The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender

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Paraontology

... the challenge of calling an object into being without owning or being owned by the call of identity or identification, of recognition or acknowledgment.
—Stephen Best, None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life

The paraontological distinction. That is Chandler’s task in so many ways, to clarify and flesh out this distinction. It proceeds by way of a general critical practice, a general desedimentation concerned with the mode or dimension or order—whatever metaphor of your choosing—of this distinction, that is, the conception of difference among humans and nonhumans and other-than-humans understood through the concepts, chiefly, of race and gender. (Chandler, though, would drop the qualifiers and thereafter simply notate the distinction as “difference among humans understood as . . .”) It is a distinction that unmoors the ligaments of ontology, inclusive of identities held dearly like those of race and gender, in the service of what J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak refer to as “paraontological life.”¹ I am understanding the paraontological project

as a stringent, radical attempt to explore other modes of living. These modes of living might cause the death of a subject, but that is only the death of a subject that needs to measure up to ontological grammars. Paraontological life, subjectivity emerging through paraontology, can look quite different, and it is that kind of life we strive toward. We get closer to it with the attenuation of each vector of ontological entrapment we manage to grittily, painstakingly abandon.

The concept of the paraontological cannot be “reduced” or “simplified” to any one thing, its elusiveness perhaps its primary point. It is, crucially, not really a concept to be pointed to; more closely to truth, paraontology concerns the effective loosening of concepts to which we can point. Indeed, it bears a certain relation to Derrida’s *différance*, a term famously deemed a “non-concept” to refer to the difference and deferral of meaning. Pertinently, *différance* has been described by Derrida—after much frustration with an audience member who likened the term to the god of negative theology—as precisely the unknowable source of everything, and precisely not that at all. Attentive listeners can hear the reverberatory echoes of an Ellisonian, and later Marlon Riggsian, declaration: “I said black is . . . an’ black ain’t . . .,” and also pertinently, “Black will make you . . . or black will un-make you.”

A few clarification points, via Chandler: paraontology names “the project of a desedimentation; it is genealogical and deconstructive, yet neither; a desedimentation of the status of the distinctions among beings, a critical account of their ostensible ground or predication, and a critical reconsideration of the

undercommon otherside of paraontology, namely, a modality of life unmoored from ownership, (en)titlement, groundedness, and settlement.”

hierarchies and orientations by which they are articulated or understood as in relation.” It also rejects an absolute mark or determination, rejects, that is, a categorical distinction, purity.³ Desedimentation is taken, with some license, from Derrida, one of Chandler’s primary interlocutors. He shares an anecdote, one, on his account, he had never shared in public before until his annotations on the Negro as a problem for thought during a Society for the Humanities lecture at Cornell University I attended in 2018. As is his wont, he spoke slowly, and swayed slowly yet, ironically, dizzyingly. His voice deep and commanding, again as is his wont. He shared that while in Chicago—the city of which I am now a denizen—he walked around the University of Chicago’s campus discussing with Derrida desedimentation. Derrida at that point found desedimentation a more convincing notion than deconstruction as a metaphor system or network. Derrida gave, Chandler says, a proverbial “thumbs up.” What Derrida wrote as “de-sedimentation” implies an undoing of the work of sedimentation, the consolidation that occurs in thought (a thought often given to forms of commodification). Chandler makes it his preferential term for its radical fundamentality, or potential for a radically fundamental loosening. And he links this with the movement of difference and differentiation, the proliferative unhinging effects of the movement of differentiation: “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” (18). This is paraontology, the paraontologically distinctive movement.

