The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender

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Problem?

... making no effort to do away with this problem once and for all.

—GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

For years, perhaps since my youth, I have been intrigued by problems. In a world in which so many seek solutions to all the troubling, fussy problems out there, I was one who enjoyed the problems themselves, those units of vexing ebullience. And the more they eluded solutions, the better. Problems to me were much more interesting because they cause a bit of a ruckus, get people all riled up and ready to do something about them. Solutions, on the other hand, stopped everything. It was always the problems that got things going. The intriguing part was the problematizing, as problems became problems because they did something: they problematized. And the problematizing, I examined, allowed for the jostling of the very things I believed to be worthy of being jostled.

That felicitous noun has a rich etymology, a strand of which is defined in alignment with its more common definition as “a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome.” This marks problems as impediments to be surmounted. Problems serve no positive purpose, only a negative roadblock to progress. It is no surprise, then, that problems have caught a bad rap. But examining a different
etymological trajectory in asymptotic relation to the former, we discover that a problem can more succinctly be described as “a difficult or demanding question.” Problems are no mere things in themselves that, transparently, have meanings or effects in need of overcoming. They express a certain agency and, indeed, demand a reckoning. And yet in the vociferous demand, it is nevertheless never entirely, or even marginally, certain what that demand is. Thus, the demand, while still present, straddles a teetering chasm met as a radical indeterminacy, an unmitigated uncertainty.

Because I also grew up around people who have a history of utter coolness, that black cool known as an “intelligence of the soul” that “stirs the imagination,” “problem” was never permitted to remain in its lexical strictures dictated by standard English.1 It gained a lilting flutter that made it something slightly different. Problems could not be mere things to be solved, especially from a problem people, as it were (“How does it feel to be a problem?” Du Bois intonates, ventriloquizing his white interlocutors); problems had to actualize themselves in different ways. So they took on the meaning of something not quite discernible. Imagine: someone looks at you askance, too skewed to be read as innocuous, so you ask, “Problem?” Or, you are listening to a throwback track, Lil Scrappy’s and Trillville’s “No Problem,” and hear, over that melodiously eerie instrumental and stipples of “Okay-kay-kaaay,” “But you don’t want no problem (problem, hoo!).” Or further, you realize that time and again its pronunciation is much closer to “prollum,” a vernacular rejoinder to coercions of “proper” diction. Problems signify here something like a generative waver. In the interrogative form, it portends an unsettling of norms of courteous interaction. In the musical

sense, it acts as an enticing threat, something attractive for its mystery but, too, frightening because of it. And as a vernacular tinkering, one knows but initially cannot be sure of the word one is hearing, its pronunciation obscuring something as it illuminates another way to encounter the very thing being obscured.

It strikes me that problems in these senses orbit around an understanding of the term as indicative of an indeterminate obscuration. Or alternatively, problems—somewhere between connoting and denoting—ghost meaning, leaving the encounter with them in a state of specific unspecificity. A problem thus presents a charged space of indeterminacy. Such indeterminacy generates the possibility of something profound happening at the level of the micropolitical, the molecular, wherein small tinkerings yield micro-abrasions that dissolve the sedimented regimes structuring our horizons. In alignment with my paraontological obsessions—that is, the radical effects of blackness and gender nonnormativity or transness—problems index, in their tinkering, molecular and molar, the animative “black operations that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out.”

It is because of the utility of problems, their expressivity of something to be learned via their opening up of normative seams, that I wish to dwell on them, that I have dwelled on them since my youth, and now in my maturity through, again, my obsessions of blackness and gender nonnormativity.

Illuminative of my opening epigraph is the simple fact that problems are not problematic. Indeed, they problematize and open space for inquiry, inserting a richness via rupture in the smoothness of decorum, but they are not problematic in the negative sense of stalling progress or being unjust. Only if we

mean the puncturing of the violence of the unexamined quotidian can we say problems are problematic; only if we mean to honor the pricking characteristic of the punctum jamming the machinic studium, as the punctum’s mere presence shifts the interpretive gaze, permitted a renewed encounter via its snapping of the quotidian, the metaphysical, the ontological, Barthes has said. While Deleuze and Guattari are referencing, in the epigraph, the impediment of psychoanalysis’s bourgeois repression to liberation, I excerpt them here to suggest that problems need not be solved at all; indeed, problems ought not be solved, as it is the problematizing function that generates what Deleuze and Guattari are calling “genuine liberation.” The onset of problems’ problematizing engenders that milieu of uncertainty and indeterminacy, which, by virtue of its fracturing—or its “fractal,” to use the language of my key interlocutor in this text, Nahum Chandler—presents the possibility of exploring the ghosts in the machine, as it were, precisely because of its own ghosting of a meaning that abides the machinic logics mooring normativity in place.

