

Introduction

Race, the State, and the Malleable Body

Kyla Schuller and Jules Gill-Peterson

The contributors to this special issue argue that plasticity is a central axis of biopolitical governance. *Plasticity* refers to the capacity of a given body or system to generate new form, whether internally or through external intervention. Conceptually, it has infused a range of theoretical, material, and scientific idioms for describing the malleability of a given body or system. In many theories of affect and the new materialism, for instance, the preindividual scale of interaction between bodies takes a qualitatively plastic form, endlessly open to reverberation, expansion, and contraction.¹ Feminist and queer reconceptualizations of life and the inorganic, aiming to revisit domains long presumed to be anathema to a queer politics of subversion, or even benign variation, have described an ontological plasticity in the subindividual dimensions of the world. Often, feminist and queer theories of plasticity are offered to support nondeterminist accounts of matter and categories such as gender.² And in the sciences, perhaps most visibly in neuroscience, cellular biology, and epigenetics, plasticity has not just a conceptual but a more literal meaning. As the observed biological capacity of living systems like the human brain, or gene expression, to change form as they grow over time, plasticity indicates the means by which bodies absorb the impact of their environments and resist calcification.³ Each of these fields of plasticity provides an important account of malleability that, given its seemingly inexhaustible destabilizing and disorganizing qualities, has sometimes been framed as a resource for the disruption of normalizing systems of power. The hegemonic systems allegedly destabilized by plasticity include forms of social regulation, political subjectification, and medical normalization.⁴ The forms of what we refer to in this introduction as *state power*, in particular—a style and logic of

modern institutions designed to aggregate and manage large populations through individual traits, extending well beyond the literal sovereign state—appear particularly vulnerable to the disrupting force of plasticity. Yet notions of plasticity, we argue, emerge from within biopower.

If the malleability of plastic bodies appears to antagonize state power from the subindividual scale, this special issue replies not that state power can leech from malleability for its own ends but that malleability is already an enlisted feature of state power through the biopolitics of plasticity.⁵ While conceptual and material investigations of plasticity in such domains as affect theory, feminist and queer science studies, and cross-disciplinary engagements with neuroscience have by no means ignored state power, this special issue focuses on the biopolitical function of plasticity itself to rescale the conversation. A biopolitical account of plasticity insists that the plastic individual and subindividual are central to the managed population. Plasticity is not an inherent property of an individual body or system but is, rather, a key axis of the administration of populations. Furthermore, plasticity is not equivalent to malleability—it names a specific regime of biocapital that seizes the malleable body as a means to engineer the individual and the population. This issue of *Social Text* takes up and analyzes that administrative role across a range of domains, from the era of Lamarckian biology in the nineteenth century to the present day.

By specifically naming a *biopolitics* of plasticity, we foreground two central vehicles of governance that cultivate malleability: race and state power. Plasticity is the organic vector through which the biopolitical practice of managing and optimizing the population transpires at the level of the individual body. A key feature of biopolitical plasticity is that it unevenly distributes the capacity of corporeal malleability. Thus plasticity, we argue, lies at the heart of the idea of race in the Western world. Plasticity functions as a key logic underpinning the modern notion of racial difference. Generally, organic plasticity is equated with potential itself and assigned to whiteness. Whiteness, in the specific case of plasticity, is equated with brimming potential and is protected and nurtured by the state. While the distribution of this capacity of plasticity need not be restricted to groups socially or politically recognized as white, it is routinely denied to the racialized, whose bodies are seen as rigid, inflexible, overly reactive, and insufficiently absorptive, contagions to the potential growth of the population. In the dominant Western racial imaginary, Blackness occupies the opposite pole of whiteness and is characterized by a quality of stolidity that at best can be pressed into a new shape, but never can self-transform. Racist thought places other racial groups in the space between these two poles of unlimited potential and finite debility. Indigeneity allegedly lingers as a relic of the past, a remnant of past growth that froze in time many centuries ago, and Asianness is typified

in the figure of the worker whose body and mind have crystallized into the forms demanded by technology and labor. Whiteness is marked by the capacity for self-making and moving forward through time, whereas the racialized body is consigned to the fate of being made to move by others.⁶

