

# Toward Terra Incognita

## A Critical Look at Cultural Essentialism, Nationalism, and Body Policing

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On their own, beyond anthropocentric contextualizing, my dreadlocks are meaningless. They have no intrinsic value, no inherent racial or gendered significance, no ancestral, cultural, or traditional spirituality carried from beyond the grave of history. They're just hair. But in a society domesticated by politics – the scientific pursuit of social governance, my hair is assigned several different meanings. For colonizers, it means savagery. For capitalists, it means unemployable. For the civilized, it means animalist. For the left, it means controversy. But rather than openly rejecting the negative connotations of these meanings in order to appeal to a sterilizing civility, I embrace them, celebrating the tension dreadlocked hair creates. Like a brick hurled at every market portrayal of standardized beauty, my locs are the grin of guilty pleasure, drenched in sweat like an out of control orgy.

I direct this writing at the body police - the ones who continue to view and treat individuals as mere bodies measured by proximity to whiteness. These authoritarians border-patrol identity with an essentialist mindset dictated by a nationalist distortion of liberation. Driven by an *inverted* hierarchical power, they seek to police the bodies of others (ironically) in the name of anti-oppression. Like all other reformists, the gatekeepers of identity fail to understand how their reinforcement of racialized, cultural essentialism ultimately preserves the white supremacy they claim to act against.

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Prior to European colonization, cultures were largely amorphous relationships of people, influencing and influenced by others all over the world. What kept these cultures alive and strong was a constant flow of mutually shared ideas, stories, and other varying forms of expression. Without the life force of desire, exploration, and creativity driving this exchange of fresh ideas, a culture quickly becomes stagnant and dies.

Industrial civilization requires social order to ensure its futurist expansion. Establishing social order means mapping out territory to occupy and control. Similar to how colonization carves borders into the earth to accomplish this, lines must be drawn around cultures in order to objectify and control them. Once lines have been drawn, a culture is extracted from the flow of life for dissection and exploitation – a process similar to when scientists kidnap wildlife from forests

for dissection and observation in their labs. But lines of colonial designation aren't just drawn to map out culture and wild spaces but to also map out people.

The mythology of *whiteness as superior* requires lines to be drawn around people based on *skin color*. Alongside the invention of *white* in order to describe people is the invention of *black* and every color in between. White supremacy requires the *preservation* of identity categories based on color to contrast it. And by extension, the division of labor necessary for maintaining industrial civilization requires the use of identity politics to homogenize bodies and determine their level of work-based subjugation. The colonial construction of *race* serves as a tool of division, separatism, and alienation for categorizing and stratifying groups of individuals. White supremacy is the *body politics* of racial subjugation, as patriarchy is the body politics of gendered oppression. *Race* is used to describe the grouping of individual bodies, mapped out based on their proximity to *white skin*.

As a direct result of this racial (and gendered) stratification, culture is no longer experienced as free-flowing interactions between free, unique individuals. Co-opted by white supremacy, the concept of culture is redefined as a way to identify one another through the use of surface-level (colonial) identity constructs. Assumptions based on racializing bodies replace the more in-depth getting-to-know process of direct interaction. Like draining an ocean to observe marine life, capitalism drains the life out of social interactions in order to extract and enslave the bodies. Rather than really getting to know one another - engaging in a mutually beneficial cross-fertilization of ideas - bodies become colonized subjects, like a battleground territorialized and governed by industrial society. In effect, people become subjective enforcers of colonization when their understanding of one another is confined to racially assigned identity. This only encourages people to interact with and treat one another as mere stereotypes of their assigned identities rather than unique individuals.

Once enough individuals and cultures are mapped out, objectified, and re-defined as social groups fixed in place by assigned identity, a sense of group-think competition and ownership take hold. People, habituated to defining themselves in terms of belonging to these categorized groupings, personalize the assigned colonial constructs and begin to see themselves as personal representations qualified to speak for all others.

