted that there would no longer be anything to stand in the way of the abolition of slavery if it were possible to have the indispensable jobs done by "mechanical slaves", and when Marx attempted to forecast the future of the human species, all he did was to take up this idea and develop it (OL, p. 67)."

[28] OL, p. 39.

[29] See OL, pp. 39-45 where she refers sarcastically to the progressivist fantasy of the tendency of production to increase as the "religion of productive forces".

as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world.[30]

While Weil is inattentive to the structure of anti-Black racism that determines the identity of slave, as Wilderson argues, they share a certain recognition that even the most radical forms of understanding have failed to fully respond and articulate the position of the most abject. As Wilderson goes on to claim, if the slave is socially dead, meaning generally dishonored and perpetually open to gratutious violence, utterly alienated from birth and so outside any kind of recognizable two-way relationality, then we will not begin to respond to oppression until we understand "how the Slave is of the world".[31] Weil remarks, again in what I take to be a parallel point, "What we should ask of the revolution is the abolition of social oppression; but for this notion to have at least a chance of possessing some meaning, we must be careful to distinguish between oppression and subordination of personal whims to a social order."[32] To provide a gloss on this let's again look at Wilderson's grammar of suffering. Wilderson calls the subject that is socially alive and not natally alienated, that is the person who is not a slave, simply with the name "human". The slave, within the construction of the dominant social ontology, is cast as not-human. A human may subject themselves to a society for the sake of the life of that society, may enter into compromises and struggles. A nonhuman or even anti-human only enters that society as an object. "If, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity".[33]

The Need for Roots and the Grace of Deracination

Wilderson, Roberts, and Patterson, whose work we have surveyed, disagree on many important points of interpretation regarding the existence and social meaning of slaves and slavery. What they all agree upon, and where Weil's understanding converges with theirs, is that slavery is an ontological condition. That is, slavery is a question of being, not simply of historical and political happenstance. This is where we begin to see where Weil's lack of conceptually clarity on the figure of the slave moves to a powerful elaboration of slavery's obverse—revolt. She writes, "They didn't know that, though the submissiveness of slaves is greater than that of free men, their revolt is also a far more terrible one."[34] What Patterson says concerning the co-emergence of slavery and liberty is equally true of the emergence of something beyond slavery and liberty, "The movement from nonbeing to being, and structurally, from nonsignificance to significance, frequently involves different sets of explanatory conditions, but they usually share the quality that mathematicians and some physicists call a 'catastrophe'."[35] We enter here then into the problem of pessimism regarding the world that emerges from attempting to decide between a survival haunted by affliction (the concrete, or world of gravity) versus a life lived as if immortal, which is to say decreated (the event

[30] Wilderson, pp. 10-1.
[31] Wilderson, p. 11.
[32] OL, p. 53.
[33] Wilderson, p. 11.
[34] NFR, p. 59.
[35] Patterson, p. x.

of grace).

As we stated in the introduction to the previous section, Weil's social ontology is difficult to parse because of the necessity of certain compromises located throughout her work. Undoubtedly the most sustained investigation of these compromises is found in Weil's final major work, *The Need for Roots*. The English title is a strange translation choice for the French *L'Enracinement*, since that title carries no sense of the imperative that the English does and could have simply been translated more neutrally as *Rootedness*. Weil herself waffles in this text between her critique of the social world as always oppressive to individuals and the objective conditions for existence being found within that social world. One might simply write her off as being confused or as having a desire for some impossible purity, but I see the problem she locates as a real one akin to that of Theodor Adorno's description of negative dialectics as exploring "the wrong state of things".[36] In other words, Weil's rigorous pessimism arises out of the irresolvable conflict between her ideal conception of liberty and the "institution of freedom" that is the reality of the worldly, social institutions that obscure themselves via the myth of freedom.[37] While demands to "be realistic" or to act like a "grown up" are often propagated by professional political activists and writers of opinion editorials, they remain fundamentally conservative in their political position. If the world is produced as the split between the ideal and the concrete, then compromise is the order word of a worldly existence. While the problem we are confronted with in Weil's work is locating the line between compromise and collusion, I do not think there is anything particularly gained by pretending this compromise is simplistically beneficial or evil. Therefore it is strikes me as an imperative to read Weil's *The Need for Roots* as a kind of survival book within her wider metaphysics.

