The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender

Bey, Marquis

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I begin with a brooding frustration. A problem, if you will. That frustration, that problem, however, yielded all of this. So, while frustrating, the problem was necessary; it gifted me, us, with all that lies before you, all of these thoughts—indeed, as a problem, it gifted me, us, as such, thought. While frustrating, the problem precipitated the emergence of the very thing that demonstrates the utility, the generativity, of problems.

I have only been calling myself a scholar of black studies and transgender studies for five years at the time of this writing. In that time, I have come across, on occasion after occasion, the illustrious name of Nahum Chandler. Whenever reference to black thought arose, or the figure of the Negro, or “paraontology,” Chandler’s name followed almost immediately, a citational nod that couldn’t not be made. But that was often what it was—a nod, a quick slip of the conceptual, philosophical brand name, as it were, perhaps a brief subsequent foray into a quoted or paraphrased definition, and then back to originally scheduled academic programming. I wanted to know more. Who was this Chandler guy, this powerhouse who seemed to loom large yet whose words, whose deep cogitative archive, often went ungrappled with? So, I set out to read his opus: X—the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought.
I’m not going to say that that was a mistake, but I will say, with an unwavering fortification, that it was a stupid idea at the time.

Reading Chandler’s work made very clear why he was only referenced rather than deeply, sustainedly engaged, why he was known mostly through the buzzwords and not the archive on which the buzzwords rested. The man is difficult to read; reading X is a treacherous discursive experience. One cannot leisurely read Chandler; one must strap in, come correct, bring one’s A+ game, and, in the immortal words of The Lion King’s Scar, be prepared. I was not prepared my first time reading it. I could not commit, could not get past “Anacrusis.” So I gave it up for months, contenting myself with the secondary literature and references to that behemoth of a text. That is, until the resounding pulsations of the “X,” its polysemous and promiscuous applications, compelled me to return.

This book, what you hold in your hands—more of a pamphlet actually, a speculative wandering around the circulatory system of a problematic and problematizing thought—culminated because of my frustration with the difficulty of Chandler’s writing yet the perceived (and, in my opinion, confirmed) importance of a deep engagement with it, the love of thinkers who oft made references to Chandler (Fred Moten, J. Kameron Carter, Denise Ferreira da Silva), and lastly, the thing that made me dive deep into the Chandlerian thickets, his profound oversights as to the massive resonances the X-as-Negro problematic and problematic figure of the Negro have with the X as referential of the gender nonnormative, the trans.

What I have written here is thus an attempt to take Chandler’s book, and his overall intellectual corpus, to task on its radical reconfiguration of “the figure of the Negro” as a disturbance of ontological groundedness and, more pressingly, its elision of the gendered valences of such ontological disturbance. Insofar as Chandler’s work is deeply generative in theorizing the figure of
the Negro as both a “historial” figure and a nonfigure, as it were, that undoes the ontological moorings that sustain the violent logics of metaphysics, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* pushes this in a more radical direction by amplifying the figural nature (or the not-quite-material nature) of “the Negro” and excavating the deeply gendered, *trans* resonances not considered in Chandler’s incredible book. This book, then, seeks to contribute two primary things. First is a deep reading and writing-with Chandler’s theorization of the X and the Negro. Part of the lack of sustained engagement with the full scope of Chandler’s work is his esoteric writing, which I hope to clarify. Not only do I hope to elucidate Chandler’s theorizations but I also hope to excavate the gendered elisions in theorizations of the Negro as an ontological problem. That is, I am bringing the trans and transgender studies to bear on the methodological critique of the ontology of whiteness so pervasive now in black studies. Therefore, second, I contribute an argument in excess of, though conversant with, Chandler in that I draw readers into a meditation on black feminism and gender nonnormativity via the X. *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* is interested in how gender, specifically trans genders, nonbinary genders, and the nonnormative gender implied by the nexus of black and woman, are necessary for any radical project of interrogating the logics of Western ontology.