Collectively, bodies are viewed less in terms of individualized personhood and more so as objects, defined by the politics of any given structural identity. When a population of people are designated a single culture that's fixed to an identity category, a nation is born among a global collection of other nations. Despite internal differences and/or disagreements, a nation, in response to capitalism or the threat of another imposing so-called culture, becomes a colonial power necessitating the creation of borders, economy, and militarism.

Nationalism is an ideology-based movement in which a population of people (sometimes at the command of a vanguard or governing elite) who happen to share a particular identity seek to gain and maintain sovereignty over a perceived 'homeland'. Nationalism sometimes gets confused with *national struggle* - a struggle for liberation widely understood as a political response to the control, domination, and/or erasure of one identity-based people by another. Unfortunately this confusion is based on the reality that national struggles often *do* turn into nationalism, becoming reformist rather than anti-authoritarian. For example, as a response to the colonial expansion of white supremacy, black nationalism attempts to preserve black bodies through the personal embrace and celebration of black identity. But as with all forms of nationalism, the personalization of identity categories only galvanizes the colonial logic of territory and cultural

ownership. Rather than confronting the root – the authority that identity holds over the individual – identity is upheld to preserve individual subservience to the nation.

It is for this reason (and because social conformity is the archenemy of anarchy) that despite desperate attempts to synthesize the two, nationalism continues to be incompatible with anti-social pursuit.

Through the lens of a nationalist worldview, dreadlocked hair is a controversial topic of debate. Since dreadlocks have historically been used to symbolize black power against white supremacy, they are mistakenly viewed by some as cultural *property*, and therefore exclusively *owned* by black people. So when white (and sometimes even brown) people dreadlock their hair, some perceive it as *theft* or used without permission. This perception is validated by the way that capitalism, designed to benefit white supremacy, sometimes rewards this perceived theft with celebrity glorification and fashion trends that remove dreadlocked hair from any historical or contemporary context of rebellion. This capitalist rewarding and sterilization is what defines *cultural appropriation* – the adoption of cultural elements from an oppressed culture by a dominant culture.

The problem with the concept of cultural appropriation isn't so much its portrayal of capitalist commodification, but rather its overall analysis, which relies on a definition of culture limited by racial identity. Most suggested solutions to cultural appropriation only end up reinforcing racial identity categories and stereotypes, behavioral expectations and body-policing.

The concept of cultural appropriation often leads people to embrace the colonizing worldview that bodies are simply identity spaces of structural oppression. Rather than acknowledging personhood, bodies are viewed as politicized battlegrounds where body-policing is confused with anti-oppression. Since cultural identity has been socialized to correspond to bodies, bodily expression becomes a site of cultural gate-keeping. Since one's body – not personal experiences or history – is treated as a subject for political debate, it is also viewed as a target for restrictive control. Restricting the bodily expression of others becomes necessary for maintaining racialized, cultural preservation. Rather than challenging white supremacy by rendering its orchestra of body politics powerless, it is preserved through cultural essentialism.

For those who claim to be against oppression but view dreadlocks *only* within the narrow framing of both capitalist appropriation and cultural essentialism, prohibiting all white (and sometimes brown) people from having dreadlocked hair is mandatory. This authoritarian way of thinking tends to manifest in anarchist spaces as top-down mandates that racially exclude people on the basis of their hairstyle – reproducing the same exclusionary dynamics already experienced by many black people under capitalism. In extreme cases some so-called anarchists, emboldened by a sense of duty and loyalty to their identity, take a more coercive approach, physically assaulting anyone who refuses to comply.

*“I hate white people. All of them. Every last iota of a cracker, I hate it. We didn't come out here to play today. There's too much serious business going on in the black community to be out here sliding through South Street with white, dirty, cracker white bitches on our arms, and we call ourselves black men. ... What the hell is wrong with you black man? You at a doomsday with a white girl on your damn arm. We keep begging white people for freedom! No wonder we not free! Your enemy cannot make you free, fool! You want freedom? You going to have to kill some crackers! You going to have to kill some of their babies!”*

— King Samir Shabazz, former head of the New Black Panther Party Philadelphia chapter, in a National Geographic documentary, January 2009.

