

# Plasticity and Post-Colonial Recognition: ‘Owning, Knowing and Being’\*

Brenna Bhandar

Published online: 6 August 2011  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

**Abstract** In this article the author traces the limits of the philosophy and politics of recognition as manifest in colonial settler contexts. Forms of property ownership and ways of being, sutured by the racial body, are contained by a restricted economy of owning, knowing and being. Bringing the concept of plasticity to bear on the relationship between the body, property and the colonial, the author illuminates the ways in which practices of ownership that exceed the restricted economy of recognition exhibit a temporal and spatial plasticity in the context of the Palestinian struggles over land in the West Bank.

**Keywords** Indigenous · Land rights · Ownership · Palestine · Plasticity · Post-colonial theory · Property · Recognition

## Introduction

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) analyses the impossibility of recognition in the colonial context. The colonial subject, so utterly saturated with the raciality<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ferreira da Silva defines raciality as a ‘tool of productive nomos, [which] constitutes an effective tool precisely because of the way its main signifiers—the racial and the cultural—provide an account of human difference, an account in which particularity remains reducible and unoblitable, that is, one that would not dissipate into the unfolding of “Spirit”’ (Ferreira da Silva 2007, xl). I employ Ferreira da Silva’s notion of raciality throughout in order to denote the complex web of philosophical concepts, scientific invention, and economic forces that produce raciality as a strategy deployed to create and sustain particular subjectivities that irredeemably exceed existing frameworks of cognisability.

---

\* This formulation, which reflects the relationship between ontology, epistemology and relations of ownership, was articulated by Fred Moten on 4 June 2010 at a seminar at Goldsmiths, University of London.

---

B. Bhandar (✉)  
School of Law, Queen Mary, University of London, London, UK  
e-mail: B.Bhandar@kent.ac.uk

of blackness, could not engage in a struggle for recognition with colonisers as the conditions for a mutual struggle, namely, a space of opposition, were absent. The native subject, a creation of the settler, was (and remains) caught within relations of dispossession, alienation and ownership that do not allow, in the absence of a dramatic rupture, for mutual recognition. Recognition, when it does ostensibly take place in the post-colonial polity, fails to escape the violence inherent in colonial spatial and temporal orders. The question that I seek to explore in this article is why recognition, despite its limitations and its seemingly inevitable failure to shift the ontological and material conditions embedded in colonial settler regimes, endures as an idiom through which to articulate legal-political struggles for freedom.

Before going any further, we may want to ask, what is recognition? The term recognition lends itself to a wide and easy utilisation with a less than rigorous indication of precisely what is meant by the concept. For instance, in the political-legal sphere, claims for the recognition of rights lend themselves to a theorisation of recognition purely on the basis of the most common sense definition of recognition: acknowledgment of the existence, validity or legality of someone or thing. In this article, I move beyond this colloquial understanding of the term through an examination of philosophical discourses of recognition that sometimes remain neglected or not fully considered. In an expansive meditation on recognition, Paul Ricoeur excavates the 'rule governing the polysemy' of the term and produces an understanding of the relationship between 'the lexical plane and that of [the] philosophical discourse' of recognition (Ricoeur 2005, pp. 22–24), going some distance towards connecting the philosophical and colloquial conceptions of the term.<sup>2</sup> Recognition can be understood as a conceptual framework through which we understand the struggle to become; to become full legal and political persons or, more broadly, fully individuated beings. There are some who assert, as a truth claim of sorts, that recognition is imperative for individuals to exist as human beings, to thrive, to be fully themselves. Hegel's philosophy of recognition, on this view, provides an ontological and phenomenological understanding of being itself. I treat recognition as an idiom in which struggles for political and social justice are articulated; and as a powerful and enduring philosophical discourse of being and becoming.

The subject of recognition is, in my view, thoroughly imbricated with relations of appropriation and ownership. As I have argued elsewhere (Bhandar 2007), the philosophy of recognition imports a notion of the propertied subject; a subject for whom certain qualities or properties are prefigured as the bounds of intelligibility that are co-emergent with relations of ownership. As I explore below in relation to Canada, the recognition of indigenous rights remains confined to a restricted economy of property ownership and subjectivity embedded during colonial

---

<sup>2</sup> What at first appears as a stochastic exercise in the terrain of lexicography reveals itself as a careful enquiry into the changing definition of the word recognition and its development in the philosophical discourses of Kant, Bergson and Hegel. Various manifestations of the concept remain intermingled within the philosophical field yet become fragmented and practically atomistic in their common dictionary definitions. Ricoeur connects these two planes together in an attempt to produce a more cohesive understanding of how recognition and the history of the concept can be understood (Ricoeur 2005, pp. 22–30).

settlement. Raciality and property ownership were co-constituted through a tautology repeated throughout European colonies: in order to be a proper political subject one had to own property, and in order to own property, one had to be in possession of certain qualities in the requisite degrees, such as whiteness and maleness, which determined whether one could own property. Properties circulated amongst and were unevenly attached to subjectivities of both coloniser and colonised. Fanon refers to this co-constitution when he writes:

The settler and the native are old acquaintances. In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing ‘them’ well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence. The settler owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say his property, to the colonial system. (Fanon 2001, p. 28)

The failure of recognition in the colonial settler context, as I explore below, derives from its inability to account for this relationship between property ownership and the emergence of the modern subject.

In critiquing the impossibility of recognition in the colonial context, Fanon rightly assumes a lived experience and a life, a body, that precedes and exceeds the constitution of colonial subjectivities. Fanon wrote most poignantly about the psycho-affective dimensions of the lived experience of blackness that bleed out beyond the dialectical logic of recognition when he wrote about love:

Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding. (Fanon 1967, p. 8)

And further on in the text:

I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white.  
Now - and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. (ibid, p. 63)

Fanon subjected Hegel’s dialectic of recognition to a plastic reading, pointing to the ways in which the ‘epidermilisation’ of the violence of colonialism created sites where recognition was thoroughly shaped by psycho-sexual and racialised desires. For Hegel the emergence of self-consciousness involves a process of negation, sublimation and transcendence, always in relation to another. Fanon asserts that the process of transcendence is contaminated by desire, and moreover, that this desire issues from the unstable site of the body; critiquing the violence of abstraction that appears to pervade Hegel’s dialectical logic. As explored in this article, the body, as one manifestation of form that appears to be absent in the dialectic of recognition, illuminates that which exceeds the restricted economy of owning, knowing and being that characterises the struggle for recognition in the colonial context. As explored below, the body is co-emergent with the scene of recognition, and the spatial and temporal instability of this embodied subjectivity reflects a plasticity inherent in Hegel’s dialectical logic. The concept of plasticity presents a mode of

reading that both enables an understanding and realisation of this unstable body that receives and gives form, that has the capacity to explode and shatter existing forms of reason and sense.

Despite the impossibility of mutual recognition in the colonial context for the reasons explored above, it persists; demanding a kind of ventriloquism in its search for realisation. The black man wants to be recognised as white, and while this can be understood sympathetically in a context in which whiteness signifies humanity, it also confuses and destabilises the terrain of mutual recognition. Fanon illuminated the ways in which to inhabit a black colonial subjectivity, desirous of white love and of becoming white, was to dwell as comparison: the ‘Negro is comparison; the existence of the Antillean is contingent on the presence of “The Other” to which he compares himself; is the Other more black than he, more or less literate in the language of the civilised race and their philosophical ideals?’ (Fanon 1967, p. 212). Recognition in this context can only take place in the shape of a fixed triangulation, with civilised whiteness at its apex.

Fanon uses the term ‘epidermilisation’ to describe the internalisation of an inferiority complex by the colonised subject; skin (perhaps even more than the body it encases) is a site dripping with sense and sensation; marked by exterior relations of power; a scene of desire. Fanon, to whom Hegel’s contemporary critics and interlocutors owe a rather large debt, foregrounds the ways in which bodies (which include the psycho-sexual body)<sup>3</sup> operate in the dialectic of recognition as a site of instability. The body, as one form of the self who emerges on the scene of recognition, imports a constantly shifting, unstable self that cannot only not be captured by the temporality of the always-already, but engages the realm of the illicit, and turns to improper, unexpected acts and practices that open a space for political transformation and rupture.