This movement, to continue in the Derridean vein with a blackened twist, if you will—or ceding the nonexistent ground to what can only be a black and blackened Derrida—refuses to give definition or essence to purportedly extant historical figures precisely because, via the desedimentary, deconstructive, différantial workings of thinking these subjects, there is to be found no definition or last essential analysis. The deconstructive work of desedimentation, its paraontological sinews and ligaments, is, if you’ll allow me this neologism, nondefinessential. Because of this, we cannot and can never distinguish between who or what is within or without the ostensible boundaries of the very thing we mark as possessing a transparent definition or essence. Hence, the criteria for inclusion and exclusion dissolve into nothingness, thus making the work of paraontology the recognition of this dissolution and, from there, joyfully conceding that there are no criteria for subjective verification, no ontological ground on which to stand in order to be viable, and indeed a no-groundedness that invites subjects into it as a place to stand, para- and non- and nega-ontologically. Paraontology, then, reading Derrida both into and out from this, characterizes an uncertainty principle: not merely an undecidability but an intentional impossibility to determine what is inside and outside the subjective, ontological threshold. So, there is no threshold. The door swings marvelously open for entry into the effects of blackness; there are no regulatory criteria for those who might take up the impure and desedimentary effects of the figure of the Negro, those deployed Africanist rumblings. In this is the radical “suggestion of the possibility of a general desedimentation of a traditional conceptual premise that organizes the interpretation of the African American subject in the United States,” a premise fixated on bestowals of sufficient measurements of ancestry or
blood quantum or byzantine criteria for authenticity as definitive for one’s status as black. Doing this, Chandler concludes, “assist[s] further in opening a new way of thinking the question of the African American or African diasporic subject, the implications of which might bear force on our understanding of the modes of constitution of any historical subject”—this new way being one that has wrecked the purity of ontological grounding so much as to dislodge the aforementioned organizing premises as regulatory qualifications for the problematics indexical in the Negro, making the figure of the Negro, blackness, and Africanist thinking possible for constituting any subject who bears a desedimentary relationship to ontological mandates, for the Negro, blackness, and Africanist thinking name that impurifying process, somatically indiscriminately so (135). So, again, there is no—or a refusal of, a displacement and exorbitance of—ontology and the purity upon which the figure of the Negro, in its paraontology, rests. And that is nothing short of salvific.

The ontological predicate of purity signifies strongly in terms of gender too, with there being a long history of (white) women being subject to and deploying notions of purity. At times, white feminist women garnered a sense of moral capital on the concept of “purity,” specifically sexual purity, which then acted as the legitimizing force for their valid claim to womanhood and, through this, respect and dignity believed to have been denied them. At other times, white feminism (an albeit nebulous term too often assumed to be readily intelligible), and some other types of feminisms, mobilized a sense of gendered essentialism or pure category of “woman” that needed to be restored, recovered, and wielded to shore up women’s rights claims.⁴ Purity, then, on the ontological level, is significantly gendered, and the

ontological grounds vitiated by paraontology’s desedimentation is a markedly ungendered move as well, a trans move.

The site of the movement is placed under the heading (a phrase I adopt from Chandler’s consistent use) of originarity. Originarity is not to be reduced to, or understood as, an origin with all its attending purity. The contrary is at work here. It is deployed as a “scene of possibility” (17), which I read as in convivial harmony with an understanding of transitivity, where the latter is a (trans)gender inflected primordially proliferative scene. Originarity as a scene of exorbitant (chapter 1) possibility spills into transitivity as a sort of Pangaea where the trans thinks across registers of species and, moreover, indexes the incohering of gender, sex, and anatomical indices of gender.5 Through both these registers, desedimentation takes place; originarity and transitivity precipitate desedimentation, giving over anything that might be considered new, like different formations of subjectivity. (Its texture is consolidated succinctly at the outset of X in Chandler’s description of the Los Angeles rebellion that took place in the year of my birth: as “an explosion, an irruption somewhere, from the beginning of time, as time, and thus yet beyond time, neither time nor not time, indeed displacing time, before beginning, cavernous and massive, fractual, infinitely so” [2].)

These new formations arise through paraontology, for to arise via ontology would be to be already enthralled in the philosophical mandates regulating what can ontologically appear, what can be captured by ontology. The paraontological is how the Negro emerges or the trans emerges, both of which

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find expression—as will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters—in the figure of the X.

In short, forwarded in Chandler is a notion of a paraontology that functions as a critical concept that breaks up and desediments. By way of this, it permits the rewriting of narratives and the very conditions of understanding the present as such. Importantly, the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology. Paraontology is not a search for new categories, as if categorization is a neutral process. It is not; categorization is a mechanism of ontology, an apparatus of circumscription. What the paraontological suggests is a dissolution. As a project of desedimentation, it takes categorizations, namely, “race” for Chandler but extensive in its identificatory assaults, which then includes a category such as gender, and wishes to “make tremble” any kind of “sedimented commitments” that maintain in place (5). This making tremble staunchly refuses to permit subjective lodgings into place, those processes that end the possibility of mutability. Being and becoming other than we must, or other than we are said to be able to by ontological mandates, is to find life and livability in mutability and rearrangement toward the illegible, which is to say the defiance of the ontological—in other words, the paraontological. Subjective and existential trembling, “ontological” trembling, is the reconfigurative life for which we search; it is paraontological life.

