Uninscriptions

The proper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration, because the erasure and the imposition of the letter are originary, because they do not supervene upon a proper inscription; it is because the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, anything but the original myth of a transparent legibility present under the obliteration.

—Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

Now, one hears from a long time ago that “white is merely a state of mind.” I add to that, white is a moral choice. It’s up to you to be as white as you want to be and pay the price of that ticket. You cannot tell a black man by the color of skin, either.

—James Baldwin, “Black English: A Dishonest Argument”

What would it mean to possibly reject, as we seem to be called to do in Chandler’s text—not to mention da Silva and Derrida, Moten and Spillers, among others—the grounds that provide our legibility? No, dead ass: what would it mean to reject, as an ethical imperative, ontological grounds of legibility, rooted in purity and demarcation, which is to say to reject the things given to us as our existence even though, I would submit, those things are violences—racial identities predicated on racial distinction and
taxonomies, gender identities predicated on gender distinction and the gender binary? What would it mean not to recapitulate the very logics we are seeking to undermine even if the refusal of recapitulation makes us uncomfortable?

The briefest but perhaps most biting chapter of Chandler’s text is “The Souls of an Ex-White Man,” in which he reads Du Bois’s meditation on John Brown:

Du Bois describes a melancholic John Brown, compelled to challenge the very terms of his fate or death. In doing so, the narrative that his life and precipitate death makes possible outlines a tear in the fabric of providence, and thus marks his struggle with the limits that have been bestowed upon him as privilege. It moves in some tenacious relationship of maintenance or affirmation, as well as a sense of loss, of the sense of possible being that has been withdrawn, the ways of being a “white” man that have been marked as beyond the acceptable or the normal, that is, the ways of being other than a “White” man. (114–15)

John Brown died twice, Chandler argues. Indeed, Brown was executed on December 2, 1859, for treason, murder, and insurrection. This is the death on the historical record. This was the death of the flesh-and-blood man. But he died another time, or rather something Brown was, not born but, coerced to be in order to exist in the world as such died, or was killed by the subject who was executed. This other death was to create a life, an unsanctioned life. The person we call John Brown understood that he was “a ‘White’ man,” a social designation he did not want and, I would assert, jettisoned. He understood “that in order for him to live he must give this socially granted life over to death (or not to live, or to maintain himself only within a kind of death by living as a ‘White’ man); or rather, we might say, that in order to live, he had to take this socially and historically granted life and dispense with it, kill it, destroy it, give it up to the risk and possibility of absolute dissolution” (115). This
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death is what intrigues me; this death demonstrates that not only is the figure of the Negro a historicized figure made to exist within a certain corporeal delimitation but the problematics that inhere in the figuration of, as it were, Negroness, a Negroness that is an imperfect nominative (as all nominatives are) for the desedimentation of pure being, are truly an open desedimentary terrain that even “white” people have the capacity to take on. Brown is recognized as possessive of a “fundamental and radical orientation” toward Negro figuratives, or the desedimentation of pure being unfixed from a historicized subject, making due on the generalization Chandler proffers as that which is to be mobilized around. John Brown became problematic; John Brown became a paraontological Negro. Blackness, in its paraontology and the taking seriously of that paraontology, can and must be mobilized by any and all who commit to radicality and ontological desedimentation named in that insurrectionary radicality. So yes, John Brown might have been a hell of a lot blacker than even Darnell next door.¹

