

# “DISMANTLING THE MASTER’S HOUSE”

## Freedom as Ethical Practice in Brandom and Foucault

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### ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for the capacity of “social practice” accounts of agency and freedom to criticize, resist, and transform systemic forms of power and domination from within the context of religious and political practices and institutions. I first examine criticisms that Michel Foucault’s analysis of systemic power results in normative aimlessness, and then I contrast that account with the description of agency and innovative practice that pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom identifies as “expressive freedom.” I argue that Brandom can provide a normative trajectory for Foucault’s diagnoses of power and domination, helping to resolve its apparent lack of ethical direction. I demonstrate that Foucault, in turn, presents Brandom with insights that might overcome the charges of abstraction and conservatism that his pragmatic inferentialism frequently encounters. The result is a vindication of social practice as an analytical lens for social criticism that is at once both immanent and radical.

KEY WORDS: *Foucault, Brandom, Audre Lorde, social practice, pragmatism, democracy, expressive freedom, immanent criticism*

THE YEAR WAS 1979. The event was a New York University panel discussion addressing feminist perspectives on “The Personal and the Political.” Identifying herself as a black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet, and warrior, Audre Lorde rose to the podium and delivered a searing indictment of what she characterized as an all-too-easy, white, North American, academic feminism for its inattention to systemic forms of subjugation extending beyond the margins of the Academy. She said,

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in

order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support [1984, 112].

Lorde's words still resound today as a powerful caution to any attempt to bring analysis to bear upon systemic forms of power and domination inscribed in religious or political institutions and practices. In fact, her language about "the master's house" has come to serve as watch-words for the claim that tools of resistance forged within prevailing practices, structures, and institutions are ultimately unusable for the task of overturning the hegemonic conditions that prevail there. Any such tool, she suggests, will be so implicated in the very thing it seeks to dismantle that its use will replicate the same conditions of domination, though perhaps under a new guise. "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" Lorde pressed the point: "It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (1984, 110–11). In other words, the changes effected by such tools will take the form of an intrinsically conservative reformism—changes either permitted by or quickly assimilated to "the powers that be." On this view, genuine measures of resistance and liberation must come from somewhere else, somewhere "outside," whether outside of "the canon," outside of mainstream Academia, outside of modern political institutions, structures, and social processes, or perhaps from outside of history altogether.

In this essay, I contest Lorde's claim that "the master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house." I do so by intervening in recent debates about the capacity of "social practice" explanations of agency and freedom to radically critique, resist, and transform systemic forms of power and domination. Social practice accounts of agency typically appeal to norms implicit in practices as critical leverage by which to administer immanent forms of criticism, and pursue possibilities of resisting and transforming prevailing forms of power and domination. Because the resources utilized by such accounts are implicit in already existing practices and institutions, and because the forms of criticism that they aim to facilitate are immanent, they appear to invite Lorde's criticism. Allegedly, they exemplify the conservative reformism of "the master's tools." To address this issue, I take up the accounts of social practice and strategies for resistance proposed by Michel Foucault and pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom, both of whose accounts of practice, agency, and criticism appear to suffer in

various ways from weaknesses that Lorde articulates. I propose readings of Foucault and Brandom in which appropriating and reconfiguring “the master’s tools” turns out to be a condition for the possibility of systemic critique and resistant action that might disassemble and genuinely transform “the master’s house.”

In Part 1, I examine Foucault’s attempt to fashion a social practice framework for analyzing systemic forms of power. I begin by exploring criticisms leveled by Nancy Fraser and Richard Rorty that Foucault’s approach to analysis results in normative aimlessness, precisely because it is at once systemic in its aims and immanent in its orientation—because there is no position from which to critique power that is not itself yet another manifestation of power. I propose to sidestep these criticisms by reading Foucault’s account of “power as productive” against Brandom’s social-practical account of “expressive freedom.” To this end, I explicate Brandom’s account of social practice and the possibility of expressive freedom through normative constraints, and then contrast it with Foucault’s. My aim is to illuminate their respective weaknesses and offer a modified proposal informed by the other’s best insights. I contend that Brandom’s account of expressive freedom aids in answering the criticisms of Foucault leveled by Fraser and Rorty, clarifying a normative trajectory for his diagnoses of power and domination, thereby resolving the alleged ethical aimlessness of his account. Foucault, in turn, presents Brandom with insights that force him to actually consider questions of power and domination, and thereby to overcome charges that his account issues in abstraction and conservatism. Both of these interventions will serve to demonstrate the potential for social practice explanations of agency and freedom to critique and resist systemic forms of power and domination, thereby elucidating the capacity of “the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.”

