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### Introduction: Theory in the Wild

New forms of wildness call to us on all sides, whether in the form of odd weather patterns, inventive forms of political activism, new classifications of the body, fluctuating investments in disorder, or a renewed embrace of the ephemeral. But, at the same time, wildness has a history, a past and, potentially, a future. As certain new forms of wildness present themselves to us (the digital wildness of the glitch), others slip from view altogether (natural habitats). To say that *wildness* has a past is in no way to declare that past over or to announce the arrival of a new discursive regime. Rather, we claim here that the past of wildness is not all that wildness is or can be. Wildness has certainly functioned as a foil to civilization, as the dumping ground for all that white settler colonialism has wanted to declare expired, unmanageable, undomesticated, and politically unruly. For us, that makes wildness all the more appealing. Like another problematical term—*queer*—*wildness* names, while rendering partially opaque, what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins. Unlike the way claims have been made on behalf of the queer, we are not brushing off a rejected term and refurbishing it here so much as we are attending to what an idea

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has always gathered in its wake and what it gestures toward in terms of the expunged features of our own critical systems of making sense and order. It is time to rewild theory.

Saidiya Hartman, in her contribution to this issue, tracks the lives of young black girls in early twentieth-century New York City, girls whom she describes in all their glory as “wild and wayward.” As the law gathered itself up to issue new ways to snuff out the wildness of the wayward, those black girls found new ways to sound their riotous intentions, to flee the workforce for which they were destined, and to yoke themselves to a freedom held in abeyance but glimpsed ahead through the communities they formed. Hartman names the forms of life forged by black girls in the city as “nothing short of anarchy” and sets out to account for the disorder they willfully sowed. This anarchy, in these girls and their forms of wildness, offers a glimpse of the stakes of rethinking the relations between civilization and its others.

The rewilding of theory proceeds from an understanding that first encounters with wildness are intimate and bewilder all sovereign expectations of autonomous selfhood. To be wild in this sense is to be beside oneself, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues. By abandoning the security of coherence, we enter a dark ecology, where, to quote Michel Foucault (1994: 302) from *The Order of Things*, “nature can no longer be good.” But even as wildness is internal in a psychic sense, we also sense it as an extrahuman, suprahuman force, what Timothy Morton (2013) dubs a “hyperobject” and what might be received as a message from nature to humans reminding us that there could be and probably will be life without “us.” As Nina Simone reminds us, “wild is the wind,” and the wildness of the weather, internally and externally, implies a pathetic fallacy that tethers the undoing of the human to the rage of new storms blowing in across the Caribbean. Wildness is where the environment speaks back, where communication bows to intensity, where worlds collide, cultures clash, and things fall apart.

Wild is the will, and wilder still is the sense of an increasingly criminalized disorder of things. We live in wild times; we bear witness to wild and ruinous places. No history of wildness can be pure or clean. The idea inheres to colonial fantasies of the primitive. It spurs pioneer dreams of unpopulated space; it fuels eugenic fantasies of social control. It emerges as the other to fascist principles of order, symmetry, and blood purity. And indeed, as the essays gathered here under the sign of “wildness” indicate, there are still multiple ways in which the wild remains a potent location in a febrile colonial and antiblack imaginary. Few here are interested in pursuing a history

of ecology or environmentalism per se. Nor is wild theory offering another update of “the Other” of deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Instead, the essays gathered here think beyond the colonial epistemes in which wildness indicates uninhabitable space and unknowable peoples all at once. What is wildness for those who have been forcibly gathered under its sign? Wildness is loud and disruptive; it interrupts the neat narratives of freedom and escape, and it lurks within an anarchistic longing for what one writer in the archives that Hartman navigates calls a “wild world of fun and pleasure.”

While before the nineteenth century “the wild” could still take something like “nature” as its referent, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the wild had become part of a colonial division of the world into the modernizing and the extractive zones. The wild was a resource, a genetic variant, or an indigenous remedy to be patented, transplanted, exploited, commodified. As a source of white renewal from the supposed excesses of civilization, the wild had a vertiginous array of modernist avatars, from Tarzan to Picasso. And yet Wilfredo Lam, an Afro-Chinese surrealist painter of the decolonial imaginary, came to the African mask by way of Picasso in Paris, a mask that in turn led him and André Breton back to Haiti and vodun. We cannot simply shake free of this division, of this inner complicity, of primitivism and wildness. But we can think about what wildness might signify in a postcolonial world and within an anticolonial project. Contributor Julietta Singh proposes, via Edward Said, that colonialism has imagined itself on an “errand into the wilderness,” the term *errand* picking up the etymological strands of “waywardness,” “errancy,” but ultimately signifying an unfinished bureaucratic mission. A rewilding of theory wants to make those connections. The errand into the wilderness remains and will remain incomplete if only because civilization has already collapsed, and the black and decolonial world is already here. If we refuse to access all that wildness names and has named, we will be acceding to a monologue of civilization with its narrative alibis of humanity, economic growth, and the approaching technological singularity. Wildness speaks back to the ongoing stream of consciousness of so-called civilized thought on behalf of those who live and dream otherwise.

