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The Niggarization of Black Bodies

The overall goal of this project is to examine the niggarization of black bodies in the United States and to put forth resources for resistance to it. What is at stake in this project is that if I can show that what is meant by the niggarization of black bodies is the internalization of aspects of white supremacy, then we have to put forth a methodology that historically tracks and situates the *nigga* as related to and maintaining of power structures of white supremacy. If I can historically trace and situate the *nigga* as related to and maintaining the power structures of white supremacy, then I can put forth options for a transformative praxis that acts as a site of resistance and acts as a guide for personal and social transformation. This project is important because it attempts to preserve and develop the black intellectual tradition for self-determination, the deepening of American Democracy, and the creation of a broader humanity well into the 21st century. The first part of the project will put forth an experiential account of niggarization, and a methodology that allow us to understand the conditions for the possibility of the *nigga* and to understand the process of niggarization or how the *nigga* is internalized. The second part of the project will look to black culture as providing valuable resources of resistance to niggarization. I will focus solely on the first part of the project in this paper.

My general claim is that the *nigga* functions to normalize black bodies. Further, I claim that this normalization is the internalization of aspects of white supremacy into black bodies. This internalization is what I am calling niggarization. Specifically, by niggarization, I mean the social production of black bodies according to the "nigga" as found in hip hop culture. The *nigga* in not a set of propositions that one accepts, but rather, a way of being in the world that one enacts in their social practices. To get the project off the ground, I will employ an

experiential account of niggarization and a methodology that will function to potentially explain this process. My aim in this paper is to show, first, that Thomas Chatterton Williams' memoir titled, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd*, provides an experiential account of niggarization; and, second, how Foucault's notion of *genealogy*, and the gaze within the *Panopticon institution* act as starting points to get at the niggarization of black bodies. As an exploration of part one of the project, I can only offer a schematic account of both. My thesis is that Williams and Foucault offer us the tools and skills to begin talking about the niggarization of black bodies in the U.S. In this paper I will: (1) elucidate what Williams means by the nigga; (2) explain the genealogical method, and (3) discuss the disciplinary technique of "the gaze" of the Panopticon.

Losing My Cool is a memoir that recounts how and why Williams adopted the *nigga* as represented in hip hop culture, the daily social practices that came along with being a *nigga,* and his transcendence beyond it. For this discussion, we will bracket his transcendence beyond the *nigga*, and focus on the other two aspects. Before we examine Williams's move to adopt the *nigga* as his way of being, we must first have a grasp of how his parents' robust conception of race failed to existentially sustain him in the world. Williams's parents' understanding of blackness emerged out of their work on the War On Poverty campaign in California during the late 60's; the father's experiences of growing up in the segregated South in Galveston, Texas; and the father's journey for black self-actualization through living a life dedicated to education – earning a Ph.D in sociology from the University of Oregon. Although Williams's father was black and his mother white, his parents did not think of themselves as an interracial family. Instead, his parents asserted that they were a black family. Further, they taught Williams and his

sibling that they were black, and needed to be taught how to move as black men through a white world that would treat them as such. As Williams states,

> My parents adhered to a strict and unified philosophy of race…black, they explained, is less a biological category than a social one. It is a condition of the mind that is loosely linked to certain physical features, but more than anything it is a culture, a challenge, and a discipline. We were taught from the moment we could understand spoken words that we would be treated by whites as though we were black whether we liked it or not, and so we needed to know how to move in the world as black men.[1]

The way Williams's father understood blackness as a culture, a challenge and a discipline was to encourage his sons to live the examined life based on a devotion to learning and personal excellence.[2] His father talked to Williams about Socrates and Confucius. In addition, the parents passed down the history and cultural memory of black struggle and resistance in the United States. For example, the parents gave Williams, at the age of 7, Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, to read and discuss with them. What I find significant about this understanding of blackness is the following: (1) Williams's parents' understanding of how thoroughly the gaze of white supremacy circumscribes black life; (2) the father's "determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion,"[3] as a response to the segregated South; and (3) the parents attempt to provide Williams with a positive and life-affirming sense of black identity that is grounded in a broader sense of humanity. This robust understanding of blackness existentially sustained Williams until he was nine.

