On Conceptual Sufficiency: Humanity in Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction and John Brown

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I read Stuart Hall’s idea of “politics without guarantees” as meaning that all concepts are saturated with history and that no use of a concept can prevent it from being co-opted. The contribution of this reading is that it shifts the task of critical theory: if all concepts carry limitations and can be used to advance domination, then critical theorists need not search for pure concepts or worry about how to prevent our concepts from being captured. Instead, our task is to strategically leverage always already imperfect concepts with a view toward shared political goals. For an example of this kind of critical theory, I look to W. E. B. Du Bois’s uses of “human,” “humanity,” and “human rights” in Black Reconstruction, which I suggest were informed by how he came to understand “humanity” in John Brown.

KEYWORDS: humanism, human rights, W. E. B. Du Bois, Stuart Hall, critical theory

War and especially civil strife leave terrible wounds. It is the duty of humanity to heal them.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction (1935)

Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity—new or old—that attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community, and by the refusal to engage with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference. The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century.

In February 2003, in one of his last major speeches, Edward Said reflected on his ethical obligations in a time of war: “I feel it is my moral and intellectual duty to oppose the unjust use of [U.S.] military, economic, and political power abroad for what is, it claims falsely, to be its national security interests.” “I have no power,” he goes on, “so I have to resort to the tools of education, to writing and speaking” (Said 2003). Said’s reflection, spoken painfully as he watched another imperial invasion and occupation proceed across the Middle East, raises the question of what tools we who oppose war can use to work toward a “noncoercive human community” (Said 1982, 219). As we resort to education, writing, and speaking, which concepts can help us to make the political gains we so gravely need today?

In what follows, I read Stuart Hall’s idea of “politics without guarantees” as meaning that all concepts are saturated with history and that no use of a concept can prevent itself from being co-opted. The contribution of this reading is that it asks critical theorists to turn down our emphasis on making critiques of concepts and to turn up our emphasis on using concepts to construct new coalitions, collectives, and communities. If all concepts carry limitations and can be used to further domination, then we need not search for pure concepts, worry about how to prevent a concept from being captured, or spend too much time showing how concepts are contaminated and co-optable. I address this point particularly to those of us (myself included) who write about what is increasingly called “decolonial philosophy,” and who to some extent seek what Enrique Dussel calls “exteriority,” meaning we search for some idea, community, or people exterior to the contaminations of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism. Dussel develops his concept of “exteriority” from Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “alterity.” Both concepts suggest a rupture outside the norms of the present. Drawing our attention to historical and conceptual crossings and mixtures, Caribbean philosophers focusing on creolization and diaspora, such as Édouard Glissant and Stuart Hall, call into question the possibility of an “exterior” in modern/colonial times. Following Hall, our task is not to search for (cultural) authenticity or essence, but to strategically leverage always already “contaminated” concepts with a view toward shared political goals. The practical question then becomes: Which concepts—no matter their history, even if that history, as it always does, shapes their limitations and possibilities—are most helpful to achieve those goals?

I will ultimately argue that “humanity” remains a sufficient concept for building new communities (at least in the U.S.) because of: (a) its normative ability to work against fabricated hierarchies of our species created by concepts such as race; (b) the universality of its scope, calling for species-wide rights and
obligations; and (c) how it has functioned historically, and continues to function, to invite people to realize the universalism it outlines. To provide an illustration of how to leverage a concept understood as sufficient, I ultimately look to W. E. B. Du Bois, because he re-described some of the dominant concepts he inherited for liberatory ends. As Inés Valdez has argued in the pages of this journal, Du Bois’s transnationalism “helps us recover forms of cosmopolitan engagement that can work with—rather than against—self-definition” (2021, 295). In Du Bois’s critique of imposed, Eurocentric hierarchies of humanity but maintenance of a self-defined “humanity” in his 1935 *Black Reconstruction*, which I will speculatively suggest was informed by his reading of “humanity” in his 1909 *John Brown*, I see an exemplary mode of critique that is also constructive. Du Bois not only criticized his world but also tried to produce or create an alternative one. I read Du Bois’s leveraging of the concept “human” as turning its noun form into a verb, that is, not simply as invoking “the human” as a given universal, but as pragmatically calling for his audience to respond with actions that would realize the universalism that the concept ostensibly— but almost never in historical practice—outlines.

**What Do Concepts Do?**

To consider Du Bois’s use of “humanity” as exemplary of both politics without guarantees and conceptual sufficiency betrays my own position: that Du Bois’s strategic leveraging of “humanity” offers lessons for contemporary critical theory. This is a reading that goes against the contemporary grain. Critical theorists across academic fields have recently suggested that “the human” is an imperial tool, that we should think not with a sense of humanity but against it, and even that the concept of the human inherently leads to social terror. Writing in 2009 from a position that has come to be known as decolonial philosophy, Walter Mignolo argues that

> from the sixteenth century to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, He who speaks for the human is an actor embodying the Western ideal of being Christian, being man and being human. In other words, ‘human’ in human rights is an invention of western imperial knowledge rather than the name of an existing entity to which everyone will have access. (10)

Intervening in questions of human rights and international law, in her 2017 “Thinking Against Humanity,” Ayça Çubukçu reads Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon to argue that “violence is central, and hierarchy is intrinsic to the polit-
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Bringing together Continental metaphysics and Afropessimism, Calvin Warren takes “a world of antiblack brutality” as a point of departure in his 2018 *Ontological Terror* and explains his title as “the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism” (2, 3). For a final example, in her category-challenging 2020 book *Becoming Human*, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson reads African, African-American, and Caribbean texts as working to “critique and dispose prevailing conceptions of ‘the human’ found in Western science and philosophy” (1). Jackson ultimately puts forth a method of “questioning rather than presupposing the virtuousness of human recognition,” going on to say that “the pursuit of human recognition or a compact with ‘the human’ would only plunge one headlong into further terror and domination” (1, 18, 20). In sum, several critical theorists—including decolonial thinkers and Afropessimists—see the argument for the humanity of *les damnés*, and the human rights thus entailed (or demanded), as a failed and ultimately *passé* political strategy (cf. Wilderson 2020, 15). Beyond the above criticisms and debates, thinking about the question of “the human” is additionally complicated because “the human” nevertheless remains the term many of us use not only to understand the social arrangements in which we live, but also to understand the kind of beings we are.

To begin thinking about “humanity,” it is worthwhile to reflect on what we expect concepts, as tools, to do. After all, no one criticizes a hammer as an insufficient tool for picking up green beans at the dinner table; we simply do not expect a hammer to do the work of a fork. Further, many schools of philosophy, from U.S. Pragmatism to Black radicalism, have warned against expecting that a concept, by its very being (or ontological constitution), can bring about some desired outcome. Perhaps Hannah Arendt made this point most poignantly in her mid-twentieth-century critique of a natural-rights understanding of human rights, writing that “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (1951, 299). Accordingly, this essay does not proceed as if a use of a concept can do something *by itself*; rather, it offers an examination of what different uses of concepts do, including how they inspire various actions. “The challenge,” Ann Stoler writes, “is both to discern the work we do with concepts and the work that concepts may explicitly or inadvertently exert on us” (2016, 9).