It is from a place of alienation, even dispossession, that the plea/demand for political transformation issues; but more significantly, this position of instability enables political practices that disrupt the spatial fixity and the temporal closure of a singular, linear telos that have characterised colonially embedded relations of being and property ownership. In Parts II and III of this article, I discuss the ways in which contemporary forms of recognition fail to move beyond colonially inscribed relations of ownership and the proper(tied) subject in the Canadian context, reflecting the critiques of Hegel’s restricted economy of recognition rendered by Fanon, Derrida and Ferreira da Silva. In Part IV, I turn to recent work by Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou in order to explore a reading of Hegel’s dialectic of recognition that enables us to see the plasticity that inheres in the dialectical logic of recognition. Relating this critical reading of recognition back to the relationship between owning, knowing and being, I briefly, by way of conclusion, examine how in the context of one contemporary colonial situation, that of Palestine and specifically the site of a West

---

<sup>3</sup> The body as one manifestation of form has many different valences. For an interesting and nuanced treatment of the materiality of the body and its representations in psychoanalytic, phenomenological and linguistic registers see Salamon (2010). I focus on the body as a way of getting at the unstable but inescapable materiality of form and its place in the dialectic of recognition.

Bank refugee camp, plastic political practices defy a linear teleology and the spatial techniques of containment that characterise Israeli colonial settler society. The plasticity of the dialectic of recognition endures while (and perhaps because) it enables a politics that exceeds and goes beyond its own limits. Before we proceed any further, however, there is another vital question to explore: what is plasticity?

## I. Plasticity, Subjectivity and a New Materialism

The reading of the dialectic of recognition that I put forth relies on plasticity, as a philosophical concept developed and articulated by Catherine Malabou, which has many different valences.<sup>4</sup> It is a motor scheme that can be taken as a way of understanding the ‘metabolism of philosophy’ itself in this particular moment (Malabou 2010, p. 27). Plasticity is also a mode of critique, an ‘autonomous hermeneutic strategy’ that can be deployed to dialecticise ‘the relation between a text in its tradition and its destructive and deconstructive exterior’ (ibid, p. 24). In relation to Hegel’s philosophy in particular, the concept of plasticity inheres both within Hegel’s dialectical logic<sup>5</sup> and is a concept used to subject Hegel’s philosophy to destructive and deconstructive shaking. Plasticity as a potentially ruptural force also offers a way of thinking about subjectivity as one aspect of a newly reinvigorated materialism. As I explore in this article, the concept of plasticity provides a vital means of understanding the way in which the relationship between owning, knowing and being is triangulated within the dialectical phenomenon of recognition. What is novel about the exploration pursued in this article is the consideration of how the concept of plasticity is relevant to political practices pertinent to relations of dispossession and ownership in the colonial settler context.

Plasticity has many guises: as noted above, it is a motor scheme; a way of understanding subjectivity; and a manner of writing and reading. A plastic reading is a way of articulating the manner by which a reader actualises a specific kind of critique: a plastic reading involves a consciousness of what she brings to her reading of a text, coupled with the active desire to open a space for thought that exceeds the relationship between the tradition (from which the text derives) and its superceding (by subsequent scholarship) (Malabou 2010, p. 52). I write, perhaps a bit tentatively, that to engage such a reading the reader herself must be inclined towards deploying herself as a plastic subject. That is, the relationship between the concept and the materiality of plasticity as it might manifest in the world, in the realm of politics, accompanies the reader/writer’s own consciousness about the plasticity of her (neuronal) habits and the capacity to extend herself beyond a present that is at once (over)determined by the past and at the same time, to dwell in a present that remains open to a future time that is not messianic, but is one that she pulls towards herself with a force and speed of her own. The plastic subject is a subject who moves; ‘one movement is terminal, while the other is initial’ (Malabou 2010, p. 34).

<sup>4</sup> For further analysis of the concept of plasticity that explores different aspects than those articulated here, see Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Explored most fully in Malabou (2005).

Malabou has shown how the Hegelian subject differentiates itself temporally. Three historical moments of self-determination, of the emergence of particular forms of subjectivity, correspond to three different temporalities. The three moments identified in Hegel's work are: the notion of the subject represented in Ancient Greek sculpture; the emergence of the modern subject, represented by Romantic painting; and Absolute Knowledge, manifest in the reconciliation of man and God in the body of Christ (Malabou 2005, p. 20).<sup>6</sup> These three moments exist in relation to one another but do not follow one another in a teleological fashion. Rather, the different temporalities represented by each moment reflect different moments and shapes of being itself. Being, in whatever form it takes (in this article I am primarily concerned with the body as one type of form), occupies different temporalities simultaneously. This plastic reading of Hegel's dialectical logic offers a way of cognising that which exceeds a linear, teleological temporality.

Malabou takes her deconstructive reading of Hegel and, in keeping with Hegel's injunction that one ought to subject one's own idiom to the speculative method, gives us the term *voir venir* as a way of understanding the temporalities of the dialectic of becoming. *Voir venir*,<sup>7</sup> or 'to see (what is) coming', reflects the relation between teleological necessity and surprise, or contingency in Hegel's thought. To see (what is) coming reflects the temporality of a being for whom the necessity of what is to come is tempered with a cautious anticipation of what is unknown. The necessity of what is to come is held in tension with that which is unknown—the contingent, the accidental. It is not the time of the *avenir*, or the 'to come', but *la nécessité du devenir*, or the necessity of the coming-to-be. Malabou finds in Hegel the simultaneous existence of a linearity that is not tied to teleological time. The emancipatory potential of this rendering of two times is described by Malabou as thus:

The arrangement of these two times determines the future of those creatures who no longer have time ahead of themselves, who live out a teleology which is shattered because already accomplished. Such a future is both beautiful and terrible. Beautiful because everything can still happen. Terrible, because everything has already happened. (Malabou 2005, p. 192)

<sup>6</sup> To briefly summarise Malabou's argument, she examines Hegel's philosophy of aesthetics and traces the way in which Hegel conceived of the transitions from Classical Greek art to the Roman world, and then the advent of modernity and the attendant art forms that reflected the motor schema of these eras. The harmony and serenity of Classical Greece and its ideal forms no longer serve as a model for the human form. In Malabou's words, 'Greek art remains alien to the experience of heartbreak' (Malabou 2005, p. 117). The Roman world inaugurated a rupture and disharmony out of which the modern individual subject emerged, along with the discovery that the source of its freedom lies wholly within itself (Malabou 2005, pp. 116–117). The ascendance of painting in the modern period, and the era of Romantic art specifically, occurred because it was more capable of expressing the rupture out of which the modern subject emerges than the ideals of beauty reflected in the sculptural body (ibid).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of plasticity also infects the concept of temporality, or 'time' itself. Malabou argues that temporality is, like other concepts caught within a dialectical relation, logically differentiated (Malabou 2005, p. 14). In other words, time can be understood as something that is constituted by 'moments' that pass into their opposites; 'now' (which is day) passes into night. For Hegel, time 'temporally differentiates itself'; it has a history (Malabou 2005, p. 16).

As I will discuss in more detail below, this plastic rendering of temporality offers a framework through which the political practices of colonial subjects caught between a politics of return and the here and now of the refugee camp can be understood.

Significantly, the concept of plasticity also applies to the materiality of subjectivity itself as it is manifest in the body. Fanon's notion of epidermalisation and its impact on desire, suggests how the body destabilises the spatial and temporal fixity characteristic of colonial settler regimes. The body, the skin, its senses, exceed the reach of the boundaries of the restricted colonial economy of meaning and being. The recent work of Butler and Malabou further illuminate the presence of the body (as form) in Hegel's dialectic of recognition. The plasticity of the body not only inheres in its capacity to destabilise, to issue demands, but in its capacity to give form and shape to its environs, to resist, and to create.

