READER:

Nonidentity. Current Configurations in Critical Theories and Poetics

Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference at the Department of German, NYU in cooperation with the Department of Comparative Literature, NYU

April 28-29, 2022
Can we mobilize concepts of nonidentity as resources for current configurations of resistance and disfiguration in critical theories and poetics? Our conference traces this question by connecting the emergence of nonidentity in the Frankfurt School with Postcolonial, Indigenous, and Black Studies. Focusing on contemporary entanglements of critical theories and poetics, we seek to provide answers on how postcolonial theories and the Frankfurt School enunciate concepts liminal to conceptualization.

According to Adorno/Horkheimer, the identity principle serves to dominate nature by subsuming particulars under universal concepts. An “ur-form of ideology”, the identity principle correlates with the compulsion towards identification with authority. In continuations of the normative and historically contextualized reflection of critical theory throughout the last decades however, certain notions of identity have been discussed as political tools to counter structural violence: identity politics started with analyses of forms of oppression of particularities by the governing concepts to reclaim the previously stigmatized accounts of social groups (Combahee River Collective) and has been critically reconfigured in postcolonial theorems like the third space (Bhabha). For both, the Frankfurt School and postcolonial theories, the relation between identity and nonidentity was intricately mediated.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School deployed the term identity ambiguously within reflections on philosophical, economical, and social discourses. Identity thus figures as a nexus highlighting how structures of thought are sedimented in and carried on by social and economic operations:

- Epistemologically, “to think means to identify” (Adorno), as a reference and an equation. Identity is a necessary stage of dialectics, wherein to think presupposes subsumption, and the form of the subject mediated through conceptual synthesis is itself a form of identity. Its mediating process prevents the concept from generating an identity between subject and object; nonidentity denotes a concept of what escapes conceptualization. Erupting from the contradictions stored within the implementation of the identity principle, it is exerted on conceptual thought as it is carried out by the subject.

- The principles of abstraction and exchangeability, the essence of capitalist society, are correlative with and reproduced by the conceptual operations of identity thinking in society’s subjects and link philosophy to the economic and social sphere. From the standpoint of the reproduction of totality in the capitalist society, nonidentity, then, is living labor, the precondition of the production of value. The nonidentity between capital and subsumed labor appears in the contradiction between reducing the cost of labor and realizing the value of the products as social coercion expressed in sicknesses, accidents, strike.
- The identity principle is also analyzed by the Frankfurt School in its psychic dimension of the connection between the abstract subject and the concept of the modern individual. The experience of transference can be seen as the starting point for Freud’s concepts of identification, projection, and the ego ideal. In Freud’s *Massenpsychologie*, it becomes clear that the ego ideal has political implications for the formation of mass movements.

For Adorno, any critique of the existing totality has to orientate itself by nonidentity through the process of mediation that performs the self-destruction of conceptual synthesis and transforms theoretical thinking into poetic operations.

Our conference seeks to discuss current reconfigurations of nonidentity in literary texts, in transformations of critical theory in Decolonial Theory, Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, as well as involvements with the Frankfurt School, that mediate between critiques of capitalism, colonialism, and racialization. We want to ask whether nonidentity can serve as a resource for resistance within the entwinement of thought and the economic and social sphere under the present political conditions. As reconfigurations of nonidentity, we could consider notions of disfiguration: the more-than-human “‘demonic ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman’” (Wynter) liminal to the governing configuration of the human, and Spillers’ “undifferentiated identity” of flesh as a passage between the human and the non-human. We could also think of notions of displacement that counter the history of forced displacement as in Byrd’s notion of “transit” indigeneity, and in the poetics of “untelling” in NorubeSe Philip’s poem *Zong!*. Or we could take into account the explicit interlacing of poetic operations with theoretical practices such as Cusicanqui’s “Ch’ixi”, and Brand’s metaphor of “the door of no return” to continue a way of thought that takes rupture as a point of unending departure.

We are soliciting papers concerned with contemporary entanglements of critical theory and poetics. Topics of interest may include but are not limited to:

- mediations between identity and nonidentity in postcolonial theories, Indigenous Studies, and Black Studies
- mediations between identity and nonidentity in the Frankfurt School
- critical concepts liminal to conceptualization such as “desedimentation” (Chandler), “nonsite” (Moreiras), “poethics” (da Silva) or “disaggregation” (Nichols)
- literary forms of non-identity, displacement, and indigenization
- the authoritarian personality as figuration of identity/non-identity
- nonidentity between the more-than-human and the End of Man
- impasses of identification in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical investigations in the social formation of identity

We welcome proposals from graduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral researchers working in fields including but not limited to Cultural and Literary Studies, Critical Theory, Decolonial Theory, Black Studies, and Gender Studies. The conference will adopt a hybrid in-person and online format.
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THE BODY RETURNS...BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

All she have is two fine leg and a gully.

Caribbean men using cricket, the game of place and space, beating their former masters at their own game and putting their mark on the outer space. “Two fine leg and a gully”—cricket—shaping the image of the Caribbean in the outer space of the world, where women not even playing the game let alone going “beyond the boundary.” “Two fine leg and a gully.” To move beyond the boundary of fear—of penetration—unwanted and unwanting—c(o)unting the inner space—to find the source and sound of our silencing, we must become cartographers of silence, mapping not only the known edges—the boundaries of our inner space—we must be moving beyond the boundary. To take soundings of the deep, where the voice is not one but “the many-voiced one of one voice / ours.” Polyvocal and many-tongued.

“You better know your place”—the question at the centre of “Earth and Sound.” What is this place? The body linking the place between—Dis Place—to the beyond of boundary—dis place.
30 The late C. L. R. James in the definitive work on cricket, explored the West Indian psyche and character, and the relationship between the imperial power, England, and its colonies through the game of cricket. C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

31 Both “fine leg” and “gully” are cricketing terms referring to fielding positions.


For the “Abolish Law, Woman” speech delivered at the Women’s
Kabir: selected verses on negativity and non-identity

The *bhakti* poems of the 15th-century Indian mystic poet Kabir are usually considered to express the search for and devotion (*bhakti*) to an absolute and formless (*nirgun*) divine. At the heart of Kabir’s search for divine truth, however, is also a strong notion of negativity and non-identity as well as a steadfast refusal of all religious doctrines and social regulations. Due to their radical political edge and poignant critique of social norms, Kabir’s poems have long held a central place in various political reform and protests movements of oppressed and marginalised communities, particularly Dalits.

Philipp Sperner

Ramaini 6

What form or shape to describe?
What second one is there to see?
At first, no Om or Veda—
who can trace his ancestry?
No starry sky,
no moon or sun,
no father’s seed,
no calm air,
sea or land—
who can name him
or know his command?
No night or day—
his race and family
who can say?

Remembering the empty, the easy,
a light broke out.
I offer myself to a being
based on nothing.


Ramaini 19

They’re hoping to hear the unstruck sound—
see the upside-down spectacle!
Just look at the spectacle, brother—
they’ve taken off for the void.
They want emptiness, go to emptiness,
let go of hands and are left handless.1
The world is a beast of doubt.
Death hunts the prey, early and late.
Keep remembering Ram,
Death has you by the hair.
He’ll strike at home or in foreign lands,
you never know when or where.

(Kabir. *Bijak Of Kabir*. 81)
**Sākhī 120**

If I say one, it isn't so.
If I say two, it's slander.
Kabir has thought about it.
As it is, so it is.

*Kabir. Bijak Of Kabir. 103*

**Sākhī 129**

Seeing the mill turn
brings tears to the eyes.
No one who falls between the stones
comes out unbroken.

*Kabir. Bijak Of Kabir. 104*

**Sākhī 343**

They searched and searched, searched some more
it just kept disappearing.
After all that search, when they couldn't find it,
they gave up and said, "Beyond."

*Kabir. Bijak Of Kabir. 130*
be mistaken for a flirtation with positivism. However, I want to linger in, rather than quickly jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience in order to consider the word “case” as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between the two. I’m interested in how the troubled, illicit commerce between fact and lived experience is bound up with that between blackness and the black, a difference that is often concealed, one that plays itself out not by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and beings. Attunement to that difference and its modalities must be fine. Perhaps certain recalibrations of Fanon—made possible by insights to which Fanon is both given and blind—will allow us to show the necessity and possibility of another understanding of the ontological difference. In such an understanding, the political phonochoreography of being’s words bears a content that cannot be left by the wayside even if it is packaged in the pathologization of blacks and blackness in the discourse of the human and natural sciences and in the corollary emergence of expertise as the defining epistemological register of the modern subject who is in that he knows, regulates, but cannot be black. This might turn out to have much to do with the constitution of that locale in which “ontological explanation” is precisely insofar as it is against the law.

One way to investigate the lived experience of the black is to consider what it is to be the dangerous—because one is, because we are (Who? We? Who is this we? Who volunteers for this already given imposition? Who elects this imposed affinity? The one who is homelessly, hopefully, less and more?) the constitutive—supplement. What is it to be an irreducibly disordering, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form? This is not the same as, though it does probably follow from, the troubled realization that one is an object in the midst of other objects, as Fanon would have it. In their introduction to a rich and important collection of articles that announce and enact a new deployment of Fanon in black studies’ encounter with visual studies, Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland index Fanon’s formulation in order to consider what it is to be “the thing against which all other subjects take their bearing.” But something is left unattended in their invocation of Fanon, in their move toward equating objecthood with “the domain of non-existence” or the interstitial space between life and death, something to be understood in its difference from and relation to what Giorgio Agamben calls naked life, something they call raw life, that moves—or more precisely cannot move—in its forgetful non-relation to that quickening, forgetive force that Agamben calls the form of life.
Sexton and Copeland turn to the Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*, the phenomenologist of (the lived experience of) blackness, who provides for them the following epigraph:

> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (*Black Skins*, 77)

> [J’arrivais dans le monde, soucieux de faire lever un sens aux choses, mon âme pleine du désir d’être à l’origine du monde, et voici que je me découvrais objet au milieu d’autres objets.]