Problem and its lexical derivatives (problematic, problematize, problematization) proliferate through Chandler’s text, and rightly so, as the term is precisely the organizing concept (or perhaps I should say, with Chandler’s preferences in mind, a concept-metaphor or, even better, paraconcept) for the figure of the Negro. Certainly, he gains problem’s efficacy from Du Bois’s quite famous opening scene in which many a white person skirts around the question “How does it feel to be a problem?” to which Du Bois responds, “Seldom a word.” But what is being done with problem and its derivatives is the work of ontological critique. Before addressing Chandler, I might offer a reading of Du Bois

first, as “How does it feel to be a problem”—which is for him, he says, the real question—is an ontological query: it is in effect a question of what it means to be a, the, problem, affectively. To answer “seldom a word” is a nonresponse that registers at the level of Being inasmuch as the seldom word answered by the being that is a problem for Being problematizes Being as such. Put differently, a reading of Du Bois that converses with Chandler’s, that is perhaps the second verse of the track Chandler is putting down, is one in which Du Bois’s nonresponse is the problematizing of his problematic status precisely because his problematic status is the result of the philosophical project of ontology that he, in his concerted beingness as a nonresponse, cannot not critique.

Chandler accentuates this via his elaboration on the impossibility of asking the question of Being, which is to say the impossibility of encountering Being on innocent grounds. From the jump, ontology is fraught and given to obscuring its intentions. To ask the question of Being is to inhabit its fraughtness that, in an inhabitation of it, disallows one to ask it the question of itself that must be asked. Asking of it the question that must be asked yields the conclusion, Chandler says, that “the question destroys itself” (3; emphasis original). It is in this destruction that another terrain or logic—“an other logic, logic of the other” (5; emphasis original) of which we are in the midst—can be unleashed to luminous effect. Or, darkened effects.

These effects fall under various headings in Chandler’s text, one of which is instructive here: the heading of “Africanist problematics” (15). To be sure, as will be made clear, lovingly and hopefully humbly, throughout this meditation, my concerns exceed the paradoxically capacious parochialism of Chandler’s readings. That is, Chandler’s illustrious reading misses certain opportunities to think rigorously about the “paraconcept” of gender or, more specifically, transness/gender nonnormativity,
as well as the utility of his conception of the X as a figurative to highlight gendered valences. Still instructive here is the potently racial notion of Africanist problematics in that it should be understood as the problematizing engendered by blackness (a term Chandler actually rarely uses, preferring other terms, such as the Negro or African American). It, or they, Africanist problematics, articulate groundedness’s problem; they are problems for grounds and groundedness, or first principles, origins and primordial purities. Chandler’s itinerary by way of Du Bois’s is one that follows around a certain rift, a rending of the philosophical mainstay of essence, or a first principle, of a ground, and finally of pure being, all of which are troubled by the problematization of the figure of the Negro, the African American, the “X.” The move I wish to make here is that the Africanist problematic, insofar as it raises the general question—a generality that proliferates throughout X—the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought and that I find conceptually compelling as it gets us outside of specificities that often disallow capacious and coalitional thinking—of “the possibility and ground of being” (52), is one that rigorously excavates the possibility of another kind of subjective generality. The raising of the general question of Being requires us to vitiate all that such a question has ushered forth, which is, of course, everything. That this also dissolves all borders concerning the “human,” including, Chandler says, “gender,” I am drawn to the operative role of, as it were, gender problematics.

Let us inscribe this a bit differently. The Negro’s questioning and problematizing of the ground of pure being gets us to question then the human and necessarily the things that constitute the human, including the animal and sexual difference and gender—and perhaps beyond this. Though others might be itching to say that gender is more and originally constitutive of the human, to say that gender comes before the Negro viz. race, I
am uninterested in making such a move. I will say, however, that the Negro, while not at all a comfortable inhabitant of gender as such, is differentiated along lines of what might be called gender. By this I do not mean simply that black “women” are “multiply marginalized” but something more incisive: that the figure of the Negro, that blackness, animates and instrumentalizes gender always toward its dissolution. The Negro and its figurative problematization is presumed by Chandler as, ironically, “purely” “under the heading of” race without accounting for how this is at once a general problematic and thus a problem for gender as well as problematized through gender. It is not so much that I disagree with Chandler than that I want to critique and radicalize him on the behalf of his own thought. The gesture of problematization is a good and necessary one that must reckon with the ontological problematic of gender through and for the Negro, which is then to say through and for the nonsubstitutable vectors that compose ontology as such.

The forms this meditation on problematizing will take are, in Chandler’s preferential term, the Negro and, extending Chandler beyond his elisions, gender, or more specifically, the trans and gender nonnormative. The Negro problem, inflective and definitional of the vitiation of the typical, unhindered goings-on of sociality, dovetails lusciously with what might be understood as the gender problem, or the way the ghosted presence (which is to say, the way that the trans ghosts or evanesces corporealized meaning) of gender nonnormativity vitiates the founding attempts to make legible through a grounding in binary gender.