Malabou locates the potential for radical transformation of the subject in the plasticity that inheres in the brain:

The word plasticity thus unfolds its meaning between sculptural moulding and deflagration, which is to say explosion. From this perspective, to talk about the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model. (Malabou 2008, p. 6)

The interesting move that Malabou makes, and perhaps William Connolly<sup>8</sup> before her although he does it very differently, is to engage the multiple fields of action that neuroplasticity allows us to access. If we understand our brains (and ourselves) as 'self-cultivating organs' (Malabou 2008, p. 30), then the aesthetic, ethical and political aspects of being (and being-in-common) become open fields, subject to our making and re-making. The materialism of plasticity thus consists in the neuronal capacities of the subject to re-make itself, and also in the way in which subjectivity temporalises itself. The different temporalities (there are at least two) that the emergent subject engages (potentially synchronously), take different forms; they have different qualities, properties and gestures. The difference is porous, but in this difference lies the potential for (self and) political transformation.

## II. Ontology and Property: Owning, Knowing and Being

Contemporary forms of recognition (such as the legal recognition of indigenous rights in Canada, Australia and South Africa, among other jurisdictions), in my view, may recognise the injustices of past dispossessions on the basis of racist assumptions about indigenous populations, and juridical concepts such as that of *terra nullius* which justified the appropriation of indigenous lands in some territories. In contemporary colonial settler contexts such as Palestine, the wasteland rationale used to appropriate the lands of others is still employed, reflecting the

---

<sup>8</sup> See Connolly (2002).

persistence of the notion of a proper subject of ownership that is thoroughly racialised.<sup>9</sup> In the (post-colonial) colonial settler context, indigenous rights to land have been recognised; however, by defining these rights on the basis of an identity largely defined by cultural practices, contemporary forms of recognition fail to account for the centrality of property relations (or the propertied dimensions in the more full sense just elucidated) to the dispossession that forms the basis of the struggle for recognition in the first instance.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary forms of recognition fail in a second way as well. While failing to account for the propertied dimensions of subject formation as it unfolded from the eighteenth century onwards, contemporary politics of recognition also ignore the ways in which the relationship between ontology and property has undergone transformations with the rise of finance capitalism and a much more fragmented relationship between intangible and tangible forms of property. So, for instance, forms of recognition that retain allegiance to a nineteenth century concept of the subject fail to acknowledge how emergent subjectivities are no longer constituted through the same relation of owning, knowing and being. Owning, as the sub-prime mortgage crisis has taught us, was forged through a technology of debt which the realm of speculative capital was simultaneously creating and feeding off in ways that can only be described as vampiric (Harvey 2010). The affective properties imbricated with ownership today are markedly different, reflecting radical changes in processes of propertisation and the very substance of ownership itself.

The regimes of property and ownership that lay at the basis of colonial settler activity have transformed with the ascendance of intangible and intellectual forms of property in an era of global capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2009; Harvey 2010; Duménil and Lévy 2004). The subjectivities to which older regimes of property ownership were attached have been disaggregated by new forms of property (Maurer and Schwab 2006). Land itself has taken on multilayered valences as so much more than ‘territory’; property exists on multiple planes, as a resource, habitat, cultural artefact, amongst other things (Pottage 2007). Yet, indigenous rights claims for land come to be reduced and articulated in the language of sovereign territory,<sup>11</sup> nation<sup>12</sup> and a concept of culture that is synonymous with

<sup>9</sup> In the Palestinian context, for example, the wasteland rationale, which is premised on the idea that land use not conforming to Anglo-European agricultural modes of production is wasteland and can therefore be justifiably appropriated is recombined with security imperatives. Effectively, the Minister of Agriculture is empowered by virtue of the Emergency Regulations (Cultivation of Waste Lands and Use of Unexploited Water Resources) 1948 ‘to take over agricultural lands not being cultivated due to the war. In practice, these powers were used in conjunction with other emergency enactments in order to requisition land, including that of internally displaced Palestinians who remained with the State of Israel as well as the refugees. Palestinians wanting to cultivate their land would be prevented from entering the area where their land was situated, which would be declared a closed area. The land would then be declared uncultivated, the Minister would take possession and hand it to neighbouring Jewish agricultural settlements to farm’ (Abu Hussein and McKay 2003, p. 81).

<sup>10</sup> For the centrality of property ownership to the Hegelian philosophy of recognition see Bhandar (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Who is the subject at the heart of the dialectic of recognition? Markell renders a critique of the sovereign subject that he sees as privileged within a politics of recognition. He addresses claims about the ‘obsolescence of the idea of sovereignty’, evidenced, for instance, by its erosion by multinational capitalism, and also, to Foucault’s call to ‘set aside the concept of sovereignty... in favour of the study of the multiple, local and daily “techniques and tactics” of power that productively order and govern human



unchanging, static traditions. An example from the Canadian context will help illustrate how contemporary forms of recognition fail in these two ways.

Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution recognises and affirms aboriginal and treaty rights. In order to establish an aboriginal right, a claimant must demonstrate that the practice, activity or custom has a ‘reasonable degree of continuity with the practices, traditions or customs that existed prior to contact’ with non-aboriginal settlers.

The practice, custom or tradition must have been ‘integral to the distinctive culture’ of the aboriginal peoples, in the sense that it distinguished or characterised their traditional culture and lay at the core of the people’s identity. It must be a ‘defining feature’ of the aboriginal society, such that the culture would be ‘fundamentally altered’ without it... This excludes practices, traditions and customs that are only marginal or incidental to the aboriginal society’s cultural identity, and emphasises practices, traditions and customs that are vital to the life, culture and identity of the aboriginal society in question (*Mitchell v M.N.R.* (2001) 1 S.C.R. 911, para 12).

By defining aboriginal rights in this way, the Court has produced a subject of aboriginal rights who remains caught within the pre-history of the sovereign nation state. The ghostly subject of modernity keeps wandering around, unable to recognise itself in new concepts of subjectivity of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It finds its home in the recognition of a subjectivity defined by the sovereign law as the proper subject of a particular version of ownership and of

---

Footnote 11 continued

activity’ (Markell 2003, p. 28). Markell’s response, in brief, is to treat sovereignty as a force that ‘retains its salience in the political imaginary’, and as a category through which our political experience is organised. On the latter point, he conceives of the state as a sovereign actor that is both participant and artefact of a politics of recognition; that is, he treats the state as a ‘set of social institutions’ through which people pursue their desire for recognition. The sovereign state may be a phantasm, but its effects are real and powerful (pp. 28–30). This is a productive response to the problematic of sovereignty and Markell, in the alternative, turns to Arendt’s notion of a politics of acknowledgment as a way of dealing with this phantasmatic sovereign subject. Markell offers this as an alternative because of his view that the circuits of desire for recognition are, at present, an inescapable dimension of the human condition (p. 176). A politics of acknowledgment, unlike a politics of recognition, does not presuppose a fixed, sovereign subjectivity that is owed, as a matter of justice and equality, his or her due recognition. On the contrary, a politics of acknowledgment orients one’s approach to another in an open-ended manner, ‘in the sense of accepting that the existence of others—as yet unspecified, indeterminate others—makes unpredictability and lack of mastery into unavoidable conditions of human agency’ (p. 180). I appreciate Markell’s innovative theorisation of how the politics of acknowledgment, which he offers as an alternative to a politics of recognition, need not require the acceptance of the fantasy of the sovereign subject. However, as I will argue below, the concept of plasticity shatters the assumption of a sovereign ‘I’ in the dialectic of recognition.