Fanon writes of entering the world with a melodramatic imagination, as Peter Brooks would have it—one drawn toward the occult installation of the sacred in things, gestures (certain events, as opposed to actions, of muscularity), and in the subterranean field that is, paradoxically, signaled by the very cutaneous darkness of which Fanon speaks. That darkness turns the would-be melodramatic subject not only into an object but also into a sign—the hideous blackamoor at the entrance of the cave, that world underneath the world of light that Fanon will have entered, who guards and masks “our” hidden motives and desires. There’s a whole other economy of skins and masks to be addressed here. However, I will defer that address in order to get at something (absent) in Sexton and Copeland. What I am after is something obscured by the fall from prospective subject to object that Fanon recites—namely, a transition from thing(s) (*chooses*) to object (*objet*) that turns out to version a slippage or movement that could be said to animate the history of philosophy. What if we bracket the movement from (erstwhile) subject to object in order to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing (a change as strange as that from the possibility of intersubjectivity that attends majority to whatever is relegated to the plane or plain of the minor)? What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, founds things? What if the thing will have founded something against the very possibility of foundation and against all anti- or post-foundedational impossibilities? What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of “object”? At the same time, what if the value of that absence or excess is given to us only in and by way of a kind of failure or inadequacy—or, perhaps more precisely, by way of a history of exclusion, serial expulsion,
presence’s ongoing taking of leave—so that the non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin, is the only way to approach the thing in its informal (enformed/enforming, as opposed to formless), material totality? Perhaps this would be cause for black optimism or, at least, some black operations. Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object’s vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that escapes enframing is what I’m interested in—an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions. To operate out of this interest might mispresent itself as a kind of refusal of Fanon.” But my reading is enabled by the way Fanon’s texts continually demand that we read them—again or, deeper still, not or against again, but for the first time. I wish to engage a kind of pre-op(tical) optimism in Fanon that is tied to the commerce between the lived experience of the black and the fact of blackness and between the thing and the object—an optimism recoverable, one might say, only by way of mis-translation, that bridged but unbridgeable gap that Heidegger explores as both distance and nearness in his discourse on “The Thing.”

Michael Inwood moves quickly in his explication of Heidegger’s distinction between Ding and Sache: “Ding, ‘thing,’ is distinct from Sache, ‘thing, (subject-)matter, affair.’ Sache, like the Latin res, originally denoted a legal case or a matter of concern, while Ding was the ‘court’ or ‘assembly’ before which a case was discussed.” In Heidegger’s essay “Das Ding,” the speed of things is a bit more deliberate, perhaps so that the distinction between things and human affairs can be maintained against an explicatory velocity that threatens to abolish the distance between, which is also to say the nearness of, the two: “[T]he Old High German word thing means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter. In consequence, the Old German words thing and ding become the names for an affair or matter of pertinence. They denote anything that in any way bears upon men, concerns them, and that accordingly is a matter for discourse.” The descent from Old High German to Old German is held here and matters. The trajectory of that descent is at issue such that we are to remain concerned with the detachment and proximity of “a gathering to deliberate” and “contested matter.” It might even be worthwhile to think of the gathering as contested matter, to linger in the break—the distance and nearness—between the thing and the case in the interest of the ones who are without interests but who are nevertheless a concern precisely because they gather, as they are gathered matter, the internally differentiated materiality of a collective head. The thing of it is, the case of blackness.
The will to this understanding bespeaks a power claim denied by that which is to be understood.

The most patent expression of philosophy’s historical fate is the way the special sciences compelled it to turn back into a special science. If Kant had, as he put it, “freed himself from the school concept of philosophy for its world concept,” it has now, perforce, regressed to its school concept. Whenever philosophers mistake that for the world concept, their pretensions grow ridiculous. Hegel, despite his doctrine of the absolute spirit in which he included philosophy, knew philosophy as a mere element of reality, an activity in the division of labor, and thus restricted it. This has since led to the narrowness of philosophy, to a disproportionateness to reality that became the more marked the more thoroughly philosophers forgot about the restriction—the more they disdained, as alien, any thought of their position in a whole which they monopolized as their object, instead of recognizing how much they depended on it all the way to the internal composition of their philosophy, to its immanent truth.

To be worth another thought, philosophy must rid itself of such naïveté. But its critical self-reflection must not halt before the highest peaks of its history. Its task would be to inquire whether and how there can still be a philosophy at all, now that Hegel’s has fallen, just as Kant inquired into the possibility of metaphysics after the critique of rationalism. If Hegel’s dialectics constituted the unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts, the relationship to dialectics is due for an accounting insofar as his attempt failed.

DIALECTICS NOT A STANDPOINT

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising. But neither need dialectics be muted by such rebuke, or by the concomitant charge of its superfluity, of being a method slapped on outwardly,
at random. The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel’s absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.

Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions. It is a thesis secretly implied by Kant—and mobilized against him by Hegel—that the transconceptual “in itself” is void, being wholly indefinite. Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Since that totality is structured to accord with logic, however, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever will not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.

Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking. We are blaming the method for the fault of the matter when we object to dialectics on the ground (repeated from Hegel’s Aristotelian critics on\(^2\)) that whatever happens to come into the dialectical mill will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction, and that (an argument still advanced by Croce\(^3\)) the full diversity of the noncontradictory, of that which is simply differentiated, will be ignored. What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it. This is what
dialectics holds up to our consciousness as a contradiction. Because of the immanent nature of consciousness, contradictoriness itself has an inescapably and fatefully legal character. Identity and contradiction of thought are welded together. Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification. Contradiction is nonidentity under the rule of a law that affects the nonidentical as well.

REALITY AND DIALECTICS

This law is not a cogitative law, however. It is real. Unquestionably, one who submits to the dialectical discipline has to pay dearly in the qualitative variety of experience. Still, in the administered world the impoverishment of experience by dialectics, which outrages healthy opinion, proves appropriate to the abstract monotony of that world. Its agony is the world’s agony raised to a concept. Cognition must bow to it, unless concretion is once more to be debased into the ideology it starts becoming in fact.

Another version of dialectics contented itself with a debilitated renascence: with its intellectual-historical derivation from Kant’s aporias and from that which the systems of his successors projected but failed to achieve. It can be achieved only negatively. Dialectics unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal, dictated by the universal. As the subject-object dichotomy is brought to mind it becomes inescapable for the subject, furrowing whatever the subject thinks, even objectively—but it would come to an end in reconcilement. Reconcilement would release the nonidentical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualized coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconcilement would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason.

Dialectics serves the end of reconcilement. It dismantles the coercive logical character of its own course; that is why it is denounced as “panlogism.” As idealistic dialectics, it was bracketed with the absolute subject’s predominance as the negative impulse of each single move of the concept and of its course as a whole.
semblance of its absolute being-for-itself. That semblance in turn is a product of identifying thought—of the thought which depreciates a thing to a mere sample of its kind or species only to convince us that we have the thing as such, without subjective addition.

ON THE DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY

As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with, in the concept, and as he perceives its immanently antinomical character, he clings to the idea of something beyond contradiction. The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction. Reciprocal criticism of the universal and of the particular; identifying acts of judgment whether the concept does justice to what it covers, and whether the particular fulfills its concept—these constitute the medium of thinking about the nonidentity of particular and concept.

And not of thinking only. If mankind is to get rid of the coercion to which the form of identification really subjects it, it must attain identity with its concept at the same time. In this, all relevant categories play a part. The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total. But if we denied the principle abstractly—if we proclaimed, to the greater glory of the irreducibly qualitative, that parity should no longer be the ideal rule—we would be creating excuses for recidivism into ancient injustice. From olden times, the main characteristic of the exchange of equivalents has been that unequal things would be exchanged in its name, that the surplus value of labor would be appropriated. If comparability as a category of measure were simply annulled, the rationality which is inherent in the barter
principle—as ideology, of course, but also as a promise—would give way to direct appropriation, to force, and nowadays to the naked privilege of monopolies and cliques.

When we criticize the barter principle as the identifying principle of thought, we want to realize the ideal of free and just barter. To date, this ideal is only a pretext. Its realization alone would transcend barter. Once critical theory has shown it up for what it is—an exchange of things that are equal and yet unequal—our critique of the inequality within equality aims at equality too, for all our skepticism of the rancor involved in the bourgeois egalitarian ideal that tolerates no qualitative difference. If no man had part of his labor withheld from him any more, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the identifying mode of thinking. This comes close enough to Hegel. The dividing line from him is scarcely drawn by individual distinctions. It is drawn by our intent: whether in our consciousness, theoretically and in the resulting practice, we maintain that identity is the ultimate, that it is absolute, that we want to reinforce it—or whether we feel that identity is the universal coercive mechanism which we, too, finally need to free ourselves from universal coercion, just as freedom can come to be real only through coercive civilization, not by way of any “Back to nature.”

Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself—of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept. Negative dialectics is thus tied to the supreme categories of identitarian philosophy as its point of departure. Thus, too, it remains false according to identitarian logic: it remains the thing against which it is conceived. It must correct itself in its critical course—a course affecting concepts which in negative dialectics are formally treated as if they came “first” for it, too. It is one thing for our thought to close itself under compulsion of the form which nothing can escape from, to comply in principle, so as immanently to deny the conclusive structure claimed by traditional philosophy; and it is quite another thing for thought to urge that conclusive form on its own, with the intent of making itself “the first.”

In idealism, the highly formal identity principle had, due to its formalization, an affirmative substance. This is innocently brought to light by terminology, when simple predicative sentences are
called “affirmative.” The copula says: It is so, not otherwise. The act of synthesis, for which the copula stands, indicates that it shall not be otherwise—else the act would not be performed. The will to identity works in each synthesis. As an a priori task of thought, a task immanent in thought, identity seems positive and desirable: the substrate of the synthesis is thus held to be reconciled with the I, and therefore to be good. Which promptly permits the moral desideratum that the subject, understanding how much the cause is its own, should bow to what is heterogeneous to it.

Identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it suppresses; adequacy has always been subjection to dominant purposes and, in that sense, its own contradiction. After the unspeakable effort it must have cost our species to produce the primacy of identity even against itself, man rejoices and basks in his conquest by turning it into the definition of the conquered thing: what has happened to it must be presented, by the thing, as its “in-itself.” Ideology’s power of resistance to enlightenment is owed to its complicity with identifying thought, or indeed with thought at large. The ideological side of thinking shows in its permanent failure to make good on the claim that the non-I is finally the I: the more the I thinks, the more perfectly will it find itself debased into an object. Identity becomes the authority for a doctrine of adjustment, in which the object—which the subject is supposed to go by—repays the subject for what the subject has done to it.

The subject is to see reason against its reason. The critique of ideology is thus not something peripheral and intra-scientific, not something limited to the objective mind and to the products of the subjective mind. Philosophically, it is central: it is a critique of the constitutive consciousness itself.

COGITATIVE SELF-REFLECTION

The force of consciousness extends to the delusion of consciousness. It is rationally knowable where an unleashed, self-escaping rationality goes wrong, where it becomes true mythology.
The ratio recoils into irrationality as soon as in its necessary course it fails to grasp that the disappearance of its substrate—however diluted—is its own work, the product of its own abstraction. When thinking follows its law of motion unconsciously, it turns against its own sense, against what has been thought, against that which calls a halt to the flight of subjective intentions. The dictates of its autarky condemn our thinking to emptiness; in the end, subjectively, the emptiness becomes stupidity and primitivity. Regression of consciousness is a product of its lack of self-reflection. We can see through the identity principle, but we cannot think without identifying. Any definition is identification.

