The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender

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The Interminable Figure of the X

The black chant she hears is old and new to her. She is unmoored. She is ungendered.

—Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)”

Importantly, “X” might be read as a Derridean repackaging with a difference—or, if you will, with a différance. If différance is a movement of the trace and instantiation of the impossibility of origin and a shattering of cultist identitarianism, X proceeds along these routes as well. X is not “simply nothing (or, rather, not absence)” (77); X is the trace of a movement for which we are always too late, a movement of displacement, a movement toward a certain rupture of the thing that permits sedimentation. X’s utility comes in its ability to mark an absence, to reference a non-thing, placing it in the between, as discussed in the previous chapter: X is a thing that is not a thing. Like the Negro, and I would insist on the addition of the trans and gender nonnormative, X is a figural figure, yet not a figure proper (101); it marks a difficulty posed to the identificatory, the ontological, imposition.

But whence does this niggling little letter that is so much more than a letter come? The letter X has a rather shifty history. It has morphed like other letters and phonemes, of course, but its etymological trajectory proves particularly useful in excavating the possibility of a link to contemporary understandings of non-normative modes of existence.
X was originally used by the Phoenicians as a representative of the hard consonant /s/ sound (*samekh*), which the Greeks later borrowed around 900 B.C.E. and named “Chi.” The Greeks then used this letter to simplify the digraphic /ks/ sounds, a sound pervasive in western Greece. Subsequently, the Romans adopted the /x/ sound from the Chalcidian alphabetic system, borrowing the “Chi” symbol, and wrote it as two diagonally crossed strokes (what we might understand today as an X). Thus, in short, the Romans took the /x/ sound from the Chalcidian alphabet, combined it with the diagonally stroked “Chi” symbol from the Greeks, and that confluence begot the letter X as we know it. Now, X is an especially phonetically volatile letter. It can be written to announce a voiceless velar fricative (your common /ks/ sound), a /gz/ sound exemplified in words like “auxiliary,” or the /z/ sound, as in “xylophone,” and it can be soundless, as in “faux.”

In excess of strict syntactic and semantic shifts and meanings of “X,” it has also taken on broader social meanings that open up avenues of thought, or rather, that problematize thought. The X-shaped Phoenician “Taw” symbol has roots in Old Testament scriptures as a mark to be borne in order to avoid being smitten by the angel of death. It was a signifier of divinely chosen life. Too, it has marked the location of unknown variables (X marks the spot); it has acted itself as the unknown variable (as in mathematical $x$ variables, or more loosely in what has been deemed the “X-factor”) and has denoted the obliteration of typed script. “X” has long marked error, too, to which any teacher with a red pen can attest. Additionally, it marks relationality, or how a preceding quantity relates to the subsequent one, as in measurements (e.g., $2 \times 4$). And lastly, though there are likely others that escape this brief enumeration, Xs have been used to signify kisses, with its accompanying O for hugs, in friendly and romantic missives.

Most apropos for my concerns, however, is perhaps X’s racialized and chromosomal inflections. X has come to imply,
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the afterlife of U.S. enslavement of African-descended peoples, a marker of absence for an unknown Africanic surname. A referent to that locus of blackness, that “dark continent,” X signifies a type of nothingness insofar as such a nothingness indexes both the epistemic and racist conception of Africa as producing nothing of intellectual and cultural value as well as the no-thingness the name blackness comes to stand in for: an absolute dispersal of generativity, what Amaryah S. Armstrong would understand as blackness in its exuding of an abundant multiplicity, or what Claire Colebrook would understand as a transitivity in its not-yet-differentiated potentiality to give rise to distinction.¹ Many ex-slaves in the late nineteenth century and African-descended people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who wished to supplant their “slave names” took to declaring their last name as, simply, “X.” The mark, the “remainder” (111), that is, the X is a kind of surplus, referential of “the interminable figure” (176). As interminable, the X is perennially open-ended. An endlessness of the X is indicative of an ongoing mutability and processual alteration, a never-being-closed or finished. This open-endlessness, if you will, excites the Negro and the trans, as the X names the unnamed, the blessed loss of namedness; this open-endless X, to reactivate contextually differently Cameron Awkward-Rich’s “[Black Feeling],” is “a room where things go / to lose their names,” becoming “[ ].”² The letter, then, comes to stand in for an unnameable blackness that was lost or stolen—a trans experience, I want to assert briefly, in that “to feel black


in the diaspora,” which brings with it a necessary relation to the Middle Passage and histories of forced captivity and cultural theft, “might be a trans experience,” and also in that stealing the body back inflects a trans/gender self-determinative mode of existence—and this unnameable blackness is, put differently, the figure of the Negro as the figure of the X.³ To quote Chandler:

We can recall that X of the shuttling signature that remains of the unnamed and unnameable Negro or African American slaves of the four centuries up to the nineteenth, only iconically recollected at the juncture of emancipation when the ex-slave soon to become the so-called freedman [sic], could mark only X for a name, to indicate or proclaim her, or his, status. (102)

Surely the very idea of race marks our history and, indeed, marks us ontologically to the extent that we might not even be able to become subjects (now) without recourse to that structuration. Nevertheless, Du Bois’s color-line problem and the extant racist structures and attitudes are in fact a response, Chandler notes, to a more originary process of centrifuge and dispersal. It is that originary thing to which structures of categorization respond that occupies the figure of the X—that unknown factor of centrifuge and dispersal—and which occupies the more general possibility to which the problematizing analytics of blackness and transness give rise. Of utmost concern is “the problem of the status of difference in general” (71, emphasis added), a difference that is mobilized for its problematics and presents the possibility of identification otherwise: an identification as a kind of disidentification. This concerns a radically different way of identifying, a radical way that puts pressure on the very means

by which we come to subjectivate ourselves. Operation under the sign of race, or blackness, is indicative of a more general and fundamental question of difference and differentiation—the originary dispersal that is the black and trans of the matter.

As X relates to gender, it is a growing practice in places like Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Canada, and some states in the United States (Washington, Oregon, and California among them) to have X legally mark one’s gendered relation to the State. The X in these cases is akin to what is being dubbed a “third gender,” or sometimes (as in the case of Australia) akin to a “decline to state” status, but is on the whole meant to be a capacious signifier of all genders not exclusively “male” or “female” (if any genders in fact are exclusively locked on one side of the binary). As well, as conveyed by Joshua M. Ferguson, “in Japan today, ekkusu-jendā (X-gender) people identify as an intermediate gender. So-called third genders in China (yinyang ren), Samoa (fa’afafine), the Philippines (bakla), Thailand (kathoey), and Tonga (fakaleiti) have been documented.”

X, too, has a chromosomal significance. The X chromosome—often the so-called female chromosome—renders the letter saturated with a kind of femininity or maternity, its affiliation with what is thought to be the “mother’s” only chromosome making it hefty with gendered significatory power. X’s figuration as a “figural figure that is no figure,” in Chandler’s


5. It must be noted that the giving of an X chromosome does not mean that it was given by the “mother” or by a “woman.” X chromosomes are present, of course, in cis men, but also in trans men, nonbinary people, and people with intersex conditions. Thus I mean not at all to imply the naturalness of the femininity and maternity often ascribed to the X chromosome, only to alert us to how the chromosome moves discursively throughout the social realm.
terms, is the marker of an absence, but a marker with an inherent lability. Such a lability is engendered by “a dispersal of forces” (or a transitivity) that, when speaking of paternity, continues to bear the mark of its figural effects. This Chandler circumstantially colloquializes, tellingly, “as the X of the chromosomal kind” (101–2).

Moreover, this chromosomal X and its circulation around questions of paternity, a paternity shrouded in lability that Chandler argues Du Bois’s narrative has the ironic effect of desedimenting, bears the overall figurative problematic of the Negro as streamed through the X. It raises the critique of pure origins, which have not only the racial inflection Du Bois and Chandler point out (that is, in the context of Du Bois interrogating his mixed parentage) but also the gendered inflection residing in a general critique of when we might locate a coherent and uninterrupted—or unmixed—gendered origin, corporeal or chromosomal. The difficulty, which is to say the problematizing, the X poses, its racialized and gendered traces ever present, is one for Being’s ground. The X’s propulsion by the figure of the Negro and nonnormative gender allow for a fundamental interrogation of the historicized instantiations of these figures; they allow for a radical disintegrative interrogation of “the Negro,” “the transgender,” and ultimately “the human” in their saturative exorbitance of ontology—in their problematizing.