<sup>12</sup> The question of how claims for the recognition of aboriginal rights to land and resources could be articulated juridically without being confined to the paradigms of sovereignty and territory is a complicated one and beyond the scope of this article. Claiming rights on the basis of indigenous laws, and thereby claiming the recognition of indigenous laws that are based on entirely different ontologies (different from Anglo-European ones) has been discussed in relation to the Canadian context extensively by Borrows (2002). Borrows discusses the historical recognition of indigenous laws by colonial settler legal systems and how this could be radically augmented.

nation; and in opposition to the legal subject whose rights are akin to cultural artefacts.<sup>13</sup>

In relation to the test for establishing aboriginal title, the Court held that claimants must satisfy three criteria in order to prove the existence of aboriginal title:

1. the land must have been occupied prior to sovereignty;
2. if present occupation is relied upon as proof of occupation pre-sovereignty, there must be a continuity between present and pre-sovereignty occupation; and
3. at sovereignty, that occupation must have been exclusive (*Delgamuukw v British Columbia*, 1997, para 143).

In defining the criteria necessary to establish aboriginal title, the Court imports one of the central features of Anglo-European private property ownership—exclusive possession—into the definition of aboriginal title. The principle of prescription, that is, that one acquires title to land through continuous occupation, becomes one of the characteristics of aboriginal title. However, the definition of aboriginal title as being constituted by one of the central characteristics of Anglo-European private property ownership exists alongside (or perhaps in conflict with) the temporal requirement that aboriginal nations must have enjoyed exclusive occupation prior to the assertion of colonial sovereignty, and the imposition of Anglo-European private property relations. This points to the fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of aboriginal rights: they are based on aboriginal peoples' prior occupation of the land, but defined in relation to Anglo-European norms of private property ownership and colonial sovereign power. Alternately, rights to land in the context of indigenous rights claims are conceived in terms of a contest between property that exists within a market economy (the property of non-aboriginal property owners) and territory as cultural right. (See *Musqueam Indian Band v Glass* (2000) 2 S.C.R. 633).

How does the concept of recognition both lend itself to the sort of violent closures that have constituted legal-political responses to land rights claims in colonial settler contexts; yet, simultaneously, hold open the possibility for the emergence of a subjectivity not already confined by the spectre of a racialised, propertied being? The dialectic of recognition is firmly embedded in a nineteenth century, modern conceptualisation of the subject and property relations; and, despite the fact that 'we have never been modern', a compulsive force of the dialectic of recognition continually sets the scene for the realisation of this subject. While practices of property ownership and what constitutes property itself, along with prevailing understandings of human subjectivity, have undergone radical changes since the nineteenth century, the cunning of recognition lies in its ability to circumvent these shifting conditions, to retain its allegiance to a particular (ghostly) subject even as it navigates terrain that has shifted dramatically since the nineteenth century, and to offer up a concept of legal rights that binds emergent subjectivities to the old tombstones of the triumvirate: culture, nation, land. The dialectical logic

<sup>13</sup> This has been critiqued by many scholars as constituting a 'frozen rights' doctrine of aboriginal rights. See Borrowes (2002).

of Hegel has been critiqued for effecting a spatial and temporal closure of what can come into being; the structure of the dialectic of recognition effectively forecloses the potential for a being who is *sui generis* to emerge. The 'always-already' quality of the dialectic that circumscribes, before anything has even really had the chance to begin, the conditions for the emergence of ways of being that do not reproduce that which is already cognisable or intelligible.<sup>14</sup> The concept of plasticity resists the notion that the (Hegelian) subject is doomed to be caught in the ether of the teleological, the time of the always-already which is determined by preconceived notions of subjectivity. More than that, the concept of plasticity draws our attention to a moment in the dialectic of recognition where the body renders itself the central focal point of movement and change in relation to others, in its becoming, or emergence into self.

We return to Fanon's observation that the process of consciousness coming out of itself and realising that it exists in relation with others (a process of transcendence in Hegelian parlance) is haunted (or mediated) by forces, attachments and desires that exceed the framework of recognition. Recognition is always about something more than what appears to be at stake; the body from which the demand for recognition issues makes an appearance, it is here and there, it exposes and reveals a 'breakthrough of sense' (Nancy 2008, p. 24) that is an excess.

### III. Critiques of Recognition: Colonialism, Property and Race

There are three axes of critique in relation to the failures and limits of the dialectic (and a politics) of recognition. The first is that of Fanon, and the absence of the grounds for a genuinely dialectical struggle for recognition in the colonial context. The second, explored through Derrida's work, relates to the temporality of the dialectic, and the always-already quality that prevents the emergence and mutual recognition of a *sui generis* difference between subjects. Ferreira da Silva illuminates how the onto-epistemological edifice of Western philosophy productively and continually sets the scene for the recognition and representation of a political subjectivity saturated with historical, scientific and globalised knowledge of raciality and is the third critique explored here.

In many ways, the eloquent analysis of the failure of recognition in the colonial context rendered by Fanon has yet, in my view, to be surpassed. For Fanon, the conjuring of the Universal subject of humanity (read: white, male, and property owning) was intimately tied to a burgeoning capitalism that violently appropriated labour and land from those who were either irredeemably sub-human or had not yet achieved their full potential as human beings. The subject of a Universal humanity that emerged during the colonial era has been undone, shattered, by revolutionary and anti-colonial movements and the radical thought that accompanied them. This undoing continues in the face of the persistence of radical injustices that adhere to a colonial logic of subordination and appropriation.

---

<sup>14</sup> For an insightful discussion of apprehension as that which precedes cognition, see Butler (2009, pp. 1–33).

Colonialism—with its strategies of material and ideological containerisation and segregation—does not allow for a dynamic relation of opposition characteristic of the dialectic. Racial hierarchies and colonial relations are expressed spatially, translated into spatial dynamics that continue to operate as technologies of colonisation in contexts such as Palestine. Eyal Weizman explores how the Israeli state has deployed a technology of verticality in the appropriation and occupation of Palestinian land. The resulting, ever increasing stratification of territory means competing layers of ownership and occupation of the same space. For instance, one of the most significant sites of contestation is water that lies below the surface. Accordingly, notes Eyal Weizman,

Israeli pumps may reach down to the waters of the common aquifers, whilst Palestinian pumps are usually restricted to a considerably shorter reach, only as far down as seasonal wells trapped within shallow rock formations, which, from a hydrological perspective, are detached from the fundamental lower layers of ‘ancient waters’. (Weizman 2007, p. 19)

Here, spatial opposition is displaced by a strategy of verticality enables the Israeli political and ideological claim of prior ownership over land and water based on divine right to manifest itself in the control over precious resources. Despite the impossibility of recognition in the colonial settler context, Fanon did not abandon his belief in the dialectic of recognition as a (or the) means for the individual to enact his desires for new, inventive self-creation, always in relation with others. The difference that is always already proper to the subject is captured precisely because the only difference that can be recognised is that which is proper to the white, colonial settler and his laws of property ownership. Decolonisation thus meant, for Fanon, who was a revolutionary Marxist, the overthrow of bourgeois property relations; what is at stake in claims for recognition are not only the categories of racial and cultural identity as the basis upon which claims are made, but also the property relations through which these identities have been mutually constituted. As I will explore in the final section, de-colonising property relations in spaces of containment requires plastic political practices that do not rely on static conceptions of identity, place or belonging. The plasticity that inheres in the dialectic embodies the conditions for the type of instability on which such practices both rely and feed off.