But definition also approaches that which the object itself is as nonidentical: in placing its mark on the object, definition seeks to be marked by the object. Nonidentity is the secret telos of identification. It is the part that can be salvaged; the mistake in traditional thinking is that identity is taken for the goal. The force that shatters the appearance of identity is the force of thinking: the use of “it is” undermines the form of that appearance, which remains inalienable just the same. Dialectically, cognition of nonidentity lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies—that it identifies to a greater extent, and in other ways, than identitarian thinking. This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself. The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object. Under its critique, identity does not vanish but undergoes a qualitative change. Elements of affinity—of the object itself to the thought of it—come to live in identity.

To define identity as the correspondence of the thing-in-itself to its concept is hubris; but the ideal of identity must not simply be discarded. Living in the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept is the concept’s longing to become identical with the thing. This is how the sense of nonidentity contains identity. The supposition of identity is indeed the ideological element of pure thought, all the way down to formal logic; but hidden in it is also the truth moment of ideology, the pledge that there should be no contradiction, no antagonism. In the simple identifying judgment.
the pragmatist, nature-controlling element already joins with a utopian element. “A” is to be what it is not yet. Such hope is contradictorily tied to the breaks in the form of predicative identity. Philosophical tradition had a word for these breaks: “ideas.” They are neither χαρτοί nor an empty sound; they are negative signs. The untruth of any identity that has been attained is the obverse of truth. The ideas live in the cavities between what things claim to be and what they are. Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity.

For the sake of utopia, identification is reflected in the linguistic use of the word outside of logic, in which we speak, not of identifying an object, but of identifying with people and things. Dialectics alone might settle the Greek argument whether like is known by like or by unlike. If the thesis that likeness alone has that capacity makes us aware of the indelible mimetic element in all cognition and all human practice, this awareness grows untrue when the affinity—indelible, yet infinitely far removed at the same time—is posited as positive. In epistemology the inevitable result is the false conclusion that the object is the subject. Traditional philosophy believes that it knows the unlike by likening it to itself, while in so doing it really knows itself only. The idea of a changed philosophy would be to become aware of likeness by defining it as that which is unlike itself.

The nonidentical element in an identifying judgment is clearly intelligible insofar as every single object subsumed under a class has definitions not contained in the definition of the class. But to a more emphatic concept, to one that is not simply the characteristic unit of the individual objects from which it was abstracted, the opposite applies as well. Emphatically conceived, the judgment that a man is free refers to the concept of freedom; but this concept in turn is more than is predicated of the man, and by other definitions the man is more than the concept of his freedom. The concept says not only that it is applicable to all individuals defined as free; it feeds on the idea of a condition in which individuals would have qualities not to be ascribed to anyone here and now. The specific of praising a man as free is the sous-entendu that something impossible is ascribed to him because it
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shows in him. This quality, striking and secret at the same time, animates every identifying judgment that is worth making.

The concept of freedom lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. It is not what it says, then. But because it must always be also the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers. Such confrontation forces it to contradict itself. Whenever we try by a merely posited, “operational” definition to strip the concept of freedom of what philosophical terminology used to call its idea, we are arbitrarily diminishing the concept for utility’s sake, in comparison with what it means in itself. The individual is both more and less than his general definition. But because the particular, the definite, would come to itself only by voiding that contradiction—in other words, by achieving an identity of the particular with its concept—the individual’s concern is not only to hold on to that of which the general concept robs him; he is equally concerned with that “more” of the concept compared with his need. To this day, he will experience this “more” as his own negativity. The substance of the contradiction between universal and particular is that individuality is not yet—and that, therefore, it is bad wherever established. At the same time, that contradiction between the concept of freedom and its realization remains the insufficiency of the concept. The potential of freedom calls for criticizing what an inevitable formalization has made of the potential.

OBJECTIVITY OF CONTRADICTION

Such contradiction is not due to faulty subjective thinking. The embittering part of dialectics, notably for the reflexive philosophy that prevails now as in Hegel’s day, is its objective contradictoriness. This, we say, is incompatible with flatly valid logic and removable by a formally unanimous judgment. As long as criticism sticks abstractly to the rules of logic, objective contradiction would be merely a pretentious way to put the fact that our subjective conceptual mechanism will inevitably claim truth for its judgment about the specific entity it judges, whereas this entity does coincide with the judgment only insofar as it is pre-formed in the definition
all narrow-mindedness, is not indifferent to the means intended to achieve it; otherwise this dialectic would degenerate into vulgar Jesuitism. The idiotic parliamentarian in Doré’s caricature who boasts, “Gentlemen, I am above all practical,” reveals himself as a scoundrel who cannot see beyond the immediate tasks and moreover is proud of it; his behavior denounces the very spirit of praxis as a demon. Theory speaks for what is not narrow-minded. Despite all of its unfreedom, theory is the guarantor of freedom in the midst of unfreedom.

Today once again the antithesis between theory and praxis is being misused to denounce theory. When a student’s room was smashed because he preferred to work rather than join in actions, on the wall was scrawled: “Whoever occupies himself with theory, without acting practically, is a traitor to socialism.” It is not only against him that praxis serves as an ideological pretext for exercising moral constraint. The thinking denigrated by actionists apparently demands of them too much undue effort: it requires too much work, is too practical. Whoever thinks, offers resistance; it is more comfortable to swim with the current, even when one declares oneself to be against the current. Moreover, by giving way to a regressive and distorted form of the pleasure principle, making things easier for oneself, letting oneself go, one can hope for a moral premium from those who are like-minded. In a crude reversal, the collective substitute superego demands what the old superego disapproved of: the very cession of oneself qualifies the willing adept as a better person. Even in Kant emphatic praxis was goodwill; but this signified as much as autonomous reason. A concept of praxis that would not be narrow-minded can be applied only to politics, to the conditions of society that largely condemn the praxis of each individual to irrelevance. This is the locus of the difference between Kantian ethics and the views of Hegel who, as Kierkegaard also saw, no longer accepts the traditional under-

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8 The concept of the traitor comes from the eternal reserves of collective repression, whatever its coloration may be. The law of conspiratorial communities is irrevocability; for this reason conspirators enjoy warming up the mythical concept of the oath. Whoever thinks differently is not only excluded but exposed to the most severe moral sanctions. The concept of morality demands autonomy, which is, however, not tolerated by those who always have morality on the tip of their tongue. In truth it is the one who sins against his own autonomy who deserves to be called a traitor.
standing of ethics. Kant’s writings on moral philosophy, in their conformity to the state of enlightenment in the eighteenth century and despite their anti-psychologism and all their endeavors to attain an absolutely conclusive and comprehensive validity, were individualistic to the extent that they addressed themselves to the individual as the substrate of correct—that is, for Kant, radically reasonable—action. All of Kant’s examples come from the private and the business spheres; and this conditions the concept of an ethics based on dispositions, whose subject must be the individuated singular person. What comes to expression for the first time in Hegel is the experience that the behavior of the individual—even if he has a pure will—does not come near to a reality that prescribes and limits the conditions of any individual’s action. Hegel in effect dissolves the concept of the moral by extending it into the political. Since then no unpolitical reflection upon praxis can be valid anymore. However, there should be just as little self-deception about the fact that the political extension of the concept of praxis introduces the repression of the particular by the universal. Humaneness, which does not exist without individuation, is being virtually recanted by the latter’s snotty-nosed, casual dismissal. But once the action of the individual, and therefore of all individuals, is made contemptible, then collective action is likewise paralyzed. Spontaneity appears to be trivial at the outset in the face of the factual supremacy of the objective conditions. Kant’s moral philosophy and Hegel’s philosophy of right represent two dialectical stages of the bourgeois self-consciousness of praxis. Polarized according to the dichotomy of the particular and the universal that tears apart this consciousness, both philosophies are false. Each justifies itself against the other so long as a possible higher form of praxis does not reveal itself in reality; its revelation requires theoretical reflection. It is beyond doubt and controversy that a reasoned analysis of the situation is the precondition for political praxis at least: even in the military sphere, where the crude primacy of action holds sway, the procedure is the same. An analysis of the situation is not tantamount to conformity to that situation. In reflecting upon the situation, analysis emphasizes the aspects that might be able to lead beyond the given constraints of the situation. This is of incalculable relevance for the relationship of theory to praxis. Through its difference from immediate, situation-specific action, i.e., through its autonomization, theory becomes a transformative and practical productive force. If thinking bears on anything of importance, then it initiates a practical impulse, no matter how hidden that impulse may remain to thinking. Those alone think who do not passively accept the already given: from the primitive who contemplates how he can protect his small fire from the rain or where he can find shelter from the storm to the Enlighten-
ment philosopher who construes how humanity can move beyond its self-incurred tutelage by means of its interest in self-preservation.\textsuperscript{11} Such motives continue to have an effect, and perhaps all the more so in cases where no practical grounds are immediately articulated. There is no thought, insofar as it is more than the organization of facts and a bit of technique, that does not have its practical telos. Every meditation upon freedom extends into the conception of its possible realization, so long as the meditation is not taken in hand by praxis and tailored to fit the results it enjoins. Just as the division of subject and object cannot be revoked immediately by a decree of thought, so too an immediate unity of theory and praxis is hardly possible: it would imitate the false identity of subject and object and would perpetuate the principle of domination that posits identity and that a true praxis must oppose. The truth content of the discourse about the unity of theory and praxis was bound to historical conditions. On the nodal points and fractures of this historical development reflection and action may ignite; but even then the two are not one.

The primacy of the object must be respected by praxis; this was first noted by the idealist Hegel’s critique of Kant’s ethics of conscience. To the extent that subject is for its part something mediated, praxis rightly understood is what the object wants: praxis follows the object’s neediness. But not by the subject adapting itself, which would merely reinforce the heteronomous objectivity. The neediness of the object is mediated via the total societal system; for that reason it can be determined critically only by theory. Praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis. Desperation that, because it finds the exits blocked, blindly leaps into praxis, with the purest of intentions joins forces with catastrophe. The hostility to theory in the spirit of the times, the by no means coincidental withering away of theory, its banishment by an impatience that wants to change the world without having to interpret it while so far it has been chapter and verse that philosophers have merely interpreted—such hostility becomes praxis’s weakness.\textsuperscript{12} The requirement that theory should kowtow to praxis dissolves theory’s truth content and condemns praxis to delusion; in practical terms, it is high time to voice this. A modicum of madness furnishes collective movements—apparently for the time being regardless of their contents—with their sinister power of attraction. Individuals
Byard’s fellow players gravitate toward that node of significance. Their contributions thicken and deform it—initially by merely repeating the riff verbatim and then through more deliberate deconstruction. The performance allows us to glimpse a way to listen to, to be with, and to speak as part of a gathering of deviates. It demonstrates how unfettered, poorly regulated black life congregates in distinction. We are able to sneak a listen beyond the racial clod that organizes black excursions into mainstream spaces, of which discourse on jazz performance, such as we have here, must be included. The musicians are “at play in themselves,” but they are also at play with the image or concept the world has of them. Their interlocution reflects, and is perhaps even facilitated by, the constant negotiations between their everyday life and that of the “hung, drawn-and-quartered” extramural portrayal. And at the risk of a charge of infinite regress, it could be argued that this burden is the foundational condition of blackness. The riff recalled by Byard (and again by Mingus) is a node of significance to which contribution gathers; and, in a slight shift of emphasis, it is also a token or symbol of an inescapable collectivity in displacement, an “abeyance of [the] closure” between appearance in the general social field and the life that imagining routinely suppresses. The riff can be understood as a sacrificial amulet, an ever-forming, ever-vandalized effigy of “the black.” While on, a distinct but imbricating register, the flashes of eschatological utopia that we hear in the sociomusical play take us, momentarily, into a blackened atmosphere “beyond space, time, causality, and individuation.” According to Adorno, it is “in [these] emotional shocks of aesthetic experience” that the human “self peeps out for a moment over the walls of the prison that it itself is.”