In theory, we argue, the wild need not be delimited by its uses within a colonial, antiblack lexicon. Nor is it exhausted by the romantic image of spontaneous revolt. Wild theory uses and abuses these lexicons and brutal grammars while extending them, amplifying them, contesting some and ignoring others. While wildness itself continues to play its part in the ongoing project of propping up a thoroughly corrupt and barely legible understanding of the civilized, the real question to parse is, how might we become

feral? A few of the authors gathered here pursue the feral as a mode of mess making in a world obsessed with order (Martin F. Manalansan IV) or as agitation (Mel Y. Chen) at a time when what Paul B. Preciado (2013) terms the power of the pharmacopornographic seeks to inoculate us, to still our movements, and to manage political agitation by prescribing chemical dependencies. The postcolonial world of media control and pharml power, in other words, has found new wild territories to exploit and different ways of closing off access to the wild worlds we pursue anyway. Even so, in Chen's terms, we remain animated in our pursuit of the unruly, agitated in our desire for unrest.

The force of such wild modes of feeling and doing surface in the "utopian impulse" that, in previous work, Jayna Brown (2010) has located in the musics of Africa and its diaspora. There, Brown argues, the "buzz and rumble" of these musics sound out a bricolage of communications technologies, which operate on a frequency that evades the purview of neocolonial command. In this issue, Brown extends this argument backward in time, as she considers the anarchist call for the creation of counterpublics through the pirating of the airwaves in Lizzie Borden's 1983 film *Born in Flames*. Critiquing neoliberal market feminism and its capitalist appeals for inclusion into the nation-state, Brown is interested in a genealogy of black and brown feminisms that refuse and unsettle and urges us to renew a politic of "noncompliance that dances and screams and blows things up." She insists on a historical memory of radical black and brown feminist articulations committed to decentralized and nonhierarchical organizing principles and to a politics of self-recognition. Speculative modes of revolt, like those in Borden's film, continually question, and they defy incorporation by dominant, and dominating, regimes of power (Brown 2012; see also Brown 2013).

Put another way, wild theory doesn't come with a prefabricated apologetics or scholarly apparatus, because it doesn't quite know yet how to fit into polite society. Either that or it has forgotten its manners, insofar as rewilding embraces forgetting, senility, menopause, and absentmindedness as evasions of compulsory performances of youthful rebellion. The wild, that is, can be that which has gone to seed, that which failed to thrive, those who are both in and out of the game. The wild can be loud and dangerous, but it can also be placid and unruffled, even neutral and sterile. Wild are the words that anarrange gender, sexuality, ability, and other modernist paradigms of normalization into unstable vocabularies and idiolects, symbol-words that are as much about getting lost in the inner and outer hinterland as they are about any resystematizing ambitions in queer theory (with or without antinormativity).

“If I could write this in fire,” Michelle Cliff (2008) states, “I would write this in fire.” Rewilded theory fans the flames Cliff (1988: 57) lights when she laments: “I felt . . . that my wildness had been tamed—that which I had been taught was my wildness.” If we could write this wildly, we would write this wildly. In this passage, we must listen for the interanimative shift in her repetitions of *fire* and *fire*, *wildness* and *wildness*. A poetics of wildness evades terminological definition. Cliff continues:

I originate in the Caribbean, . . . [where] I received the message of anglocentrism, of white supremacy, and I internalized it. As a writer, as a human being, I have had to accept that reality and deal with its effect on me, as well as finding what has been lost to me from the darker side, and what may be hidden, to be dredged from memory and dream. And it is there to be dredged. As my writing delved longer and deeper into this part of myself, I began to dream and imagine. I was able to clearly envision Nanny, the leader of a group of guerrilla fighters known as the Windward Maroons, as she is described: an old Black woman naked except for a necklace made from the teeth of white-men. I began to love her. (58–59)