Overall, my aim is not to legislate which concepts work and which do not in some time-out-of-mind way, but rather to invite readers to consider further how concepts function *in their own contexts*—to examine what works and what
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does not in the situations in which we find ourselves, and to leverage sufficient concepts as part of an ongoing process of dialogically re-imagining them. The fact that our creative uses of concepts are limited does not mean that we are left, as Stuart Hall jokes, with a single option—“read the Guardian and pray!” (1982, 206).

My focus will be on how different uses of concepts work to explain material conditions and to invite actors into political struggle. Although a clear explanation of the world by no means necessarily leads an actor to try to change it, and although a creative use of a concept that openly draws out political implications is an invitation that is often declined, explanation and invitation are part of how concepts work as (political) tools. For one, decolonial uses of self-determination explained why independence movements were necessary in Africa following World War II, and those uses were flexible enough to invite actors in many countries to leverage the concept (see Getachew 2019). For another, the Standing Rock Sioux’s use of the language of human rights both explained why moving the route of the Dakota Access Pipeline closer to their treaty-bound land violated their sovereignty and invited actors to participate in decolonial struggle. In this way, explanation and invitation serve as decent proxies for the political function of the concept. While it is not my claim that the role of critical theory needs to be to bring about certain ends, theory can thus inform and inspire practice.

My claim is also not that sufficient concepts are external to anti-egalitarian uses or inherently check against co-optation. No concept is a priori safe from state or elite capture (see Crabtree and Durand 2017; Táíwò 2022). Rather—and this is part of living under what Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called “the coloniality of being” (2007)—concepts are always already saturated with history and are always able to be co-opted. “History will always find you,” the poet Joy Harjo writes, “and wrap you / In its thousand arms” (2019, 3). That concepts are saturated with history, that history finds us, means that we would do well to acknowledge, for instance, that “the human,” as many of us have come to know and practice it, is “always already an effect of coloniality,” as Denise Ferreira da Silva puts it (2015, 101). But this colonial mediation is perhaps less of an obstacle to political struggles than it might initially seem, because its recognition allows us to quit searching for an unmediated or un-capturable concept. This is part of what Stuart Hall means when he teaches us that in politics there are no guarantees.

Stuart Hall’s “Politics without Guarantees”

In his final 1983 lecture on cultural studies, “Culture, Resistance, and Struggle,” Hall said about “the rule of law”: “People who were being excluded, whether
the working classes, the poor, women, servants, et cetera, did not need another term; they needed that term, the term which the bourgeoisie already understood, in order to conduct the struggle” (183–184). “The fact that these struggles were stitched into a fabric of ideas which were bourgeois in origin,” he went on, “does not guarantee that they always remained inscribed in just this way” (184). “This is as true of the present as of the past,” he concluded (Ibid.).

Politics without guarantees, then, goes both ways: just as no emancipatory use of concept can prevent itself from being co-opted to serve structures of domination, as when white alt-right actors begin to talk about their “lived experience” or Hillary Clinton mentions “intersectionality” on the campaign trail while maintaining her commitments to prisons and pipeline-funding banks, so too are no concepts that have advanced domination safe from re-inscription by actors working toward emancipation, as Hall’s example of “the rule of law” shows (see Foran 2016).

In his 1997 lecture “Race, The Floating Signifier,” Hall elaborated on what he means by politics without guarantees:

The one thing we are not is guaranteed in the truth of what we do. Indeed, I believe that without that kind of guarantee we would need to begin again, begin again in another space, begin again from a different set of presuppositions to try to ask ourselves what might it be in human identification, in human practice, in the building of human alliances, which without the guarantee, without the certainty of religion or science or anthropology or genetics or biology or the appearance of your eyes, without any guarantees at all, might enable us to conduct an ethically responsible human discourse and practice about race in our society. (1997, 372)

Here Hall develops what we might call a “humanism without guarantees,” that is, a humanism that refuses to be based on the old “certainties” of Western (social) science. He hints at what this new humanism requires in his emphasis not on narrow but on human identification, practice, and building alliances. He stresses the importance of new beginnings not just for discourse, but also for ethical practice, for how responsibility to one another ought to play out within a society (as well as, for Hall in other places, across different societies).

Regarding the intervention of this article, which concerns the method of critical theory today, Hall’s idea of “politics without guarantees” ultimately implies the need for some practitioners of contemporary theory—those whose method involves examining a concept only to deconstruct, destabilize, or abandon it without a return to the question of what we can build together—to
shift their approach. Once we have studied and practiced deconstruction or critique, we can always deconstruct or critique a concept. With Hall, I am more interested here in considering the skill of recognizing when an imaginative use of a concept can do the work we want—that is, the skill of knowing when and how to wager that a term is what he calls “that term” needed to conduct the struggle or to build alliances. If some use of a concept (a) does extensive explanatory work and (b) does that work in a widely legible, accessible, and thereby invitational way, then, no matter the concept’s history or how it has been captured, it remains a valuable political concept.\(^{17}\) It is sufficient for the task at hand given what we can expect of a concept, that is, given the limits of modern/colonial theory. It is from that point of recognizing sufficiency that we “begin again” (cf. Davis 2023). With Hall, then, our task is neither merely to de-stabilize or to play with the problematic concepts we have inherited nor to search for some concept “outside” of, or free from contamination by, unjust structures, but to strategically leverage the always already limited concepts that will allow us to win collectively on the terrains on which we are currently losing.

Examples from the past help us take up our task today. The most compelling example I know of a philosopher using a deeply imperfect concept for liberatory ends—of a philosopher’s wagering that a concept is sufficient for the political purposes at hand—is Du Bois’s epic invocations of “humanity” in *Black Reconstruction*.