”We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”

— Slogan coined by David Lane, a member of the white supremacist terrorist group known as The Order. The slogan reflects the primary white supremacist worldview in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: that unless immediate action is taken, the white race is doomed to extinction by an alleged ”rising tide of color” purportedly controlled and manipulated by Jews.

As an analysis, identity politics can be useful for describing the socio-economic way industrial society is structured. But as an end goal for any liberatory project, identity politics carries with it the dead-weight of artificial divisions that undermine individual liberation.

Representation plays a role in how identity politics exerts social control through individuals who speak as though they represent the views of others. Exactly how this liberalism found its way into anarchist discourse (and maintained its power this long) honestly beats me. When self-proclaimed anarchists speak like politicians, I always ask *how* they got to be the elected identity politician to speak on behalf of all others. *Who* gets to be the official authority to speak for everyone when determining what *is* or *isn't* cultural appropriation?

Either the identity police feel all black people are a monolith and hold the same views, or are being dishonest when they claim to uplift *all* black voices. There is no such thing as uniform agreement among all people of color. Not all black people give a fuck about white dreads, So why do some people claim to speak on behalf of black people as a *whole*?

I am wary of anyone who tries to gate-keep something as nebulous as culture, community, or opinions and views based on nothing more than categorical identity. And rather than simply speaking for their individual selves, they act as *the* arbiter of what is culturally offensive. And so these gatekeepers in effect define themselves as authoritarians, feeling it is their authority to put up gates in the first place.

Over the years, conversations about cultural appropriation have exposed a desperation for personal control – a desperation fueled by an industrial society that increasingly dominates more and more. Some are focused on re-possessing and controlling material objects or forms of expression considered essential to their cultural preservation. I am focused on reclaiming my body.

It is in this world that I strive to liberate myself from colonial subjectivity, recognizing my body as unique and hostile toward the domestication of colonial geography. My hair is my body. My locs are not a commodity for territorial claim nor re-possession of any kind. I find the notion of white dreads laughable because *white* is a racial construct incapable of exclusively possessing a style of hair that has been shared by all. Just as the word *culture* re-defined as a *nation-state* is an invention of political power, ‘White dreads’ is a political invention that inevitably upholds the myth of *white* culture – a so-called culture accused of *stealing* a hairstyle that was never culturally *owned* by anyone in the first place. The continued racialized identity affixation to culture is the continuation of colonizing power. The use of dreadlocks to symbolize black power implies no more ownership than anarchists of *all* races who wear dreadlocks to symbolize feral insubordination to the racist and classist grooming norms inherent to working class conformity.

So-called white dreads are viewed as oppressive only by those who view them through a nationalist lens of cultural ownership – a framework still upheld by many anarchists today.

I feel nationalism has escaped the grave long enough. With this text I seek to instigate and encourage an anti-authoritarian flame that once and for all sets fire to its anarcho-confused, stumbling corpse. I also encourage anarchists to question the notion of any *said thing belonging exclusively to any said culture*, to question the notion that *every* individual identifying with said culture *claims* to own it, and to question the authority of whoever it is making universal claims on behalf of others in the first place.

I say normalize dreadlocks across *all* racial categories; *rebel against work* – especially the type of work that seeks to conform us to beauty standards of marketing and production! I say dismantle white supremacy by making whiteness as insubordinate to colonial order as every black and brown youth who light up precincts like bonfires to freedom!

I propose an anarchy that moves beyond the politics of embracing assigned identity, toward de-territorializing one's body and destroying identity-based occupation all together. At the intersection of anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian praxis is a nihilist critique of any and all cultural ownership of one's body, becoming a dangerous space of terra incognita.

Only when dreadlocks cease to be the subject of culture wars over racial ownership, cleanliness, political representation, or bodily autonomy will I consider removing mine. Every strand of my hair grows wild in a complex network in flux with my every breath. Any individual, collective, or so-called anarchist project that values body policing shares with the State the values of coercion and subjugation. And as long as these locs have the power to destabilize and challenge those demands, (and agitate authoritarians possessed by the delusion that a single race has rigid, exclusive ownership over a style of hair), I will remain individualistically, nihilistically, and *dreadfully* provocative.

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