Williams describes what caused him to lose this sense of black identity and adopt the *nigga* as a way of being black in the world. One day Williams and his parents were driving, in a barely running and used Mercedes-Benz sedan, to a black barbershop in a working class neighborhood. While stopped at a red light, Williams was staring at a black woman standing

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[1] Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and A Black Man's Escape From the Crowd*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010) 15.
[2] Ibid., 15.
[3] W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999) 37.

outside, on second floor balcony, smoking a cigarette. This black woman began yelling at the car, saying, "What the fuck are you staring at…You rich, white motherfuckers in your Murr-say-*deez*, go the fuck home! You think you can just come and watch us like you in a goddamn zoo?"[4] Williams was perplexed and could not understand how this black woman had mistakenly perceived him as being white.[5] This affected him deeply that resulted in a kind of loss of his identity. One of the reasons that this impacted him so deeply is that Williams did not want to resemble or be identified with the type of white men he encountered in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, especially the white men that brutally killed Malcolm's father. Through this experience, Williams discovers what it means to be a black boy.

In order to protect himself from being identified with whiteness again, Williams adopts the "realest" and "deepest" blackness any black body can exemplify, namely the *nigga*. Williams studies and looks to the other black boys in the black barbershop as models and modes of being black in order to appease and conform to the black gaze. Williams looks to the black boys in the barbershop as models and modes of being black due to his belief that none of the boys in the barbershop would ever be perceived as being white by the black gaze. For Williams, these black boys have a protective cultural armor that acts to prevent their dislocation or being set apart from the black community by the black gaze. As Williams states, "I decided I wanted whatever it was that protected them."[6] What Williams discovers by studying the boys' postures, gestures, mannerisms, and style of dress is that their way of being in the world is evoked, supported, and sustained by visual and linguistic representations of the *nigga* within Hip-hop culture.

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[4] Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and A Black Man's Escape From the Crowd*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010) 8.
[5] I will refer to blackness policing blackness in this specific was as the black gaze.
[6] Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and A Black Man's Escape From the Crowd*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010) 9.

Inside the barbershop, such representations were shown on cable TV in the form of music videos aired on a channel called Black Entertainment Television. Williams describes the visual representations of the black men and women in the videos as "all so luridly sexual, so gaudily decked out, so physically confident with an oh-I-wish-a-nigga-would air of defiance, so defensively assertive"[7]; and he describes the corresponding linguistic representation as a word list that contained words like *nigga* and *bitch*. Williams makes explicit that not only was it necessary for *nigga* and *bitch* to become imbedded in his thought process, but also that he had to move his body according to "a silent body language that everybody seemed to speak and understand,"[8] if he was to convincingly perform and be perceived as a *nigga*. Beyond the barbershop setting, Williams learns that it is not enough to project and mimic the language and body rhythms.

In order to be perceived as a full member of the *black* community, Williams recognizes that he will eventually have to physically violently dominate or be physically violently dominated by an other. The postures, gestures, style of dress, language, and especially the oh-I-wish-a-nigga-would attitude are not only a protective cultural armor, but more importantly a potential weapon. By weapon, Williams means the power to potentially physically dominate or be dominated by another person. The central norm of the *nigga* is physical violence. Guided by the norm of physical violence, the *nigga* projects a sense of their own invincibility and a certain kind of bravado, into physical space, that must be defended when tested. The test itself is expressed as a desire to or to be dominated. For example, Williams describes when his friend RaShawn savagely beat a white boy for testing him during a basketball game.[9] This power of

[7] Ibid,, 10.
[8] Ibid., 11.
[9] Ibid., 23.

potential violence is what unites people like RaShawn and Williams. A power that must be exercised when tested in order to be perceived as credibly black enough.[10] As Williams says:

> The loose jeans falling from our hips,, the unlaced kicks adorning our feet, the slang encrypting our speech, the slow roll choreographing our strides, the funky-ass hairstyles embellishing our domes, the hip-hop soundtracking our days, the pigment darkening our skin (whether octoroon or fully black) – all these disparate elements congealed into a kind of glue that invisibly but definitively united people like RaShawn and me. As different as the two of us were, it was undeniable that we shared something with each other that neither of us had in common with…that white boy stretched out on the asphalt. What that meant, I suspected, was that I, too, could participate in some of the immense power that brothers like RaShawn wielded and exercised all over the place. It was a wicked genie that I, too, could summon if I choose.