**Du Bois’s Use of “Humanity” in Black Reconstruction and John Brown**

Before I turn to elaborating Du Bois’s work, I will note why I am looking to *Black Reconstruction* and *John Brown* instead of to Du Bois’s writings from the 1940s, such as *Color and Democracy* (1945) and his unpublished manuscript “Human Rights for All Minorities” (1947). Indeed, aren’t those the places where Du Bois took on the question of the human and human rights most directly? The context of those texts informs why I am not focusing on them here. Du Bois wrote *Color and Democracy* as a specific intervention into the formation of the United Nations and, more broadly, into the post-war global order that Western powers were founding on still-colonial and capitalist lines despite their ultimately false rhetoric of democracy and humanity.\(^{18}\) Because Du Bois was intervening into this specific discourse, he had to take on the language of human rights and humanity in those 1940s writings.\(^{19}\) But that was not the context or problematic to which he needed to respond in writing *Black Reconstruction*. He did not have to speak of humanity in the epic terms he chose to use in telling the story of
Reconstruction; he did not have to invoke the concept at all (much less capital-ize it!). He could’ve limited the scope of his analysis to a national context. He could’ve presented the consequences of that period with respect only to one race, to one class, or to one place. Instead, he connected that period in U.S. history not only to an international labor struggle, but also to the fate of our species and even to how we would be judged by the world and the divine. “God wept . . . The world wept because within the exploiting group of New World masters, greed and jealously became so fierce that they fought for trade and markets and materials and slaves all over the world until at last in 1914 the world flamed in war” (1935, 634). Further, as he himself acknowledged, he did not need to write *John Brown*; he noted at the beginning of the book that there were already plenty of good biographies on Brown. On my reading, then, both *Black Reconstruction* and *John Brown* reflect not only Du Bois’s particular political interventions, but also his overarching constructive vision of a universalizing practice of humanity, a universalizing practice that embraces cultural difference and starts from the emancipation of unfree laborers and the abolition of the structures that deny their freedom.

In the December 1934 prefatory remarks of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois embeds the story he is telling into a larger one of “human culture,” asks his reader to consider the Black person as “an average and ordinary human being,” and says he will tell his story assuming that Black people are “ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail [his] audience.” Early in the book, he describes the system of slavery as “the absolute negation of human rights,” and he diagnoses the racialized global division of industrial labor as “the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity,” such that the resulting political task is to achieve “[t]he emancipation of man,” meaning “the emancipation of labor . . . the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black.” Later, when presenting “[t]he decisive battle of Reconstruction” in 1867, he explains that “[a]boli-tion—democracy demands for Negroes physical freedom, civil rights, economic opportunity . . . and the right to vote, as a matter of sheer human justice and right.” He goes on to describe the connection between democracy and human-ity in ethical terms:

The current theory of democracy is that dictatorship is a stopgap pending the work of universal education, equitable income, and strong character. But always the temptation is to use the stopgap for narrow ends, because intelligence, thrift and goodness seem so impossibly distant for most men. We rule by junta; we turn Fascist, because we do not believe in men; yet the basis of fact in this disbelief
is incredibly narrow. We know perfectly well that most human beings have never had a decent human chance to be full men. Most of us may be convinced that even with opportunity the number of utter human failures would be vast; and yet remember that this assumption kept the ancestors of present white America long in slavery and degradation. It is then one’s moral duty to see that every human being, to the extent of his capacity, escapes ignorance, poverty and crime.

And in his final chapter, he writes in poetic terms about a future where “we are going . . . with regard to all social problems, to be able to use human experience for the guidance of mankind” (quotes in this paragraph from 1935, xix, 8, 16, 325, 382–383, 722). From these few but representative examples—Du Bois employs “human” so much in Black Reconstruction that you can almost open a page at random and find it20—we see the different ways that Du Bois invokes the concept of humanity not simply as a universal already in existence so much as to call for universalizing practice: invoking “humanity” can put a historical event in the perspective of our species; it can ask us to see someone who looks different from ourselves as part of the same species, and thus worthy of fair treatment and possessing rights; it can be used negatively, as a standard to condemn social structures that violate human rights and, specifically, to call for the abolition of (racial) capitalism; it can be used positively, as an aspirational standard, the reaching of which would require new social, economic, and political organization (e.g., an expanded system of public education, a universal right to vote); it can be used to describe our shared fallibility and vulnerability while challenging undemocratic assumptions and rejecting any form of organizing a polity that maintains ignorance and poverty; and it can remind the reader that there are moral duties we’ve always owed one another.

Writing from Atlanta in the 1930s about Reconstruction, Du Bois was more than aware of insidious uses of “human” and “humanity” that maintained hierarchies over time. Many of his writings, from The Souls of Black Folk to The World and Africa, could be read as tracking the fallacies that are part and parcel of any racialized hierarchization of our species. Nevertheless, he did not see violence and oppression as “intrinsic” to, or domination a sure result of, the operation of “the human.” Rather, he maintained the concept in Black Reconstruction, leveraging it alongside the focus on class and labor he gained from his 1933 turn to Marx, who also maintained a sense of species-being.21 Given these methodological moves, and in light of recent criticisms of “the human,” one might then ask: Why would Du Bois maintain a term that he knew, firsthand and histori-
cally, contributed to hierarchy, violence, and terror? I suggest that one answer can be found in Du Bois’s biography of John Brown.

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In his short Preface to *John Brown*, Du Bois notes that the only reason he is conducting yet another study of Brown is to put emphasis on a different element of his life (1909, xxv). In the final chapter, Du Bois cites both a letter of Brown’s saying, “I cannot believe that anything I have done, suffered, or may yet suffer, will be lost to the cause of God or of humanity,” and another letter Brown wrote to his younger children, saying, “I feel just as content to die for God’s eternal truth and for suffering humanity on the scaffold as in any other way” (1909, 187–188, 188). Du Bois then summarizes Brown’s conceptual influences:

Was John Brown simply an episode, or was he an eternal truth? And if a truth, how speaks that truth to-day? John Brown loves his neighbor as himself. He could not endure therefore to see his neighbor, poor, unfortunate or oppressed. This natural sympathy was strengthened by a saturation in Hebrew religion which stressed the personal responsibility of every human soul to a just God. To this religion of equality and sympathy with misfortune, was added the strong influence of the social doctrines of the French Revolution with its emphasis on freedom and power in political life. And on all this was built John Brown’s own inchoate but growing belief in a more just and a more equal distribution of property. From this he concluded,—and acted on that conclusion—that all men are created free and equal, and that the cost of liberty is less than the price of repression. (1909, 190)

In making his moral judgements, Brown was influenced by a variety of sources, his faith probably the most important. But then again, as Ted Smith has noted, perhaps it is “[b]ecause commentators have not seen him as fighting for ‘his own’ people” that “his religious motives come into sharper focus”; in other words, too often commentators miss the fact that “Brown . . . sincerely regarded enslaved people as his sisters and brothers” (2014, 8, 161). Du Bois saw in Brown someone who embraced “suffering humanity” as his own people. One lesson Du Bois drew from his study of Brown—and that, I am suggesting, he carried into *Black Reconstruction*—is that a belief in shared humanity over and against using race to create divisions of labor and distributions of property was, for Brown, sufficient not only to conclude that the state-sanctioned violence of his
time needed to be challenged, but also to act personally on that conclusion. “Humanity” was also sufficient for those Brown inspired, especially the multi-racial group that carried out the illegal raid with him—“not men of culture or great education,” Du Bois says of the group, but “intellectually bold and inquiring” and “skeptical of the world’s social conventions” (1909, 144). For Du Bois, in matters of “vast human import” there is a “great parting of the ways—the one way wrong, the other right, in some vast and eternal sense” (1909, 172). Regarding the matter of slavery, Du Bois says, “John Brown was right” (1909, 172). One concept that led Brown to the right position was humanity.