Racialized bodies are denied individual malleability, becoming expendable at the level of the individual on account of their resistance to meaningful change. At the same time, racialized bodies allegedly possess a threatening fungibility and thus volatility as a group. Within biopolitics, whiteness is valorized as plasticity of the individual body, which connotes potential, resilience, and dynamic transformation. Racialized bodies are freighted with a different kind of plasticity, one ascribed to the level of the mass. At this dimension of population, persons are stripped of individuality and lumped as racial types marked by replaceability, interchangeability, and shapelessness. These are the bodies that, collectively, forge into mobs, rebellions, and riots. Kyla Wazana Tompkins describes such a plasticity as marking the condition of racial groups as a whole in the nineteenth century: fungible surplus populations whose labor is extractable for profit, where individual bodies dissolve into a volatile, threatening mass.⁷

The articles in this issue address a range of domains in which human beings have become the targets of the biopolitics of plasticity, including the violent conversion of people into fungible chattel by transatlantic enslavement, the practice of US torture techniques in global warfare, and cross-species organ transplantation. Each of these instances of the biopolitics of plasticity is also constitutive of the human, whether as exchangeable commodity, enemy combatant, eugenic stock, or the ostensibly progressive equation of humanity with educability. The articles in this issue understand these instances of state power as manipulating the human at the individual and population level to govern through organic instability. The production and maintenance of race as a stratifying mechanism of political domination that rigidly sorts populations, justifying a litany of violent and oppressive outcomes, have in this way depended on race's conceptual opposite, the mutable and transformative potential of flesh and matter without form.

Through plasticity we identify a core biopolitical logic: that governing the vital fluxes of energy and matter inherent in a population relies on its ostensible contrary, the cultivation and preservation of dynamic instability in the individual. Stability of the organic whole is achieved through manipulating the formlessness of individual bodies, a condition often equated with whiteness and the abled body. We want to underscore that, while homeostasis is measured by the state at the population level, the individual is enfolded in and, in some ways, an outcome of this racial logic. The plastic individual, in other words, is the product of populational thinking. Biopolitics delineates relative biological qualities across

a population as different, uneven capacities and debilities. Yet this instability strengthens rather than undermines it. In fact, the calculation and maldistribution of life, calcifying into forms of racial domination, depend on and are regenerated by the instability of organic plasticity. As Sonali Thakkar's article in this issue explores, this proves a problem for antiracist and anticolonial political projects that turn to models of plasticity as a means to overturn racism. UNESCO's mid-twentieth-century statements on race, Thakkar notes, equate racism with determinist frameworks in which organic capacity is fixed and posit plasticity as an alternative model for a postracial world. Yet plasticity, rather than resisting the rigidity or illogic of racial hierarchies, often materializes them: it is how the populational logic of relative bodily worth scales at the level of the individual body.

The value of plasticity lies, therefore, not in the malleable dimension that confounds liberal individualism and the determinist paradigms that allegedly underwrite ideas of sexual and racial difference. Rather, plasticity uniquely illuminates *how* biopolitics intervenes into matter and constitutes distinct forms like human bodies as variably actionable entities inside larger populations. Plasticity does not confound biopolitical logics but, rather, comprises their very substance.

The Historical Development of Plasticity

Plasticity connotes a paradoxical state: the capacity to be formed by outside pressure, yet to maintain internal coherence all the while. Plastic objects are molded by their surroundings; they do not dissolve into their environments. (By contrast, the minoritarian materialisms that Monique Allewaert identifies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caribbean notions of being consider life-forms as fully entangled with the other bodies and forces of their environments.)⁸ Some current celebrations of plasticity identify this tension between formlessness and form as plasticity's political potential. One locus of such resilience celebrated in recent writings about plasticity can be found in the human brain. For example, philosopher Catherine Malabou considers the implications that new neurological conceptions about the brain's capacity for self-transformation might have for thinking about subjectivity and social and political life. Neural pathways, the structure of the brain, are now seen to take shape in response to repeated action and emotion. For Malabou, the shift from older mechanistic understandings of neural capacity to more recent frameworks of mutability and self-transformation give rise to new possibilities for resisting constraints on individual and collective conduct. Arguing against those who equate ideas of neural plasticity with the kinds of flexibility and mutability prioritized by neoliberal economic regimes, Mala-

bou holds that neuroplasticity models can inspire a less alienated consciousness, grounded in the mutability of bodily capacity and the ongoing potential for new forms of political action.⁹

