

Editorial Note: About the Otherwise

Peter Skafish

The Otherwise is devoted, among other things, to writing about the stakes of ways of thinking that thoroughly differ from those of modernity and the former colonial powers. The title comes from the French word *autrement*—“otherwise”—which Michel Foucault employed to suggest the sort of nascent, unanticipated variations of life and thought that are deemed impossible when the historical situations in which we live appear necessary, inevitable, and unchangeable. But where the French philosopher conceived of such alternatives primarily with reference to the historical past of modern Europe, some of his most remarkable readers have done so by reckoning with those of peoples and collectives that were made its others throughout the colonial era and after. To them, “otherwise” names the innumerable variations and corresponding potentials of thought that modernity has silenced and disavowed but been unable to extinguish.

That sense of the word perhaps first emerges in the oeuvre of François Jullien, for whom the term names the intention behind his inquiry into the wide divergences between the Chinese tradition and that of Greece and/or Europe. In identifying in texts like *Detour and Access* and *A Treatise on Efficacy* the distinct presuppositions and formats of the two traditions, the sinologist seeks to show both that thought indeed does happen otherwise and that our own for that reason can too.¹ As Jullien once put it, to work on such unfamiliar *pre*-suppositions is not to characterize them from and thus remain within European thought but rather to let their difference expose those of the latter, “those from which one thinks and that, precisely due to that fact, are never thought—those that one puts forth as evident without thinking to interrogate them”—and to gain thereby enough distance from them to begin to imagine them anew.² That process of comparative estrangement, moreover, reveals for Jullien something about China’s and any other otherwise. It is not the other to and in which the West finds a dialectical mirror for knowing itself but instead what he calls an “elsewhere,” *d’ailleurs*, another, distinct location in thought that is not part of some whole place and thus has no intrinsic relation to any other such location, but from which, nevertheless, one can better comprehend one’s own. Not the Other to and of the Same (that is still a Greek idea), but a somewhere else not at all resembling the image of here

projected onto everything out “there.”

The otherwise so conceived informs and resonates with the work of such anthropologists as Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Philippe Descola (not to speak of Claude Lévi-Strauss), which is among the main intellectual stimuluses of this journal. That loose cohort has sought to characterize the location in thought that can be called modern, European, patriarchal, and white through the presuppositions and concepts of some other locations, be they “Melanesia” and “Amazonia” or less quasi-cultural spaces like the precolonial analogistic empires. Thus in spite of the misunderstanding of their (so-called ontological) anthropology as yet another attempt by the European subject to discover itself in some fantasy of the other, it has succeeded, instead, at something altogether different. It has shown, first, that there not only were but very much still are kinds of thought that neither have been absorbed or compromised by global modernity nor are reducible to its categories; second, that it is thus by learning and working from those variations of thought that a critical understanding of modernity can be obtained; and, third, that to reject the study of those variations—of versions of thought that prove, again and again, to exceed the limits assumed for it—amounts to treating the modern version as unquestionable. In sum, the radical insight of recent anthropology is that it is *through the otherwise* that any understanding, any critique (if that is still the right word), of the prevailing modern condition must be produced.

That may sound implausible to the remaining generations of intellectuals who still believe that they must protect but never directly work right from or aside the thoughts of the othered and *damnés*. Yet for many of their counterparts born from the late 1970s and after, it is almost given that one is dependent on the otherwise in order to think critically at all. Whether the likes of Yuk Hui in his critique of modern technology by way of Chinese cosmotechnics or Zakkiah Iman Jackson in her deployment of the black speculative imagination against the human-ism of so much philosophy, some of today’s most compelling new researchers find in non-Occidental and/or extramodern variations of of thought the very stuff of thought as such, and no longer in so many of the theoretical discourses that have obsessively fixated on the supposed impossibility of connecting with such outsides—or, worse, that almost try to ban discussion of them as unethical and dangerous. Such thinkers (most of them are not really philosophers by formation) have even gone so far in their deployments of the pensive otherwise as to show that it might be as if not more crucial to understanding blackness, indigeneity, and gender as critical approaches that are avowedly or unambiguously modern.

