Neoliberalism, Racial Capitalism, and Liberal Democracy: Challenging an Emergent Critical Analytic

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ABSTRACT

Response to Jodi Melamed, “Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis: Forms of Institutionality, In the Making,” published in Lateral 5.1. Aho pointedly argues that studies of institutionality all too often substantiate what she calls neoliberalocentrism, which readily posits neoliberalism as the singular paradigm into narrating a teleological development of history. Instead, she echoes Kim and Schalk to articulate ‘crip-of-color materialism’ as an analytic that thickens understandings about global structures of inequity and fissures within them.

It is not just different structures of oppressive violence that radical scholars are trying to make legible, it is violence of a certain depth, with specific and morbid implications for some peoples’ future existence as such.

– Dylan Rodríguez, “Racial/Colonial Genocide and the ‘Neoliberal Academy’”

The forum editors Chris Eng and Amy King open their introduction with Lisa Lowe’s words that “it is necessary to . . . imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now.” Lisa Lowe’s historiography of intimacy at the confluence of racial capitalism and liberal democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century offers just such a “much more complicated set of stories.” But so do the contributions to this forum on “Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities,” which offer much-needed reminders of the necessity of critical analytics that have remained all too lateral within our fields. The contributors also advance insights that are in conversation with or could be usefully engaged by another critical analytic that has currently taken a dominant hold in cultural studies: neoliberalism. In the following, I want to discuss the politics of this emerging methodology that centers neoliberalism as an explanatory paradigm and a field of adversity in studies of cultural political economy, and outline some of the pitfalls that a shift from racial capitalism to neoliberalism engenders.

The particular analytic of neoliberalism has found a much wider reach than traditional studies of political economy, spanning from affect theory to queer studies, from animal studies to ecocriticism. Across these fields, neoliberalism-focused analyses are influenced by two major thinkers. Most cited by far is critical geographer David Harvey, whose classical Marxist analysis sees processes of neoliberalization as part and parcel of the globalized class struggle for resource redistribution. Then there are the writings of Michel Foucault, whose thinking has been highly influential in the field of governmentality studies, especially in respect to biopolitics, which for Foucault can only be understood as a disciplinary regime in the context of liberalism and its variances. In their wake, the humanities have witnessed an abundance of work on neoliberalism, from political
philosopher Wendy Brown’s polemic about the end of democracy to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s cultural analysis of neoliberal able-nationalism. What most of these recent studies share is what I call “neoliberalocentrism”—evoking J. K. Gibson-Graham’s critique of capitalocentrism—an a priori belief that neoliberalism has succeeded in its teleological march to global hegemony and now shapes everything from our national policies to the ways in which we relate to, feel, and understand our very selves. While there is certainly a geographical, cultural, and historical specificity to our contemporary moment, neoliberalism is oftentimes evoked, as Arlene Dávila points out, as a shorthand for a confluence of events, developments, and structural and cultural changes that are a lot “more contradictory and uneven.” Such shorthand, Dávila warns us, applied “without any specificity about whether we may be referring to a particular ideology, or a technique of government, or a policy, or a financialization regime,” not only weakens the forcefulness of our analyses and arguments, but also dilutes the efficacy of our critical interventions.

In this response then, I would like to nudge neoliberalocentrist analytics towards an engagement with crip of color materialism, which the forum contributors already advance in various ways. By crip of color materialism, I reference the convergence of a historical materialist critical disability studies/crip theory/mad studies with critical race theory and queer of color critique. Such an approach situates regimes of normalization and pathologization within the longue durée of the co-constitution of patriarchal racial capitalism and liberal democracy. It approaches structures of exclusion, dispossession, and death, and their concomitant ideas of human worth, vis-à-vis delegitimizing assignments of intensity, instability, and irrationality. In so doing, it encourages scholars interested in questions of political economy to move from evoking David Harvey ad nauseam to instead follow those who advance indigenous, critical race, and postcolonial perspectives on political economy, such as Jodi Byrd, Cedric Robinson, and Malini Johar Schueller. A crip of color materialist analytics returns to the question of rationality—one of the central tenets of liberal thought—to trouble its beginnings at the center of racial capitalism.