As a method of desedimented irreducible difference counterposing, or better, transposing—“the everyday act of becoming otherwise”; changing something into another form or a simultaneously destructive and generative “deviation that disposes order” descriptive of transsexuality—the projected and imposed space of purity (on which ontology rests), X gets at a becoming other and becoming oneself.6 Or, a becoming oneself

by way of the other; or, again, differently, a becoming other than oneself through the other that has been erected to buttress oneself, which is another way to say an unbecoming inasmuch as becoming is a departure from being. And being is X's ontological nemesis. There is no origin, we know. No bedrock foundation, no Aristotelian prime mover or first cause to which we can point, no Motherland housing our totality prior to some kind of corruption, no Eden. We are not in search of a totalizing whole, for which beingness is indexical. Our aim is the paraontological, a sort of originary impurity, which is no origin at all if origin is definitionally a pure, unperturbed beginning state. We are, and must be, impure from the start. Desedimentation, affixed to X's effects, revokes the sediment’s license to stay here, grounded, as the ground. The ground’s sediment has given us the way we are and must be. To proliferate desedimentation will require, then, another way.

And the figure of the X is a solicitation to view ourselves “in a radically other way” (111, emphasis original). If I may, this radically other way is necessarily bound up with the radical re-seeing of oneself, one’s very subjectivity, that occurs in gender transition. Undergoing hormone replacement therapy and observing the gradual process of seeing one’s facial features, one’s chest, one’s genitals, one’s body hair shift and move, appear and disappear, can be construed as the emergence of a radically other self that is, paradoxically enough, a self that may have long been there. Gender transitioning is a conceptual ensemble that traffics in the realms of ideality and the corporeal, requiring an alteration in the apparatus of encountering self and others; thus it marks a slow-going other way in which one sees oneself as well as how one quite simply sees, how and from where one gains a perceptual purview. And this swings pendulously from the seeming benignity of, say, looking in the mirror over the course of the early stages of taking hormones, seeing oneself
in another and an other way, to a more trepidatious looking, as in that conveyed by Miss Major Griffin-Gracy: “always paying attention to people coming past you and how they look at you, worrying that once they go behind you, they are going to turn around and come back at you,” she says in a conversation with CeCe McDonald and Toshio Meronek. “So you learn to look in reflections—off of store windows, or windows on cars—just to be sure, because you never know.” In short, the radical other way of looking and, indeed, becoming solicited by the figure of the X is present in other realms of subject formation. These other realms, namely, gender—or what might be called such—are, too, constitutive of ontological grounds, the Negro and the trans desedimentative of them.

This framework bolsters my search for “something” that is “X”: analytic patterns, processes of becoming, transformations, fault lines, and the problematics of the present. Illustrative of much of this, if I might be permitted a brief meditation on another text, is Claudia Milian’s LatinX. Milian is concerned with the history and reverberations of the phrase “Latinx,” as the book’s title implies, and she articulates this in ways that converge with my own discussion. Latinx serves not as a decided, delimited demographic or geographic; rather, it is indicative of an analytic itinerary working as a “speculative springboard” of indeterminacy. More than a mere gender-neutral neologism for “Latino/a” people, Latinx is descriptive of, indeed inaugurative

8. Claudia Milian, LatinX (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), hereafter, because it concerns a decent chunk of the rest of the chapter, paginated in parentheses.
of and emergent through, a certain rupture in the implicit purity of the being of “Latin.”

“The X,” Milian writes, is “one that is falling through the Latin cracks—the spaces between the o’s and the a’s” (2). Where “o’s” and “a’s” signify the fortress of the gender binary, X falls through its cracks, fracturing the gender binary and, further, binaries by definition. It is an excessive little lexical figure, refusing to abide the grammatical syntax necessitated for certain kinds of legibility. Where the binary, indexed historically to both race (e.g., white/black) and what is called sex (e.g., male/female), has been cast pervasively as an organizing apparatus, the X in Latinx, and, too, the X as the figural figure of the nonfigure that is blackness synecdochalized as the Negro “complicates and makes space for discussions that do not solely rely on binary configurations” (2). Binary configurations are axiological configurations, configurations as such, casting a wide net over worldly inhabitation and relation. It can be contended, thus, that Latinx’s “X” is a general problematic that speaks more broadly to subjectivity in general.