I have argued that Du Bois’s maintenance of “the human” illustrates Hall’s idea of politics without guarantees. For those who concluded that their society was unjust and acted upon it by raiding Harper’s Ferry at the cost of their lives, “humanity” was what Hall called “that term.” On my reading, one reason Du Bois maintained a vocabulary of “human,” “humanity,” and “human rights” in Black Reconstruction is that he knew, from his earlier study of John Brown’s raid, how a notion of humanity inspired Brown and how it could inspire others. My sense is that some contemporary philosophers who maintain a radical humanism do so based on a similar historical understanding of how the concept has functioned: Paul Gilroy’s call for a “planetary humanism” informed by Black Atlantic political struggles—including the rights claims of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and Ida B. Wells—comes to mind, as does Lewis Gordon’s maintenance of a humanism based on his reading of Frantz Fanon, as does Sylvia Wynter’s foundational reconstruction of the human that draws on Césaire, Fanon, and Michel Foucault (see Gilroy 2000, Gordon 2015, Scott 2000). Such constructive or re-imaginative practices of reading and conceptualization are, in my view, examples worth following today, because our movements still very much need tools to make judgments and demands as we strive to build more just societies.

Is “Humanity” a Sufficient Concept Today?

There remain great partings of the ways. We, as U.S. citizens, permit the imprisonment of some in Angola State Prison; permit the flooding of Lakota land via the damming of the Missouri River and continue to threaten that land with the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), through which oil now flows; and permit access to healthcare to be tied to employment and a market economy such that many do not have access to health insurance or cannot afford needed (and available) medication. In this context, I suggest that the constellation of concepts that Du Bois invoked in Black Reconstruction—human, human rights, and humanity—remains sufficient both for explaining how partial or
non-universal social structures violate fundamental decolonial values and for inviting actors into struggles to make those structures more universal in providing healthcare, education, access to voting, a right to move across borders, and so on.\textsuperscript{23}

In merely one part of Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family”—we have a tool that, if gendered and otherwise flawed, nevertheless allows us to condemn the social arrangements of Angola, DAPL, and non-universal health care, all of which actively prevent health and well-being in myriad well documented ways. That the language of human rights is already institutionalized imperfectly or part of a severely limited Declaration that Du Bois himself condemned for not addressing colonization, does not mean that such a tool is \textit{ipso facto} oppressive, and therefore worth leaving behind.\textsuperscript{24} It is the argument of this essay that we should only abandon a concept if it has been articulated in a way that prevents social actors from using it to read their realities or from legibly inviting others into political struggle—that is, if even imaginative uses of it no longer work toward our goals in a specific situation.\textsuperscript{25} For this reason, analyzing the limits of a concept alongside how the concept functions does remain of critical importance—as long as that analysis is tied to strategy, experimentation, and constructive practice, what Hall called “the building of human alliances.”\textsuperscript{26}

Recognizing conceptual sufficiency is important for political theory because it entails changes to the kind of inquiry that follows from such recognition. It points critical theory in a direction different from spinning around in aporias. That new direction would include (1) clarifying and making more accessible what the concept implies and (2) inquiring into the barriers that prevent actors from carrying out its implications.

Regarding (1) clarification, we can consider the claim—in the face of a differentially borne climate emergency and amid an ongoing global pandemic—that the earth as one “country” that humanity shares\textsuperscript{27} is a better understanding of the reality of our species than divisions of planet earth and humanity into nation-states and races and thereby into different civic and ascriptive statuses.\textsuperscript{28} If we believe this humanist understanding is correct, then there remains work to be done to clarify its implications. For instance, if a country currently allows its citizens to come and go as they please, then it should also allow all people to travel freely across its current borders. If a country provides healthcare and education for all its citizens, then it should provide both to whoever lives within its borders. And thus over time these categories and borders might loosen and dissolve. In other words, what such a “planetary humanism” would
look like in practice would include eliminating in policy all hierarchies of personhood tied to civic status (Gilroy 2000, 2). Further, it would mean that currently predominant conceptualizations of obligation, particularly around debt—around who owes whom and why—would need to shift to reckon with historical and ongoing (colonial) hierarchies of humanity. A clear example of the need to re-frame obligation lies in the fact that Western financial bodies are willing to forgive some of Ukraine’s debt in the face of war but not that of Barbados in the face of climate emergency exacerbated by war. These are simple examples of my larger point: the work to be done regarding the concept of humanity includes theorists’ clarifying its implications for broader publics, using it to raise political consciousness, and explaining how its partial (national, gendered, racialized, etc.) use is always a false use. As Césaire taught us, any “true” use of “humanity” must be a universalizing one (1950, 73).

Regarding (2) inquiring into the barriers that prevent people from acting upon their understanding of a concept, there are moments when the social problem is not that we have an insufficient concept, but that we are not willing to take the risks required in living it out. Sometimes the fault is not in our stars or in our concepts. The example of John Brown is striking precisely because most of us—while agreeing both that slavery still exists and that it violates our most deeply held principles (see Gordon 2020)—do not give up our lives fighting against it. Brown thus serves as a “touchstone” that tests not just how we understand violence, but also the strength of our will (see Smith 2014, 15–39). In other words, sometimes the social problem is not a theoretical or conceptual problem, but rather one of political commitment.

Once we recognize that the problem is not with the concept, then we are able to ask one another the questions that are crucial to transforming the structures in which we live, the kinds of critical questions that Du Bois put on the table in his reading of John Brown, and that Du Bois carried forward into *Black Reconstruction*. If we agree that a prison or a pipeline or a for-profit school violates how others around us should be treated as part of humanity, or violates their human rights, or violates our sense of dignity or justice, then what risks are we willing to take? What comforts are we willing to give up? From what are we willing to divest? What public spaces are we willing to reclaim? How will we connect these risks, refusals, divestments, and reclamations to ongoing work across borders? How can we remind one another that “it may be important to pause over the awareness of dissatisfaction just where it starts to seem futile” (Terada 2009, 200)? What kinds of kin structures, and ways of taking care of one another, would not only affirm our dissatisfaction with the present order of things, but also allow us to take more risks and make needed interna-
tional connections (see TallBear 2018; see also Gumbs, Martens, and Williams 2016)? How can forms of resistance become “more accessible to people with varying debilities, capacities, and disabilities” (Puar 2017, xiii)? What forms of agency can we outline, given that many of us experience our situations as ones of tremendous constraint (bills to pay, debts racking up, kids to care for) and extremely limited possibility (climate change, police violence, low wages outside of the corporate world)? How can our mobilizations not only make demands on those in power, but also build power in a way that makes a world of decolonized land, as well as of universal healthcare and education (and so on), a more widely desired and thus more feasible option? Along the way, how can we see, and explain for wide audiences, what Wynter calls “the performative enactment of all our roles, of our role allocations as, in our contemporary Western/Westernized case, in terms of, inter alia, gender, race, class/underclass, and, across them all, sexual orientation” (McKittrick 2015, 33)? If we understand that all our roles are “praxes . . . rather than nouns,” then how, concretely, do we practice differently—how do we perform our humanity as an affirmation of a different future, no matter the success of each of our mobilizations and demands (McKittrick 2015, 33)? Could raising these questions in community and conversation itself be part of re-describing “humanity” and thus thinking alongside Wynter’s task-setting lines that

the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves? (2003, 260)

Wouldn’t this be, as Wynter reads Glissant, “a specific mode of uprising, one which calls into question, rising up against, our present mode of being, of subjectivity, of Self” (Wynter 1989, 640)?