Two further points: (1) the potential for violence permeates all of one's relationships due to the desire to be credibly black enough, and (2) another consequence of this desire is a narrowing or dumbing down of blackness in the sense that people like RaShawn and Williams fully immerse themselves in and become circumscribed by images and narratives that sustain their self-identity as *niggas*; the sites that provide this are Hip-hop, ESPN, and street culture.[11] At this point, we must ask some critical questions: how does the *nigga* become a site for defining blackness?, How are we to understand the shift from white supremacy circumscribing black life to the *nigga* circumscribing black life?, How does the *nigga* become the "realest" and "deepest" sense of being black in the world?, and, more generally, how does the *nigga* emerge as a social practice? We turn to Michel Foucault to provide us with a methodology as a starting point to answer such questions.

Foucault's understanding of modern power as productive and operating at the level of social practices is significant for this project. It is important for two reasons: (1) it provides us with a framework to contextualize the emergence of the *nigga* within the shift from overt racist structures to our contemporary society in the U.S., and (2) understanding the *nigga* as playing a

[10] Ibid., 27.
[11] Ibid., 25.

role in the functioning of society prevents us from sliding into that long standing American tradition that asks black people, "How does it feel to be a problem?"[12]; instead we are able to see the *nigga* as a problem that is constitutive of U.S. democracy.[13]

Foucault reflects upon the shift of the operation of power from explicit external structures that acted to prohibit the body to the emergence of modern forms of power. Modern forms of power use the body as the material that is invested with and subjected by power relations. The aim of modern power is to render bodies useful and docile. This is accomplished in two ways: (1) the power-knowledge interrelationship that produces norms that act as social constraints, and (2) an internalization of these norms into individual bodies that seeks to produce an individual with "normal" habits and ways of behaving.[14] The power-knowledge interrelation is grounded in a multiplicity of apparatuses and institutions, what Foucault calls a micro-physics of power. This micro-physics of power is the site that creates a spectrum of knowledge about bodies that is used to both produce and subject bodies. Foucault tells us that these power "relations go right down into the depths of society…at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behavior."[15] In order to apply Foucault's notion of modern power as a methodology to analyze the *nigga*, we must unpack it, focusing on what he means by genealogical method and how he employs it, and how the gaze functions in the Panopticon institution.

In volume 1 of *The History of* Sexuality, Foucault employs a genealogical method to understand the discursive conditions for the possibility of modern sexuality. Foucault investigates the historical emergence and development of a multiplicity of discourses on sexuality that began in the 18th century. The aim of Foucault's study is to "define the regime of

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[12] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 9.
[13] Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 3.
[14] Daved Garland, "Foucault's "Discipline and Punish" – An Exposition and Critique," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 11, No. 4 (1986): 852.
[15] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 27.

power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world."[16] For Foucault, social practices are intimately linked to the interrelationship between power and discourse. Genealogy seeks to map out the historical emergence and development of social practices in regards to the interrelationship between power and discourse. In other words, genealogy takes it as axiomatic that cultural practices are contingent, grounded by prior contingent practices, and historically instituted by a multiplicity of apparatuses and institutions that produce knowledge.[17] Further, Foucault asserts that institutions have their own objects of inquiry, apparatus and criteria for producing discourse, and specific social practices they seek to constrain or make use of individual bodies. This understanding of genealogy guides Foucault's inquiry into modern sexuality.