Yet the process of endowing the brain with executive function as the sovereign of the flesh entails some real limits, as Fred Moten reminds us. “Malabou says, ‘We are the authors of our own brains,’” Moten reflects. “But who are ‘we’? How can ‘we’ resist a tendency to isolate the brain from the rest of ‘our’ (phenotypical/genotypical) flesh so that authorship doesn’t reify an old administrative or executive function that is nothing other than a new version of sovereignty? How can we prevent the body’s inspirited materiality (the brain) leaving the flesh behind?”¹⁰ Moten sees a familiar hierarchy of flesh/spirit at work in Malabou’s celebration of the political potential of neuroplasticity, a hierarchy at the core of rationality. From our historical perspective examining plasticity’s formative role in articulating racial hierarchy, we agree. Malabou argues that plasticity usefully destabilizes the essence of the subject—“to behold essence is to witness change.”¹¹ Yet plasticity has historically been mobilized to develop racialized ontologies of utter malleability and formlessness and the stolid impenetrability of flesh against which the usefully plastic subject of whiteness and capacity coheres. The subject of reason, particularly as elaborated by John Locke and David Hume, coheres through the effects of its senses over time. The subject is born a blank slate. Sensory impressions etch subjectivity deep into its surface. The rational subject depends upon plastic bodies, on the mind that is constructed through sensory impressions from the outside world. Accordingly, the rational subject must also be a sensory normative one. The rational subject requires the stimulations of the world external to it for its own self-constitution, inciting a vulnerable process of cohesion that transpires through relation and immersion.¹² This issue of *Social Text* puts pressure on plasticity to manifest its links with biopower, in order to consider how it buttresses ontological suppositions about personhood that ground concrete practices and relations of racial differentiation. The plastic body has long been the servant of the rational, sensory subject, while a lack of plasticity, and thus potential, is ascribed to the racialized and disabled.

Plasticity names a specific ideology of corporeal flexibility that emerged hand in hand with biopolitics, the method of biopower that targets the population as a species. Plasticity biopolitics became particularly prominent in the Lamarckian evolutionary theories of the early nineteenth century. French biologist Jean Baptiste Lamarck extended Locke and Hume’s idea that the individual mind and subject develop through sensory impressions into the new concepts of species and evolutionary change over time.¹³ For Lamarck, sensory impressions not only forge the mind and character but also forge the body itself. Repeated impressions

cause the relevant body parts to enlarge, while disuse causes atrophy. The mind's pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain shape the body, and this dynamic transpired at the level of each individual organism and of the species. Modified traits—for example, Lamarck's famous long-necked giraffes—transmit to the next generation, such that descendants inherit the morphological effects of their ancestors' behavior. Habitual function directed the form of the body over generational time. Lamarck's was the first fully elaborated evolutionary theory, and it linked individual organisms to species outcomes and emphasized that a species' environment has particular impact on its development. In this pregenetic era, individual habit was understood to produce populational traits. Lamarckism was thus central to the rise of plasticity biopolitics, for it hinged species-level outcomes on the behavior of individual organisms. Plasticity, we stress throughout, is the implantation of population-level governance at the dimension of individual organic capacity.