**Conclusion: Humanity and Political Commitment**

I wrote this essay in the summer of 2022, just after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. I was thinking hard about the kind of political responsibility Lewis Gordon says should be “borne by every member of society, for the actions of their government” (2022, 158). I was also then visiting my ageing parents in rural Minnesota. When I would “head into town,” as we rural people say, I would come across an anti-choice billboard with a photo of a fetus along-
side text in all caps: “ALL HUMANS HAVE HUMAN RIGHTS.” I am not, then, unaware of how both “the human” and “human rights” are deployed against women’s rights.

Our post-Roe moment recalls Hall’s conclusion to his 1979 essay, “The Great Moving Right Show,” where he notes that conservative politicians have “change[d] the nature of the terrain itself on which struggles of different kinds are taking place” (186). But “[t]hat,” he says, “is exactly the terrain on which the forces of opposition must organize, if we are to transform it” (186). If you want to move a concept, “to rearticulate it another way,” Hall says in his penultimate lecture on cultural studies in 1983, “you are going to come across all the grooves that have articulated it already” (1983, 143). What Hall said there of Jamaica is true of the U.S. today: “[N]o political movement in that society can become popular without negotiating the religious terrain” (1983, 144).

I have suggested that “humanity” remains a valuable concept for negotiating not just political but also legal, educational, and religious terrains today. That “the human” and “human rights” have been degraded and continue to be used for anti-egalitarian ends simply illustrates how all concepts travel. With Du Bois and Wynter regarding “the human,” but drawing a conclusion different from their critique and setting aside of “human rights,” my view is that a degraded concept need not become one we abandon outright (q.v. nn. 18, 19, 24). Such (mis-)uses of concepts will continue to happen because politics never comes with guarantees. One skill of reactionary political programs is their ability to appropriate radical uses of concepts, with the result that radical actors hesitate to use powerful terms and end up without a shared vocabulary. But again: that such appropriation happens does not change the fact that we need useful concepts to leverage “in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents,” as the political scientist Sidney Tarrow says of successful social movements (2011, 6). We still need, in Alexander Weheliye’s terms, a “speculative blueprint for new forms of humanity” (2014, 14; cf. James 2019). Such a blueprint is precisely what Du Bois’s reading of John Brown’s bold, skeptical, abolitionist, and humanist crew, carried into Black Reconstruction, offers us. Ultimately, Du Bois shifts the question from one of theory to one of will, highlighting the importance of what Césaire calls “the weapon of unity, the weapon of the anticolonial rallying of all who are willing” (1956, 148). In this way, Du Bois offers an ethical and political theory in which one key value is courage.

To think from what is today called Minnesota is not just to think alongside anti-choice billboards, but to think with Indigenous-led organizations, such as Honor the Earth, whose mission states:
We believe a sustainable world is predicated on transforming economic, social, and political relationships that have been based on systems of conquest toward systems based on just relationships with each other and with the natural world. We are committed to restoring a paradigm that recognizes our collective humanity and our joint dependence on the Earth. (See Honor)

For Honor the Earth, “humanity” is also that term. It is a term that can explain the violations of the Line 3 pipeline and invite actors to mobilize against the pipeline. It is a term that, even after oil began flowing through the pipeline, has been used to make connections between Line 3 and other anti-pipeline struggles up and down the Mississippi River, from Minneapolis to St. Louis to New Orleans. For Honor the Earth, “humanity” is a tool that is part of a larger practice of being human; this re-imagined practice receptively situates itself within right relations to the Earth.

In cases when we recognize the concept is not the problem, our practices could change in response to the actual problem, which is often one of political commitment. The legal scholar Patricia Monture-Angus makes this point clear regarding how citizens of so-called Canada often choose to address questions of Indigenous rights:

It boggles my mind to think that all of this constitutional debate, the number of conferences, the amount of federal money and federal energy spent trying to figure out what Aboriginal people want is merely the struggle to accept that we want to be responsible as Peoples. At the centre of our demands is one simple thing: I want and I need and I have the right to live as a responsible person in the way that the Creator made me, as a Mohawk woman. That is the only right I need. When I have the right to live in my territory as a Mohawk woman then I will have justice. (Monture 1994, 230)

As I read Monture, she is not saying that the problem preventing her from living on her land as a Mohawk woman is that the concepts of people, responsibility, territory, or justice are inadequate. She treats those concepts as sufficient. Because those concepts are not inadequate, the solution to recognizing Indigenous rights is not really one of debates, conferences, or increased grant money from non-profit organizations—it is not about performing mere discursive exercises, as if justice were a game. The actual social problem is that settlers want to hold on to their settler states; the actual social solution is “the significant letting go of . . . government power over the lives of Aboriginal citizens”
(1994, 230). What Monture teaches resonates with what Hall diagnosed in his 1966 essay “Political Commitment”—that the work of politics needs to “connect experience with demands in a meaningful relationship” and “connect awareness of the nature of the system to aspiration, and aspiration for change to the agencies of change” (94). Read in dialogue, Hall, Du Bois, and Monture ask us to consider whether the most pressing limitation to decolonial politics in our time might not be that we lack sufficient concepts, but that we lack political commitment—that we lack the will to carry out what we know is necessary for our species, for the land that teaches us, and for the planet that hosts us. It remains the task of critical theory to make explicit the forms of agency we have to realize our political commitments—to outline the paths we can still walk together—and in doing so, to imagine and communally construct alternative forms of human life.