Interestingly, the prefixal para- comes from the Greek word παρά-, meaning “by the side of,” “beside,” and hence “alongside, by, past, or beyond.” It also bears the sense of cognate adverbial prepositions like “to one side, aside, amiss, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong.” Additionally, however, as a second prefixal etymology, para- is linked to French, Italian, and classical Latin words for to make ready, prepare, defend from, or shelter; it is affixed to words with the sense of “protection from ____.” Often when para- has been invoked in philosophical theorizations, it
has only been used in the first sense, which importantly bears a strong etymological affinity with *trans* (to the side of, across, beyond). I wish to explore the implications of thinking the *para-* of *paraontology* in both etymological senses, denoting the paraontologicality of blackness and transness as a fissuring besidedness to ontic and ontological meaning making *and* a protection from the regime of ontology, which is to say, defended from the tyrannies of hegemonic, stabilizing subjectivation. (Because, after all, despite my own critical position relative to his work, Calvin Warren’s assessment of ontology as the field in which blackness is cursed by Being as unintelligible and “execrated” from it is apt.)

Hence, not only are blackness and transness beside ontology as its insidious simmering sibling but it is sheltered from the normalizing forces of that ontology, definitionally refusitive of being affected by that ontology. They are moves of refusing ontology as a form of emerging otherwise, which is to say—that is, those forms that are otherwise emergences are to say—the Negro and the trans are problematizations of one another and the ontologically imposed claims that are race and gender. This is a profound site, in fact. Indeed, we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us, and that refusal to accommodate is the marker of paraontology. And problems, the Negro and trans, do not accommodate the worlds of race and gender.

In a simplistic sense, paraontology refers to something that


7. I am drawing here from Sara Ahmed and would be remiss if I did not quote the opening lines from her essay “Affinity of Hammers”: “We learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Not being accommodated can be pedagogy. We generate ideas through the struggles we have to be in the world; we come to question worlds when we are in question.” *TSQ* 3, no 1–2 (2016): 22.
cannot really be “referred” to. References hold sway by virtue of their allusions to something concrete, something rooted and grounded. A kind of sediment, if you will. Yet we know that, per Chandler, paraontology cannot refer to something in this way because paraontology is a project of desedimentation. I propose, then, the language of pulsation or resonance. Hence paraontology in a brief sense resonates with a meaning of that “which is yet to be thought,” as Giorgio Agamben has offered. I, and I submit Chandler, too, depart slightly from this understanding, inasmuch as Agamben says that paraontology is “an ontology which is yet to be thought.” But I maintain here through my reading of Chandler that paraontology cannot be said to be another type of ontology; it is not ontology with a different, less normative name. More closely, the pulsation of paraontology exudes a meaning that appears as a “potential ontological alterity,” where the alterity is one that contrasts with, or, more accurately, deviates from and destabilizes the point of reference for, ontology. What arises nebulously, unintelligibly, in the interstices or beyond the scope of what can be understood has the residue of the paraontological. It is because to bring something into a certain legibility is to place it within the dictates of ontological constraints, to subject it to onto-epistemic templates that paraontology, by definition, eludes by way of a double gesture of being hailed by language but inadequately, hailed by insufficient language and thus only partially understood, which is in fact its wont.

There is theoretical work being done by paraontology. It is theoretical work that Chandler wants to think as critical theoretical

fiction. For critical theoretical fiction is not presumptive about its theoretical import as bearing a “real” or ontological relation to that which it theorizes, and this relinquishing of an ontological hold permits other moves to be made. This theoretical work, this paraontological work, goes under these names but cannot, in the final instance, go under any given name. The practice of naming emerges by way of the historial, as Chandler calls it, a staking of identification in the American ontological project, construed convincingly to the Western philosophical project of racial distinction and, I add, the gender binary and “coloniality of gender.” Paraontological theorizations and paraontology itself must be beyond any name as it is otherwise than a thought, properly understood. Thought in the philosophical tradition is oriented toward existence as being, which the Negro, the X, and, in my iteration, the trans all seek to undermine as they are projects of impurity and nonexistence. The name for the concern with impurity, with grounded irreverence, or irreverence for the ground, is paraontology.

So when meditating on the relationship between the Negro and the trans—or more specifically, blackness and transness, those indexical referents of corporeal transgression via a primordial mutiny—what arises is an entrée into a generative disruption.

10. He gets this from Spivak, who in an interview argues that Derrida theorizes deconstruction by way of a unifying theoretical fiction, a methodological presupposition that allows the work of deconstruction to begin in the middle, as it were. Theoretical fiction is the formulation for what must be posited but known to be not quite true in order for the work of deconstruction, or desedimentation, to proceed. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues (New York: Psychology Press, 1990), 136.