Foucault employs the genealogical method to study the discursive regimes of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustain the discourse on modern sexuality. There are three topics Foucault examines in regards to sex being put into discourse in the 18th century. First, the focus on the transformation of sex into discourse accounts for the fact that it is spoken about, "to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints form which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said,"[18] and which type of discourse is authorized to speak.[19] Second, the focus on techniques of power seeks to "locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this

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[16] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol 1*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990) 11.
[17] Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 19-20.
[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol 1*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990) 11.
[19] Ibid., 27.

entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification." Third, the focus on the will to knowledge keeps track of the aim or reason why an institution produces knowledge; the will to knowledge "serves as both their support and their instrument."[20] We will look at the examples of the Catholic Church and the State in order to have a clearer idea of how the genealogical method provides Foucault with the tools to understand the discursive conditions for the possibility of modern sexuality.

Through a genealogical investigation, Foucault is able to account for the way in which both the Catholic Church and the State use their own apparatuses for producing knowledge; the way in which their respective discourse on sex constrains and makes use of sex in individual bodies, and their own reason/s for the incitement to discourse. Foucault tells us that the Catholic Church transformed sex into discourse for the purpose of a spiritual reconversion of their parishioners. The Catholic Church required each of its parishioners, during confession, to transform all the aspects of their sexuality into discourse. This included "thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings…combined movements of the body and the soul."[21] The Catholic Church collected, analyzed, and used this information to instruct and reorient the thoughts, desires, and body movements of each parishioner in order to render sex morally acceptable and technically useful.[22] Thus, as Foucault states, "this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself."

Foucault describes the state as producing a rational discourse on sex in order to manage the birthrate of its population. The state began to realize that the way each

[20] Ibid., 12.
[21] Ibid., 19.
[22] Ibid., 21.

individual made use of their sex played a role in its economic and political future and fortune.[23] For this reason, sex became a public interest that had to be managed, inserted into systems of utility, and regulated for the greater good of all.[24] The state used statistics in order to produce knowledge about its citizens' sex and the way they made use of it. For example, the state found it "necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births…the ways of making them fertile or sterile."[25] With this knowledge, the state attempted to regulate the birthrates of its citizens.

The state made attempts to transform its citizens' sex to serve public interest. For example, there appeared "those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional means—moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures—tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior."[26] For Foucault, it is institutions such as the Catholic Church and the state that have produced and sustained discourses on sex from the 18th through the 20th centuries. Foucault denies that there has been a continuous linear discursive growth on sex over the past three centuries. Instead, he "assumes the existence of a plurality of incommensurable discursive regimes that succeed one another historically," and he also assumes that these regimes are supported by their "own correlated matrix of practices."[27]

We must make a similar genealogical inquiry into the *nigga* in order to understand the discursive conditions for the possibility of it. However, there is a difference in how this project will employ the genealogic method. Foucault seems to privilege discourses that are produced out of a dialogue with its subjects. The

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[23] Ibid., 25-26.
[24] Ibid., 24.
[25] Ibid., 25-26.
[26] Ibid., 26.
[27] Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 21.

genealogical study into the *nigga* must take up the discursive conditions of the nigger. The discursive regimes that sustain the discourse on the nigger are grounded in white supremacist logics. These discursive regimes exclusively objectify black people; they do not engage in a dialogue with the subjects their regimes signify, but rather, imaginatively create images of black people into order to control it. For this reason, the genealogical inquiry into the *nigga* will emphasis who gets to speak, what discourses are authorized to speak, who stores the data and disseminates it, and the institutions which give support to and sanction such speech. The genealogical account will also seek to explain the discursive continuities and discontinuities between the shift from the nigger to the *nigga*. In addition, the genealogical account must explain how discursive regimes sustain the discourse on the *nigga* in our contemporary life. With a method in place to track the emergence and development of the *nigga*, we will now turn our attention to outline a method to explain the internalization of aspects of white supremacy into black bodies.