NOTES

1. I see the tendency to search for pure concepts as part of the Levinasian inheritance of decolonial philosophy, which, beyond how his specific vocabulary of “alterity” has been adopted to describe cultural difference, has also led to the impulse to seek out “the Other” in theory. John Drabinski explains: “Difference, for Levinas, is only genuinely radical when it is thought outside its distinction from, which invariably means derivation from, identity” such that “transmitting Levinas beyond boundaries, borders, and old habits of scholarship ought to be quite natural. It is in the very orientation of work dedicated to the Other to seek out alterity without the prerogative of conquest” (Drabinski 2011, xii, xiv, emphasis mine save on “derivation”). On these pages, Drabinski also points to Jacques Derrida’s second essay in Rogues. There Derrida calls for hospitality and generosity toward “an event” of “exceptional singularity” (Derrida 2005, 148, see also 149). Derrida asks his reader to think about the becoming of reason in terms of an arrival “as other, as the absolute exception or singularity of an alterity that is not reappropriable by the ipseity of a sovereign power and a calculable knowledge” (148). In advancing his philosophy and ethics of liberation, Enrique Dussel draws on Levinas, modifying “alterity” to “exteriority.” Alejandro Vallega summarizes the trajectory this way: “For Dussel . . . philosophical thought arises in alterity and toward the engagement with alterity . . . a thinking in radical exteriority” (2014, 6). In my view, one contribution that Caribbean philosophers—such as Édouard Glissant (in his concept of “entanglement”) and Stuart Hall (in how he sees the world as becoming increasingly diasporic)—have made to critical theory is to call into question the possibility of a Levinasian or Derridean “event” or “rupture” of alterity in a globalized/colonial world where languages, norms, values, and concepts are already shared, overlapping, and mixed. If these philosophers are correct, then one on the search for exteriority will never find what one seeks, because it does not exist in modern/colonial conditions. Instead, we are
left with what Paul Gilroy called “another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity,” leading to a series of “strategic choices” (1993, 2, 19). The task of decolonial philosophy, then, might be not to find concepts outside of the contaminations of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism, but to leverage strategically the always already contaminated concepts that we have in order to make political gains. Thinking with Hall and Gilroy (as well as with Du Bois, as I suggest in what follows), this point is not at all an admission of defeat, but rather one that liberates us from worrying about whether we found an “exterior” concept and whether that concept can become co-opted (we did not, because modernity/coloniality is always already mixed; it can, because all concepts can, because politics does not come with guarantees).

2. My reading of Du Bois is less a contribution to Du Bois scholarship and more a suggestion for critical theory. (This is why my endnotes are not to Du Bois commentary but to critical theory, broadly understood.) The method I underscore here is less a new intervention and more in search of a renewal; it is an echo of the method of Caribbean critical theory, with Aimé Césaire’s new humanism in *Discourse on Colonialism* being perhaps the most famous (and in my view still the standard-setting) example. This method was arguably part of not just Césaire’s theory but also his practice. In his resignation from the French Communist Party, he wrote that in light of Stalin’s brutalities, he expected from the Party “not a renunciation, but a new and solemn departure” (1956, 146). This method (departure but not renunciation) is why Césaire can say later in that letter, without contradicting himself, that “the time has come to abandon all the old ways, which have led to fraud, tyranny, and murder” while still calling for a new universal, “a universal enriched by every particular” (150, 152).

3. Several readers of this essay have commented that I do not define “we” and “our” in this paragraph. My lack of definition reflects, I think, the state of an un-formed community that would be influenced by the New Left but perhaps think beyond Left/Right terms. For Hall, as he discusses in *Familiar Stranger*, the New Left hinged on the events of 1956: it needed to be democratic (because of Hungary), anti-imperialist (because of Suez), and anti-war (because of nuclear proliferation). The question of what our new community would hinge on today remains largely unanswered; it is a question beyond the scope of this essay, yet with which this essay is in dialogue. I thank Paget Henry for emphasizing the need for a (new) New Left today.

4. We might also call this mode Romantic. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1919 that “for the Romantics and for speculative philosophy, the term ‘critical’ meant objectively productive, creative out of thoughtful deliberation” (1920, 142).

5. At the risk of being wildly misunderstood, I will note here that the method I have in mind for critical theory regarding the judgment of when a concept is sufficient is something of a pragmatic method. I see my own claims as resonant with John Dewey when he writes that while “a withdrawal is necessary,” the fact is that “[t] hinkers often withdraw too far”; he goes on, “Over-specialization and division of interests, occupations and goods create the need for a generalized medium of intercommunication, of mutual criticism through all-around translation from one separated region of experience into another. Thus philosophy as a critical organ
becomes in effect a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meanings with which they are charged” (1925, 306). Du Bois himself acknowledged the importance of U.S. Pragmatism (especially that of William James, his teacher, more than that of Dewey) to his project: “I went forward to build a sociology, which I conceived of as the attempt to measure the element of Chance in human conduct. This was the Jamesian pragmatism, applied not simply to ethics, but to all human action” (1944, 48). In a connection worth noting but ultimately beyond the scope of this essay, Césaire is perhaps the most instructive example of such a radical pragmatism, meaning an experimental and always political orientation to concepts understood more as verbs than nouns—that political ideas should always start from and return back to local contexts and practical ramifications. For this reading of Césaire, see Wilder 2015, 21. Whether my reader agrees with the content of my thesis might not be significant, because I understand the overall contribution of this essay to be in the form of the thesis: one skill for connecting critical theory to practice today is our ability to acknowledge when a concept does sufficient normative work, such that the resulting political task is not to perpetually debate the limitations of the concept, but to organize around it. Two of the anonymous reviewers of this essay justifiably wondered whether my claim that my contribution lies in form more than content is in fact a defense mechanism. And perhaps it is, so I have relegated this point to an endnote. It is possible that this note interests my reader as little as the fact that while writing this essay I spent much time in seated silent contemplation in front of Gerhard Richter’s diptych November at the Saint Louis Art Museum. But to me the point about form matters well beyond whether “the human” is the term we need. I am trying to say: the readers of this open-access journal of global philosophy might be in Cairo, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Melbourne, Moscow, Santiago de Chile, or Santiago de Cuba. In my particular context in the Midwest of the U.S., following Hall’s setting our task as “strengthening and deepening the oppositional elements of already existing cultural forms,” one concept worth strategically engaging is “humanity,” and one instructive history related to this context is Du Bois’s reading of John Brown, who carries historical significance not just out East where he died, but also and perhaps especially in Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa, where he fought against the creation of states that supported slavery (Hall 1983, 189). Writing from the U.S. (drafting this essay along the Mississippi in Minnesota; revising it along the Mississippi in St. Louis), I am trying to acknowledge that I do not know which concepts have, or could have, the most purchase in the places where my reader finds themselves, but that my reader and I share a need for concepts we can organize around in order to make international political gains. “Humanity” might not be your term—I would be interested in learning what is.

6. It is worth noting, probably because her work has always been so admirably tied to practice, that Çubukçu is the rare thinker willing to take strategic and (therefore) mobile positions regarding the use of concepts. For other examples of how she reads “humanity,” see Çubukçu 2018 and her forthcoming article “David Graeber’s Anthropology of Human Possibilities” in boundary 2.