While history has consolidated these names into ontological facts that seem deeply particular and specific, it is nevertheless contingent upon the vagaries of history; history, in other words, as it has come to give heft to an understanding of blackness and transness as particular existential modes of living specific to those given (in and as) black and/or trans(gender) people, might be very viscerally felt as exclusive of those who do not measure up to preconceived somatic endowments of race and gender. It is not, however, the understanding displayed on the occasion of this meditation. It has been argued, persuasively, elsewhere by scholars like Claire Colebrook, C. Riley Snorton, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Fred Moten that the black and trans of the ante-and antimatter are less measurements of the body—a body, we must note, that is not always epistemically certain of its nature and its effects—and instead, more substantively, denote a kind of antieorinal displacement of sedimentation, a noncategorical movement away from definitive loci of corporeal and ontological knowledge. The thrust of this book, then, will operate under this mantle of blackness and transness as transgressional: as what will become more evident as problematizing analytics.

Consider here the paraontological “movement of black thought”:

the internal production of racial ontologies of blackness by black diasporans have destabilized the claim that any racial category is given, or natural. Nahum Chandler has written of this double character of blackness as a fundamental problematic to any notion of categorisation because of its “paraontological” status. By this he means that any iteration of blackness involves the shattering of the basis of racial purity in all its forms, in the service of the affirmation of dehiscient non-exclusionary improvisations of collective being. The “paraontology” of blackness is the constant escape of blackness from the fixity of racial ontology that structures white supremacy.12

Upon these logics Chandler calls the Negro a “paraconcept,” and I might also call the trans a paraconcept—they are referents to desedimentary impurities that do the work of dislodging, respectively, racial and gender distinction, rather than figures that exist as such. To say that the Negro, or the trans, is an actually occurring self-evident entity in the world concedes to the very logics that someone like Du Bois is trying to oppose. That is, to concede uncritically that there is something called the Negro and that it exists, that it is obviously called and known as the Negro, is to affirm the logics behind the entity of the Negro, which brings with it also the violently racist formulations of it that would adhere to those hailed by that nominative. On the other hand, to say that the Negro, and the trans, are merely concepts is to bereft them of any kind of essence; to deem it a concept would, in a way, be a radically anti- or nonessentialist move. Theoretically and philosophically, such an argument might be fine, but politically—in an environ wherein something called the Negro and some people called transgender are deeply felt to exist and, on the grounds of that existence, are pulverized in so many ways—it is quite dangerous. In other words, the Negro cannot exist, but the Negro must exist. Black is . . . an’ black ain’t.

Hence the paraconcept addresses this double bind. And struggle needs to be had to reckon with this double bind. That bind is the necessity of refusing the premises on which the Negro, as a subject, rests and to not disregard the Negro, as subject, precisely because the historical trajectory of that subject is consequential. Forgive me now for conveying a lengthy passage from Chandler that illustrates this matter pristinely:

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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. 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 contemporary, 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. (14–15, emphasis original)

The discourse of the Negro never comes from a place of sequestered quietude or freeness from all the surrounding static;
it does not, and has never, come from one writing, as it were, in “a room of one’s own,” taking, as many others have done, Virginia Woolf to task on her white feminine solipsism. That which erupts from the Negro as paraontological desedimentation works doubly as a response and a call: it works as an impure injection into the pervading white supremacy and as a transitive, anoriginary beckoning toward life unbounded by the ontological—which is to say, the white, cis, male, Western—dictates organizing life and livability. As the discourse of the Africanist figure arose, on one reading, in the cacophony of attempts to enunciate identificatory difference as a way to gain steam in promoting different conceptions of life for those who indexed the “ancient volcano,” paraontological life, this discourse took on the identificatory project as well. Thus the Negro “subject” was given over to onto-epistemic criteria. This must be noted and, to an extent, an extent that is still up for debate and will likely always be nebulous, heeded. Too, however, the “European” or “White” subject (neither of which Chandler believes exists as such) organized the very ground of ontology, and the question of the subject, any iteration of the subject—whether Negro or non-Western or what have you—is always a reiterative process of the foundational subject (“European” or “White”) and its logics for subjecthood proper. The white subject is the ground allowing all notions of “subject” to come forth, no matter how “black” it might be. This ground must be displaced, and the name Chandler gives for that displacement is the Negro, that figurative instantiation of desedimentation. Chandler is not arguing for simply a nonessentialist or anti-essentialist project, as such projects always presume the immutability and transparency of the ligaments of the ontological identificatory project without questioning, desedimenting, its grounds. Taking the Negro as a paraontological force, then, is the avenue by which we proceed toward unseating the grounds
without assuming the immutability and transparency of the grounds that gave rise to the figure that permits us to unseat those grounds.