In the pregenetic era of the nineteenth century, this individual capacity to be affected over time and to transmit those changes to descendants was denoted as impressibility. *Impressibility* marks a body's relative responsiveness to and absorptiveness of its stimulations and thus is its capacity to move forward through time; it thereby became the fleshy substance of race and sex difference, as Kyla Schuller claims.¹⁴ Impressibility frameworks particularly emboldened reformers and other agents of biopolitics who seized the idea that orchestrating a people's sensory experience would direct their development. Until recently, the most common understanding of nineteenth-century notions of race emphasized rigidly determinist models in which biology represented a kind of prison confining individuals into distinct and unchanging biological types.¹⁵ Current research has unearthed the broad influence of Lamarckian ideas of the possibility that civilized subjects could acquire new traits and transmit them to children.¹⁶ Unevenly distributed plasticity, rather than biological determinism, characterizes nineteenth-century ideas of racial and sexual difference.¹⁷ Race delimits ontological existence through circumscribing the possibility of transformation over time, sequestering changeability as the unique capacity of whiteness and/or civilization. For example, the origins of foster care in the United States reveal deep investment in the possibility that reformers could manipulate the impressible bodies of European-origin children. The so-called orphan trains removed 200,000 Irish and German immigrant youth from East Coast cities between the 1850s and 1920s, yet they did so not just to rehome orphaned children in a manner that would reduce urban crowding and increase the western labor supply. As explained by program founder Charles Loring Brace, removing immigrant children from their milieus and immersing them in western labor would transform their heritable material, impressing new habits

into plastic-enough flesh.¹⁸ Brace's Children's Aid Society refused to take African American children, however, on the grounds that they lacked the capacity to change.¹⁹ In the Lamarckian-dominated nineteenth-century United States, Blackness functioned as impressibility's limit, the rigidity and torpor against which materialized the malleable evolutionary body that moved forward through time.

A new regime of plasticity superseded the impressibility theories of the Lamarckian nineteenth century. This shift was motivated by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, though it was not until the early twentieth century that the major contribution of Darwin's work was understood to be his theory of natural selection.²⁰ Natural selection emphasizes the role of population pressure and environmental conditions in creating better chances for survival for some organisms and traits, and poorer chances for others. It transpires at the level of population: specific traits persist or disappear in populations over the scale of generations. How those traits appear in the first place, or proliferate, is outside the control of individuals. New traits are generated by random chance and variation. Traits' continued existence is the result of the struggle for existence: some traits lend themselves to survival, and thus further reproduction. This emphasis on plasticity at the level of the species ushered in a new phase of biopolitical thinking. Individual choice and habit matter little in species change. Rather, large-scale environmental pressures over time impinge on individuals, determining their life chances. With natural selection, plasticity's key register shifts to how the individual body survives competition within the population.

The clearest outcome of this shift is the rise of eugenics as a science, practice, and policy.²¹ Eugenics manipulates plasticity at the populational level of the gene pool (itself a new idea that emerged in the early twentieth century). As the nineteenth-century concept of impressibility gave way in the Western biological sciences to a concept of plasticity during the early twentieth century, eugenics served as an anchor for managing racial and ability hierarchies through their relative malleability (a trajectory the editors of this issue have explored elsewhere).²² Human "stock" became one operative concept for this racial plasticity, adapting agricultural and animal husbandry motifs to imagine the scientific manipulation of the natural laws of heredity.²³ In coining the term *eugenics*, Francis Galton characterized its practice as "the cultivation of the race," where the well-born referred to that which is "good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities."²⁴ The role of plasticity in the manipulation of stock is important in emphasizing that eugenics was not a strictly determinist form of race science. Rather than seeking to impose a rigid, unchanging racial taxonomy on the human species, eugenicists conceived of racial science as the means by which to optimize certain populations over others,

preserving the instability of heredity rather than dictating to it. Eugenicists identified the plasticity of population as their central target for their nefarious goal of breeding out disability and increasing the biocapacity of the nation's stock. For this reason, as several articles in this issue explore, eugenic logics were easily able to survive the discrediting of race science in the mid-twentieth century, continuing to the present day to inflect medical care, biological research, and the study of human population diversity through the concept of plasticity.

The Plasticity of Population

This special issue specifies that plasticity functions as a racialized lever for the management of a population. For Michel Foucault, the function of racism under a biopolitical system is to organize the exercise of the “power of death” when life has been elevated to the central concern of techniques of power.²⁵ Racism, by this definition, concerns the drawing of lines within a population as a biological domain to determine the relative worth of its component parts, “introducing a break into the domain of life . . . between what must live and what must die.”²⁶ This form of racism that society directs at itself allows Foucault to make the point that Nazi genocidal practice, obsessed as it was with the purification of the state's internal living population, is not categorically dissimilar from the Soviet Union's “state racism” or “social racism.”²⁷ Yet Foucault's concept of biopolitical racism has come under critique from Black studies and postcolonial studies for the ways in which it relies on a bracketed, Eurocentric vision of race that displaces the empirical, historical anchors of racial biopower: the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism.²⁸