My larger argument is that neoliberalocentrist analytics face a number of problems: First, they often follow a dehistoricized hermeneutics that reinvests ontological forcefulness into well-critiqued binaries that extend racial capitalism’s ideological dominance. In other words, anti-neoliberal critiques oftentimes reinforce dichotomies such as the public versus private and the political versus economic. Second, they choose to center the supposed novelty of certain phenomena over the longue durée of patriarchal, racial capitalism as it has become manifest most recently through liberal democratic systems. Third, neoliberalocentrist analytics tend to ascribe all current woes to neoliberalism because of an inability to think through the co-constitutive nature of various forms of governmentality (the police/carceral state, the rule of law/raison d’état, etc.)—despite Foucault’s emphasis that these are not incompatible systems but instead co-occurring rationalities characterized by “tensions, frictions, mutual incompatibilities, successful or failed adjustments, unstable mixtures, and so on.” While engaging with Jodi Melamed’s writing in particular, my response is meant to serve as an addendum to all of the essays offered in this forum as a way to highlight the crip of color materialist analytics I have found most productive in understanding the contemporary materializations of the co-constitution of liberal democracy and racial capitalism.

Jodi Melamed’s work has offered many productive avenues through which to approach (higher) education, institutions, and questions of difference, diversity, and inclusion as they are situated and become manifest in racial, neo/liberal capitalism. As Melamed argues in this forum, neoliberalocentrist analyses often either ascribe to the Harvey-ite lament of the weakening of liberal democracy’s bulwark institutions, such as the
university and the union, or follow the putatively Foucauldian biopolitical concern for the extension of “economic measures to every dimension of human existence.” Instead of a teleological heuristics of neoliberalocentrism, Melamed encourages scholars to investigate the amplification, the intensification, of already established “liberal modes of institutional power” under racial capitalism, to focus on the “internal and continuous” dynamics of “accumulation in political modernity.” Such a shift away from neoliberalism to racial capitalism as the overarching framework allows for more nuanced understandings of not just the continuities, but also the changes between past centuries and today. As Melamed argues, one possible insight might be the waning importance of citizenship as a determinant for dispossession, although contemporary contestations around resource exploitation and land claims, deportations, the “refugee crisis” in Europe, and many others might complicate this insight and certainly encourages more thorough studies of this nexus.

Nevertheless, the most important intervention that Melamed offers in her piece is to reconceptualize neoliberalism as intensification, as the amplification of “racial capitalist colonial modernity’s shadow rationality” that is “the evil twin of its liberal political manifest reason.” In other words, the recent turn towards neoliberalocentrist analytics has one major, albeit unintended, bonus: it makes manifest the violent processes of liberal democracy in racial capitalism that can only function vis-à-vis exclusion, dispossession, and oppression because it has now become disturbing “even for centered white nationals.” What from an indigenous, postcolonial, and/or cri/queer of color perspective already appears as a structural legitimation of unjust resource allocation—or, in the words of Audra Simpson, theft—now becomes tangibly unsettling also for the colonizer. The anxious states that neoliberalism has been found guilty of producing in white, Western subjects—and that affect theory and more recent strands of mad/disability studies have taken up—are not to be discounted. But, instead of halting at an analysis of their particular manifestation, our analyses can be enriched by considering how this discomfort speaks to larger epistemological lacunae.

Furthermore, I would extend Melamed’s insight by emphasizing the need to realize that what is claimed to have been newly marketized under neoliberalism, and how democracy has supposedly been de-politicized in order to be economized, reproduces dichotomies that have been foundational for racial capitalism’s dominance —such as the separation of the political and economic, the public and the private. Critical race studies and women of color feminisms have long contested epistemological approaches that recenter such dichotomies, and yet they remain prominent in anti-neoliberal analytics. As Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo outlines, it is the depoliticization resulting from a conceptual differentiation between the political and economic in liberal democracy under racial capitalism that has created the framework for neoliberalization processes. It would thus be imperative for analyses concerned with the role of political economy to avoid reproducing such polarizations and instead challenge naturalized dichotomies that ahistorically lament the marketization of specific practices and goods. There is very little work as yet that attempts to tease out in what ways the “contraction of democracy to liberalism” (Woods) that is an inherent tendency of liberal democracy under racial capitalism has produced the historical specificities within which we find ourselves faced with neoliberalization processes.