This strikes me as imperative for there are two distinct options seem open to me for how to read Weil's last book in light of her previous work. Firstly, one may simply claim that Weil has changed her mind towards the end of her short life and traversed the stereotypical move from left-wing to right-wing in her short thirty-four years of life. Such interpretation does not make sense out of her own commitments during the last years of her life as reported in her biography. When she writes, "we owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind—country, family or any other—not for itself, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls" are we really able to forget her own refusal of food?[38] This leads us to the second option. When Weil writes, "Rootedness lies in something other than the social" we have to understand this paradoxical conception within the fundamentally cracked nature of reality.[39] True rootedness is a kind of life unsayable within the world of untruth. Yet, such is the world where we live, where we are fated or sentenced to struggle against untruth. Rather than seeing a simply contradiction in Weil's work or a change in worldview, we have to understand that her valorization of survival is pitched between her understanding of the

---

[36] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 11.
[37] This second form of Freedom is explored at length by Orlando Patterson in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) but it was reading Sylvester A. Johnson's *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) that helped me to achieve clarity on the difference. See Johnson, pp. 1-9.
[38] NFR, p. 7.
[39] GG, p. 169.

difference between decreation and destruction: "Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation."[40] Decreation should not be confused with destruction anymore than pessimism should be confused for nihilism. Instead decreation is about becoming inoperative. Yet what decreation refers to also exceeds this signification, for it signifies something beyond signification at all. Thus to say that decreation is about becoming inoperative is to say that decreation refers to a form of life that would not be intelligible within the world. It is, for that reason, perhaps her most gnostic concept. Yet, within the world, we can see that for this signification to be exceeded it still must have some relative intelligibility within the world. If the need for roots is a need for life, then there is a form of life that is survival and affliction and a form of life that is, within Weil's philosophy, a life of truth that opens up beyond worldly articulation. Here Weil's pessimism gives way to something like a higher hope in line with Roberts as he writes, "Unfreedom is the condition the *damnés* reside in. It also contains the resources for their revolutionary flight from slavery."[41] Thus in this final section we will examine the figure of the slave as it elucidates what I am calling the grace of deracination.

Here we will depend in part upon Weil's often aphoristic remarks in *Gravity and Grace*. Deracination, or uprooting, is associated in *Gravity and Grace* with decreation. She writes, "To uproot oneself socially and vegetatively. To exile oneself from every earthly country. To do all that to others, from the outside, is a substitute (ersatz) for decreation. It results in unreality. But by uprooting oneself one seeks greater reality."[42] Importantly Weil marks a difference between a form of uprooting from the outside and a self-deracination. The first constitutes the uprooting one finds in colonialism and its postcolonial afterlife. The second marks something otherwise. But how might we distinguish between the two forms in practice?

Developing a rigorous evaluative analysis for the difference between an oppressive deracination and a graceful deracination is clearly a major challenge and one that Weil herself appears to struggle with in her notebooks and published work. There are arguably traces of such an analysis, though they require that we attend to some of Weil's most difficult statements that often appear corrupted with anti-Semitism.[43] There is not space here to fully deal fully with Weil's complicated relationship to her own Judaism and her relationship to anti-Semitism. Clearly amongst here statements regarding Jews and Jewish culture there are many that are problematic. An example that struck me particularly was her declaration that she would accept non-Nazi anti-Semitic violence in France if it helped keep the Republic together.[44] We see here a certain failure within her own thought to live up to its ideals, its own broken and cracked nature, but one brought on by the requirement of compromise for survival. However, assuming that we have to think in the midst of this necessary failure (to distinguish it between simply a failure of strength), I am more interested in