### 1. Foucault, Social Practice, and Normative Neutrality of Power Analysis

Fraser credits Foucault’s work in the 1970s with reconceiving power as productive rather than merely prohibitive or repressive. Rather than administered by discrete, identifiable power holders and distributors, Foucault reconceives power as “a complex, shifting field of relations in which everyone is an element” (Fraser 1989, 29). Power is “capillary”—“operating at the lowest extremities of the social body in everyday social practices” (1989, 29). As a result, practices and power are not separable entities that momentarily interact. Rather, power is constitutive of social practices. It is inscribed upon “bodies, gestures, desires, and habits” (1989, 29). For example, it is a conceptual feature of language use that the normative constraints exerted by words and

linguistic norms “enable us to speak precisely insofar as they constrain us” (1989, 32). In other words, in order to say anything at all language speakers submit themselves to the proprieties and exigencies that constitute the language. “Such norms make communication possible,” Fraser writes, “but only by devaluing and ruling out some possible and actual utterances” (1989, 32). The force of language-constitutive norms constrains language users. In constraining, these norms enable the production of particular performances just as they rule out other performances. As Fraser reads him, this is what Foucault means when he writes of power in its productive sense.

Of course, to say that “power is productive” in this sense is to say that power is everywhere and inescapable. Fraser describes this result as a “normatively neutral” account of power. “[E]very power regime creates, molds, and sustains a distinctive set of cultural practices, including those oriented to the production of truth,” she writes. “It follows, in [Foucault’s] view, that one cannot object to a form of life simply on the ground that it is power-laden. Power is productive, ineliminable, and therefore normatively neutral” (1989, 31). As Fraser sees it, the normative neutrality of Foucault’s account means that it lacks an explicit normative orientation for either resisting the all-pervasiveness of power, or even adjudicating between its various forms. In other words, he lacks a basis for preferring one power regime or set of social practices over another. While he occasionally calls for resistance to domination, he provides no coherent means by which to orient such resistance. “Why is struggle preferable to submission?” Fraser presses (Fraser 1989, 29). “Why ought domination to be resisted? . . . Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it” (1989, 29). The result presents itself in Foucault’s work as a “one-sided, wholesale rejection of modernity as such,” and this without any alternative with which to replace it (1989, 33).

Fraser’s charge finds an analogue in Rorty’s criticisms of Foucault. Rorty pinpoints “a crippling ambiguity between ‘power’ as a pejorative term and as a neutral, descriptive term” in Foucault’s work. This ambiguity causes the term to “los[e] its contrastive force” and thereby becomes “vacuous.” The result is not merely normative confusion, according to Rorty, but tends toward “political anarchism” (1991, 195–96). On one hand, for instance, Rorty agrees wholeheartedly with Foucault’s claim that “the self” is “a contingent product of contingently existing forces” (Rorty 1991, 197). However, he rejects Foucault’s claim that it is, therefore, impossible to determine which of those “contingently existing forces” and states of affairs are better, and which are worse—“that every social institution is equally unjustifiable, that all of them are on a par” because “all of them exert ‘normalizing power’ ” (1991, 197). As

Rorty sees it, Foucault's account of power pulls the rug out from under any possibility of ameliorating actual, existing social conditions.