**Fumi Okiji: Jazz as critique. Adorno and black expression revisited. pp. 5 -8.**

The explorations in this study rest on the idea that black life cannot help but be lived as critical reflection. One need not be politically committed to question the integrity of the world. Blackness is a mode of existence in which the disjuncture between the reality of one's everyday living and the ways one is understood by society at large is so pronounced that the former must be considered an impossibility or a lie in order to preserve the latter. Enabled by, but in animated debate with, Adorno's thoughts on the notion of a social theory being offered by Western art, I propose that jazz is also capable of reflecting critically on the contradictions from which it arises—indeed, that it is compelled to do so. Art embraces what the world cannot or will not accommodate, Adorno tells us. It gives voice to that which has been silenced or
excluded, either willfully or through negligence. In a rejoinder to Adorno’s European selectivity I will show how jazz, too, rejects “categorical determinations stamped on the empirical.”

This book explores the idea that jazz—the music Adorno considered archetypically affirmative of the failed Enlightenment project and insufficiently autonomous to mount effective critique of it—is capable of contributing to a “model of a possible praxis” that shows a gathering constituted by the play, the wrestling and cooperation, of disparate parts. I am less interested in speculating on a utopian alternative than in explicating how jazz gives us access to a conflicted subject that will not cohere but rather is in a state of constant rejuvenation through the unstable, generative relations of its disparate ways.

**Why Adorno?**

Krin Gabbard assures us that "while Miriam Hansen has brilliantly constructed a positive aesthetics of cinema out of Adorno’s largely negative writings on film, no one is likely to tease a corresponding jazz aesthetic out of essays such as ‘Perennial Fashion—Jazz.’” Jazz studies’ engagement with Adorno has been largely confined to the debate over his provocative linking of the music to the machinery of capitalistic cultural production. In dedicated texts such as “On Jazz,” published in German in 1936, and “Perennial Fashion,” which first appeared some seventeen years later, as well as in his treatment of the form within essays such as “On the Social Situation of Music” and “On the Fetish-Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” Adorno details his objections to what he views as an embodiment of the “administered life” of late capitalism, a synecdoche that speaks on behalf of the entire culture industry.

The publication of an English translation of “On Jazz” in 1989, which happened to coincide with the “contextual turn” within jazz studies, has resulted in a burgeoning of interest in Adorno’s critique. Among the most astute of recent responses is Robert Witkin’s, which, alongside an insightful rehearsal of the debate, reaches beyond well-established battle lines to suggest that, far from dismissing jazz as an inconsequential irritant, Adorno’s attentiveness was due, in part, to the music’s questioning the exceptionalism of Austro-German and critical formalism. Witkin writes: “The very claim that jazz music was good music, that it was serious and creative as well as being informal and primitive, posed a formidable challenge to the sociological and musicological theses that Adorno was advancing in respect of twentieth-century modernist music. Adorno’s implacable opposition to
jazz has to be seen in the context of these claims.\footnote{This is stunning speculation but, in light of the discussions of this book, also compelling. Furthermore, the all but unachievable preconditions required to instigate a genuine revolution bring Adorno’s underdefined utopian ideal (which we might say would reside in these preconditions, as much as in any “No-Such-Place” beyond) very close to Jared Sexton’s striking assertion that “the most radical negation of the anti-black world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world.” This book attempts to reconstruct this unfulfilled engagement.} Adorno’s response to jazz must be accessed by way of acknowledgment of his anxiety over the fact that individuals are powerless and socially impoverished and that this situation has been exacerbated by the culture industry and its products. The individual holds a problematic but central position in jazz narratives. The term \textit{individual}, which in its most common usage leads us to the image of the defunct bourgeois subject of earlier and less malignant permutations of capitalism, has largely escaped interrogation within jazz studies. Its use has assisted the desire to bring jazz closer to the model provided by Western European concert music and the singularity of the composer and her or his composition. It is an abstraction that leads to the fetishization of the solo as the essence of jazz work. Yet the idea, which finds its (broken) voice with Louis Armstrong’s twelve-second introduction on “West End Blues,” is considered significant within the most improbable of contexts. The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) is by many accounts the most successful example of artistic collectivism in black American music. During the fifty years of its activity, it has maintained its commitment to community engagement, collaborative creative work, and the pooling of economic support and resources.\footnote{During a 2014 panel discussion, cofounder Muhal Richard Abrams stated in no uncertain terms that the AACM is grounded in the contribution of distinct personalities and that “individualism” is a fundamental facet of human existence. It is essential to pay close attention to what Abrams says here, thrown as it is into sharp relief against the communitarianism for which the organization is renowned. I repeat his actual words for clarity: “I realized very early in life . . . I noticed . . . very early in life that individualism was one of the basic [traits of] . . . human nature. Why is it that none of us are alike? Why? . . . So it occurred to me that individualism, being that extensive, meant that all the information was not put in one place. . . . So, I decided that, well, we learn from each other, because he’s not like me and I’m not like him, so he’ll do something and I’ll say, ‘Oh you can do it that way,’ and vice versa.”} Abrams’s
individual is encoded with heterogeneity and distinction. True individualism cannot occur in isolation. It is not captured by mere tolerance of difference. In fact, it goes beyond a virtuous embrace of the best examples of multiculturalism. It involves an awareness of the individual’s dependence on what it is not. An individual cannot reach truth alone, “the information” being distributed across each and every one. Or, as Adorno has it, “the concept of freedom does not lie in the isolated subject, but can be grasped only in relation to the constitution of mankind as a whole. Freedom truly consists only in the realization of humanity as such.”

Prior to Abrams’s having pinpointed it for me, I had taken Adorno’s dismissal of the music as pseudo-individualism to be an attack on jazz (supposedly) leading people to believe that the category of the individual still had relevance. I now consider the disparagement to also refer to the debasement of the term itself: the “individual” being defined over and against the collective—even as real-life human beings struggle to assert a modicum of personal sovereignty—rather than as existing in empathetic, ceaselessly mutating relations with other individuals and the collective whole. Abrams’s nuanced, very particular understanding of individualism helps us to see what is lost in shorthanded parlance. When Adorno tells us it is no longer correct to speak of the individual, he is referring, at least in part, to the fact that the milieu is not conducive to a communal individualism. Faced with the isolation and self-interest propagated by ideology under the cover of which the dehumanizing infrastructure of capitalism and acute rationalization operate, genuine communion retreats into artistic practice, social theory, and those underground spaces that have been rejected or ignored by the societal mainstream. An interest in jazz as representative of this subterranean space, where alternative forms of subjectivity are able to flourish, fuels this study.

What Jazz?

In “Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation” Vijay Iyer disputes the idea that jazz work “unfold[s] merely in the overall form of a ‘coherent’ solo” or “simply in antiphonal structures.” He urges us to look to “the microscopic musical details” and “the inherent structure of the performance itself.” And perhaps most crucial for this book, he stresses that the “story dwells not just in one solo at a time, but also in a single note, and equally in an entire lifetime of improvisations. In short, the story is revealed not as a simple linear narra-
the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself. . . . [O]n the other hand—to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new “concept,” a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime. If this interval, this biface or biphase, can be inscribed only in a bifurcated writing . . . then it can only be marked in what I would call a grouped textual field: in the last analysis, it is impossible to point it out, for a unilinear text, or a punctual position, an operation signed by a single author, are all by definition incapable of practicing this interval.  

Nahum Dimitri Chandler: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought. pp. 12-19

Problematic

When speaking of the question of the situation of the Negro American as a matter of thought, we must begin by recognizing the historical problem, or the historical form of the problematization of existence, the kind of problematic, that has organized its emergence and rendered both its necessity and its possibility. That problematization is, in a word, since the sixteenth century, the double and reciprocal articulation of the institution of modern slavery and its aftermath, including colonialism, in continental Africa, in the Americas, and in the Caribbean, on the one hand, and the emergence of a global practice of distinction among humans that has come to be placed under the heading of an idea, or concept, of race, on the other.

As much as or more than almost any other social configuration or grouping of peoples in the modern era, this historical situation has posed for Africans, especially of the so-called diaspora, an exposed or explicit question about the forms of historical existence and the grounds of reflexive identification. Inheriting or confronting, in any case inhabiting, this situation, African American or diasporic intellectuals of the United States from Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, or Olaudah Equiano of the eighteenth century, including David Walker, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper or Alexander Crummell of the nineteenth, to W. E. B. Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper of the turn to the twentieth, for example, elaborated an ensemblic discourse that in each case proposed (albeit in
heterogeneous ways, often in the same discourse) the production of a subjectivity, subject position, or profile in discourse that they or later intellectuals, through readings of their work, have marked as Africanist. This question was raised for them not only in terms of their own practices and their own sense of identity or identification, but in terms of the question of the relationship of existence, essence, and identity in general. In the originary passage of the founding of their mundane inhabitation as a problem to the problematization of their own itinerary of existence, this figuration or configuration, perhaps in terms of social and historical practice in general, but certainly in discourse, enacted or enabled the elaboration of a fundamental questioning of the possible character and order of social and historical being in general. For, indeed, although it is rather typically assumed, too simplistically, that the grounds of historical and social existence and identification were placed in question for “Africans,” or “Negroes,” or “Blacks,” configured in this vortex, what is not so typically remarked is the way in which a fundamental questioning of the roots of identification and forms of historical existence for “Europeans” or “Whites” was also set loose at the core of this historical problematization. Indeed these very terms perhaps can be thought as pertinent only in the devolution of the rhythmic turns of this vortex. The profound character of this interrogation and its full implication remain to be elaborated. For, indeed, even though it has remained an exorbitance for traditional forms of thought in Europe and America, this questioning can certainly be thought of as concerned with the most fundamental questions that have been gathered in the modern era under the heading of ontology, and it can also be understood to pose the questions concerning the possibility of truth that the history of metaphysics in the modern era, whether as philosophy or as theology, has called its own. Indeed, it may yet remain the very historical cusp of the announcements of such so-called general considerations.