Glen Coulthard, following Fanon, argues that there can never be mutual recognition in a colonial context because the context produces psycho-affective attachments in indigenous communities to identities defined and forged through colonial relations. He critiques the way in which the state ‘entice[s] indigenous peoples to come to identify...’ with ‘non-reciprocal forms of recognition’ (Coulthard 2007, pp. 437–460 at p. 439). Because the state does not require the recognition of indigenous peoples, this mode of recognition can only ever be non-reciprocal. At the moment in which claims for recognition are articulated in language that renders them legally intelligible, Coulthard argues, the space for a mutual recognition of authentic or genuine indigenous ways of being is foreclosed. Claims for land are translated into the language of property, jurisdiction is expressed in the language of sovereignty, and so forth (Coulthard 2007). Ultimately, he argues, following Fanon, that self-recognition by indigenous communities is what is

required for a movement away from colonial oppression. As Coulthard points out, this does not depart from the master–slave dialectic, following the moment at which the slave comes to be conscious of his own creative abilities and power. However, Coulthard does argue that a contemporary politics of recognition is ill-equipped to deal with indigenous struggles for freedom, because it is wholly focused on a colonial state apparatus. Coulthard critiques the violence rendered by a contemporary politics of recognition in the context of racist, capitalist economic systems still mired in colonial relations of domination (ibid). What remains as a question is how the philosophy of recognition lends itself to this violence: the violent forms of state lethality<sup>15</sup> witnessed in the treatment of indigenous populations. Critiques of the architecture of Hegel’s dialectical logic by Derrida (following Bataille), and Ferreira da Silva illuminate the answer to this question.

In ‘From restricted to general economy: A Hegelianism without reserve’ Derrida elaborates Georges Bataille’s critique and discussion of Hegel’s thought as set out in *L’expérience intérieure*, ‘Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice’ and other pieces (Bataille 1990, pp. 9–28). Bataille takes Hegelian concepts and submits them to a ‘trembling’ which dislocates them, ‘immobilizes them outside of their syntax’ and enables us to see the internal fault lines that exist within what appears to be an otherwise seamless system of thought (Derrida 2002a, p. 320). As such, we can explore this Derridean take on Bataille’s critique of Hegel as labouring within the Hegelian schema yet, at the same time, exceeding its boundaries by uncovering the traces of laughter that were, perhaps, stilled by Hegel’s own hand.

In the dialectic of lordship and bondsman, the master risks his life in order to prove his superiority as ‘pure self-consciousness’ but realises that equally as necessary in his quest for recognition is the fact of being alive. That is, self-consciousness becomes aware that staying alive and preserving his life is necessary in order to achieve the recognition and the meaning of self-certainty that he was seeking in the first place. While he is impelled to risk his life in order to gain the recognition of the other, to actually die would mean to lose everything (in Derrida’s analysis, meaning or reason itself) that was at stake. Because the master’s life (meaning) is retained, meaning that exists in the first place can never exceed the economy of reason that already exists.

An actual death would explode the economy of life and meaning that existed in the first place. However, through a ruse of reason<sup>16</sup> the life of the master remains alive and death just a rhetorical ploy of the master. To recall Nancy, as long as the master remains an abstraction that does not tremble before death, there is no expenditure of life (or thought) that falls outside of Hegel’s totalising discourse of knowledge. Nancy seems to be pointing towards the lack of a body in Hegel’s text.

<sup>15</sup> Writing in the Canadian context, Antaki and Coel explicitly state that they do not contribute to the theoretical literature on recognition. They articulate the state treatment of indigenous populations in Canada in terms of cognition as a form of state lethality. They see recognition as a moment where proper sight could occur; however, contemporary politics of recognition are grounded in the Royal Proclamation 1763, which was formed through cognition. Antaki and Coel’s article about contemporary politics of recognition is perhaps an example of a very cogent consideration of the failures of recognition not attached to the philosophical discourses of Hegel. See Antaki and Coel (2009).

<sup>16</sup> The ruse of reason is the rationalisation of the master that to die would make all that was at stake in the first place meaningless, so it is better to live.

As Butler points out, and as I will discuss below, the desire of consciousness for recognition requires a body that can fight this battle and risk death. It is actual death, or absolute negativity in the words of Hegel, that is significant and necessary when one thinks about the economy of reason in this dialectic of self-consciousness. It is death that provides the rupture out of a totalising metaphysics of presence. The risk of death, as the limit of sense and reason, becomes crucial to an economy of thought that seeks to break the boundaries of absolute meaning. Thus, in the dialectic between master and slave, the master preserves and conserves absolute meaning in a restricted economy.

Derrida writes that the master amortises death by effecting a prosthetic replacement of sorts: a life that is essential to holding back the first (natural, or biological) life, and ‘making it work for the constitution of self-consciousness, truth, and meaning’, is put in its place (Derrida 2002a, p. 323). The prosthetic replacement is the life attached to the servile consciousness. The master, with the acuity of a private equity trader or hedge fund manager, effectively replaces the risk of his actual death with the living death of another.<sup>17</sup> He amortises the risk of losing himself absolutely, in the other, by effecting a violent ruse of equivalence. But like anyone who opts for security and safety over passionate attachments that necessarily risk the loss of one’s self, deploying an arsenal of crafty techniques to insure himself against such liabilities in order to shore up his sense of mastery and control, the master’s triumph over the slave eventually rings hollow. The body cannot be contained, the body of the servile consciousness (to which the master is of course attached) exceeds the relation of subjugation and emerges, and with her emergence she changes the scene of recognition entirely. ‘Le corps est souverain’ (Butler and Malabou 2010, p. 31). Malabou observes that

Bataille prepares Derrida to say what Hegel could not say: that to be self constituted with a body is to carry with it the erasure/effacement of the dialectic, to become the trace. The trace is perhaps the best possibility of absolute substitution of sense [here sense indicating the sense, reason and meaning of the master] with the body (Butler and Malabou 2010, p. 33 trans. B Bhandar).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A good example of this is the trading in derivatives on the prices of food such as cocoa, soy, maize, and other staples. A recent report by the World Development Movement analyses how financial speculation on food prices is harming the world’s poorest producers of food as well as resulting in huge increases in the prices of different foods, making it more difficult for the poor to feed themselves. The report by the World Development Movement can be found here: [http://www.wdm.org.uk/sites/default/files/hunger%20lottery%20report\\_6.10.pdf](http://www.wdm.org.uk/sites/default/files/hunger%20lottery%20report_6.10.pdf); reported by The Guardian, 19 July 2010. The indignant, if rather anaemic response by Goldman Sachs can be found here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/20/defence-futures-trading-cocoa-rise> and here: <http://www.wdm.org.uk/blog/goldman-sachs-responds-launch-our-food-campaign>.

<sup>18</sup> In responding to Derrida’s resistance to the concept of plasticity, Malabou writes of the need to challenge the notion that particular concepts—such as that of the trace—are incontrovertible into form. For Marx, Malabou reminds us, ‘the assertion of incontrovertibility lies at the heart of fetishism’ (Malabou 2010, p. 77). Placing things outside of the realm of exchange and the market provides, *prima facie*, the conditions for the fetish to flourish. She writes of the need to consider how things which seem irreducible to form (hospitality, the trace) exist in relation to the operations of exchange and the market. ‘To state that nothing is incontrovertible amounts to claiming the philosophical necessity of the thought of a new materialism, which does not believe in the “formless” and implies the vision of a malleable real

In Derrida's critique, the proper(tied) nature of identity and difference fits within an ontological 'economy of the same' (Derrida 2002b, p. 117) in which difference is not really 'difference' at all, but a presupposed, assumed counterpart of the self-same subject. If, as Nancy postulates, 'the life of spirit does not tremble before its own differentiation, not even in death, for there too it maintains itself', the question remains as to where difference can emerge from (Nancy 1993, p. 12). The question—from 'where' difference may be allowed to emerge within the dialectic of recognition—invokes the question of space and spatiality within the economy of the dialectic. Derrida critiques the dialectic of recognition because potentially different shapes and forms of thought and Being are imprisoned within a 'restricted economy' of meaning, history and life, caught within a logic of appropriation and reserve (Derrida 2002a, p. 318, 322). Presupposing a particular ideal of universal Humanity; caught within a linear telos, the only subject that can be recognised is she who is always-already proper to existing frameworks of cognisability.

