Slowing down race
The world is mixed up and it always has been. It is difficult not to marvel at the stories of individuals in other times whose lives illustrate that contention. Think, just as one example, of the remarkable life of Frank Grouard (de Barthe, 1894). Born in 1850 in the South Pacific Paumoto Islands out of the union of a Mormon missionary and the daughter of a local high chief. Grouard moved with his father to California where he was adopted by a Mormon family which then moved on to Utah. He ran away from home aged sixteen and ended up at the age of nineteen being abducted by the Lakota Sioux. Sitting Bull subsequently adopted him and he became known as Jumping Bull (Philbrick, 2010). After falling out with Sitting Bull, Grouard moved from the Lakota to the Oglala people and became the trusted lieutenant of Crazy Horse. By 1875 Grouard had left Crazy Horse and moved to the Indian Agency where he offered his services to the US government as a scout in the United States Army. He later served as a US Marshal in Buffalo, Wyoming, becoming involved in the Johnson County Range War.

The extraordinary fluidity of Grouard’s life acts as a warning to all of those who think that identity is the only category in town when it comes to writing about race. As Bersani points out concerning the category of the homosexual, whereas Foucault has often been thought to be concerned with rethinking categories, he was actually trying to rethink relations. In a world where identity drives ethnic and nationalist relations, has in some places become a grand selling point which can even allow ethnic communities to remake themselves in the image of the corporation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009), and in all places is a means of producing problematic social aggregations, it has surely become imperative to imagine the possibility of nonidentitarian community in which nonsovereign subjects can dwell. The whole question, in other words, of “how one thinks of oneself without identity politics, or without individualist politics” (Colebrook, 2010, page 145) has never been more relevant.

An undeniable part of this act of reimagining community and individuation as nonidentitarian is affect. As Papoulias and Callard (2010) remind us, it is possible to play fast and loose with affect, making it into a deracinated process which, as in the current profusion of Deleuze and Whitehead talk, can very easily tip us over into saying not very much about pretty well everything. But there is another way of proceeding which takes the best of this strand of work and applies it to actual events. Such work realizes that the affective practices that bind strangers to each other arise from the articulation of triangulated relations to something that seems stable, like racial, national, sexual, gendered, and class identity. But it also realises that these practices can be and are shifted. Sameness does not have to be identity. There is also “a solidarity of positioning and configurations in space” (Bersani, 2010, page 184), of spatial disseminations.

There are all kinds of means of pursuing this vital point. For example, it highlights the importance of the nonhuman as part of a broader concept of relationality than just the interpersonal—as a reaching for one’s own form elsewhere, for example (to gravitate rather than contain, as Bersani might put it). That is important because “the only way we can love the other or the external world is to find ourselves somehow in it. Only then can there be a nonviolent relation to the external world that doesn’t
seek to exterminate difference” (Bersani, 2010, page 183). Above all, this work realizes that “a commitment to process is a hedge against pathological outcomes .... Buffeted by our own and other’s discomfort with being excessive subjects, we rush to find any shelter from [the]affective storm swirling through the social field”, including those pathological categories that appear to offer affective sustenance. But we could instead “accept being ‘laid bare’ in groups where the condition of our belonging is being there” (Rothenberg, 2010, page 229).

What does this mean for race, an idea (or rather, a current of ideas) and a set of practices which keeps a hold even as we agree that it has no intellectual hold? First, it means understanding the way in which space can intervene in affirming the power of race. For example, race is materialized in the physical spaces of American cities as it is in the static icons of black American culture. Thus, Hayward (2009) traces out how collective problems are sited in American cities in ways which avoid making them into a problem for all, while English (2007, page 7) hunts for spatial disseminations which won’t allow black artists’ work to be endlessly “summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging ‘culture of origin’.” Then, it means looking for practices which change the affective terms of trade and so weaken the hold of race. We can see the way in which new kinds of practices have been and can be promoted, not only in the obvious examples of feminism and antiracism but also in all kind of proximate or juxtapolitical situations in which collectivities that are not considered to be political (and indeed are often meant to generate relief from the political) suddenly make the leap into political visibility (Berlant, 2008). Finally, it means thinking about different forms of the subject that are unencumbered by the legacy of race. One only has to think of new work by various authors to see the way in which new nonsovereign, supervalent senses of the subject are being generated which, in time, might be able to get a grip on the world (eg Rothenberg, 2010; Thrift, 2010).

In all of this, space will be both key and the key. We need to rid ourselves of the reciprocating environments where categories gang up to produce affective symptoms that confirm a particular order, particularly by stoking up the both etiolated and powerful anxieties of precarity (Berlant, 2008): race can echo around spaces in so many ways in these circumstances. But it can also be interrupted. This wide-ranging set of papers all underline the fact that the hunt is on to produce ways in which race can no longer bounce comfortably around lived experience but can be challenged on a routine basis, and in the affective register too. Race’s ‘refresh rate’, so to speak, can be slowed and even halted.

Such a hunt will require a fine balance between theoretical appreciation and practical engagement. Perhaps we can take an inspirational leaf out of the life of not Frank Grouard but another itinerant, WEB Du Bois. Du Bois was “possessed of a principled impatience” (Lewis, 2009, page 713). Indeed, “in the course of his long, turbulent career [he] attempted virtually every possible solution to twentieth century racism—scholarship, propaganda, integration, cultural and economic separatism, politics, international communism, expatriation, third world solidarity” (page 713). But he also had to live that long, turbulent career and he could take some comfort from the weave of small events as well as the weft of larger triumphs. For example, in 1936, an ageing Du Bois visited Russia, China, and Japan. In a Tokyo hotel, somewhat ironically given Japan’s own racial hierarchies, he recorded how an American woman, “‘loud-mouthed’ and white, demanded immediate service. In the United States, she would have been given priority over a brown gentleman. ‘But not in Tokyo’, Du Bois chortled. The clerk finished attending Du Bois ‘and took time to bow with Japanese politeness and then turned to America’” (Lewis, 2009, page 608). Somewhere between
the grand arc of theory and these kinds of small interruptions in circuits of power and domination, race will finally rot away as both category and practice. Through a process of becoming unbecoming, it will cease to have an affective pull.

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