For much of the past two decades it has been a rather perennial fashion to register a certain kind of critique of the enunciations that I have described as “Africanist.” This critique has been directed especially at the work of African diasporic intellectuals from the United States. Over the course of its devolution, a privileged object of such critique remained the work of Du Bois. Further, such critique was almost always placed as the opening or clearing epistemological and political operation for the staging, or setup, of a self-proclaimed new project
in the study of African Americans in the United States, the African diaspora in general, or now a domain placed under the loosely conceptualized umbrella term “Africana.” These critical pronouncements of the past two decades are, finally, always placed under the heading of a de-essentializing critique of (African American or diasporic) conceptualizations of identity and of practices of identification. As such, these critiques as they have been announced since the mid-1980s remain in one entire sense simply part of a broad and diverse contemporary configuration that has made thematic the heterogeneous structure of identification and social practice.\(^4\)

Yet, it remains that however much one affirms the questioning of the idea of a simple essence as the ground of supposed identity, identification, and historical existence, across the heterogeneity of its enunciation, this perennial critique is in turn questionable in one entire and fundamental aspect of its elaboration. It naively implies that a nonessentialist discourse or position can be produced. As such, it presupposes an oppositional theoretical architecture at its core, in the supposed and self-serving distinction between a discourse or position that does not operate on the basis of an essence and those that do. It thus all the more emphatically presupposes a simple essence as the ground of its discourse, in both conceptual and practical, that is, political, terms.

Yet, no practice in general, no practice as thought, in a sense that we can still refer in a certain way to a radical order of question, can simply mark or absolutely delimit its own inhabitation of the presumption of essence.\(^5\)

It is thus that in the presupposition of such a replete position, this critique seems unable to recognize in the historical situation of the African American the most mundane of circumstances: that there is not now nor has there ever been a free zone or quiet place from which the discourse of so-called Africanist figures, intellectuals, writers, thinkers, or scholars might issue. And this can be shown to be the case in general. Such discourse always emerges in a context and is both a response and a call. In this specific instance, it emerges in a cacophony of enunciation that marks the inception of discourses of the “African” and the “Negro” in the modern period in the sixteenth century.\(^6\) At center of this cacophony was a question about what we now often call identity and forms of identification. On the surface, its proclaimed face, it was a discourse about the status of a putative Negro subject: political, legal, moral, philosophical,
literary, theological, and so on. On its other, and hidden, face, was a question about the status of a putative European subject (subsequently understood as an omnibus figure of the “White”), the presumptive answer to which served as ground, organizing in a hierarchy the schema of this discourse, and determining the historically supraordinate elaboration of this general question. This hidden surface, as ground and reference of identification, along with the exposed surface that showed forth as a question about “Negro” identity, must be continually desedimented, scrutinized, and re-figured in their relation. It is the status of the identity that takes its stand in the shadows, or the system that it supposedly inaugurates, that is so often assumed in the de-essentializing projects that remain perennially afoot in African American and African diasporic studies. Or, if this “European” or “European American,” or later “White,” subject (presumptively understood as a simple whole despite its remarkable “internal” heterogeneity), or the system presumed to originate with it, is not simply assumed, the necessity, rigor, patience, and fecundity of antecedent Africanist discourses, as they have negotiated a certain economy, one within which such discourses (antecedent and contemporaneous, diasporic and continental) function, is too easily diminished, if not outright denied, in the perennial de-essentializing critique of the immediately past and present intellectual generations.

The economy at work in Africanist problematics, as they articulate the problem of principle or ground, especially as the interwoven questions of tradition or forms of social existence and practices of distinction according to a mark or concept of race, can be stated quite simply. In the face of a distinction, a judgment of value, a recognition of a difference in any sense whatsoever, even or especially if the mark is understood to indicate or name an absence or a putative “nothing,” one cannot bring that distinction or mark into question by the postulation of a simple denial of the integrity or ground of the distinction and difference that has been proclaimed; that is, by counterposing either the fullness of a directly oppositional claim, or a measure of neutrality, to the distinction in question. Not only does the apparent direct denial of a distinction, or an apparent refusal of acknowledgment thereof, do so in the very statement or practice of such a gesture, but the force of that implicit and buried recognition will function all the more powerfully in defining the terrain and organizing the field in which the critical discourse operates, limiting and specifying its critique, because such a
denial has in fact not overturned existing hierarchies (conceptual and political) of power and authority. It will, in an essential sense, leave the status quo intact.

Such is the paradoxical aeconomy that takes shape for any practice as the announcement of form, the mark, the sign, or the phaenomenon, regardless of the premise of the ostensible ground of such as the real or the imaginary.

Thus, if one’s practice would operate on the order of fundamental thought and be general in its practical theoretical implication, it is necessary in articulating oneself in the historical space in which discourses of the Negro emerge and resound to produce a double and redoubled discourse. The enunciation of Africanist figures in discourses of the Negro emerge in a hierarchically ordered field in which the question of the status of the so-called Negro is quite indissolubly linked to a presupposition of the homogeneity and purity of the so-called European or its derivatives. Their discourse is historically coextensive and interwoven with the inception of what philosopher Kevin Thomas Miles once proposed in a felicitous phrase during an interlocution on the question, one might call the “project” of (white) purity in the modern era. This situation, or more precisely problematization, yields for African American thinkers what I call the problem of purity, or the problem of pure being. To inhabit such a discursive formation, perhaps in a structurally contestatory fashion, one cannot, under the premise of the ultimate incoherence of such a presupposition or proclamation of purity, of the (im)possibility of the pure, simply declare in turn the status (as prior, for example) of a neutral space or position. One must displace or attempt to displace the distinction in question. This necessity is perhaps all the more astringent when the distinction in question is a claim for a pure origin, a pure identity, an ultimate ground of identification. Such a displacement can be made general or decisive only through the movement of the productive elaboration of difference—as articulation—perhaps even according to necessity as the performative announcement of a differential figure. Such a production makes possible a delimitation of the claim of purity and prepares the ground for an elaboration of its lability. In the historical situation of the African or Negro American, as has been said in many ways, in many forms of enunciation, but to take W. E. B. Du Bois’s formulation from the “Forethought” of the Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches, one has to establish, despite all its paradoxes and risks, in the domains of
sociality and political inhabitation, for example, the character of an origin of “world.”

Or, as I prefer to put it, one might speak of an originary scene of possibility. This necessity can be understood to establish its claim in an order that is as radical, or more so, as all that has been called transcendental in philosophy since the eighteenth century. And its enigmas demand that one find a traversal that moves otherwise and perhaps beyond the limits of that tradition of questioning. It can thus be said that to fail to undertake this differential elaboration would leave the critical position enclosed in the horizon of the declarations of the same or the simple. Yet, especially in the case of the question of the subject, of subjectivation and the movements of identification (individual and collective), in the practical theoretical horizon of the question of “world,” one must elaborate not just a negative difference, identity, or identification, which is always recuperable to an ultimate claim of an absolute, of pure being or concept, by way of something like a movement of speculation such as that proposed in the thought of G. W. F. Hegel, in particular all that he placed under the heading of his neologism Aufhebung. A thought of the negative in this sense might still remain a simple stage in the consolidation of an original or destined being as a subject that would proclaim itself as absolute. What is at stake then is situated at a level somewhat more radical than the negative in general. Nor is it a matter of establishing a predicate of some kind. The originarity that one must remark in the situation of an Africanist problematic since the sixteenth century can emerge for thought only within an approach that attends to that within historicity and existence that would distend form in general, distantiate presence or its derivatives, disseminate any presumptive sense of being. As a practical theoretical operation it must be elaborated in, or along the track of, the movements of the opening of the general possibility of difference, possibility thought as the remark of both sides of the limit, of limit as the form of the appearance of possibility, of possibility as the announcement of the limit of limit, and perhaps the passage beyond such. There is no absolute origin here, no absolute beginning, no final difference. The modifier general, here, should suggest a formulation in which difference is understood as nothing in and of itself. Yet, it is radical that one must begin with the constituted. Difference named under the heading of such “world” or “worldhood,” then, must be elaborated simultaneously as a question of the radical possibility of difference, of the general possibility
of the otherwise; yet, it should also be understood as remarking the “fact” that there is difference (maintaining thereby a critical inhabitation of a situation, historical, at once temporal and spatial). And of course the pertinence of the sameness of time, of punctual temporality, would thereby be displaced from its traditional privilege in modern thought in Europe and the Americas. Originarity here would be understood in such a way that the movement of difference, passage, in every sense, is the very possibility of marking any inside or outside and before and after. Such movement is the very form of the organization of the inside of the inside and the outside of the outside. Its temporality will always have been only that which will have been. Such difference, or movement of difference, not only proposes the possibility of a desedimentation of the presumption of purity, or pure being, inhabited as a problem and problematic by Africanist thinkers, but it would also remark the most fundamental dimension of the configured possibility of that which could, perhaps, be considered new in the world in general and in any sense. In this passage, the sovereign gesture of becoming would remain always at stake in that which is not yet born, in that which always arrives on the threshold of historicity too late or after the fact: the new would be this interminable process of becoming such. The new would always only arrive by way of a second time or even an apparently secondary time. The implication of such a practical theoretical thought addresses itself to the most general contemporary proclamations of idea, of system, of the whole. As such, it announces itself on an order of the political that would exceed all existing senses of horizon.

Such is the outline of the always “doubled” or enfolded character of the gesture required in a critical or desedimentative “Africanist” inhabitation of this problematic. (1) Such gesture would affirm an always nominal subject position, never an empty form, that is to say never simply a form and never a simple transcendental. (2) It would go by way of an elaboration of the latter’s always already differential condition of possibility. What I have proposed to call a “redoubling” would be not only (a) this further elaboration of the ways that this “identity” or identification that one has adduced to contest the discourses of purity is itself heterogeneous, elaborating the differential production of the proclaimed identity (or difference), but also (b) the way in which the movement of this problematic in general arises and takes its organization only through an agonistic mode of irruption. This interminable passage through the
agon, this redoubled inhabitation of the middle passage or a certain maintenance of ambivalence (both of which remain radically otherwise than the neutral) is a theoretical passage that is at once a politics and the practice of an art. This agonistic movement would thus attend to the general order of question in this apparently quite parochial problematic.

In the course of the present chapter I propose the opening of Du Bois’s discourse to such an elaboration.

Yet, the practice of Du Bois should be understood as only a certain kind of example or even as a counterexample to the aforementioned perennial premise, an exemplarity which if understood in a certain manner might assist us in reopening the impasses of contemporary thought.

Now, this further elaboration would be the work of critical thought as participation in a tradition. Certainly such critical, or desedimentative, practice would require recognition of the necessity inscribed in antecedent practices of thought. This inhabitation of a nominal critical tradition should be given some further specification. It must (1) maintain a recognition of the necessity of this double gesture and (2) elaborate this necessity as both the possibility and condition of its own practice, in that it always emerges on the scene late and by way of its other, in all senses, and that it cannot accede to the fullness of its own voice, its own declared or willful position within knowledge and power. More sympathetically, we might index this redoubled enunciation as displaced in relation to both (a) its recollection of antecedent practices and (b) its possibility of setting loose a thought whose fullness is always yet to come. This “yet to come” is the spacing or timing of the operation of a nominal critical, or desedimentative, practice, of its possibility and its devolution. This is the order of a paleonymic problematic encoded in the task of theoretical labor in our time.