What matters most from Rorty's point of view is "devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality" (1999, 5). He believes that the North American democratic experiment has accomplished this task better than most other social and political arrangements to date. "You would never guess, from Foucault's account of the changes in European social institutions during the last three hundred years, that during that period suffering had decreased considerably, nor that people's chances of choosing their own styles of life increased considerably" (1991, 195). For Foucault, every attempt to identify and reform undesirable conditions will, itself, be implicated in yet another form of the very power that it seeks to resist. From Rorty's point of view, this position presents a theoretical analogue to the Christian doctrine of original sin—"the old religious idea that some stains are ineradicable"; "the ubiquity of Foucauldian power is reminiscent of the ubiquity of Satan, and thus of the ubiquity of original sin—that diabolical stain on every human soul" (1998, 95). The result is a practical paralysis that rules out the possibility of actually improving concrete social conditions, and helps breed a dangerously debilitating form of theorized self-disdain. "Because [Foucauldians] regard liberal reformist initiatives as symptoms of a discredited liberal 'humanism,' they have little interest in designing new social experiments," Rorty writes (1998, 37).

If the latter is true of Foucauldians, it was not entirely true of Foucault himself. Peculiarly enough, at the point when Foucault was most emphatic about the inescapability of power in his writings during the late 1960s and 70s, he was also most politically active.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career Foucault asserted that there is a "permanent and fundamental" connection between philosophy and theoretical analysis on the one hand, and political activism on the other (1997, 293). Fraser acknowledges Foucault's persistent use of terms like "domination," "subjugation," "struggle," and "resistance," suggesting that they hint at a normative orientation implicit in his work. However, she claims that Foucault lacks the resources necessary to make any such orientation explicit. Assuming that Fraser's observation is correct, how might Foucault make such an orientation explicit and then develop it in ways that would permit him to differentiate between better and worse forms of social practices, institutions, and agency?

In his later interviews and lectures, Foucault considerably altered his earlier claims about the nature of power and the contingencies of

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Foucault became a vocal member of the Group on Prison Information, a group that attacked the prison institutions and practices of criminal reform in France.

personal identity. However, he held fast to his earlier view that “the self” is not an essential something waiting to be uncovered. According to that account, “selves” are historically local productions formed in relations of power such as linguistic, institutional, economic, romantic, familial relationships, formations, and fields. In its extreme form, this view implied that selves are simply determined by anonymous and arbitrary out-workings of bundles of power dynamics that happen to occur in a given context. This view seemed to challenge the very possibility of individual agency and responsibility. The subject was merely a “function of discourse” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, Part 1). What appeared to be individual agency was, in fact, more like a momentarily distinguishable wave that swells across the underlying body of historical and social formations, and was little more than an inseparable and fleeting manifestation of them. In his later writings, Foucault refined his earlier views about the self on precisely these points.

Foucault came to claim that while selves are not simply imaginary, neither are they purely arbitrary extensions of whatever practical and institutional forces produce them. They are, thus, not simply determined—nor equally un-free—in all circumstances and contexts. Rather, Foucault came to view the various relations of power in which selves consist as “mobile, reversible, and unstable” (1997, 292). In other words, the constraints and limitations exerted upon—even constitutive of—a self in given historical circumstances and cultural locations simultaneously enable possibilities for innovation and resistance insofar as that self was intentionally, perhaps artistically, cultivated. He came to think it possible to nurture or manipulate, to transgress and unlearn, relations of power in caring for, and thereby—in effect—creating, oneself. Alexander Nehamas clarifies this development in Foucault’s understanding of the self,

The self may not be the final reality underlying history, but it is not exactly a fiction either; and though it is not ultimately (or “metaphysically”) free, it is not exactly a puppet. Moreover, every form of power . . . contains the potential of its own undoing, since every prohibition, [Foucault] came to realize, creates the possibility of a new transgression. Since power is productive, the subjects it produces, being themselves forms of power, can be productive in their own right [1998, 177].

On the basis of these insights, Foucault came to speak of “self-creation” in terms of a range of historically situated practices made possible by all of the antecedent constraints of the time and place in question. He came to view self-creation as a task that afforded a way of utilizing the all-pervasive dynamics of power that he invested so much effort in identifying in his earlier work. “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to

create ourselves as a work of art," he wrote. "Couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" (1984, 350).