Cliff does not hallucinate Nanny as an imagined lineal ancestor (as settler-colonial subjects are prone to); instead, her phantom here grounds a decolonial black lesbian feminist imaginary in the prolonged exercise of its writing out from under the tamed wildness of English letters. Like other colonial subjects who have had to write their way out of the madness of imperial rule—Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Jamaica Kincaid—Cliff finds that the only way out is through. In “Notes on Speechlessness,” Cliff (1978: 8) retells the story of a dream in which she enters an old-fashioned butcher shop and samples the wares, only to realize, in an auto-cannibalistic ecstasy, that “the meat in the shop is the dead flesh of lesbians.” As this anecdote shows, rather than just evade or repress the white supremacy of her class formation, Cliff recognizes that she must eat her own, that the opposition to colonialism requires that she fight fire with fire, violence with autodestruction, and civilization with wildness.

The wild modes of thought that we engage in here work best as a disruptive force, breaking free of the need to produce queer policy or trans modes of governance and instead offering critique in a utopian mode. This version of utopian thinking eschews the idealizations of straight utopian thought for the wilder speculations of queer utopia, such as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) models in his book *Cruising Utopia*. In the chapter “A Jeté out the Window,” Muñoz recounts the staging of dancer Fred Herko’s suicide as

his final performance. Using the concept of surplus value to frame acts, work, and modes of being that exceed capitalist flows, Muñoz takes Herko's leap into the void as an example of an excessive gesture—one that could be read as useless, childish, wasteful, or nonsensical—that literally refuses all that capitalism (and capitalistic notions of time) offers and instead gestures toward a particularly wild mode of queer aesthetic production, one where escape and refusal rub shoulders and cross paths. In his piece posthumously published in this issue, Muñoz shows that he was prepared to take these refusals, and these wilder forms of fugitivity, even further: he uses X's punk album *Wild Gift* as a place to launch his utopian idea of an uncommon commons: "The wildness of punk and its commons is that annihilative force, that refusal of cohesion and insistence on scatteredness, partiality, and the impossible act of not only living but also striving that are accomplished in an uncommon commons." We return to the well of Muñoz's thinking, not to canonize or to fetishize, but in a Muñozian spirit of surplus labor, surplus pleasure, surplus meaning. We began thinking and planning this project with him, before his sudden and untimely death. It is an incomplete and uncompletable fulfillment of the best (and worst) laid plans.

It would be antithetical to the spirit of this project to expect the authors here to present a common front or even to accept the framing terms of this essay as their own. Contemporary dancer and choreographer Trajal Harrell quotes Butoh originator Tatsumi Hijikata as reminding us that "in one step are a thousand animals." Harrell takes this as a choreographic principle for enacting the movement insight that any single gesture or term can unlock infinite and wayward series. But the animals within his step or his gesture are not only human—in Dinesh Wadiwel's inspired consideration of the opposition that animals mount to human exploitation, we learn about chicken resistance to machine harvesting, and he reminds us that "even domesticated animals are always already 'wild'!" Wildness, indeed, is always already animality—an unruly energy that stands outside of human forms of control, management, exploitation, and consumption. And while the human-animal divide seems absolute and decisive in some of this issue's essays where the human understands itself as nonanimal, in others, like L. H. Stallings's, the animal finds its way into the human in the form of food, chitlins specifically, which not only nourish and fill but also take pride of place within black Southern cuisine. For Stallings, chitlins were "emblematic of black performative wildness in various cultural institutions during segregation and early integration."

Wild theory subscribes to an understanding of the political that is not coextensive with our fucked-up political present, but nor does it appeal to an idealized anarchism of the past. Anarchist politics today, which we find to be a clustering of all kinds of social justice positions (some great, some not so much), few of which reduce down to individualism or sociopathic libertarianism, are not the anarchist politics of the early twentieth century. While anarchy lingers in the practices of Hartman's "wayward" black girls and underpins the agitation in Chen's unruly bodies, it names now a set of practices and refusals that make up contemporary anticapitalism and indicate a new or at least different paradigm of the political, one that lodges more comfortably in the resistance to agendas and the improvisatory politics of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) have named "the undercommons."