Plasticity is quite useful diagnostically in heeding this critique. It helps us avoid the pitfalls of Foucault's emphasis on race as European racism, rejoining it to hypervisible, phenotypical, colonial, and so-called ethnic contexts without losing the value of the analysis of biopolitical racism. For example, instead of seeing anti-Blackness as a secondary effect of biopolitical racism, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson reads “slave humanity” as “central to, rather than excluded from, liberal humanism” insofar as “the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress.”²⁹ Jackson argues that “plasticization,” as a material process, “is the fundamental violation of enslavement,” a “coerced formlessness as a mode of domination and the *unheimlich* existence that is its result.”³⁰ In this way, “in the process of distinguishing itself from blackness, normative humanity nevertheless bears the shadowy traces of blackness's abject generativity.”³¹ Jackson places Blackness and anti-Blackness at the heart of the biopolitical through processes of plasticization that imposed a central fault line within the species between

the slave and the human. Once again, plasticity simultaneously stabilizes the meaning of human life (by organizing the demarcation of humanity around the excluded status of enslavement) and exacerbates the coerced formlessness of the slave that haunts this ostensible stability. The concept of racial plasticity shows us, in other words, that there are multiple modes of racialization integral to biopolitics and that plasticity is one mode that binds them.

Put differently, we argue that racial plasticity is a signature attribute of biopolitics that could be placed in a global genealogy built out of the transatlantic slave trade, imperialism, and settler colonialism. However, coediting as two scholars of the United States, we also want to mark this special issue as only one contribution to a much larger field of work on forms of racial plasticity in a wide range of historical and geographical contexts. Notably, the forms of settler biopolitics by which the US and Canadian states have targeted indigenous societies, the plastic underpinnings of racial and gendered logics in Latin America and South America, and the “biopolitics of Hindu nationalism” laid out in Banu Subramaniam’s recent work all name important domains in which the racial biopolitics of plasticity operate distinctly from how they are addressed in this issue.³² Yet there are some key continuities, too. In *Plastic Bodies* (2016), anthropologist Emilia Sanabria examines the use of sex hormones in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Sex hormones are broadly marketed in Bahia and are used as agents of individual self-making and therapeutic protection, especially for birth control or menstrual suppression. But Sanabria argues that these celebrations of the individual plasticity of the body, in which large portions of women have voluntarily silenced their menstrual cycles, initially took shape via neo-Malthusian efforts to limit population growth. And these individual practices of bodily plasticity “create, mold, or discipline social relations and subjectivities”—specifically biopolitical outcomes in a context where individual bodily transformation is intimately linked to deeply internalized goals of modernizing the state.³³

Many of the articles in this issue survey highly uneven global flows of the biopolitical management of plasticity, including in the global proliferation of the logic of transatlantic slavery, the international governance of “humanity” through postwar UN agencies, US exportation of carceral logics via warfare in the Middle East, and the staging of speculative racial and sexed species-crossings in French colonial settings. And while each article in this issue takes up a different instance of racial governance through plasticity, they stop short of claiming race as a simple top-down “master code” for other axes of difference, such as sex, gender, sexuality, and disability. Instead, each investigation of the biopolitics of plasticity asks how the racialization of life depends on specific relationships to other

homeostatic forms, rather than either presuming their radical separate-ness or flattening them onto an identical plane.

Racial plasticity's malleable framework pinpoints a wide range of specific ways that sex and gender intersect with race. Sex differences of temperament, psychology, anatomy, and behavior were codified in the nineteenth century, for instance, as the unique achievement of the civilized races.³⁴ All other groups were cast as unsexed or less fully sexed, as lacking the plasticity to have evolved into a specialized pair that distributed productive and reproductive activities. C. Riley Snorton has pointed out how genealogies of sex difference might also reframe our understanding of Blackness. Invoking Hortense Spillers, Snorton suggests in *Black on Both Sides* (2017) that "reading the archive for gender as an always racial and racializing construction" reveals how gender mutability operates simultaneously as a dehumanization tactic of anti-Blackness and a "loophole of retreat," in Harriet Jacobs's famous phrase.³⁵ Racial plasticity serves as both the vector of biopower and a site of critical maneuver: "The ungendering of blackness, then, opens onto a way of thinking about black gender as an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured 'outside' of gender's established and establishing social order."³⁶ This special issue is particularly interested in how plasticity charts some of the ways in which fungibility functions simultaneously as governance and resistance, as well as how sexual difference emerges within a broader field of race.