As Foucault came to understand it, the goal of artistic self-fashioning was not to identify some power-free location from which to resist power. The point, rather, was to reflectively explore the possibilities of cultivating or manipulating the inescapable, historically contingent power dynamics that make the self a self in the first place. Self-cultivation meant that one would seek to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking, what we are, do, or think." This task would seek to "give a new impetus . . . to the undefined work of freedom" (1984, 46).

This conception of self-cultivation rejected the idea of discovering "who one truly is." At the same time, it refused the notion that one can invent one's self *ex nihilo*. Rather, this task entailed "rearranging the given" and "manipulating the dated" (Nehamas 1998, 177–78). More specifically, it meant critically engaging the "models that [the subject] finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault 1997, 291). "Self-creation" thus came to look like a decidedly artistic endeavor with distinct ethical implications. Rather than a state of liberation from all antecedent constraints, Foucault spoke of freedom as a range of practices by which one might cultivate one's self in virtue of all the constraints in and through which one lived and moved and had one's being. He came to speak of ethics as self-reflective development of one's engagement in these practices of self-cultivation (1997, 284).

Of course, if "becoming someone else" was the goal of self-creation, the question quickly presented itself: Does it matter *who* or *what* one becomes? Will any old possibility do so long as it is born of the recognition of the historicity of the self one finds oneself to be and then artistically endeavors to become?<sup>2</sup> Foucault's celebration of becoming something other than what one happens to be again appeared to invite the charge that his account lacks a normative orientation by which to distinguish better and worse things to become. And yet, at this point in his work, Foucault may actually have in place the resources necessary for a normative orientation that Fraser accused him of lacking. In the following segment, I make the case that the normative orientation

<sup>2</sup> Foucault's later thinking about self-creativity was fairly preliminary at the time of his death. At that point he had begun to explore the ways "care of the self" had been practiced in Greek, Roman, and Christian contexts, in various forms of asceticism as well as in the exploration and management of pain and pleasure. What is clear is that at no point did he derive a distinct program for resistance in his work on the care of the self (1997, 93–105). Todd May provides a helpful account of self-care in Foucault's latest work, and how it coheres with his genealogical work of the 1970s (1993, 111–28).



provided by Brandom's account of expressive freedom is not only compatible with, and instructive for, Foucault's account of the ethics of self-creation, but in fact illuminates an ethical orientation already implicit in that account.

## 2. Brandom and Freedom through Constraint by Norms

Much like Fraser's reading of Foucault with which I opened the previous section, Robert Brandom takes language use as paradigmatic of what he finds most distinctive about essentially discursive, vocabulary-mongering creatures such as ourselves. In particular, becoming the speaker of a language is not simply learning to respond reliably to specific situations by applying the correct phrase out of a set stock (like the parrot trained to respond with the phrase "red car" each time a red car passes the window in front of his cage). The human capacity to apply concepts (paradigmatically, words) is marked by the capacity for novelty. As Noam Chomsky has shown, most of the statements that a given language user makes at any given point have never been uttered before (1965, chap. 1). Even the phrases passed back and forth between speakers in workaday exchange—"Have a nice day," and "Please pass the salt"—vary in meaning according to particular uses and in light of contextual and situational specifics. Different collateral commitments make the same string of words mean something slightly different in the mouths of different speakers. Brandom calls this capacity for novelty and innovation "expressive freedom" (1985, 186; 2000b, 17).

Expressive freedom is possible only through constraint by norms—specifically, through the practical application (and perhaps eventual mastery) of the proprieties that constitute a given practice. For instance, the ostensibly boundless capacity that individual language users have to say things never before said is possible only by virtue of the proprieties, regularities, and norms that constitute language use. All of these are constraints that make speaking possible in the first place (1985, 188–89). Expressive freedom occurs in performing the practice in new ways—innovating, improvising, and thereby transforming the practice. In principle, the practice will evolve like case law in the sense that particular applications of the norms of the practice further enrich the practice itself, as well as the capacities of the practitioner to perform the practice. Occasionally these will converge to produce precedent-setting instances of the practice, and practitioners, who transform the practice.