This is a project with deeply gendered resonances. The insistences on purity and ultimate grounds are the same insistences that seek to invalidate the livability of trans and gender non-normative life. “Biological sex” and the gender binary are those pure, ultimate grounds that trans, prefixally and analytically and corporeally, originarily displaces, acts as exorbitant to. One must not, then, simply submit that there is such an identifiable, transparently knowable entity called a trans subject, nor submit that trans subjects do not really exist and bear no unique relationship to the process of ontologization. What, then, are we to do? While the phenomenological gendered experiences of trans people are not to be discarded, which would risk reifying the gendered ontology that orchestrates transantagonism, it can be said that trans as a prefixal indexation of gender desedimentation is precisely the working-on and undoing-of the organizing frame of the gender binary, necessary to be taken up by anyone making a practice—which is to say working toward a subjectivity—of dislodging the violence of ontology, of which the gender binary, biological essentialism and determination, and anatomical over-determination are deeply constitutive. “Trans” is a figuration that is mapped onto certain subjective formations and modalities that “exist” by way of its effects on predominating onto-logics, yet those effects index that which precisely cannot exist within those logics, that which implies a life and livability not of this world.

I want to proffer a certain understanding of the trans or trans-ness as a paraontological gesture. This is a proffering gaining its heft not only on indication of elision, a move that almost goes without saying and is, quite frankly, grossly lacking in revelation. Trans as bearing a paraontological residue, as it were, is a testament to the fact that other words besides “the Negro” or “African
American” can and must be used, that these other words do not replace or displace the efficacy of words that are already used (e.g., Negro), and that these words add genuine depth to what is being spoken of. Trans, then, like the X and the Negro and African American and blackness, must be thought alongside them, for they reference how and where desedimentation is taking place. Trans “converge[s] in an irreducible way” with the Negro, and when Fred Moten in his conversation with Wu Tsang says that “there are other words that one could use, but none of those words is replaceable. Not only are they not replaceable, they are not substitutable;” he is speaking to the potency of trans as doing the work, or indexing the impulse of impurity, of what Chandler is indexing to the Negro as paraontological.13 I emphasize the necessity of speaking to gender and the rending of its cohesion—that is, the trans/gender—because ontology is given over to readers of Chandler’s text as an encompassing terrain of organization and coherence. And it organizes and coheres by way of what Chandler insists on calling racial distinction (not “race,” Chandler always putting “race” in quotes). I cannot help but insist, too, on the gender binary as analogical to “racial distinction,” irreducibly, because gender, like it seems Chandler implies with racial distinction’s role in modernity organizing itself around racial taxonomies, “is also an administrative or bureaucratic structure for the management of sexual difference and reproductive capacity.”14 The field of ontology is vehicularized

in substantive part by gender as a necessary and nonnegotiable constituent of ontological status.

Hence, if the counterproject is to desediment the ground on which ontology gains its efficacy, and if the Negro is one name for that desedimentary project, another name for that, not reducible to the Negro but vital also to name, is *trans*. By way of Mel Y. Chen’s definition, “*trans* is not as a linear space of mediation between two monolithic, autonomous poles, as for example ‘female’ and ‘male’”—and this is the ontological function, a gestural fixity begotten by linearity, binarism, and homogeneity—“rather, *trans* is conceived of as more emergent than determinate, intervening with other categories in a richly intersectional space. . . .

Rather than a substantive core such as a noun, I wish to highlight a *prefixal* ‘trans’—not preliminarily limited to gender.” They go on to remark that this is a “different form of trans-,” one that does not evacuate the gendered valences of it or the affective registers it accrues around and through people of transgender experience. Trans, on Chen’s account, is asserted as a “complex, multi-factored cultural contingency of transgendered actualizations [which] affirm that gender is omnipresent, though I am suggesting that it is rarely monolithically masculine or feminine.”

Gender’s omnipresence marks it as a fundamentally ontological predicate, making any effort to desediment ontology’s hold one that necessarily attends to gender. This attention is not to be one that simply looks to “women’s experience” or incorporates the perspectives of transgender people; it is a gender binaristic eruption—a transness that speaks the language of gender abolition.