¹. A little cheeky, a little contentious, I know. But I need to say it, as I’ve said it in multiple places before. I’m drawing here largely, in addition to Chandler, on Moten and the elucidating work of George Shulman. It might be easiest for me simply to quote Shulman: “As the name for life’s animating and undoing excess, blackness provokes forms of order. . . . Blackness thus connotes aspects of life that anyone can—and all need to—acknowledge (UC, 50). Moten thereby conceives the life made by those marked black in terms neither ethnically closed nor symbolically foreclosed, but politically and aesthetically open.” Shulman continues in a footnote, “Indeed, blackness is ‘before the binary said to define our existence’ and ‘older than Africa’ (SL, 21). For him, ‘blackness is a general force of fugitivity that racialization in general, and the more specific instantiation of the color line, exacerbate and focus without originating’ (UM, 35). He thus denies ‘that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks’ (BN, 750).” See George Shulman, “Fred Moten’s Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity,” Political Theory (2020): 12, 36n21.
My concern is twofold. First, like Chandler, I do not intend to say that Brown was a Negro, that historically identifiable dark-skinned subject. Brown neither “became a Negro” nor did he “arrive” at, once and for all, a status of not-white (or not-White). The point being made is that he produced a kind of subjectivity for himself via “the strange movement of a ‘White’ man becoming ‘otherwise,’ other than simply ‘white,’ perhaps” (117). I am unsure if there is a name for this kind of subject, which would amount to a nonsubject inasmuch as he is, to whatever extent, relinquished from the ontological grounds governing existence: the ground of being within the dictates of racial distinction and governing others and oneself by their constitutive requisites.

Second, I wish to understand the gesture of “ex-ness,” the gesture of being and becoming an “ex-white man,” as consequential on both registers of the identificatory descriptor. That is, Brown was indeed one who rebuked whiteness and thus was an ex-white. But what is left that might be revealed when thinking through the valences of what it could mean, what it could do, to be an ex-white man, or more generally an ex-man? Or, I might cheekily articulate this as, how might we become X-men, galvanizing the discussion of the X again for the purposes of marking it as a gendered uninscription? These are my concerns for this final chapter.

The person we call John Brown knew it was demanded that he be a “‘White’ man.” But he in effect renounced whiteness, becoming, with a necessary linguistic precision, in proximity to and emerging through the miasmic sociosubjective ether that

2. This echoes resoundingly with nonbinary writer Joshua M. Ferguson, who writes, “The X-Men were one of my favourite super-hero teams growing up, and the treatment of their mutations bears a striking analogy to the experience of LGBTQ people. And now, I am literally an ‘X-(Man)/(male).’” See Ferguson, Me, Myself, They, 207.
mobilizes blackness. It is held that “the ultimate premise of racial distinction,” or the foundation of racialization and racializing taxonomies necessary for social legibility, is “a categorical or oppositional logic of distinction or identification” (121). White supremacy and the racial identities it fashioned gain traction via the validation of categorical distinctions that take the names of races we are called and call ourselves. These categorical imperatives—which is part of white supremacist taxonomizing logics, that in order to be understood as a valid subject, we must inhabit one of the existential options it has fashioned—cannot hold if we are to eradicate white supremacy’s ills. You know, race is the child, not the parent or guardian, of racism and all that. Brown, then, in unbecoming white, as it were, did so via a transing of the categorical imperative. And I might say, too, without undermining the possibility of enacting behaviors implied to gender privileges, in unbecoming white, and insofar as he was forced to be a certain iteration of whiteness via his induction into being and doing himself as white man, Brown also transed the “man” of his white man-ness. That is, as a required “‘White’ man,” the “man” was constitutive of his whiteness, thus to unbecome, to rebuke, to trans the white is to also, necessarily, trans the man.

Brown arises through, Chandler says, the meaning of the Negro. He emerges onto the social scene askew, or whatever might be said of the representationality, the “look,” of one who emerged precisely through how he vitiated the conditions of his natal and prescribed (and proscribed) emergence. To say that Brown comes to us as a figure by way of asserting himself, promiscuously, illegally even, through the meaning and implication and generalizable desedimentary theoretical praxis of the Negro

is to present “the Negro,” in Chandler’s terms, as a figured figure, or as, again in Chandler’s terms, a material idea, a problematic, an exorbitance. Brown did not become black, a Negro, but perhaps he became toward a certain kind of Negroness inasmuch as the figure of the Negro, an iterative Negroness, references a desedimentary X that we’ve established to be an interminable racial and gender indeterminacy. This is to say that Brown stands “within the historical consciousness of the Negro in America” (127) and on these grounds—impure nongrounds—shares an affinity with that which we refer to as paraontology, desedimentation, problematizing, impure nonbeing: the Negro, the trans.