---

[40] GG, p. 32.
[41] Roberts, p. 26.
[42] GG, p. 39.
[43] On Weil's relationship to her own Jewish past and anti-Semitism see Rozelle-Stone and Stone, pp. 51-66.
[44] See McLellan, pp. 137-38.

those moments in these remarks where the figure of the Jew is taken as a figure of the common condition of humanity. That is how I want to read her entirely problematic remarks:

> "The Jews, that handful of uprooted people, have caused the uprootedness of the whole terrestrial globe. Their involvement in Christianity has made of Christendom, in regard to its own past, something uprooted. The orientation of the Enlightenment, 1789, secularism, etc. have infinitely increased this uprooting, through the lie of progress. And uprooted Europe has uprooted the rest of the world, by colonial conquest. Capitalism, totalitarianism, have a share in this progressive uprootedness; the antisemites, naturally, propagate the Jewish influence. But before Assyria in the Orient and Rome in the Occident uprooted through poison, they had already uprooted with the broadsword."[45]

If the problem here, as the earlier quote regarding the two kinds of deracination, is that the Jews are a society and so by definition not undertaking an individual deracination, this does not give us any insight into how one might foster a decreated society, if such a thing is even possible. It does, however, point towards what Weil may have seen but was unwilling to accept: that rootedness is untenable within the wider metaphysics of gravity and grace. Instead, what the Jewish experience of deracination evidences is what Jared Sexton identifies as the possible "deracination of everything" provided for by attending to the the natal alienation of the Black slave subject.[46]

So what difference is there between the slave and the Jew in Weil's analysis? Ultimately it comes down to the difference between Jewishness versus the condition of slavery. To be a Jew is to be recognized as a part of a community. This recognition, one should note, can be horrific, as when that recognition is structured by anti-Semitism. But, even for that horror, there is recognition of some form of kinship. And though that recognition is deficient in terms of the form of honor that

---

[45] GG, p. 162. It is perhaps worth noting that Weil's remarks mirror those of Martin Heidegger's own anti-Semitic declaration that, "The question of the role of world Jewry is not a racial question, but the metaphysical question about the kind of humanity that, without any restraints, can take over the uprooting of all beings from being as its world-historical 'task.'" (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe,* Volume 96, (Vittorio Klostermann: Frankfurt am Main, 2014), p. 243. Translation on-line <http://www.critical-theory.com/7-new-translated-excerpts-on-heideggers-anti-semitism/>).

[46] Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness", keynote lecture, Terror and the Inhuman from Brown University, Providence, RI, October, 25th 2012. The video of the keynote is available on-line: <https://vimeo.com/52199779>. For the sake of contextualizing his remarks and to join others in disseminating his work, I have transcribed the relevant remarks, excising some verbal tics. "… natal alienation has been important to that distinction I have tried to draw. So I assert […] that natal alienation, as the kind of signature of enslavement, is not something that is generalizable across a whole field of racial oppressions, colonial or otherwise. But what I am starting to think about more recently is that it's not just that natal alienation characterizes racial blackness, in law and politics, economy and culture, and so forth, but that what the fact of natal alienation, the legal fact, the political fact of it, the economic and cultural fact of it as it were, what it actually demonstrates is not […] that there is a class of beings excluded from nativity and excluded from kinship and from genealogy and so on and so forth. But what that exclusion demonstrates is the untenability of kinship as such, of genealogy as such, as any natal occasion whatsoever. So what interests me maybe even more so now than my earlier attempt to try and demonstrate singularity and break out of the 'people of color' subsumption is the ways in which an attention to natal alienation in this way actually might make possible deracination in the most universal sense. For everything. Not just saying we suffer from deracination in ways you don't and so deal with that. That starts a conversation. But what I am interested in is how *we are deracinated, and you can be too.*"

may be given to a Jew, there is still some form of humanity recognized. With regards to the slave and the condition of the slave, the only form of recognition is through dishonor. As Patterson and Hartman have demonstrated, even the manumission of a slave was still dependent upon the slave's natal alienation and refusal to recognize them as a human or fully socially alive.