Denise Ferreira da Silva provides a powerful excavation of the philosophical foundations of a contemporary and globalised politics of racial subordination. She skilfully maps the architecture of modern political subjectivity, constituted by a scientific-racial apparatus that produces subjects bound within a horizon of violent relations of force. Ferreira da Silva's work seeks to destabilise the philosophical foundations of how we understand political subjectivity. Whereas Fanon's critique of recognition in the colonial context does not take issue with the philosophical architecture of Hegel's phenomenology, Ferreira da Silva illuminates how the grammar of Hegelian and Kantian ontologies embed racism in the very structure of what culminates in the figure of *homo modernus*. On Ferreira da Silva's view, the grammar of ontological concepts get spatially mapped onto particular bodies and populations globally. Racial hierarchies that defined the value of life are so firmly a part of how we understand human subjectivity that there is no ethical crisis when black (in the largest sense of who the term 'black' describes) communities are repeatedly posited as the objects of lethal violence. The body, like geo-spatial place, becomes crucial; Ferreira da Silva subjects Hegel's philosophy to a critique that reveals the ways in which his refashioning of the modern subject elides with scientific knowledges to resolve the relationship between interiority and exteriority (one that she locates at the site of the Cartesian split subject), but does so by articulating this reconciliation in the frame of World History (Ferreira da Silva 2007, pp. 72–74). By laminating the reconciliation of interiority and exteriority onto particular state forms which are by no coincidence located in Europe (and ultimately Prussia, to be even more precise), Hegel produces an account of "world history" in which the Global becomes the Transcendental I's exhibition hall... (Ferreira da Silva 2007, p. 83).

Ferreira da Silva's contribution to understanding how particular philosophical concepts ground the emergence of particular political subjectivities that are produced by an analytics of raciality and located in, but more importantly, relegated

---

Footnote 18 continued

that challenges that conception of time as a purely messianic process' (Malabou 2010, p. 77). Malabou's focus on material forms and the notion of a 'malleable real' opens up new space for a consideration of how we might decide and act to create our political futures. See discussion of her concept of the *voir venir* below.

to particular places cannot be underestimated. The question here is whether the grammar of Hegel's phenomenological concepts and their co-emergence with the body of the political subject can productively be read in a way that explains not only why there is no ethical crisis in the failure of recognition (transposing Ferreira da Silva's critique to a different idiom), but why and how recognition endures as a framework through which to articulate political-legal struggles for justice.

The critiques of the temporal and spatial elements of dialectical logic, of the very architecture of philosophical concepts structuring the emergence of the human subject from the eighteenth century onwards, and the reality of the non-disappearance of colonial relations seem to indicate that the struggle for recognition will always inevitably be a fruitless failure. Yet to go back to the question posed at the beginning of this article, recognition persists despite what is indicated by these critiques, and not merely because it functions to preserve the status quo. The dialectic of recognition persists because it also has the capacity to remain open to what is to come; it has the potential for explosive ruptures and the emergence of new (plastic) political subjectivities. There is also the matter of what escapes the moment of recognition; that which exceeds the particular claim that is being made.

#### IV. Plasticity and the Body

Body is certitude shattered and blown to bits (Nancy 2008, p. 5)

In this section, I examine the concept of plasticity in both senses outlined at the beginning: as a mode of critique, a way of reading; and the materialism of the concept as manifest in the body. I discuss how a plastic reading of the dialectic of lordship and bondsman by Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou may potentially open up some space for a consideration of how particular moments in the dialectic reveal excesses and instabilities in such a way that explains why recognition endures. The emphasis on the body follows from Fanon, who unveiled the ways in which the body of the racial subject had desires which, marked by the site of his or her skin, exceeded the frame of recognition as envisaged by Hegel. Here, we continue to shake the dialectic from the outside by considering how Butler and Malabou's emphasis on the body (as form) presents us with a materialist theory of being, a theory that carries with it the potential for political resistance to the violence of dispossession.

This is inevitably double-edged in my view. On the one hand, plasticity explains why recognition endures by suggesting that it does so on account of its having some critical, emancipatory purchase. This in turn seems to imply some sort of normative commitment to recognition as a philosophical framework for understanding the emergence of political subjectivities; and in turn, an underlying desire to rehabilitate it. I want to state categorically that it is not my aim to rehabilitate or recover some more true or genuine reading of the dialectic of recognition. Rather, it is to embrace with surprise perhaps, an openness, an attitude of risk, a philosophical rendering of the dialectic that helps explain its persistence as a mode of thought and—with specific regard to that which exceeds or escapes the 'horizon of death' so artfully illuminated by Ferreira da Silva. Moten puts this mode of enquiry like this:



What's the relation between explanation and resistance? Who bears the responsibility of discovering an ontology of, or of discovering for ontology, the ensemble of political, aesthetic, and philosophical derangements that comprise the being that is neither for itself nor for the other? What form of life makes such discovery possible as well as necessary? Would we know it by its flaws, its impurities? What might an impurity in a worldview actually be? Impurity implies a kind of non-completeness, if not absence, of a worldview. Perhaps that non-completeness signals an originarily criminal refusal of the interplay of framing and grasping, taking and keeping – a certain reticence at the ongoing advent of the age of the world picture (Moten 2008, p. 179).

So, in an effort to move between explanation and resistance by looking to moments where the self is neither for itself nor for the other, or sits between (or within) two times and states of being, I will trace three threads that run throughout the dialectic of recognition which illuminate moments where emergent subjectivities are improper, alienated, dispossessed; where the economy of the always-already is shattered by a temporality in which everything has already happened yet also remains to come. Sometimes transformation is most poignant, most possible, in moments of profound alienation; it is a space where opposition has not disappeared but is momentarily eclipsed by new political acts and imaginaries that are not confined by a dynamic of opposition. Such a state of being demands and reflects a certain plasticity, it is a state that has the potential to be politically transformative, as I will discuss in the conclusion.

The insights of Butler and Malabou come from a recently published dialogue by the two on the dialectic of lordship and bondsman entitled *Sois Mon Corps*, be my body (for me). The phrase *sois mon corps* seems to denote two things at once: a plea and a command. Coming from the bondsman, or slave, this is a plea and a command that issues from a position of radical dispossession. As Butler argues in the *Psychic Life of Power*, the bondsman first comes to recognise himself in the erasure of his signature from the object he produces. He recognises himself in this state of being dispossessed of himself. This reading, and its elaboration in this study by Butler and Malabou, allow us to understand how a self can emerge that occupies a place that is not 'in-itself' nor 'for the other'; that remains in relation to but unreconciled with itself and others.

Butler's argument in *The Psychic Life of Power* operates as the major point of departure in *Sois Mon Corps*, and grounds their exploration of the emergence of the body in Hegel's text. The plea/command of 'be my body' is a means of identifying and articulating the relationship between attachment and detachment that governs the emergence of the body in Hegel's drama of recognition. In the transition from the dialectic of lordship and bondsman to unhappy consciousness, Hegel presents a scene in which the consciousness of the bondsman emerges as the 'truth of self-consciousness' because he has trembled in every fibre of his being through the fear of death. This encounter with absolute negation (death) and the 'absolute melting away of everything stable is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness... pure being-for-self', and thus, this moment of pure self-consciousness remains implicit in the consciousness of the bondsman (Hegel 1977, para 194, emphasis in

original). The bondsman rids himself of his attachment to the (merely) natural world through his labour and, with pure self-consciousness implicit in his being, gradually acquires ‘a mind of his own’ (Hegel 1977, para 196). He rediscovers himself by becoming aware, through his labour in fashioning the object that belongs to the lord, that the being-for-self of the lord actually belongs to himself (Hegel 1977, para 196).