These formulations propose a strategic intervention enunciated here in an idiom of thought that we might call epistemological, conceptual, and theoretical, which is yet, and more fundamentally, also on the horizon of an ontological problematization of existence, in discussions of the question of the Negro or Negro American as a problem for thought, certainly of discourse and knowledge, but also of historical existence in general. They seek to help expose or bring more into relief a path, or better, paths, of interwoven tracks for retracing and reformulating the question through the operation of a kind of desedimentation and paleonymic practice in thought. In the matter of the problem of the Negro in
Black Studies is also, like Native Studies, concerned with colonization is the plain fact that colonization is not essential, much less prerequisite, to enslavement. In other words, to say that it is only through ‘disavowed colonization’ that black people can be ‘ontologically relegated to the status of property’ is a feint, just as it is to suggest that capitalism ‘ultimately commodifies most people’. In this case, enslavement would be enabled by a prior colonization that it extends perforce. If this were true, then slavery as the conversion of person into property would simply be an extreme form of colonization. Or, vice versa, colonization would be an attenuated form of slavery. In either case, there would be only a difference of degree rather than kind between colonization and slavery. At any rate, disabusing ourselves of anti-black racism would, for Smith, enable us to see that black struggles against racial slavery are ultimately struggles against colonialism.

Colonization is not a necessary condition of enslavement because: 1) slaves need not be colonial subjects, or objects of colonial exploitation, and they do not face the fundamental directive of colonialism, ‘you, work for me’, though slaves often enough labor; and 2) slaves need not be settler colonial subjects, or objects of settler colonial genocide, since they do not face the fundamental directive ‘you, go away’, though slaves often enough are driven from their native land. But the crucial problem with this formulation of the relations between racial slavery, settler colonialism and capitalism (leaving aside any problems with the pillar of Orientalism) has to do with the drive to confound the position of blacks in order to describe them as exploited and colonized degree zero. Regarding the latter, Smith writes, ‘Africa is the property of Europe’; Africa rather than the African. As in the reduction of slavery to the exploitation of labor, there is here an elision of the permanent seizure of the body essential to enslavement.15

What can be done to a captive body? Anything whatsoever. The loss of sovereignty is a fait accompli, a byproduct rather than a precondition of enslavement. Genocide is endemic to enslavement insofar as slavery bans, legally and politically, the reproduction of enslaved peoples as peoples, indigenous or otherwise, whether they are removed from their native land, subjected to direct killing, unlivable conditions, or forced assimilation; or they are kept in place, allowed to live, provided adequate means, or supported in their cultural practices.16 Native Studies scholars misrecognize ‘the true horror of slavery’ as de-culturalization or the loss of sovereignty because they do not ask what slavery is in the most basic sense – its local and global histories, its legal and political structures, its social and economic functions, its psychosexual dynamics, and its philosophical consequences. Perhaps they do not want to know anything about it, as they evaluate it through the lens of their own loss and lament and redress it through the promise of their own political imagination. Slavery is not a loss that the self experiences – of language, lineage, land, or labor – but rather the loss of any self that could experience such loss. Any politics based in resurgence or recovery is bound to regard the slave as ‘the position of the unthought’ (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003).17

Abolishing Sovereignty

There is by now a literature on the historical relations between black and native peoples in the Americas, including, in the US context, the award-winning work of Tiya Miles (2006, 2010) and the signal contributions of Barbara Krauthamer (2013).18 But Frank B. Wilderson, III’s Red, White and Black may be the first sustained attempt to theorize, at the highest level of abstraction, the structural positions of European colonists, Indigenous peoples, and African slaves in the ‘New World’ encounter and to think about how the conflicts and antagonisms that give rise to those positions in the historic instance establish the contemporary parameters of our political ontology. At this writing, Wilderson’s text has not been taken up in the field of Native Studies, despite dedicating fully 100 pages to addressing directly the machinations of settler colonialism and the history of genocide and to critically reading a range of indigenous thinking on politics, cosmology, and
sovereignty. This is not a brief in favor of Wilderson’s project as resolution or answer. The upshot of *Red, White and Black* is a provocation to new critical discourse and just such an invitation is offered midway, even as it acknowledges the grand impediment: ‘What, we might ask, inhibits this analytic and political dream of a “Savage”/Slave encounter? Is it a matter of the Native theorist’s need to preserve the constituent elements of sovereignty, or is there such a thing as “Savage” Negrophobia? Are the two related’ (Wilderson, 2010: 182)?

We might understand something else about the historical relations between black and native peoples if we bear in mind that the dynamics of Negrophobia are animated, in part, by a preoccupation with sovereignty. We have learned already that settler colonialism is governed by a genocidal commandment and that, as a direct result, survival becomes central to indigenous movements for settler decolonization. We have also learned that sovereignty, even disarticulated from the state-form, is the heading for thinking about this survival as a matter of politics. Yet, in its struggle against settler colonialism, the claim of native sovereignty – emerging in contradiction to the imposition of the imperial sovereignty of Euro-American polities – ‘fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America [or Canada or …] as a coherent (albeit genocidal) idea, because treaties are forms of articulation, discussions brokered between two groups presumed to possess the same kind of historical currency: sovereignty’ (Wilderson, 2003: 236).

This point is not mitigated by the fact that native sovereignty is qualitatively different from, not simply rival to, the sovereignty of nation-states. What links these statements discursively is an ‘ethico-onto-epistemological’ (Barad, 2007) point of contact: ‘At every scale – the soul, the body, the group, the land, and the universe – they can both practice cartography, and although at every scale their maps are radically incompatible, their respective “mapness” is never in question’ (Wilderson, 2010: 181). Capacity for coherence makes more than likely a commitment ‘to preserve the constituent elements of sovereignty’ (2010: 182) and a pursuit of the concept of ‘freedom as self-determination’.

The political de-escalation of antagonism to the level of conflict is mirrored by a conceptual domestication at work in the field of Native Studies, namely, that settler colonialism is something already known and understood by its practitioners. The political-intellectual challenge on this count is to refine this knowledge and to impart it. The intervention of Native Studies involves bringing into general awareness a critical knowledge of settler colonialism.

We might contrast the unsuspecting theoretical status of the concept of settler colonialism in Native Studies with its counterpart in Black Studies: racial slavery. I remarked above that any politics of resurgence or recovery is bound to regard the slave as the position of the unthought. This does not suggest, however, that Black Studies is the field in which slavery is, finally, thought in an adequate way. The field of Black Studies is as susceptible to a politics of resurgence or recovery as any other mode of critical inquiry. Which is to say that the figure of the slave and the history of the emergence of the relational field called racial slavery remains the unthought ground of thought within Black Studies as well. The difference, provisionally, between these enterprises is that whereas Native Studies sets out to be the alternative to a history of settler colonialism and to pronounce the decolonial intervention, Black Studies dwells within an un-inheritable, in-escapable history and muses upon how that history intervenes upon its own field, providing a sort of untranscendable horizon for its discourse and imagination. The latter is an endeavor that teaches less through pedagogical instruction than through exemplary transmission: rather than initiation into a form of living, emulation of a process of learning through the posing of a question, a procedure for study, for black study, or black studies, wherever they may lead.

Native Studies scholars are right to insist upon a synthetic gesture that attempts to shift the terms of engagement. The problem lies at the level of thought at which the gesture is presented. The settler colonial studies critique of colonial studies must be repeated, this time with respect to settler colonialism itself, in a move that returns us to the body in relation to land, labor, language,
lineage – and the capture and commodification of each – in order to ask the most pertinent questions about capacity, commitment, and concept. This might help not only to break down false dichotomies, and perhaps pose a truer one, but also to reveal the ways that the study of slavery is already and of necessity the study of capitalism, colonialism and settler colonialism, among other things; and that the struggle for abolition is already and of necessity the struggle for the promise of communism, decolonization, and settler decolonization, among other things. Slavery is the threshold of the political world, abolition the interminable radicalization of every radical movement. Slavery, as it were, precedes and prepares the way for colonialism, its forebear or fundament or support. Colonialism, as it were, the issue or heir of slavery, its outgrowth or edifice or monument. This is as true of the historic colonization of the Third World as it is the prior and ongoing settler colonization of the Fourth.23

‘The modern world owes its very existence to slavery’ (Grandin, 2014a).24 What could this impossible debt possibly entail? Not only the infrastructure of its global economy but also the architecture of its theological and philosophical discourses, its legal and political institutions, its scientific and technological practices, indeed, the whole of its semantic field (Wilderson, 2010: 58). A politics of abolition could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation. It could only ever begin with degeneration, decline, or dissolution. Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is ‘too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds’ (Trouillot, 2012: 88).25

The field of Black Studies consists in ‘tracking the figure of the unsovereign’ (Chandler, 2013: 163) in order to meditate upon the paramount question: ‘What if the problem is sovereignty as such’ (Moten, 2013)? Abolition, the political dream of Black Studies, its unconscious thinking, consists in the affirmation of the unsovereign slave – the affectable, the derelict, the monstrous, the wretched26 – figures of an order altogether different from (even when they coincide or cohabit with) the colonized native – the occupied, the undocumented, the unprotected, the oppressed. Abolition is beyond (the restoration of) sovereignty. Beyond the restoration of a lost commons through radical redistribution (everything for everyone), there is the unimaginable loss of that all too imaginable loss itself (nothing for no one).27 If the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property, then the slave’s inhabitation of the earth precedes and exceeds any prior relation to land – landlessness. And selflessness is the correlate. No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). Everyone has a claim to everything until no one has a claim to anything. No claim. This is not a politics of despair brought about by a failure to lament a loss, because it is not rooted in hope of winning. The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence.

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Notes
1. See the official website: http://www.yorku.ca/laps/des/conference/index.html. The conference, held 29 April–1 May 2011, featured presentations and performances by over 50 participants. For a critical response to Lawrence and Dua (2005) see Sharma and Wright (2008). The latter argument makes important conceptual distinctions between and among immigrants, settlers and colonists, but does not resolve the problem pursued below.
2. On the symptom, see Lacan (2006): ‘they do not see that the unconscious only has meaning in the
By ‘recognition’, I mean the political practice, rooted in philosophical formula of seeing, unencumbered, what and who is before you – seeing as one ought to be seen, in a way that is consistent with one’s sense of self and property. What this translates into in legal contexts, for questions of justice, is the affirmation of one’s (inherent) rights by the state. But these are states, in colonial contexts, that were born only through the devices of lethal force and dispossession and, in the case of the United States, economic and political enslavement of particular populations. These broad but particular and differently experienced racial histories bear upon the present in significant ways. In this piece, I focus on the particular way in which law in colonial contexts enforced Indigenous dispossession and then, granted freedom through the legal tricks of consent and citizenship. For Native people, this ruse of consent marks the inherent impossibility of that freedom after dispossession, a freedom I argue is actually theft. This because of the trickery of ‘consent’ in colonial contexts, which papers over the very conditions of force and violence that beget ‘consent’. Treaty-making is one such case that I will discuss. The long view of history, that in settler colonial contexts is actually always short, invokes a fundamental hegemony of interpretation such as viewing the ‘signing’ of agreements as full and robust consent, and consent as justice. In such political configurations, there are no further matters to be discussed. Time starts anew; the matter is done. We know with the analytic of settler colonialism that matters are not done, that oppressive structures survive agreements. Yet, in spite of the problematic historical, philosophical and legal basis of settler societies, ‘recognition’ appears to be the only political game in town, and with that comes the presumed unassailability of electoral politics as a device for not only representation, no matter how mediated and concessionary it may be, but also the recognition of rights and the exercising of rights.