Setting aside the erroneous history Weil is working with in the above quotation, what happens when we read her positive conception of slavery around the figure of Christ (the grace of deracination) as growing out of Judaism? We begin to see the cracks within her own anti-Semitism and the way in which a society of decreation may arise precisely as a people that uproots from the world. While the figure of the slave and condition of slavery mark proliferate throughout Weil's work as the absolute limit for her thought, as a condition to constantly negate, there exist also a number of positive remarks regarding slavery. Take, for example, when she writes, "The Gospels, it is true, are full of comparisons drawn from slavery. But in Christ's mouth this word is an artifice of love. The 'slaves' are men who have wanted with all their heart to give themselves to God as slaves. And although that means a gift made in the instant and once and for all, subsequently these slaves never cease for one second begging God to allow them to remain in slavery."[47] Such a statement is only consistent with her wider work on oppression and liberty if we accept a theology that looks more Jewish or even Islamic than Christian. For the absolute distance between God and creatures in Jewish and Islamic theology is the only safeguard for protecting God from being turned into an idol carried in the figure of the sovereign of the world. And so we find in this absolute distance a kind of theology of absolute deracination, "We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I'."[48]

If we are to truly have liberty then we must "strip ourselves of the imaginary royalty of the world."[49] The figure of the slave is used to build the world, even if, as Wilderson claims in a phrase that evokes the messianic figure of Christ, the slave is not recognized "in the world". So it is also through the figure of the slave that the truth beyond the constructed world may be revealed as beyond recognition, as what necessarily produces statements that appear as paradoxical within that world, and as the term within the antagonism that must triumph over the other term, the world. To be deracinated is thus a means of grace for decreation. If the path towards decreation moves through affliction and detachment, then the figure of the slave is the only figure that adequately speaks to decreation, which always feels like an allusion again to the fissure between empirical suicide and something that takes the name suicide but exceeds that name. "To empty ourselves of the world. To take the form of a slave. To reduce ourselves to the point we occupy in space and time—that is to say, to nothing."[50]

This form of nothingness, this absolute deracination, challenges and most possibly shatters Weil's positive political program. The realm of the social will always be the realm of compromise

[47] NFR, p. 271.
[48] GG, p. 26.
[49] GG, p. 12.
[50] GG, p. 12.

within a metaphysics couched between gravity and grace. And yet, we see here one of the many struggles that Weil was engaged with in her own thought and worldly practice. She would accept anti-Semitic violence if it kept the French Republic together in the face of the Nazi threat. By exploring Weil's own failure I am not working to denigrate her thought. Instead, I am working to place that thought within a framework that assumes failure is the only way to truly look and see the meaning of the world, the meaning of oppression, and the meaning of liberty. To return to Fanon who we placed in dialogue with Weil at the start of this essay, we should say that decreation in the realm of the social must look like decolonization. "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder."[51] Weil points us, almost desperately, toward something like this. She points us toward the possibility of a form of solidarity that breaks with worldly order or "sociality" in her definition of charity, a definition from which we have borrowed for the title of this essay. For it is thinking from failure as constitutive of worldly existence to name charity as the ability to love like God does, which is to love human beings as if they were nothing. That is, to love human beings as if they were slaves. This "as if" belies the actual existence of slaves, of those who are most marked as enslaveable today through the afterlives of slavery. For there are slaves, even if this must be written the way we write about the existence of God as "slaves ~~exist~~". Yet the absolute deracination of these slaves witnesses to a grace, perverse though that may sound within the world, for these deracinated subjects form the truth of humanity.

[51] Fanon, p. 2.