The being-for-self of the lord is a part of the bondsman’s very own consciousness. It does not simply vanish in the transition to Stoicism and Scepticism.<sup>19</sup> The bondsman carries the being-for-self of the lord’s consciousness with him; it was always a part of his consciousness, and he rediscovers this through his labour. Butler argues that Hegel’s subject prefigures Foucault’s notion of *assujettissement*, and the subject who internalises his own subjection, because this subject discovers that the ‘master’ or authority figure is literally a part of his own self (Butler 1997, p. 31). In the Hegelian schema, the two consciousnesses of lord and bondsman become one (again), yet recall that they were always already one consciousness reflected in different shapes of being. In Scepticism self-consciousness comes to know itself as a duality. The ‘duplication which was formerly divided between two individuals, the lord and bondsman, is now lodged in one’ (Hegel 1977, para 206). This realisation of its own duality, with its awareness of itself limited to that of its internal contradictions, makes this consciousness unhappy indeed.

The first thread that Butler and Malabou draw out of their reading of the dialectic of lordship and bondsman is how the body emerges in Hegel’s text, which involves a sort of smuggling in of the body in a text ostensibly about the emergence of self-consciousness. As Butler observes, the relationship between form and body is a complex one; while we might be most used to thinking of form in relation to the body, in the context of the master/slave dialectic, the emergence of the body (as form) requires an analysis of several transitions in the text: ‘the relation of form to life, to desire and following that, the two appearing self-consciousnesses, whose desire carries them to a battle to the death - something that is impossible without bodies capable of fighting and of dying’ (Butler and Malabou 2010, p. 69).

The emergence of the body in the master/slave dialectic occurs as a moment of alienation. The self recognises itself but also recognises that it is not itself. Butler argues that the ‘self-recognition [of the bondsman] is derived from the radically tenuous status of the bondsman’: he recognises himself in the forfeiture of the signature and the constant threat to his autonomy that the expropriation of the objects of his labour presents (Butler 1997, p. 39).

Two statements seem to be both true, and in this way paradoxical: this body constitutes my life; but this body there is equally me. This signifies that I am at the same time here and there, and that, whatever be the certainty of this ‘I’, it will deal with this spatial indecision that is necessarily a condition of being. (Butler and Malabou 2010, pp. 78–79)

<sup>19</sup> Hegel posits Stoicism and Scepticism as the transitory states of being that consciousness travels through after overcoming the oppositional relation of lordship and bondsman and before becoming the unhappy consciousness. See Hegel (1977, paras 197–208).

There is a spatial indecision that Butler speaks of that indicates a moment of being simultaneously embodied and alienated from oneself. In this moment, the self is not concerned with mastery but with trying to apprehend and give meaning to its split self; a split that is the very condition of its being.

The second insight that emerges from this text is that the body as a form is co-emergent with the scene of recognition. Self-consciousness is both witness and actor. It does not, says Butler, 'enter the stage and then take a new form; its entrance is later the same act by which it takes a new form' (Butler and Malabou 2010, p. 66). The co-emergence of scene and self (in whatever form that may be) also reflects a spatial and temporal plasticity that inheres in the dialectic of recognition. This plastic reading of the dialectic shatters the notion of the always-already. While the narrative of the master and slave appears to indicate that there is no space (or time) for rupture or transformation, focusing on the moments of alienation and resisting narrativisation as a way of reading the dialectic means not taking anything for granted.

Butler and Malabou's reading of the master/slave dialectic captures the sharp, painful perhaps, sense and sensation of being dispossessed of one's self in the moment/space between 'explanation and resistance'. This is a moment that follows the recognition of one's dispossession and that which precedes the future that one actively creates through political practices and transformative (neuronal) habits. I have explored in this section, the ways in which the body renders the static, enclosed logic of the dialectic of recognition open to a plastic reading. Attempting to take this analysis further, I return to the relationship between owning, knowing and being, and tentatively explore plastic political practices in the context of Palestinian refugees by way of conclusion.

### **Conclusion: Decolonisation and Plastic Property?**

The anarchic geography of the frontier is an evolving image of transformation, which is remade and rearranged with every political development or decision. Outposts and settlements might be evacuated and removed, yet new ones are founded and expand. The location of military check-points is constantly changing, blocking and modulating Palestinian traffic in ever-differing ways... The Separation Wall, merely one of multiple barriers, is constantly rerouted, its path registering like a seismograph the political and legal battles surrounding it. Elastic territories could thus not be understood as benign environments: highly elastic political space is often more dangerous and deadly than a static, rigid one. (Weizman 2007, pp. 6–7)

As noted at the outset, the concept of plasticity can appear to be double-edged. Weizman analyses the strategies deployed by the Israeli military-political apparatus to effectively control the built environment and the movement of bodies, goods and resources. He utilises the term 'political plastic' to describe the strategies and techniques developed by the Israeli Defence Forces to appropriate and occupy Palestinian land (Weizman 2010). These strategies are derived from and rely

heavily on architectural concepts, land use planning policies and laws, and a range of other spatial-military practices.

Weizman's book, *Hollow Land: Israel's architecture of occupation*, is quite magisterial in its breadth of analysis of how the Israeli state appropriates and occupies Palestinian lands. Weizman interrogates the architectural concepts and techniques, land use planning policies, legal judgments pertaining to land appropriation and settlements, and the political rhetoric and will of Israel's ruling elite to produce a complex frame through which to understand how land, space, law and politics constitute a malleable field deployed to further Israel's colonial interests. His analysis is both historical and steeped in contemporary practices of the Israeli military. He elaborates a theory of 'elasticity', although he more recently is moving towards an articulation of political plasticity, to make sense of these complexities. It should be noted however, that Weizman uses the terms elasticity and plasticity as almost literal descriptors for the spatio-temporal practices of the Israeli military apparatus. His conceptions of elasticity and plasticity do not refer to the philosophical concept as developed by Malabou. Having said that, it seems that the concept of plasticity appears vulnerable to being interpreted as the kind of malleability and flexibility that characterise the lethal politics of the Israeli military, or even contemporary forms of capitalism. Can plasticity, as discussed throughout this article, be deployed in a lethal fashion? Malabou is clear that the philosophical notion of plasticity is not the 'coming consciousness of flexibility'<sup>20</sup> that is used to characterise exploitative relations of flexible labour. While the concept of plasticity derives, literally, from the word *plassein*, and the French word *plastiquage*, my understanding of the concept as developed by Malabou is that this capacity to explode and re-make is not an oppressive force. It is perhaps impossible to speculate any further on a motor schema that is continually and contemporaneously unfolding.

Weizman's work on the Wall illustrates how contemporary forms of colonialism rely on two types of spatial and temporal dynamics<sup>21</sup> simultaneously. The Wall is premised on a politics of separation; a politics which is overwhelmingly supported by Israeli public opinion (Weizman 2007, p. 162). The politics of separation, containment, segregation are as old as colonial settlement itself. However, this politics of separation relies on spatial and political practices that are plastic (Weizman 2007, pp. 162–163), rendering a daily life for Palestinians that is rife with instability and uncertainty. The constant mobility of checkpoints is a key part of Israeli military strategy, controlling the Palestinian population through techniques that refuse static, fixed spaces of opposition.

To contrast this lethal form of the plastic politics, I look to a project undertaken by Decolonising Architecture (a project founded by Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Eyal Weizman and based in Bethlehem), which seems to require a certain plasticity, particularly in relation to temporality. The project is called 'Return' and addresses itself to their work in various refugee camps. They identify the Right of

<sup>20</sup> Malabou (2008, p. 12).

<sup>21</sup> He writes of the tautology by which 'occupation' is legally defined as 'temporary', and settlements can therefore be deemed legal as temporary. Thus the legal architecture of the concept of occupation is at odds with the material reality of the occupation having continued for over 40 years (Weizman 2007, p. 104).

Return as a political act that is comprised of ongoing practices, which they call ‘present returns’. The project includes observing the ways in which communities inhabit the built space of the camp, and considering the relationship between the idea of the return and present everyday realities of living in the camp. These practices ‘might also include the material practices of memory, archaeology being one of them, or other cultural and artistic practices that operate within an extraterritorial space but always in relation to an imagined one’.<sup>22</sup> The participants in the project see both the camp and the land in Palestine from which inhabitants were expelled, villages destroyed, as ‘extraterritorial’ spheres of action. These spheres are extraterritorial in the sense that they are not fully a part of the sovereign territory that surrounds them. The refugee occupies both of these spaces at once; the experience is always double. The refugee is both here, and there. Dislocated, alienated from one place yet still occupying that space through practices of memory and even archaeology. Dislocated, alienated in the camp yet occupying that space, sustaining life. In developing practices to forge a relationship between these two extraterritorial spaces, the participants (both architects and refugees) are doing something politically radical: they are imagining, thinking through, and practicing ways of creating territories that are not contaminated by an old logic of state sovereignty.