To advance these problems, the X serves as instructive. As the “X” carries with it historical valences that Chandler finds useful in terms of racial distinction (his preferred terminology over “race”)[4]...

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4. “Racial distinction” connotes a way of acknowledging that what has come to be called race is a mechanism by which difference
and that I find useful in terms of designating trans or nonbinary genders, the letter threads this brief text and highlights blackness and gender nonnormativity by way of their expressivity through it. In short, X functions throughout as a link between the problematizing done by blackness and the problematizing done by gender nonnormativity, or transness. It becomes the critical site of articulating blackness and transness as expressive through each other that is not a reduction to conflation. X is the coalescing of these two problems, indexical of their tricky indeterminacy and besidedness to ontologization.

In clarification, X can act as a problematizing anagrammar that intensifies (not consolidates) the dissonance effectuated by the Negro and, differently yet relatedly, the trans. To return to the opening discussion of problem’s valences, if X has a history, as I’ll show explicitly in the second half of this text, of alluding to the evanescing effects of the Negro and the trans, this convergence functions as a tray of indeterminacy and opening. To ask “Problem?” as a way to address, or rather unaddress, inasmuch as the query notes nothing but the laceration of meaning-as-assumed, a slight the condition of possibility for which is normality itself; or to hear Lil Scrappy’s and Trillville’s choral refrain as a paradoxically seductive danger, the mysteriousness of which is a différance in the dark; or to incite the vernacular pronunciation “prollum” as, allowing Gilles Deleuze and Henry Louis Gates Jr. to converse, a difference and repetition with a difference—where “prollum” is an anoriginal differentiation and dispersal tied to a

is mapped and, subsequently, made to subjectivate people through the inscriptions of the constructed differences. Whereas to simply say race, on Chandler’s account, “reproduce[s] not only this concept, but thereby implicitly affirm[s] the violence of the practices carried out in its name,” racial distinction sidesteps the violence by not presuming its naturalness and instead notes its political, instrumental underpinnings (49).
sociohistorical commentary via grammatical underminings—is all to suggest in different ways the desedimentary effects of the problems by the names of the Negro and the trans. “X” highlights and intensifies these effects.

In a sense, the terms *Negro* and *trans* can behave in this way because of their generalization rather than, as is typical, their specificity. By way of Chandler’s pursuit to think the racialized “double consciousness” as not confined to the African American subject but indicative of how we all come into subjectivity, there is an ontological allowance with these terms. They stand in for a process that has been mapped onto certain subjectivities and has been inaccurately presumed to be categorically destined for, and bounded by, those subjectivities. But the delinking expands the processes through the terms, terms that reference what Chandler remarks as “the historical form of the problematization of existence” (12). The historical, or perhaps I should more accurately say the historicized, embodied figures (which is to say conceptual apparatuses that have been made to live on corporealized subjects before and after interpellation) of the Negro and the transgender person may be the historical forms but are not the totality, nor the origins, of the black and the trans, I submit. They are the names that have been given to, and the kinds of bodies that have been made to live through, the problematization of existence.

Mere existence is disallowed an uncritiqued dwelling place in the world. Perturbing that existence, which is a modality of life that “overrepresents” itself as life-as-such through colonial imposition, the Negro (blackness intensified) and the trans (gender nonnormativity intensified) do the work of “unsettling.”

Finely put, if I may signpost in brutal clarity what I will be up to, this brief book takes Chandler’s Du Boisian argument in X—the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought as not merely a meditation on blackness by way of an examination of Du Bois’s oeuvre but also apt for a meditation, here, on problematic genders. That is, through the paraontological, the between, and the figure of the X (with its explicit contemporary link to nonbinary and trans genders as showcased, for example, in neologisms like “Latinx”), there is a generative co-reading to be done between the Negro’s problematizing and trans’s problematizing. Chandler’s text serves as both an argumentative tool for rendering the “radical alternative” in and as blackness as well as demonstrating, if only in its interstitial folds where my readings might nuzzle closely to mis- or overreadings, the necessarily gendered valences of that radical alternative. The Negro indexes processes of racialization in which race is a materialization of hegemony’s disciplining of unruliness and irregularity. The Negro—indexical of blackness—serves as the corporeal consolidation of such a primordial irregularity. It bears being noted, then, that the question of gender always rests alongside the question of race, or more pointedly, formations of gender are always iterations of race; gender serves often as a racial (re)arrangement.⁶ Insofar as the problematization of gender finds expression in the trans, and insofar as gender constitutes the scope of ontology and the grounds of being, it must also be said that the problem of the Negro is, via its concatenation with transness, a problem for gender.

⁶ See C. Riley Snorton, Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); see also Jules Gill-Peterson, Histories of the Transgender Child (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).