To make the argument that John Brown is not only an ex-white but also, consequentially, an ex-white man is a tricky one. If Chandler argues that Du Bois understands Brown as “melancholic,” we must heed “gender as a kind of melancholy.” Brown’s melancholy also pervaded his gendered assignation. I am not proffering the claim that Brown made intentional assertions of his “being” a woman or genderqueer or nonbinary; he, to my mind, made no such claims. What he did do, though, is vitiate the tenets upon which whiteness rests, rendering him, effectively, an ex-white. And the tenets upon which whiteness rests include normative gender, cisgender masculinity in Brown’s case; thus to dissolve the tethers stitching together a coherent whiteness is also a dissolution of his normative masculinity. He X’ed his “man-ness,” refusing all perinatal and sociohistorical requirements to remain an essential, which is to say pure, being.

The whole theoretical enterprise of desedimentation is an evacuation of essence, and evacuating essentialism of its teeth has long been a black and trans, and black feminist, project. In other words, following philosopher Catherine Malabou—with

whom my twenty-year-old self fell in intellectual love during a yearlong philosophy seminar—to the extent that desedimentation is linked to deconstruction, it is imperative that we also understand the undertaking as “deconstructing the idea of biological rigidity and showing, once again, that there are no grounds for a concept of essence, conceived of as substance, be it ontological or natural. Transformability is at work from the start, it trumps all determination.”

To engage desedimentation, a refined kind of deconstruction, is to eschew the belief in biological rigidity as manifesting itself in any kind of substance (or materiality). This is to trump all determination, all essentialist predication. Racial and gender distinctions are determinations, essentialisms, rigidities. John Brown enacts a desedimentation and is thus deconstructing biological rigidities, among which racial and gender distinctions are chief. Brown’s ex-ness is that of an ex-white man. Brown’s protestation, his ex-ness (and indeed his X-ness), is a working of himself away from the scene(s) of legibility, which are the scenes of a demanded whiteness. In working away from these—both of these—he effectively disembodies himself. (And some wonder why “the body” does not show up much in my work: it is the scene, as it were, of the ontological crime.) In disembodying himself, he falls away from, or more agentially moves away from, the premises on which bodyness rests, backed by an ontological ground. Rejection of the ontological ground leaves one unembodied, in a sense, which is also to be catapulted away from the very identificatory registers that latch onto footholds that go by the names, among others, of race and gender. It leaves one uninscribed.

My purpose here, then, is to mark Brown, not to the exclusion

of a vast array of others, as a subjective example of uninscription. We are inscribed onto the sociohistorical ledger in order to exist as such under the heading of the ontological project that curtails how and even that we exist in any particular way. The inscription, the Heideggarian thrownness, is orchestrated by what is permitted as a valid emergent onto the scene, which acts as a legibilization. To be uninscribed is the paraontological project, the project of the X (crossing out), the project of desedimentation. Uninscription bears a markedly gendered valence that converges with Chandler’s racial theorization in a way generative for the ultimate articulation of the Negro’s problematics as mobilized by, precipitative of, and coeval with gender prob-

6. I want to be very clear in this subclause, as there is the strong possibility that some might use the pedestaling of a white person as the figure through which I make the claim of exemplarity as evidence of the privileges of whiteness. That I am homing in on John Brown to assert the paraontological movement away from racial and gender distinction, that the privileges of whiteness even allow a white subject to “be” a Negro, will be read, by some, as blasphemy. This, to me, is to overlook the seriousness and abolitionist radicality of the fundamental argument that Chandler, and my reading of him, is making, namely, that (1) “the Negro” is not first and foremost a historical figure and thus is not confined to certain epidermally delimited subjects; (2) the rejection of whiteness—the serious, thoroughgoing rejection, wherein one risks oneself ontologically and existentially, as Brown did—is not to be subsumed into white privilege but a radical movement toward the demands of blackness; and (3) it is not the aim to hedge the claim of the Negro as a figurative figure who, if solely a historical figure, perpetuates the logics of ontology and pure being, and the claim of racial distinction as the product of whiteness and white supremacy, undergirded by the ontological project. Taking these claims seriously necessitates that one look for where the desedimentary work is happening, and some of those locations are in figures one would deem “white” and “men.” This does not exclude or subordinate people who are identified as black and women and trans, for example, but it also must not require them as the sole exemplars, the only valid evidentiary citations.
Uninscriptions. “It’s taken a lot of resistance,” T Fleischmann begins their musings on being uninscribed,