In a UN-funded project unrelated to the Present Returns project, researchers Nasser Abourahme and Sandi Hilal have examined the spatio-temporal practices of Palestinians living in the Deheishe refugee camp in Bethlehem. Housing more than 11,000 refugees and established in 1949 by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the camp is situated on half of a square kilometre of land (Abourahme and Hilal 2011, p. 7). The camp is extraterritorial in regard to its juridical status—the Palestinian National Authority regulates and polices the camp, however, this is characterised by executive decree, informal practice, immunity from the administrative law of local authorities, and suspension of rules and regulations in the camp; a ‘convoluted space-power system with multiple and imbricated powers, orders, rules and suzerains’, a disaggregation that is the legacy of the Oslo Accords (*ibid*, pp. 9–10).

In violation of the Oslo Peace Accords which prohibit the building of bridges over Area C, which lies under Israeli sovereign jurisdiction, the Deheishans constructed a bridge to connect the camp of Deheishe with the new ‘refugee city of Doha’ (*ibid*, p. 2). Doha has formed its own municipality and has approximately 20,000 residents (*ibid*, p. 23). The significance of the new refugee city is that it expands the camp beyond UNRWA camp borders, taking over city-space with the building of houses and blurring the spatial delineation of the camp. The bridge connects two orders of property relations and ownership that signify an apparent contradiction: the camp on one hand, marked by a temporariness and instability that characterises the state and status of the refugee par excellence; and on the other, the construction of houses and a built environment that lays claim to the city’s land and resources. The ‘permanent temporariness’ of the camp is thoroughly (and necessarily perhaps) infused with memories of the villages from which residents were expelled in 1948, the imperative struggle for the recognition of the right to

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/?page\\_id=583](http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/?page_id=583).

return, and indeed, the very subjectivity of the figure of the refugee. The spatial order of Doha reflects a desire to establish ownership over urban property, thereby asserting a more certain and enduring entitlement to the city.

What emerges is a multi-temporal simultaneity with Deheishans uneasily inhabiting the crossroads of several temporalities... In Deheishe, this dissonance or incongruence is exposed and amplified but also mediated through spatial production in its narrational and representational aspects. It bespeaks a desire to simultaneously engage with the immanent past and at the same time re-write and transcend it; in other words, to become 'author' of one's own time (ibid, pp. 30–31).

This plasticity is not merely bodily and spatial, but is also manifest in the temporality of the political practices of present returns. The daily acts take place in the present and are also 'projected as an image into an uncertain future' (see footnote 22). Very much like the two temporalities described above, the refugees occupy two times at once. The displacement has already happened, shattering the lives they once had and they live and practice in two spaces as a means of creating a present and future that is not bound by what has happened. I think this involves cultivating political subjectivities and practices while in a state of dispossession, while also never abandoning the demand for the right to return. This is about negotiating spatial instability, living in a built environment intended to be temporary and also living with memory of another (originary) site.

Although political plasticity or elasticity, as illuminated by Weizman, can certainly be lethal, the philosophical concept of plasticity elaborated in this article carries with it the potential for political rupture of a different kind altogether. Plasticity, as the motor scheme of dialectical thought, reflects the spatial and temporal instability of bodies, who inhabit alienated, fragmented and dislocated lives. As a means of understanding the strategies and techniques of ongoing colonial appropriations that move in relation to inventive, ruptural political practices, plasticity as a concept, mode of critique, and understanding of political subjectivity itself is indispensable.

**Acknowledgments** My sincere thanks to Jon Goldberg-Hiller, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Peter Lagerqvist, Nasser Abourahme, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and very helpful suggestions on earlier drafts. Unless otherwise indicated, translation of passages from *Sois Mon Corps* are those of Jon Goldberg-Hiller. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the author.

## References

- Abourahme, Nasser, and Sandi Hilal. 2011. Political subjectification, the production of space and the folding of polarity: The case of Deheishe Camp, Palestine. In *Peripheries: Decentering urban theory*, ed. James Holston, and Teresa Caldeira. Berkeley: University of California Berkeley Press. (forthcoming).
- Abu, Hussein, and Fiona Mackay. 2003. *Access denied: Palestinian land rights in Israel*. London: Zed Books.
- Antaki and Coel. 2009. The Lethality of the Canadian State's (Re)cognition of Indigenous Peoples. In *States of Violence: War, Capital Punishment, and Letting Die*, eds. Austin Sarat, and Jennifer Culbert. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bataille, Georges. 1990. Hegel, death and sacrifice (trans: Strauss, J.). *Yale French Studies* 78: 9–29.

- Bhandar, Brenna. 2007. Re-covering the limits of recognition: The politics of difference and decolonisation in John Borrows' recovering Canada: The resurgence of Indigenous Law. *The Australian Feminist Law Journal* 28.
- Bhandar, Brenna, and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller. 2011. Plasticity at the dusk of writing: dialectic, destruction and deconstruction (review). *Theory and Event* 14(1). doi:10.1353/tae.2011.0008
- Borrows, John. 2002. *Recovering Canada: The resurgence of indigenous law*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith, and Malabou. 2010. *Sois Mon Corps: Une lecture contemporaine de la domination et de la servitude chez Hegel*. Paris: Baynard.
- Connolly, W. 2002. *Neopolitics: Thinking, culture, speed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Coulthard, Glen. 2007. Subjects of empire: indigenous peoples and the 'politics of recognition' in Canada. *Feature Article: Theory and Practice, Contemporary Political Theory* 6: 4.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2002a. From general to restricted economy. In *Writing and difference*. London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2002b. *Violence and metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, in Writing and difference*. London: Routledge.
- Duménil, Gérard and Dominique Lévy. 2004. *Capital resurgent: Roots of the neoliberal revolution* (trans: Jeffers, D.). London: Harvard University Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black skin, white masks* (trans: Markmann, C.L.). New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2001. *The wretched of the earth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2007. *Toward a global idea of race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2010. *The enigma of capital: And the crises of capitalism*. London: Profile Books.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1977. *Phenomenology of spirit* (trans: Miller, A.V.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2005. *The future of Hegel: Plasticity, temporality and the dialectic* (trans: Dering, L.). London: Routledge.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2008. *What should we do with our brain?* (trans: Rand, S.). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2010. *Plasticity at the dusk of writing* (trans: Shead, C.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Markell, Patchen. 2003. *Bound by recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Maurer, Bill, and Gabrielle Schwab (eds.). 2006. *Accelerating possession: Global futures of property and personhood*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2008. The case of blackness (Spring). *Criticism* 50(2): 177–218.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1993. Identity and trembling. In *The birth to presence* (trans: Holmes, B., et al.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *Corpus*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Pottage, Alain. 2007. Conflict of laws: Comparing autochthonous legal cultures. In *Territorial conflicts in world society: Modern systems theory, international relations and conflict studies*, ed. Stephan Stetter. New York: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2005. *The course of recognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Salamon, Gayle. 2010. *Assuming a body: Transgender and the rhetorics of materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Weizman, Eyal. 2007. *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation*. London: Verso.
- Weizman, Eyal. 2010. Political plastic (interview). *Collapse: Philosophical research and development*, VI.

## Case Law

- Delgamuukw v British Columbia*. 1997. 3 S.C.R. 1010.
- Mitchell v M.N.R.* 2001. 1 S.C.R. 911.
- Musqueam Indian Band v Glass*. 2000. 2 S.C.R. 633.