The Usefulness of Plasticity as a Diagnostic

Biopolitics works by leveraging the contradiction between the too-plastic and the not-plastic-enough. It denotes matter and phenomena that are flexible, accumulative, agential, and mutable and yet, at the same time, manage to maintain homeostasis. Mutability, in the midst of internal cohesion, enables matter to respond to pressures placed on it from the milieu while still maintaining coherence as an individuated entity. Plasticity thus comprises the tension between resilience and transformation. Yet rather than a broadly capacious concept of mutability and metamorphosis, plasticity emerges specifically from the scene of biopolitical governance as the promise of homeostasis in receiving and giving new form. It yokes the existence of organic change to the possibility that state power can control its workings, at the level of the individual and/or the population. Plasticity, we might say, often materializes as a value, one that identifies and ranks the relative worth and disposability of the human and animal bodies that form a population. Plasticity, in other words, does not offer an escape from technologies of control but, rather, provides its very substance.

What this special issue does not do, however, is argue for giving up

the concept of plasticity. Despite a critical pessimism about its amenability to any dissent from its deeply entrenched biopolitical function, the articles gathered here also make a case for the productivity of plasticity. While the historical baggage attendant to thinking with plasticity is immense—and perhaps nowhere more so than in its racialized forms—the concept is for the same reason essential to thinking corporeal change across a range of scales. Prioritizing the role of plasticity in biopolitics, specifically, yields precision in thinking about how race relates to and is coconstituted by and with sex, gender, and sexuality. The four articles collected here analyze how state power manifests at the level of the individual body through the dynamic of plasticity, covering more than one hundred years. The articles move from late nineteenth-century medical interventions in the malleable body to the alleged “end” of racism in UNESCO’s postwar rebuttal of the biological notion of race and its insistence in the universal plasticity of the human. The final article turns to the role of neuroplasticity in Sylvia Wynter’s thought, urging caution against too-ready celebrations of the malleable brain as the pivot of her decolonial thought.

We begin with an article by Neel Ahuja, “Reversible Human: Rectal Feeding, Plasticity, and Racial Control in US Carceral Warfare,” that encapsulates the kernel of the issue’s intervention. Ahuja shows that plasticity is recruited more easily as a mode through which state power instantiates itself at the level of the individual body than as a plane of resistance to power. By contextualizing contemporary US torture techniques practiced on racialized detainees through their reverberation of nineteenth-century techniques of “rectal feeding,” Ahuja reveals that the plasticity of the individual body can be rendered obsolete by the racist and imperial force of state governance. Across the decades, rectal feeding functions as a tactic to produce security through manipulating the body’s neuro-gut plasticity, stretching it beyond its apparent potential to the point where the individual subject falls apart but does not die. The CIA counts on the “reversible” plasticity of the gut and nervous system to break the terrorist body and mind, extending the innate capacity for mutability to violate the limits of self-sovereignty. State power, in other words, can overwhelmingly turn the racialized body’s plasticity against itself, assimilating any potential resistance into the mechanism of torture. Ahuja’s article suggests that this maneuver is not a recent phenomenon but has been sustained by US imperialism and warfare for more than a century.