Foucault asserts that modern power seeks to produce an individual with "normal" habits and ways of behaving through techniques of disciplining individual bodies. Foucault acknowledges that societies have always had a coercive effect by treating the social body as a whole, i.e., in the forms of constraints, prohibitions, or obligations. However, what is unique about modern power is that it aims at correcting the operations of individual bodies in order to make them useful and docile. As Foucault states, "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved."[28] Individual bodies become useful and docile through techniques of discipline. By discipline, Foucault means power aimed at individual bodies that attempts to subtly coerce the internal

[28] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 136.

organization of individuals at the level of body movements, gestures, attitudes and desires.

Further, power supervises this process of internal organization. The point is that modern power does not aim at the exterior of bodies in the form of prohibitions, but rather, at the interior of bodies in the form of norms that subtly coerce individuals to correct their operations of their bodies in order to become useful and docile in accordance to the norm. I quote Foucault at length in order to more fully illustrate the point:

> The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as on wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience.)[29]

Foucault provides us with an example of this normalizing process with the Panopticon institution.

Foucault describes the Panopticon, a prison, as a disciplinary institution that employed "the gaze" as a technique of correction. As Nancy Fraser points out, "the gaze was a technique of power/knowledge that enabled administrators to manage their institutional populations by creating and exploiting a new kind of visibility."[30] The gaze operated by a normal/abnormal binary that was used to supervise and correct the abnormal inmate. The architecture and organization of the Panopticon was such that each inmate was completely visible at all times without their knowledge if they were being watched or not. In this relation between "the gaze"

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[29] Ibid., 138.

[30] Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 22.

seeing the inmates without being seen eventually leads to the inmates to internalize "the gaze." This internalization requires the inmate to see himself or herself as abnormal/the criminal in order to bring them back to normality by supervising themselves. As Foucault states, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who know it assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."[31] Thus, Foucault's understanding of "the gaze" provides us with a method to comprehend how individual bodies internalize power.

We must make a similar inquiry to how niggarization is the internalization of aspects of white supremacy into black bodies. In order to show this, it is necessary to look at historical examples of black bodies internalizing aspects of white supremacy under the discursive conditions of the nigger. I suggest that we look to James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner. I think that Baldwin (in, for example, *If Beale Street Could Talk;* or in the passages of *Go Tell it on the Mountain,* when the central character's father is abused in jail) and Ellison (where nothing is as it "seems" for the eponymous figure in *Invisible Man*) are self-explanatory. This may not be as readily apparent to some, in Faulkner. I suggest Faulkner due to his understanding of the nigger. As Eric J. Sundquist says, "To say that Faulkner first discovers the full burden of his central tragedy in the midst of writing *Light in August* is of course misleading; he had detected (without extending) it much earlier, certainly as early as the *Sound and the Fury*, in which Quentin Compson realizes 'that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.'"[32] Further, we will have to

[31] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 202.
[32] Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: the House Divided*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 67.

investigate how this process is transformed and transferred to the black gaze under the discursive condition of the *nigga*.

In conclusion, Thomas Chatter Williams' memoir provides us with not only an account of niggarization, but also, and more importantly, with an account of how pervasive the *nigga* is in black life, especially as embedded within the black gaze. What Williams shows us is that a black child that was loved and cared for in a two parent household, was reared in a middle-class neighborhood, was provided a positive and life-affirming black identity grounded in the collective memory of black struggle and resistance and within a broad sense of humanity, etc., and yet, he was still vulnerable to be niggarized by the black gaze. What is so revealing about this is that blackness is policing blackness according to aspects of white supremacy. Michel Foucault offers us a method to trace the emergence and development of the discursive conditions for the possibility of the *nigga* and a method to understand the internalization of aspects of white supremacy into black bodies.

I would like to close by reading a passage from James Balwin's *The Fire Next Time*. In this book Baldwin writes a letter of warning to his nephew about their fellow countrymen. Baldwin writes:

> Dear James:
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> I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—with a very definite tendency to sound truculent because you want no one to think you are soft. You may be like your grandfather in this, I don't know, but certainly both you and your father resemble him very much physically. Well, he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy. I am sure that your father has told you something about all that. Neither you nor your father exhibit any tendency towards holiness: you really *are* of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier called "the cities of destruction." You can only

be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it.[33]

[33] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 3-4.