Let "anarchism" hold a space, for now, for a critique of the governmental forms that developed in the nineteenth century as new techniques of rule but that now, like so many nineteenth-century systems of thought, order, and rule, have become the scaffolding for neoliberal forms of tyranny. A more erudite and informed wild theory to come might revisit and expound further on the wild as a concept as it was important to nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers, from Henry David Thoreau to Pyotr Kropotkin. This would be done not simply to name some mythic time and space before capitalism but rather to reference a space that opens up between the developed world and that which exceeds its reach. For Thoreau, that space was to be found in the wooded regions beyond urban sociality.<sup>1</sup> As for Kropotkin, in his writings from the first two decades of the twentieth century, wildness offers an opportunity to think outside of capitalist logics of competition and deadly combat. His notion of "cooperation" identifies forms of mutual aid as far more representative of most species' struggles to survive and as a model for human sociality. Wildness as a concept in these anarchist writings refers not to the colonial fantasy of untouched and unoccupied space but rather to a sensibility, an anticolonial mode of thinking, and a poetics of power. In this context, we can understand the wild as a space rendered uninhabitable by modernity but crammed with interesting life-forms of its own.

Would a rewilded theory perform new acts of colonization? To the extent that it fails to acknowledge those accused of wildness—indigenous people who get cast as the inhabitants of a lost world of another social order may well ask, as Jodi A. Byrd does in her essay in this issue, "what is the wild to the American Indian?" For those bodies that continue to represent the very condition that others have the luxury to contemplate and debate, the

wild can be a treacherous and, in Byrd's words, a "dangerous and deadly" place. But the theorizing of wildness, the calling forth of wild strands of the present, the claiming of a wildness that remains opposed to the persistent discourses of civility and civilization that mark contemporary neocolonialisms, has also been a key facet of indigenous aesthetics and specifically of an indigiqueer irreverence in the face of Canadian colonial balderdash. If we turn, for example, to the work of Kent Monkman, the Cree artist whose work graces the cover of this issue, we might find a diagram for rewilding theory in his large, explosive, dynamic, and confrontative canvases. Over the past twenty-five years, Monkman has painted, performed, drawn, and filmed indigiqueer encounters within and against the wild, grotesque, and rapaciously sexual encounters that refuse the conventional staging of wildness as a confrontation between modern innovators and traditional, anachronistic communities. Across an enormously inventive body of work that includes massive paintings modeled on works by nineteenth-century heavyweight painters like Robert Harris, Paul Kane, and George Catlin, Monkman inserts indigenous figures, often queer, into meetings that would have excluded them and onto landscapes they were meant to recede into. He repaints art history from the perspective of the indigenous bodies that are conventionally held at the decorative edges to the main scenes of modernity, but he also mounts the travesty of stolen generations (what they taught me was my wildness) as gaps and voids, traumas and ghosts in communities ravaged by settler violence. This, too, is Canadian history. He reimagines history encounter as a camp bacchanal of gender-queer bodies, anticolonial carnage, and wild reversals.

In Monkman's 2014 painting *Seeing Red*, for example, which appeared, aptly enough in a show titled *Failure of Modernity*, we witness the blurring of visual, political, geographical, and art historical imagery. The painting offers us a startling scene bristling with symbolic systems at odds with each other and time itself. Against the backdrop of the blue of either skies or heavens, a helicopter and an angel cast very different eyes upon the scene below. In the background of the painting, we see the familiar markers of urban riot—a burning car, masculine racialized bodies in motion, smoke, confusion, graffiti. But there are also buffalo within this arena, creatures allied with the rioting bodies, on the one hand, but symbolizing the loss of space, on the other. In the foreground, Monkman offers an astonishing scene of encounter. Not the policeman and the body of color, or rioters and property, not the mob and the riot police, but an imposing matador in drag and high heels is confronting the bull of Western art itself. The bull is not one of the buffalo, but wears a Picasso head and crouches before the matador, who holds a Hudson Bay

blanket in one hand and poses with her other hand on her hip. In addition, the telephone pole holding up the wires that signal modern networks of communication and connection has been carved into a totemic pole, and there are multiple native characters in the scene. Some of the native bodies are arrayed behind the burning car; two others are running one way, turning to look over their shoulders—one holds a feather, the other a musical instrument. Ahead of them, a native woman kneels at the head of a white man in colonial clothing stretched out on the ground, possibly dead—this figure is lifted directly out of Édouard Manet's 1864 painting *The Dead Toreador*.

*Seeing Red*, like many of Monkman's large-scale paintings, is extraordinary for its detail and its competing message systems. Using satire, realism, postimpressionistic style, saturated color, caricature, naturalism, and many other representational strategies, Monkman wields his paintbrush in the same manner that his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, wields lances—with artistry and flair, he seduces the bull only to wound it, calls on it only to draw blood. *Drawing Blood*, indeed, could be another name for the painting in which no blood is shed but all is lost for Western art and Western art history and aesthetics itself hangs in the balance.