Kadji Amin’s article, “Trans* Plasticity and the Ontology of Race and Species,” also questions the novelty of contemporary discourses of plasticity by locating their roots in the past century. Examining a fad in cross-species organ transplantation occasioned by eugenic endocrinology in early twentieth-century Europe, which also spanned science fiction about human-chimpanzee intimacy, Amin critically reframes the con-

ceptual amenability of plasticity to contemporary theorizations of trans*. While conceptually the transspecies plasticity of sex and race imagined in this speculative science and fiction undoes ontological distinctions between dominant binaries of race, species, and sex, in actual historical practice and outcome nothing could have been further from the truth. This eugenic and cross-species imaginary was central to making sex and gender plastic forms during the twentieth century, but that process significantly hardened colonial hierarchies of race, sex, and species. Amin argues that contemporary theories of transness at the molecular scale, or of the ontological primacy of trans*, bear an unacknowledged debt to this racial discourse. His article demonstrates one important aim of explicitly naming the racial component of the biopolitics of plasticity: categories such as sex, gender, and trans*, which are sometimes taken up in isolation as unracialized forms, always bear the trace of race and state power through their presumed plasticity.

While the first two articles draw on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses of plasticity that yield unexpected significance in the present day, Sonali Thakkar's article examines the advent of one of the most prominent and persistent forms of modern racial plasticity. In "The Reeducation of Race: From UNESCO's 1950 Statement on Race to the Postcolonial Critique of Plasticity," Thakkar argues that midcentury statements by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization signaled a lasting transformation in the category of race by identifying it with two forms of plasticity: population-level genetic diversity and educability. Thakkar argues for the dual significance of this new framework. First, it consolidated a biopolitical function for the commonness of humankind, making the governance of populations through their educability the bizarrely antiracist *raison d'être* of race. And second, in so doing, it attempted to outflank anticolonial movements, promising the end of racism not through political transformation but in the apolitical affirmation of race's scientific malleability. In trying to let race "solve itself," UNESCO preserved its governmental function precisely through its newly emphasized plasticity. The impact of this redefinition of race through the plastic governability of humanity is historically profound, underwriting the racial liberalism of the postwar era, including the shift from determinist to cultural definitions of race. Universalizing plasticity underpins the supposedly postracial discourses of more recent decades. Read in the context of this issue as a whole, UNESCO's turn to plasticity reveals postwar liberalism and internationalism's continued progressive investment in racializing logics rather than their successful defeat.

The last article does not follow chronologically from its predecessors but returns to the present through a central location of the conversation over plasticity and race: the role of neuroplasticity in Sylvia Wynter's

thought. In “Plasticity and Fungibility: On Sylvia Wynter’s Pieza Framework,” Max Hantel takes up Wynter’s body of work, reframing how the plasticization of the human is entangled with the genre categories of race, gender, and class. While more literal readings of Wynter’s recent investment in neuroplastic modeling have resulted in a mechanistic account of the symbolic encoding of categories such as race and gender “in” the plastic brain, Hantel recontextualizes this discussion in light of Wynter’s emphasis elsewhere on the pieza framework. Referring to the fungible exchange unit of one enslaved man established by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, Hantel argues that the pieza is for Wynter the central engine by which abstract codes of the human are built and constantly remade. The article importantly clarifies readings of her work that would overemphasize plastic neurobiology as the crux of her critique of Man or interpret Wynter to argue that race functions as the “master code” of all other dynamics, such as gender. Hantel underscores that even the most seemingly promising models of organic plasticity, such as that of Wynter’s decolonial thought, are useful less as literal translations of bodily capacity than as theories of how change and mutability function as nodal points of power.

Overall, we collectively elucidate the tension within the notion of plasticity, teasing out the political work of its internal interplay of formlessness and homeostasis. This ambivalence, its oscillation between mutability and resilience, is precisely why plasticity can in fact support entirely contradictory political projects. Plasticity, we stress, is not a natural ally of Left cultural politics. Rather, understanding plasticity to be a tool of biopolitical power can help us identify moments when Left frameworks themselves are invested in valorizing bodily capacity and potential and thereby fall into the logics of racialization and debilitation rather than subverting them. Cumulatively, the articles press us to consider the ongoing value of *plasticity* as a critical theory keyword. Yet in critiquing plasticity, we do not mean to dissuade the concept’s continued uptake. Rather, this special issue proposes that a biopolitical diagnostic affords a new way of thinking plasticity writ large. The articles gathered here demonstrate that racial plasticity in particular should be a central concept to biopolitics, as well as to the study of sex, gender, and sexuality. While the articles draw from and contribute to Black studies, postcolonial studies, feminist studies, queer studies, and transgender studies, they are far from exhaustive. And while we are indebted to key insights from such fields as Black studies and postcolonial studies, where racial plasticity is being taken up in a wider network of different forms and meanings, this issue’s thinking through the concept is more narrowly restricted to its biopolitical connotation. We offer this special issue to enhance the continued critical assessment of the biopolitics of plasticity in other domains. We also hope that