7. Working in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Rahel Jaeggi has called for “the concepts in terms of which we understand ourselves” to be “examined with regard
to their internal shape and quality” (2018, 7). I see my inquiry in this essay as resonant with her call for a critique of “forms of life,” which are “not individual options but transpersonal forms that possess public relevance” (4). Where we depart, perhaps, is that I would emphasize more, following Du Bois’s reading of Brown, the importance of an individual’s option. (I am also thinking here of Mignolo’s language of a “decolonial option.”) In this essay, following Hall, I am asking critical theorists to examine concepts—as well as actions, frames of reference, and forms of life—not only regarding shape and quality, but also regarding political strategy for our times.

8. While I always learn from Stoler’s striking work, it is worth noting that my sense of “conceptual sufficiency” results from an inquiry different from hers about “conceptual labor.” She writes: “Rather than acquiesce to the resolute security that concepts may be marshalled to confer, we might better look to the unmarked space between their porous and policed peripheries, to that which hovers as not quite ‘covered’ by a concept, as ‘excess’ or ‘amiss,’ that which cannot be quite encompassed by its received attributes, when ‘portability’ is not self-evident, to that which spills across its edges” (2016, 9). In this essay, I am less interested in the “security,” the “unmarked space,” or the spillages of concepts, important as those are; I am in search of concepts that can bring together struggles without guarantees.

9. Most of my examples in this essay come from my location in the United States. I do not mean to speak for, and I trust that my readers will make connections to, other locations. In pursuing this method, I have in mind Akeel Bilgrami’s point that it is “not only understandable but honorable, if someone speaking and writing in America finds it important to stress much more the wrongs of the American governments and its allies and clients . . . rather than speak obsessively, as is so often done, about the wrongs done by Muslim terrorists or Islamic theocratic regimes or, for that matter, Cuba and North Korea” (2014, 96). In this context, an interrogation and structural transformation of racialized dehumanization remains critical “in the present,” Christina Sharpe explains, because of “the ways that all black people, regardless of sex/gender, but especially the young and poor and working class have become in the United States (but not only in the United States) the symbols of the less-than-Human being condemned to death” (2014, 62). Césaire noted that such a transformation in thinking alone, a Left theory “in the service of black peoples,” would itself be a “Copernican revolution” (1956, 150).

10. While my emphasis on political strategy in this essay might appear as the opposite of Nikolas Kompridis’s call for a more open critical theory, my overall position, beyond the specific intervention here, is very much invested in such a renewed critical theory. I have written elsewhere about the human rights claims at Standing Rock, which were grounded in a larger context of situating ourselves in a way that centered land and ancestral knowledge. I understand Standing Rock as exemplary of a new critical theory that proceeds through a dialectic of strategy and receptivity, and thus as resonant with Kompridis’s call for “placing the capacity for receptivity and decentering in an unusually prominent and central normative position” (2006, 187). I will hint at how I think such a dialectic could proceed by positioning human life as relative to land, understood not as passive property but as active history, in my concluding comments in this essay, which are tied to my reading of
Patricia Monture’s contributions to rights discourse in Davis 2022. I would like to thank Allison Weir for guiding me to Monture’s work. Cf. Weir’s forthcoming Decolonizing Freedom.

11. One result of Maldonado-Torres’s thesis has been a proliferation of projects that outline the coloniality of x or y. These diagnoses are important, particularly around the coloniality of law. (I thank Mireille Fanon for helping me see this point.) At the same time, to accept the coloniality of being thesis (in general) is to accept the coloniality of x and y (in particular). Other helpful dissertations, articles, books, etc. would offer paths for where to go, that is, how to act, what demands to make, how to mobilize, and so on, given the coloniality of x and y.

12. In colonial contexts, those in power have leveraged race in order to naturalize hierarchical and oppressive divisions of labor and have thus divided humanity. Alexander Weheliye has explained that modernity is constitutively marked by racialization, meaning “sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (2014, 3). Weheliye’s concern about “juridical humanity” and call for highlighting “[t]he problematic of humanity” suggest that he might take some distance from my return to human rights as well as my suggestion in this essay that we leverage in addition to problematizing “humanity,” even if we are in full agreement that “black studies . . . is engaged in engendering forms of the human vital to understanding not only black cultures but past, present, and future humanities” (135, 136).

13. This essay comes out of dialogue on “politics without guarantees” at the 2022 Caribbean Philosophical Association summer school. I thank Nelson Maldonado-Torres for bringing up how La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción is drawing on Stuart Hall in its work; Paget Henry for lessons from decolonization in Antigua as tied to the need for a new New Left today; Derefe Chevannes for conversations about Stuart Hall; AunRika Tucker-Shabazz for raising difficult questions, and for her sense of humor; Jane Gordon for dialogue about political commitment tied to pedagogy; LaRose T. Parris for her insistence that peace is a question of political economy, and for correspondence; and Frieda Ekotto for conversations about Stuart Hall and reading as well as for the initial encouragement to write this essay. I would also like to thank Kris Sealey, Christopher Smith, Sam Tecle, Michael Monahan, Rohini Patel, Jason Walsh, Abby Scribner, Lucian Stone, Jeta Mulaj, Lucy Benjamin, Bukky Gbadegesin, Valerie Lambert, Derek Smith, Miguel Gualdrón Ramirez, Shadi Anello, and Chris Tinson for debates around the questions this essay raises.

14. I thank an anonymous reviewer for noting that this kind of humanism is the significance of this passage. This was not my original reading; it is really their contribution to this essay.

15. Hall’s attention to responsibility across societies is exemplified in his famous line: “I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea” (1991, 70).

16. Aijaz Ahmad notes that one consequence of the rise of post-structural methods has been “greatly extending the centrality of reading as the appropriate form of politics, and how theoretical moorings tend themselves to become more random, in this proliferation of readings, as much in their procedures of inter-textual cross-referentiality as in their conceptual constellations” (1992, 3–4).
17. In my view, various liberation theologies provide examples of working within a
given terrain—the predominant moral vocabulary of a situation—to achieve a more
just society.

18. For an incisive critique of this moment of human rights rhetoric, a critique that is
important to Caribbean critical theorists such as Sylvia Wynter, see e.g., Williams
2010. For Wynter’s citation, see McKittrick 2015, 39.

19. For a summary of how race and empire played into the 1948 Universal Declaration
of Human Rights, see Mackinnon 2019.

20. I did this exercise, and I found the following: “[I]n general, it is true that there
is scarcely a bishop in Christendom, a priest in the church, a president, govern-
or, mayor, or legislator in the United States, a college professor or public school
teacher, who does not in the end stand by War and Ignorance as the main method
for the settlement of our pressing human problems” (1935, 678). In regard to slav-
er as the negation of human rights, one of the reasons slavery was “cruel and hid-
eous,” Du Bois says on the first page of John Brown, is that “it gradually built itself on
a caste of race and color, thus breaking the common bonds of human fellowship
and weaving artificial barriers of birth and appearance . . . The result was evil, as
all injustice must be” (1909, 1). For how Du Bois’s claim about the emancipation of
labor goes beyond a Marxist tendency to focus on Europe, see Parris 2015, 86.