The image on this special issue's cover, *Cain and Abel*, painted in 2017, features two nude transmasculine bodies engaged in epic combat, as a female figure reminiscent of John Gast's allegorical figure of American Progress halfheartedly strives to intercede. In the background, scenes of despair, rape, and plunder both reference and upend gender and racial conventions of conquest and white settlement. The story of Cain and Abel, of course, is about more than sibling rivalry. The brothers represent not only dynamics of family drama but also contrasting relationships to the land: Abel, in the biblical myth, is a shepherd, while Cain is a farmer. In Monkman's hands, the brothers are locked in a mortal conflict that continues to haunt modernity: that of settlers versus nomads, owners versus temporary residents, people who stay put and seek to extract value from the land versus people who move around and see the land as a resource, not capital. Abel, the nomadic shepherder, falls at the hands of his brother and becomes the first martyr for wildness, the first victim of civilization. That the bodies of Cain and Abel in the painting are transgender, or two-spirited, with male torsos and female genitalia, suggests that different relations to the body, to gender, and to reproduction are also at stake in the conflict. As the bodies of cowboys are tossed aside by Indians in the backdrop, the painting offers to reverse the terms of civilization and wildness, turning the former into a lost cause and the latter into the future whose time has come. Monkman's massively

ambitious shows—with names like *Casualties of Modernity*, 2015; *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, 2015; *Failure of Modernity*, 2016; and *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, 2017—do nothing short of repaint the world, the wild, and everything in it.

Gathered here under the sign of the wild and wildness, our contributors have taken this term as an opportunity to think about errant sexualities, wayward black girls, fugitivity, mess, feminist anarchy, and other stray formulations of protest and refusal. They present for us not so much a united front as an impossible series. The impossible for us names the relation between states of affairs that could plausibly be, just not at the same time. It is not necessarily a coalitional or synthesizing term. The impossible is neither the impossible nor the implausible, but more nearly that which can be tantalizingly close while standing forever just out of reach. It represents the virtual and, why not?, the marvelous. A feeling for the impossible is as close to us as our ordinary and inevitable experience of loss, in which the lost object remains and continues to transform in both memory and imagination. We two are impossibly in relation with the third who began this journey with us and whose absence continues to shape its forward direction.

The impossible wild guides our thinking about how to complete a conversation out of which one partner has unexpectedly stepped. This special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* is not the project that began in 2013 with a series of summer walks into the urban wild, a class at New York University in dialogue with writings and lectures that were already being given. An unfinished conversation with Muñoz serves as both utopian horizon and negative condition or restraint upon what we write here. It is a project that, in its incompleteness, remains open. What was the open question Muñoz left us with? It was this: What if the “queer” in queer theory were temporarily bracketed in order to examine everything that gathered under its sign and everything that remained beyond its purview? While *wild* was certainly never intended to substitute or replace *queer* term for term, Muñoz’s question opened for us and our contributors a range of concerns—regarding race, coloniality, ecology, anarchy, and, yes, even gender and sexuality—that together present a disjunctive series of theoretical and political trajectories left open by the apparent diminishing and routinization of queer critique in its third decade. Fred Moten and Wu Tsang in their poetic duet for this issue propose: “Earth makes space through world where we hold where study, strain through set logic.” Is it reasonable to situate the wild here, on the verge

of sense making but where we are straining through the logic we inherit and trying to find another pattern, another disorder of things? Zakiyyah Iman Jackson thinks so and finds in the work of Sylvia Wynter a way around the order/chaos binary that situates blackness as the chaos that white order must hold at bay. What if earth makes space through world and new worlds, demonic ground, in Wynter's terms, require new science or a black feminine sublime, in Jackson's terms, that inverts the relations between matter and representation and unleashes a pure discursive chaos? What if, rather than fighting the chaos or explaining it, what if instead of locating the chaos and mastering it, we linger in the void and catch a glimpse of what Muñoz dubbed "the punk rock commons" or "the chaos of the everyday"? In his close reading of X's album *Wild Gift*, Muñoz asks, "What is the wildness of this gift that X offered?," and he answers, "Maybe the gift must be wild to be a gift." Maybe, but maybe the wild is a gift, one that we must accept without haggling, receive without asking for more, and open onto while making space through world. Maybe wildness, maybe now.

#### Note

- 1 Thoreau understood that these spaces were never just natural, but were a palimpsest of histories of conquest and displacement. "I walk toward one of our ponds," Thoreau (Hyde 2002: 193) writes in "Slavery in Massachusetts," but "who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? . . . My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her." Of course, Thoreau fucked up sometimes and reproduced a lot of white settler-colonial dribble, too. Nobody's perfect!

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