Rather than recognition and its ruse of consent, I have proposed elsewhere a political alternative of refusal. This article moves with recourse to ethnographic and legal cases to a deeper exposition of that alternative, one that also articulates to the present. In order to get at the architecture of this argument, I will consider the way in which I came to the concept of refusal in order to work through both the material of ‘the field’, and the field of analytic possibilities that availed themselves to the study as I started to write it up.


Refusal: a brief retrospective

When I first conceived of the project that would become my book *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, my plan was a study of nationhood and citizenship among an Indigenous people in North America who are resolutely committed to jurisdiction over territories of various forms. Their own object was and is territory in a material sense. This encompassed their ‘land’, but also a territory of ideas, of the past, present and future, and, most vigorously, their membership within the polity itself. All of this effort is made as they travel across various borders and boundaries upon their territories.

Kahnawa’kehró:non assert their histories in the face of bordered contestation of those claims by liberal, democratic and still settling states. Because these are my own people, I had a very strong a priori ‘ethnographic sense’ of what was going on; I was paying attention for years before my formal fieldwork began. Our band council (tribal council) was evicting non-native people from the community in order to enforce a 50% blood
quantum requirement for membership that was vigorously debated, contested, embraced and defended. These processes were symptoms of something more than an episodic bout of intolerance or failure of liberal subjectivity and I wanted to know ‘why?’ But more than asking, ‘why are these more than perceived failures of liberal, settler normativity?’ – which seemed obvious enough – I asked, ‘why is this happening now?’ and ‘where is it coming from?’ I looked for linkages between land, law and governance within and beyond the reserve. The project turned into something else when I encountered the archive and did interviews – when ‘observations’ and the materials from the community took form in dense, identifiable lines of argument, stances and theories themselves. Suddenly, I had something else, a colonial history of what had seemed so very ‘eventful’ and episodic, but was in fact processual and structural, and which presented no containable, predictable and diagnostic ‘easy answer’. These processes defied reduction and ethnographic containment – this was not a matter of ‘flat pluralism’ or ‘factionalised, tribal politics’. In fact, what was before me was a study in difficulty, a study of constraint and of contradictions. There was no way to describe or theorise what was crucial, which was the very deliberate actions that people were making in the face of the expectation that they consent to their own elimination, to having their land taken, their lives controlled and their stories told for them.9

‘Refusal’ was a stance but also a theory of the political that was being pronounced over and over again.10 It emerged in my own writing and through observation of Kahnawà:ke action but also through the words of people. I would hear, ‘enough is enough’, ‘it’s not us it’s them’, and – in a commentary on the international border – ‘the white man put that there, not us’. The people of Kahnawà:ke used every opportunity to remind each other, and especially non-native people, that this is our land, that there are other political orders and possibilities, and that a heightened sensitivity to matters of love and jurisdiction within the polity was also linked to longer waits at borders, awkward (to say the least) interactions with cashiers upon taking our Indian status cards for tax exemption,11 and deeply difficult personal decisions. I also saw that these discourses and actions, and these matters of moral and political habit, were articulated quite perfectly to larger actions by the Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee) through time. As such, there was an historical and contemporary push for broader efforts to demand recognition of existing agreements as well as simultaneous refusals to play various games of the state (voting, paying taxes at times and serving in the military).12

Thus, if there was a ‘structure’ of settler colonialism that was discernible through time, there was also a structure of refusal. These refusals were symptomatic of that structure and manifested in the games of settler colonial governance, and in particular, the play that would signal consent. Paramount among these refusals is citizenship itself, the aforementioned actions that would signal consent and belonging within a settler political system and would move Mohawks out of their own sovereignty into an ambit of ‘consent’ and with that, settler citizenship and the promise of whiteness. All of this pointed analytically to the deeply unequal scene of articulation that people were thrown into and were remaking through the quotidian and the grand.

This deeply unequal scene of articulation that I am describing may be understood as the ‘settler colonial present’, a present that purported newness, that owned time and was punctured repeatedly by Mohawk sensibilities, practices and by their continued life itself.13 Thus, the demand of Indigenous life upon this ‘settler present’ was temporal,
those that were supposedly sequestered in the past were pushing upon the present and this push upon the temporal was and is political. How could the claims that the state was making upon history, upon law, upon governance work factually, if not ethically, if Mohawks were demanding that treaties be upheld and Indigenous passports be honoured, if they expected that controversial internal decisions to exclude be respected? Their demands are tied to refusals to disappear or acquiesce to state legitimacy and power. They push up against the desire of the liberal state to consider its governance just. By this, I mean a state whose existence is borne of cruel and dispossessive time, yet still seems to own time, and thus is able to posture as a liberal state, ‘we are not discriminatory (anymore), so neither shall you discriminate’.

What such requirements involve is a forgetting that the state’s very being creates the problems that that Indian reserves must manage, and yet, states act as though this is not a matter at all – even though this vexed, very important non-mythical origin story of fundamental dispossession is everywhere and nowhere. So, the implicit demand to forget, through the operation of ‘consent’ and ‘citizenship’, is challenged by the counter that Indigenous people represent simply by (a) living and (b) knowing this. In living and knowing themselves as such, they pose a demand upon the newness of the present, as well as a knotty reminder of something else. That ‘something else’ is the ongoing work of dispossession, and its handmaiden of failed assimilation. Indigenous peoples are reminders, sometimes indecipherable announcements of other orders, other authorities, and an earlier time that has not fully passed. ‘Settler time’ is revealed as the fiction of the presumed neutrality of time itself, demonstrating the dominance of the present by some over others, and the unequal power to define what matters, who matters, what pasts are alive and when they die.

How then are those who are targeted for elimination to articulate their politics within the exigencies of settler time and settler governance? How are they to demonstrate the vitality of their historical consciousness of this as something that is not natural or neutral? How to articulate political projects of pre-existing political traditions if one has been offered a half-life of civilisation in exchange for land? To do these things, they refuse to consent to the apparatus of the state. And in time with that, I refused then, and still do now, to tell the internal story of their struggle. But I consent to telling the story of their constraint.

That became the point to needle through, and then stitch with. The context of the broader argument I was making about the interruptive capacity of Indigenous political life was historical as much as it was contemporary and anticipatory. After reviewing the Mohawk and settler history that framed the debates and contestations that prompted the study, there came a deep pragmatism – the realisation that this would never be read fairly. The mess of internal struggle over issues structured fundamentally by dispossession is our business. And yet, I wanted to talk about our business just enough so that it could be understood that this is a difficult situation. Bringing in blood quantum is a difficult situation, dealing with gendered and raced discrimination was at times excruciating and painful, with older, legal and Victorian sensibilities of exclusion internalised and naturalised by some and contested vigorously by others. As such, I spent as much time outlining the territorial and political context to the moment of exclusion that prompted the research: why a 50% blood quantum requirement? Why the eviction of non-Indians? Why a ‘Moratorium on Mixed Marriages’? These are excisions on agreed-upon standards of
contemporary liberal freedom – the freedom to be who you want to be, marry who you want, do what you want, unencumbered. What is the context for this? My attention to the contextual webbing was rendered here in vernacular terms: ‘let’s not pretend’. Let us not pretend that there is an even playing field for interpretation. Let us not pretend that ‘the Iroquois’ are not already pre-figured, that their actions are going to be interpreted fairly or that we do not push on all of these processes, fully. So I refused to pretend that potential readers, many of whom are in my field and subfield, would give it a fair read, would get it, were I to lay it bare. Furthermore, I was not talking about kinship charts, ceremony, ritual cycles or Mohawk verb structure. And do not get me wrong, I do not cite these classic interests of the subfield of ‘Iroquois Studies’ because these interests are not important or do not bear on interests to community itself, but because I was interested in what was not of interest to anthropology or political science and theory – the mess of what people were talking about, struggling with, trying to think through and beyond. There was no place in the existing literature for this material. So, I refused to be that thick description prose-master – the one that would reveal in florid detail the ways in which these things were being sorted out, the internal mechanisms of deliberation and discord. As such, my ethnographic ‘refusal’ operated at the level of the text: deliberate, wilful, and, like the people I was working with and the process I was documenting, very aware of its context of articulation. That settler context includes a deep suspicion of Indigenous peoples, and at times, as we saw during the so-called Oka Crisis of 1990, a deep hatred for the Haudenosaunee.15

How then to describe or theorise that which is cognisant of its own space of articulation? How to write about matters when one is deeply aware of the history that governs apprehension? This was the rub and the challenge and this was also a way of listening and anticipating that opened up a theoretical possibility for imagining and writing the political ethnographically. But also, differently.16 Here was a writing strategy and an analytic that stood outside of the repetitive stance of ‘resistance’ that, again and again, over-inscribed the state with its power to determine what mattered,17 for thinking beyond what counted through the channel of ‘recognition’,18 and moved away from while pointing to the over-determined effective capacity of the state. This was the ‘hard no’ – the refusal that operated ethnographically in time with those whose lives and actions determined the argument.