This development sparked the creation of *The Otherwise* as a forum for intellectual work

that pursues not just the journal's conceptual namesake but its links with those matters: that asks when and in what way the counterparts in other variations of thought to unquestioned concepts from the modern one (subject, object, sex, body, nature, technology, etc.) can undo and remake the world that colonialism built; how those other concepts together form other metaphysics, approaches to speculation, and systems of thought; what cosmoses they reflect, project, and may help rehabilitate or construct; and who it is that does that thinking if the answer lies not in apparently given identities but the kinds of thought through which the question might be posed.

To affirm that the other variations are capable of transforming how we think, however, is not to say that they are entirely outside power and capitalism. To the extent that thought is entangled or embedded in them, an additional sense of "the otherwise" becomes relevant. This is the one given to it by Elizabeth Povinelli, who means by the term less the kinds of thought that exceed colonial modernity's and its Greek-to-Christian a priori (although she does partly mean that) than the modes of *existence* of people who have been forced to the extreme fringes of the possible from the beginning of colonialism to the present. To exist in such modes is to exist perilously close to nonexistence, to have, as Povinelli says of her peers in the indigenous Karrabing collective, a "cramped space of maneuver" in relation to the mode of liberal governance imposed on them.³ Thus for her, it is dangerous to produce descriptions of the otherwise in lieu of analyses of how it perseveres while being dominated and governed; or, in other words, as she does of the Karrabing, of "how my friends and their existents struggle to *manifest* and *endure* in contemporary late liberalism."⁴ In that respect, the otherwise names a kind of analysis of real existences that is not and cannot be produced from inside most theory, by most of its practitioners.

That sense should be heard in *The Otherwise* as much as the more speculative one, as the journal is intended as a space of engagement with analysis of the actual struggles of people(s) against the most venal and most subtle kinds of power alike. Intended lines of publication therefore include sociohistorical as much as philosophical inquiries, whether in some of the currents of intellectual work that are already associated with the projects discussed above as well as others that could alter and also, hopefully, benefit from them: for instance in, on the one hand, cosmopolitical and pluriversal thought, "ontological" anthropology, contemporary metaphysics, and ecological thought as much as, on the other, black thought, indigenous studies, decolonial critique, and queer theory.

It should be added, finally, that *The Otherwise* means something else, too, which is the virtual, anonymous cohort formed by the kinds of researchers and writers who are not only concerned with such questions but also have realized that they cannot be addressed if one accepts to live the

sort of triumphantly professionalized existence that universities (at least in the United States) continue to demand of their subjects. Much like the undercommons has been since Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “the Otherwise” is a proper name of the sorts of people—excluded from bourgeois success in the university, unpersuaded that being professionally “political” is its alternative, suffering (yes) from the trivial normativity of standardized “thinking” and “writing”—who have felt no choice about their desire to study and to think differently, which is to say who simply cannot and will not conform. That disposition might have seemed even a decade ago to be constitutive of the *libido sciendi*, but it has been more often disparaged than supported within universities and now is threatened with their decline with losing its footholds in them. So for all of you, to all of us, who are happily, irremediably otherwise: *The Otherwise*.

1 For a summary, see François Jullien, “Thinking between China and Greece: Breaking New Ground—An Interview with Marcel Gauchet,” trans. Simon Porzak. *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18(1), 181-210.

2 Jullien, “Thinking between China and Greece,” 182.

3 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 26.

4 Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 28.

Acknowledgements: *The Otherwise* has been a long time in the making, due to the editor's situation of academic precarity as well as to the Covid-19 crisis, which delayed final editorial and design work. I would like to express heartfelt thanks the authors for their patience, especially during 2020. Equally important to the journal has been a number of graduate students who graciously helped at various stages with editorial matters: at The University of California, Berkeley, Jacob Lemming, Alejandra Perez Rotondo, and, most essentially, Matthew H. Evans; and at McGill University, Rosalyn Lemmo. Thanks also go to the students who participated in the journal through Berkeley's Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program, including Kaitlyn Duldts, Kaleo Fernandez, Arina Stadnyk, and Sean Tseng; to Stefania Pandolfo for collaborating on the URAP project and making it possible; and, finally, to Yassin Douad, Cecelia Huang, and Jack Rossetti for their outstanding design work. Special thanks goes to Eduardo Kohn for the use of his psychedelic watercolor paintings, which appear in the Table of Contents bar on the journal's website and as the "cover" image that also recurs throughout the site.

Readers may be interested in knowing that *The Otherwise* is the journal of the Institute of Speculative and Critical Inquiry, a new research center that is developing alternative forums for the humanities and social sciences than those offered by the U.S. university system.