I have been suggesting that cri/queer of color materialism proves especially productive as an analytic approach for nuancing this particular nexus. Recall the frequency with which scholars describe (neo)liberalism as a rationality. Given the centrality of rationality for liberalism, which allowed for its “twin birth” with racial chattel slavery (Lorsurdo), a mad/disability studies centered through critical race theory and historical
materialism would be equipped to unsettle the basic logic of liberal capitalism’s ableism
that is articulated to racialized and gendered realities. As Nirmala Erevelles has argued,
the pathologization of those deemed property/non-citizens is foundational for liberalism’s
production of freedom through exclusion, oppression, dispossession, and death. This
pathologization functions via delegitimation by levels of intensity, instability, and
irrationality, and has historically served as the justification for settler colonialism,
genocide, slavery, imperialism, and the oppression and exploitation of the majority of the
population, including indigenous people, people of color, women, people with disabilities,
people who are trans/intersex/queer, the poor, the undocumented, and the incarcerated.
Returning to and situating contemporary issues within the longue durée of patriarchal,
racial capitalism through a mad studies lens of intensity, instability, and irrationality would
highlight the overlapping techniques of government that we too often reduce to the
homogenized adversary “neoliberalism.”

Finally, I would challenge us to think more thoroughly about the claim that neoliberalism
“just requires a techne,” that it lacks a moralism of its own—the only truly distinguishing
feature that justifies the “neo-” for Melamed, since she rightfully rejects dehistoricized
claims about neoliberalism’s “undoing” of democracy (re: Wendy Brown). Neoliberalism
seems to be characterized by a heightened proceduralism, a “reified sense as mere
administration,” but I would argue that such an intensification of biofinancialization to a
“reductive logic of calculability” certainly offers its own moralism. How else could we
describe the austerity shaming of Greece by the troika? What would the otherwise
extensively analyzed biopolitical regimes of self-care be but a renewed moralism of
civilizational advancement and respectability? Do universities not continue to inculcate
their students with a moralism of economic success as the good life? If we truly want to
argue for the importance of a neoliberal analytic, we need to parse out more carefully how
many of the “technes” of today are continuations of earlier modes of governance, how
certain liberal tenets maintain their stranglehold on our conceptualizations of the good
life, and in what ways the changes that we want to describe as neoliberal can help us
understand the systems that shape our current moment in order to “write or imagine
alternative knowledges, to act on behalf of alternative projects of communities,” as Lisa
Lowe reminds us. It is the continued moralism of the rule of law that sustains the
naturalized liberal democratic structures that depoliticize economic exploitation and
manifest in discourses of individual responsibility, freedom, and democracy. If we are to
challenge the current political-economic order, however we conceptualize it, we need to
begin by returning to the foundations of racial capitalism and liberal democracy. This
return will allow us to move from a mere concern with the intensification of economic
exploitation to a foundational critique of the ideological structures that are currently
perpetuated in most neoliberalocentrist critiques. It could offer an analytic that would
allow us not only to critique current structures of inequality, but open the door to
overcoming liberal imaginaries on the left.

Notes

1. Dylan Rodríguez, “Racial/Colonial Genocide and the ‘Neoliberal Academy’: In Excess
2. Lisa Lowe, The Intimacies of Four Continents (Durham: Duke University Press,
   2015), 208.
3. The 2014 American Studies Association conference featured a panel called ‘Kill that
   Keyword?’ in which neoliberalism seemed to be the most despised and communally
   acceptable keyword to excise from our scholarly lexicon. While many seemed to note
   the ubiquitization and accompanying diffusion of meaning that the term
neoliberalism had recently undergone, less attention was paid to the reasons for this development.


10. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


25. Melamed, “Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis.”

26. Ibid.


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**Bio**

Tanja Aho is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the University at Buffalo, where she is completing a dissertation on the racialized pathologization of states of intensity in anti-neoliberal discourses, as they can be found in radical left manifestos, so-called neoliberal literature, pop psychology blogs, and the sharing economy. Her other work on madness/disability, political economy, and television has been published in several anthologies and is forthcoming in *American Quarterly* and the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*. In 2015 Tanja Aho served as the interim managing editor of the *Disability Studies Quarterly* and she is currently the chair of the ASA’s Critical Disability Studies Caucus and a 2017-18 NY Public Humanities fellow.