21. Du Bois’s biographer David Levering Lewis describes Du Bois as “self-instructed” in
Marxism—his 1933 self-study was “Marx in months, not years” (2009, 624, 549).

22. Teju Cole raises these ethical questions in a planetary context today, asking “Who
is my neighbor?” and “Who is kin to me?” on the cover of his book; Fazal Sheikh’s
photographs focus on the dispossessed and displaced across the world, suggesting
a non-linear, non-filial sense of responsibility (Cole and Sheikh 2021).

23. For “struggle,” cf. the concept of jihad in Islam, where the struggle is not just out-
ward-facing but inward, and in fact the most important struggle is between the be-
liever and whatever obstacles they face with respect to their relationship with God.
This was likely the most important struggle for Brown. I pay insufficient attention
to these internal questions in this essay.

24. For Du Bois’s intervention in the foundation of the United Nations, see Du Bois
1945. For his critique of the U.N.’s failure to affirm self-determination exemplified
in his disagreement with Eleanor Roosevelt, see e.g., Aptheker 1978, 180–190.

25. While a fair treatment of “insufficient” concepts is beyond the scope of this essay,
I would suggest, following Claudia Rankine, that “privilege” is one such concept
because of how it can function to provide an individualized, as opposed to a struc-
tural, understanding of racism. Rankine writes of Peggy McIntosh’s famous essay
on privilege: “I would have preferred if instead of ‘white privilege’ she had used the
term ‘white dominance,’ because ‘privilege’ suggested hierarchical dominance was
desired by all” (2019). It might well be the case that “privilege” was once sufficient
but has been articulated in a way that no longer makes it so. In this way, conceptual
sufficiency is not eternal but temporally conditioned. Thanks to Derefe Chevannes
for helping me to see this point.
26. One limitation of this essay is that I do not do a very good job acknowledging how self-critical reflection on concepts (together with using them strategically) is itself tied to building new human alliances. (I hope it is clear to my reader that I am perhaps over-stating the importance of the constructive position because I think critical theory today has swung too far toward the critical position; of course, there is a dialectic between critique and construction.) I understand the value of such reflection to be part of the work of poets such as Dionne Brand, who raises a concern about “when they say, humanity, everyone, we,” that this tends to be an instance when those speaking “talk as if the world you know is the world” (2022, 11, 12). For a wonderful dialogue on the connection between how we use language in everyday life and politics, see Brand’s connections to Ernesto Cardenal (Brand 2022, 141–161). I wonder: Are Cardenal’s Salmos, which I have long loved, more an interrogation of the sufficiency of concepts/values at hand or a leveraging of an imperfect Biblical text for revolutionary ends? Certainly such poetry shows that my limited distinctions could reflect more nuance and attention to the world(s).

27. I am borrowing this claim from the mystic and prophet Baha’u’llah, who lived his life in prison and exile for attempting to live out a planetary humanism. Cf. the work of Alain Locke.

28. As Adolph Reed explains, “ascriptive status” is “status defined by what you supposedly are rather than what you do”; this status, he further argues, was foundational for “a rigidly hierarchical social order like that of the segregationist South” (2022, 75).

29. “[B]y failing to fully account for how the exceptional costs of climate change affect national wealth, the I.M.F. and the World Bank have wound up driving countries in need toward profit-reaping hedge funds and banks, to borrow billions of dollars, often at credit-card-like interest rates. Throughout, the debts have been collected. They were collected as the shadow of the 2008 financial crisis lingered and as a pandemic decimated tenuous health care systems and tourist-reliant economies. They continue to be collected despite a climate crisis that is caused almost entirely by the copious fossil fuels that those same creditor nations burned to industrialize and achieve their own wealth, the very wealth that undergirds the I.M.F. Caribbean nations are being asked, in a sense, to pay not only their own debts but the rest of the world’s debts, too, for all the progress it made while leaving the Caribbean behind . . . Debt is written off in Ukraine, as it was for Germany after World War II. Other countries, though, the ones subjugated throughout history, have seen their humanitarian crises ignored . . . Perhaps the suggestions that lenders forgive debt isn’t about kindness but about obligation—about seeing it as a kind of back tax that they owe to society and to frontline societies, in particular” (Lustgarten 2022, 31, 49, 47).

30. To bring my position into further relief by way of another comparison, while I am overall quite invested in how concepts, in Stoler’s words, “do work and work on us to authorize some questions, to reconfigure what questions are worth asking, and, not least, to foreclose others” (2016, 173), in this essay I am suggesting that critiquing concepts can become autotelic, such that the critical approach itself can foreclose
questions about practice such as those I list following the work of James, Salaita, Monture, Revilla, TallBear, and others.


32. In regard to the self-determination of Indigenous peoples in the settler state of Canada, Patricia Monture-Angus writes, “Self-government requires the significant letting go of Canadian government power over the lives of Aboriginal citizens. I do not doubt that the release of power is a difficult thing” (1994, 230). I will return to these ideas in my conclusion.

33. And how could we connect these divestments, these refusals, to more daily practices of repair? Here I am thinking that “[r]epair, like refusal,” as Deborah Thomas writes, “is practice-oriented and quotidian; it is non-eventful and deeply historical and relational. Like its nominal counterpart [reparation], repair urges us to interrogate the multiple scales of entanglement that have led us to where we are now. But where reparation seeks justice through the naming of names, the exposure of public secrets, and the articulation of chains of causality, repair looks for something else. It demands an active listening, a mutual recognizing, an acknowledging of complicity at all levels—behavioral evidence of profound interior transformations that are ongoing” (2019, 212). Thanks to AunRika Tucker-Shabazz for returning me to the Coda of Thomas’s text.

34. Here, because the context I am familiar with is the Americas, I am thinking of Occupy, Idle No More, Standing Rock, Indigenous retomadas in Brazil, and the Movement for Black Lives. My reader likely has in mind different examples based on the movements they are a part of. I also wonder here how we can design what Maria Pia Lara calls a “wider space” and a “more complicated” space, how we might reclaim public space while acknowledging that “[t]he feminist social imaginary is a wider space than the public sphere, which, as a political institutional device, made women invisible” (2021, 3, 5, 170).

35. Cf. the poet No’u Revilla’s concept of “generative refusal” as tied to a practice of centering land (Revilla 2022).

36. I have in mind Walter Mignolo’s continued emphasis that decolonization is an “option” among other options. In my view, this framing suggests the increased importance of theoretical and discursive work that can explain widely why this option is both just and desirable. See Mignolo 2011. If the West is a project and not a place, as Glissant suggests in an early footnote in Le discours antillais, then doesn’t the key question become not where or how we are born but to what degree we participate and affirm the West in our language, dress, habits, orientations, and investments (financial, affective, etc.)?

37. I thank Chris Tinson for making this point in conversation.

38. I thank Shadi Anello for dialogue on this point.
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