our diagnosis of biopolitical plasticity inspires thinking that moves beyond plasticity. How might we continue to conceive of, and newly discover, the organic malleability of the body in ways that do not position this changeability as a site of state power? We hope our analysis opens up space for more rigorous engagements with notions of bodily malleability that both identify this locus as a key lever of power and look forward to new conceptions of dynamic matter not yoked to populational governance.

Notes

We thank the *Social Text* collective for their careful readings of this introduction and the articles collected here, and managing editor Marie Buck for her assistance coordinating this issue over several years.

1. On the plastic “affectivity” of affect across scholarship, technology, and capital, see Clough et al., “Notes towards a Theory of Affect-Itself.”
2. For a survey of feminist engagements with matter and the materiality of gender, see Alaimo, introduction; on inorganic plasticity, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
3. See Pitts-Taylor, *Brain’s Body*; Squier, *Epigenetic Landscapes*; and Landecker, *Culturing Life*.
4. For a critical reading of the political ontologies of new materialisms, see Rosenberg, “Molecularization of Sexuality”; for a critical reading of certain forms of affect theory, see Hemmings, “Invoking Affect.” On the plasticity of gender as potential antagonist of medical, legal, and social regulation, see Preciado, *Testo Junkie*.
5. To clarify, we do not mean to suggest that any of these fields or discourses invested in plasticity have been ignorant of state power. For instance, a wide range of the political valences of plasticity are explored in Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller, *Plastic Materialities*, via the work of philosopher Catherine Malabou. Our point is rather that the biopolitical function of plasticity rescales the concern with the political by reemphasizing the primacy of state power in managing the subindividual scale.
6. See also Sianne Ngai’s concept of animateness, or the idea that Black and Asian people lack individual volition and are thus highly susceptible to being made to move by others (*Ugly Feelings*, 89–125).
7. Tompkins, “On the Gelatinous.”
8. Allewaert, *Ariel’s Ecology*.
9. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* See also Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*.
10. Moten, “Touring Machine,” 283.
11. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 16.
12. For Denise Ferreira da Silva, the post-Hegelian subject resolves its dependence on the outside world for its own construction through the “transparent I,” or the fiction that the rational subject is of its own making. She contrasts this founding subject of modern thought with affectability, or the racialized state of being too easily shaped by outside forces and lacking the capacity of self-creation. Plasticity, we suggest, holds on to the tension that remains between these two poles. The mind and body made of external impressions is too thoroughly engrained in Western thought to be reconciled away. And plasticity arises to address a new problem modernity presents with the ideas of Jean Baptiste Lamarck: it seeks to manage the innate capacities of self-creation possessed by flesh itself (*Toward a Global Idea of Race*).
13. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*.

14. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*.
15. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*.
16. Wardley, "Fear of Falling and the Rise of Girls"; Kim, "Lamarckism and the Construction of Transcendence."
17. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*; Tompkins, "On the Gelatinous."
18. Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*; Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*.
19. O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 215.
20. Bannister, *Social Darwinism*; Bowler, *Non-Darwinian Revolution*.
21. For an excellent global overview of eugenics, see Bashford and Levine, *Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*.
22. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*; Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.
23. See Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 52–53; and Rosenberg, "No Scrubs."
24. Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty*, 24.
25. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 254.
26. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 254.
27. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 260, 261.
28. Mbembe, "Necropolitics"; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 57.
29. Jackson, "Losing Manhood," 96.
30. Jackson, "Losing Manhood," 118.
31. Jackson, "Losing Manhood," 115.
32. Morgensen, "Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism"; Sanabria, *Plastic Bodies*; Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*; Subramaniam, *Holy Science*.
33. Sanabria, *Plastic Bodies*, 5.
34. Russett, *Sexual Science*; Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*.
35. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 66.
36. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 74.

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