The people I worked with and belong to know all of this. The condition of Indigeneity globally is, partially, to know this, because to be Indigenous is to be structured into this position of scarcity, of defence of your attachment to land and country and water, as well as the politics and so-called metaphysics – the liveliness of those places – to live the understanding of that loss or defence against further loss. So, in fact, more than the cost of a fair ethnographic and interpretive reading is at risk. Indigenous peoples are grappling with the fiction of justice and its comingling with recognition while pushing for justice and its comingling with the failures of recognition, so I also could not let the work that I did harm us. I had to think very longitudinally about this. Struggles by and for land, for rights, for gender justice are central in Indigenous North America. And with that comes the promise of reparative or transitional justice through the impossible but therapeutic fallacy of ‘reconciliation’, as a key mode of recognition politics. This is the political language game and largely state-driven performance art that attempts to move elements of history forward in order to ‘move on’ from the past, to transition out
of one period of history into another, better one. This dramaturgical solution appears as macro (and philosophical) antidote to the so-called problems of the past – ‘historical injustice’, the error of bad moral judgement and action, before. And yet, of course, these grounded issues of land loss and legal exclusions fan out to and from the global. This is not particular to Kahnawà:ke, to Haudenosaunee peoples, and can be found in Indigenous ethnography and cultural criticism elsewhere.¹⁹

**Been caught stealing**²⁰

Let us now talk about the ‘elsewhere’. In her book, *The White Possessive*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson revisits the famous, interpretive debate between anthropologists Gananath Obeyesekere (1992) and Marshall Sahlins (1995).²¹ Here, the concern was the right way to think about the death of Captain Cook in 1779 in Kealakekua Bay in Hawai‘i, and specifically the eighteenth-century interpretation of his death by the Indigenous people of that place, the Kanaka Maoli: was he a god, was he an invader? Was he sacrificed, was he murdered? How did ‘the natives think’ about him?²² This was a tired exchange that met in questions of structure, not historical harm or justice. ‘How the anthropologists think’ was more an exercise in choosing the ‘right way’ or the correct way to think about order and interpretation. The Geonpul cultural critic and theorist Moreton-Robinson revisits this question of interpretation with recourse to those that saw Cook and their stories of his arrival on another Indigenous coast and in another land. Her presentation and analysis of the narratives offer a gorgeous triangulation between accounts and a variance in interpretation. She centres the Bubu Gujin elder Hobbles Danaiyairi’s version of Cook (as told to Deborah Bird Rose) within structure, but the structure of theft and all that it entailed: violence, killing (what Danaiyairi called ‘cleaning the country’) and erecting ‘buildings’.²³ Here, he stated:

> I know you been stealing country belong to mefellow. Australia. What we call Australia, that’s for Aboriginal people. But him been take it away. You been take the land, you been take the mineral, take the gold, everything. Take it up this Big England.²⁴

Suddenly, ‘how Natives think’ is not a presumptive claim of interpretive ownership; it is a statement of theft, in raw form.

‘You been take the land, you been take the mineral, take the gold, everything.’ What does one do with this sort of knowledge? Here, I am not even interested in the motivations of the perpetrators, who work for and are of ‘Big England’, nor the anthropological exchange itself, but with the suppositional exercise in the ways in which that statement of fact must have moved through Bubu Gujin’ consciousness and informed action. Let us think about *that*. Bird Rose calls the stories of Cook a ‘saga’ that explained and sorted the past and also accounted crucially for (settler) law, for its contingency, its randomness and its cruelty.²⁵ Hobbles Danairayi argues:

> We the one boss for the land. Because I know. You been coverem up me gotem big swag [concealing the people and the truth]. Government been coverem up me. Coverm over. That’s why he been pinch it away, that land. Because we know you mob now … You’ll have to agree with us, agree with the people, people on the land. You gonna agree because Aboriginal owning.²⁶

Everything is achieved in this statement: an Indigenous indictment of theft, a command for justice, an invocation of the facticity and un-deniability of it all. He claims ownership of territory, he marks theft, he points to takeover of that territory and twins it with the
Indigenous studies and queer studies have so far had a strange and disjuncted intimacy, at times desiring and pursuing each other at the speed of land rushes and at the margins of whiteness, feminism, and queer of color critique. At other moments, the two fields act as if the one does not exist at all for the other, not least because of queer investments in ongoing settler colonialism on the one side and an Indigenous commitment to illegibility and outright refusal of recognition on the other. Within the constraints of both fields, where it is either presumed that the Indigenous is always already queer to the normative settler or that the colonizing queer cannot and should not encapsulate Indigenous identities, genders, kinship structures, and sexualities that were only ever normative within their presumed-inclusive cultures of origin, what often emerges is an assertion of de/colonial difference enacted as and for the real. There are many reasons for such performative disjunctures and desirous pursuits that extend from genocide and the loss of languages and worlds those languages contained to the masculinist heteronormativity of some modes of Indigenous resurgence that has tried to overwrite, silence, and then speak for queer and feminist voices through homophobic gestures of liberalism.

In naming an impasse at the outset, I do not, however, want to suggest that queer and indigeneity do not go together, that they do not have vital points of intersectionality or methodology. They do, as research on the remaking of Indigenous kinship structures, genders, and sexualities into respectably recognizable Anglo-American heteronormative civility shows, or as the intervention Two Spirit makes to the hegemonic settler categories of LGBTQ demonstrates. And yet, neither should one presume the queer and the Indigenous have anything to do with each
other after all, especially as it is not entirely clear yet, as I have observed elsewhere, whether the queer in Indigenous studies bears even a remote passing similarity to the queer in queer studies. The disconnect might be ontological, a matter of living and being, surviving and thriving, resisting and resurging, or it could be that the need for materiality, for historical archives, for embodied identities, and for cultural and linguistic recovery within Indigenous studies continues to stand in for theory, for performance, and for disidentification within the queer. “It is in the unthinkable between queer and Indigenous,” Driftpile Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt writes, “that some of us stage our lives. We are both nothing and everything at the same time.”3 Within the impasse between queer and Indigenous is an erasure that shadows the dispossessive regimes of settler colonialism that has already conditioned Indigenous presence, knowledge, and livability.

It is here in this unthinkable between queer and Indigenous, what Belcourt names a nothing and everything at the same time, that I want to instantiate both a space and the ground through which to consider further the challenges Indigenous studies and queer studies pose to each other at the sites of materiality, normativity, and relationality. These words, materiality, normativity, and relationality, have emerged lately as key concepts for both fields; they are routinely evoked, contested, and reaffirmed, and in their sustained critical usage, such words can give a sense that the two fields are actually speaking to and hailing each other. But in that delimiting and sometimes limited circulation, meaning can also be fraught and, at times, contrarian, giving the illusion that there is a conversation under way when, in fact, the shared vocabulary is a structural violence or outright disavowal after all. One of my hopes in chronicling such disconnects, failures, and refusals in this article is that, in doing so, I might first offer some provisional thoughts on how to hold the Indigenous and queer together and bind them through the concept of ground, not as identitarian categories to be revitalized and performed within ethnographic and linguistic records of colonial archives or as decolonially affirmative sexualities, but as a possible way to hold the simultaneous nothing and everything—and I want to add the spatiality of nowhere and everywhere to Belcourt’s simultaneity—that the conjunction of Indigenous with queer might provide as a critical stance for eschewing recognition altogether. My secondary hope is to understand how the dispossessive logics of the nothing/everything and the nowhere/everywhere vectors of the Indigenous queer make legible exactly how central (dis)possession and its concomitant figuring of Indigenous bodies as material and immaterial manifestations of land and relationality are to how we understand ontology, embodiment, and subjectivity within the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands.
Positioning the queer as a vital analytic within Indigenous studies might also allow, I hope, a return to the question, what is queer about queer studies now? that David Eng asked with Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz in 2005 to consider what is now left of queer within the dispossession, retrenchments, and neoliberal g(r)aspings for relevancy that racial capitalism enables at the site of regressive white masculinist heteropatriarchal supremacy in the post-postracial, postqueer liberalisms that were only ever repressive logics at the heart of a brutal settler empire.\(^4\) In arguing that queer epistemology “disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent,” Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz theorized a manifesto for a globally situated subjectless queer studies that, in decentering identity and the self, could offer sustained engagements with gender and sexuality, as both are constituted intersectionally at the site of race, empire, diaspora, militarism, and colonialism.\(^5\) That lack of fixity is, however, still and importantly grounded through the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands. Ground—as land, as base, as territory, as wellness, and as center—persists as a guiding principle for decolonization, but it also becomes the locating authorization for claims, for meaning, for rightness, and for identity, subjectless or not.

In the decade plus since that state-of-the-field double issue was published in *Social Text* to take stock of queer studies’ emergence and to assess queer’s sustained political utility as a social critique of the normalization of meanings attached to sovereignty, democracy, rights, freedom, citizenship, immigration, kinship, belonging, and the human, Indigenous studies likewise arrived and transformed how scholars approached such questions by returning land, territoriality, and decolonization to the fundamental list of questions that might be posed to each and every subject-position imagined and enabled by settler colonial imperialism. Indigenous critique radically shifts the scales of interpreting the historical and political intent inherent within how self, subject, object, (dis)possession, and belonging are cohered within the context of ongoing settler colonialism. And, like the queer before it, indigeneity has had its own political utility, as well as its own internal debates about the politics and consequences of recognition and incorporation, culture and identity, sovereignty and nationalism, development and extraction, dislocation and movement, land and (dis)possession, labor and capitalism. I want to suggest that indigeneity itself functions similarly to queer as a means for interrogating how race, gender and sexuality, labor, possession, and rights are produced globally in relation to the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands and the erasure of Indigenous peoples, in what I have elsewhere theorized as the queer politics of the transitive native.\(^6\) Perhaps the reason Indigenous and queer continue to hold their boundaries and their ground against intersection-
alities is not just settler colonialism but the sheer magnitude of cognitive collapse that occurs when they occupy the same space at the same time.

While most efforts to bring these two fields into conversation have centered on Indigenous critiques of how the queer can often reify settler colonial dispossession, this article examines instead how Indigenous studies has subsumed the queer within Indigenous feminisms and how critiques of heteropatriarchy have queered all Indigenous peoples and have flattened Indigenous women’s bodies into land. If there is anything for the queer to offer Indigenous studies, I want to suggest, it may be found in the quality of (im)materiality of the Indigenous body as the ground through which belonging and being are rendered, critiqued, and transformed.

I. Grounded Materiality

But what is the ground through which Indigenous bodily materiality is apprehended? When Maori scholar Brendan Hokowhitu theorizes material Indigenous physicality as the source of embodied Indigenous epistemologies, he does so through Foucault, through C. L. R. James, and through the sheer centrality of the Maori cis-male body playing rugby to argue that “the indigenous body symbolised the physical realm and, thus, was employed for its physical labour, observed for its performativity, and humanised through the physical pursuits of sport.” In calling for such a materially constituted Indigenous body at play, he further advocates for the immediacy of Indigenous existentialism as a necessary transformation of the fixity of Indigenous physicality to stand against the realm of a self-pitying and romanticized “pure pre-colonial past” as he asks a series of seemingly rhetorical questions:

Are Indigenous bodies anxiety ridden in the present, lost between the pure past and the impure present; racked by tears over the actions of others upon us? Do we feel cheated of the future? Does the birth of our children lack responsibility; that is, will we pass on to them as part of our bodily “traditions,” the tears of self-pity? Conversely, can we “jump for joy” in the knowledge that regardless of our facticity, we have choice, responsibility and freedom?

Hokowhitu does not formally theorize Indigenous existentialism through an acknowledgment of gender, and by not doing so he reproduces and universalizes the materiality of the Indigenous body at the site of an Indigenous masculine heteronormativity that refuses tears for the joy and responsibility of generational futurity.

In his powerful critique of the institutionalization of “Indigenous masculinities” following a series of panels at the 2015 Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference in Toronto, Belcourt affirms after Sara