This general problematic signified by the X is present explicitly in Milian’s short text as well as in its less conspicuous folds. She writes that “Xs are not a single body of ethnoracial, cultural, or gendered identification” (32), stating plainly that X is not a specific classification of ethnicity, race, or gender—and we might say the same, or something similar, about “Latinx” as well—but rather alluding to, stating a bit more implicitly, X’s status as rupturative of identification itself, where identification means choosing from given options bestowed by normativity—X’s status, in other words, as a blessed impurity in the pool of ontological purity. But that X is a general problematic, a generalized impurity in ontology and thus significatory of the process of subjectivation, is not a flattening, as Chandler implies, an implication he maybe had no other option than to make, as his itinerary was one hooked to racial distinction toward ontological
generality. Looking to Milian’s *LatinX* and gleaning from this a discussion of gender permits a way to discuss gender as what might be notated as a nongeneralizable generality. A discussion of X’s gendered inflections is not meant to reduce X to a specific identificatory avenue, as if to say Chandler and those of his school—Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, J. Kameron Carter, Sarah Jane Cervenak, and others—problematically elide the import of, say, “women.” This discussion, as I’ve said and will further say elsewhere, drawing on Spillers, is a way to articulate X as a problem for gender via an intentional effort, a concerted “trying to go through gender to get to something wider.” X is linked inextricably to gender as a chief site of problematizing because gender is a chief vector of establishing ontology. And X bears a gendered potency via the chromosomal and the gender-neutral, and nonbinary in particular, that cannot be overlooked.

Xs are assemblages of unknowns, or indeterminates, or faults, or dissemblances, or irreducible noncommunicabilities. The X engenders new and other political deployments unable, perhaps, to be ensnared by capturative tendrils. Interestingly, “X” as a nonreferent to a thing that is maybe not a thing in the typical sense straddles the paradox; that is, we describe not an extant thing, as such a thing would have to abide the logics of legibility and be given an ontic form, provisional as it may be. But in giving that non-thing the language of the X, we in a sense give it over to legibility, literally inscribing it. Hence, X marks a captivation that skirts but alludes to captivity—X as captivating but not capturative. It is the path we travel to get to pathlessness.

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X, Milian writes, is our “trajectory,” but, at the same exact time, in its multiplicative “numerosities,” as Milian beautifully and succinctly entitles her concluding chapter, “X [i]s _____.”

Most illuminatively for my purposes is a select passage from LatinX. Milian writes,

I gather what is available at this moment, the X, taking LatinX’s “X” as a fruitful incitation, contemplation, and speculation—an urgent hermeneutic necessity for today. Its unifying problematic and interpretable features are linked by crises of the moment: “breaking” news and everyday events, instability, and projected catastrophic disasters and loss, as well as rapid change and disorientation that analytically put us to work. (5)

X is here described as an urgent hermeneutic, which is to say a figurative figure; X is a “problematic” linked to various kinds of crisis. X mobilizes crisis and serves as a marker for crisis. It incites, perturbs. An analytic for these crises, X, Milian shows, implies a disorientation that puts things to work. In this sense it dovetails seamlessly with Kai M. Green’s articulation of what they understand as the work of “trans*.” As Green puts it, one of the “multiple registers” on which trans* is deployed is as “a reading practice that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation.”10 The referential overlap between X and trans, or “trans*,” is precisely what I am thinking as Chandler’s X-as-Negro as a problem, or problematizing analytic, of and for gender. The X of Latinx, Milian notes, is an orientational matter for thought, and she cites Chandler explicitly (39). Dexterously, she thinks the X in a Chandlerian vein in the same context as a nongeneralizable generality of gender, indexing her discussion to Spanish as a gendered Romance language that we can, from there,

from that gendered specificity, begin to think as an unknowable and beyond-knowable rhetorical maneuver. As an unclassifiable indexation, as it were. We get to that through and after gender. X in Milian’s formulation is a disorientation; trans* in Green’s account is a reorientation to orientation, or a disorientation to get to another kind of—an other logic for—how we are oriented; Chandler’s X-as-Negro is a figure of this other logic that fundamentally disturbs ontology and pure being, or the very parameters by which we are oriented to and as ourselves. The problem of the Negro, the X, is a problem for, and by way of, gender.

In the end, the X is a significatory implicative of possibilities on the horizon. But it is more than merely to come; the X, its gendered valences reveal, unlike what Chandler finds through the valences that supervene upon racial distinctions, is already doing this significatory work as it is a possibility already here in, say, the Latinx and the chromosomally portentous X. The simplicity of the X as a referent for the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought—a “thought” that foundations metaphysics and ontology as well as the traditional philosophical baggage they bear—must not overshadow its reference of the problematics that inhere in and as, too, gender.