that I want to leave my gender and my sex life uninscribed—that it took me years to consider the fact that I did not have to name my gender or sexuality at all, so that now I must always tell people that I am not something. I insist on this absence more, even, than I used to insist on my identities. . . . The uninscribed, like Gonzalez-Torres says, is a site of change, where I might understand my actual context and do something about it, rather than getting tangled up in a game of words, and so that is where I would like to focus. I am of course still written into this whole structure, I can’t escape the language, but that won’t stop me from refusing it anyway, and believing that a blank paper might transport me somewhere else.7

In being uninscribed, one gives oneself over to movement. It is a refusal to name oneself because one knows that the name will ultimately be inadequate, it coming from the language available, a language from without and dictatorial of how we can exist. This language, we know, cannot be escaped entirely, but we refuse it anyway, knowing there is the possibility of being blank, blanked, uninscribed onto the page, our presence not a matter of how we are written but perhaps of the shadows that accrue briefly when the page is creased and crumpled. Uninscriptions unmark sites of change, of movement, of absence that vex the requisites of the scene. If we must be inscribed, we demand to be inscribed un-ly, crossed and X’ed out, annotated, redacted, misspelled, and run-on.

The mellifluously cacophonous concatenation between the Negro and the trans, or what could be said to fall under a heading iterated as Negro problematics and gender problematics, finds a certain figuration in the terminology of uninscription. For one

to uninscribe oneself from, say, racial distinction entails something that looks like what John Brown did. Such an uninscription means that one *dies*. One dies as the subject one was given over as in order to become another subject or, since to die as, say, “White” when one is told one must be a “‘White’ man” desediments the ontological ground gifting one with subjectivity, to become no subject. Brown was an ontological insurrection. They didn’t know what to do with him because he was monstrous: a “‘White’ man” who did not want to be, and indeed *was not*, after a self-murder, white. Such a subject is unfathomable and thus must be eradicated in order to maintain ontological ground. Put another way, all those who go about life being white men because they are told they are white men, believe they are white men, want there to be other white men, are pure beings. And that is to say, they were beings. John Brown, however, was an impure being, a white man who was not, and did not want to be, white. Purity is constitutive of being, so Brown’s impurity negated his being. And because of this, he was negated.

The paradoxical impure being John Brown became was the subject on the other side, the underside, of the Negro problematic. John Brown uninscribed himself without making recourse to the displeasure of widely held descriptions of deconstruction, to reinscription. He moved with the Negro, desedimented, on no ground—“disintegrate[d] . . . ground.”

We thus demand the obliteration of the ground enabling ontology, which means we obliterate the subject as we know it. The radical project of Negro and gender problematics demands it; if the problem of the Negro is indeed a problem for gender, the two swirling toward a fundamentally desedimentary project,

ontological grounds cannot hold. Hence, the subject, that by-product of ontological grounds, cannot hold. We will require something else entirely. John Brown was an ex-white man. I own that assertion along with Chandler and Du Bois. John Brown was also, unowned by Chandler or Du Bois, an ex-man, which is to say that both normative masculinity and maleness are constitutive of whiteness, a loosening of the latter necessitating a loosening, a transing, of the former; and additionally, to unmoor the purity of ontological grounds is also and always to unfix ontological ground’s attending constituents, chief among them not only “race” but “gender” as well. I am saying neither that Brown was a Negro nor that he was transgender/woman. I am saying that he was neither white nor man—he indexes a subjective mobilization through the problematic figuration that inheres in the movement of the Negro and the trans. He was an ex-white man, double emphasis; he was an X-white man.