Take a musical example. The great jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong learned to play the trumpet in accord with of all the constraints of tone, pitch, and musical grammar. He apprenticed himself to the best trumpet players of his day like Joe "King" Oliver. And with increasing adeptness—and eventual mastery—Armstrong came to improvise and



innovate with the trumpet in ways never before seen or heard, ways that transformed and expanded the practice. His playing set a practice-transforming precedent by opening new and theretofore unheard possibilities for how a trumpet player could play and what trumpet playing could sound like. He changed what it meant to be a virtuoso trumpeter, jazz player, musician, and entertainer. Many of the trumpet players that followed Armstrong emulated his virtuosity, perhaps in hopes of surpassing mere imitation. The best of these sought to find their own voice, fashion their own artistry, and thereby further expand the expressive possibilities of the practice. These prospects for innovation and transformation were possible by virtue of the flexibility of the normative constraints implicit in (constitutive of) the practice. In all this, Armstrong exemplified how a precedent-setting performance of antecedently established practice can transform the practice itself, and perhaps initiate new ones.

I should note at this point that the expressive freedom that Brandom articulates does not fixate upon novelty and innovation. Such freedom is “expressive” because it is also characterized by an increasingly explicit and self-critical understanding and articulation of the practices in question. Increasing adeptness at the practice is accompanied by increased capacity to become critically reflective about the practice—to identify and make explicit the proprieties that implicitly organize the practice. This puts practitioners in a position to subject those proprieties—and the practice itself—to criticism, commentary, contestation, and revision. To push the previous example forward, even though in the 1950s Louis Armstrong would come to disparage Dizzy Gillespie’s invention of Be-bop jazz trumpeting as so much “Chinese music,” Gillespie’s innovation was as beholden to the influence of Armstrong’s precedent as much as his playing radically transformed and departed from that precedent. (“No him, no me,” Dizzy would say on the occasion of Armstrong’s death.) Moreover, their occasionally abrasive exchanges explicitly raised questions about what jazz was and what it ought to be. Once explicit, the normative presuppositions behind these questions—and the proprieties implicit in the practice itself—became candidates for reflection, criticism, and modification or transformation in ways that they had not been before.

Brandom presents an account of constraint and freedom similar to Fraser’s reading of Foucault’s “productive power” as occurring in the “simultaneously constraining and enabling . . . practice-governing norms.” In Fraser’s example, the constraints constitutive of language use “enable us to speak precisely insofar as they constrain us” (Foucault 1989, 31–32). Brandom fashions a conception of freedom through normative constraint comparable to Foucault’s, which he refers to as “creative self-cultivation.” Brandom writes,

Creative self-cultivation is possible only by means of the discipline of the social practices which constrain one, just as the production of a poem requires not only submission to the exigencies of a shared language, but the stricter discipline of the poetic tradition as well. One must speak some language to say anything at all, and the production and comprehension of novel performances requires a background of shared constraint [1985, 188–89].

Unlike Foucault, however, Brandom goes on to sketch out the social and political implications of this account. He proposes that the capacity for self-cultivation intrinsic to expressive social practices and practitioners provides a normative orientation for distinguishing better and worse types of constraints, and thus, social practices. Elsewhere Brandom explains,

What matters about us morally, and so ultimately, politically is not ultimately to be understood in terms of . . . the avoidance of mammalian pain. It is the capacity each of us discursive creatures has to say things that no-one else has ever said, things furthermore that would never have been said if we did not say them. It is our capacity to transform the vocabularies in which we live and move and have our being, and so to create new ways of being (for creatures like us) [2000b, 178].

In other words, this normative substance of our social practices provides orientation for assessing the legitimacy of social and political arrangements. Brandom clarifies,

Constraint of the individual by the social and political norms inherent in communal practices may be legitimate insofar as that constraint makes possible for the individual an expressive freedom which is otherwise impossible for him. . . . Political constraint is illegitimate insofar as it is not in the service of the cultivation of the expressive freedom of those who are constrained by it [1985, 188–89].

As the above passages indicate, Brandom avoids moving directly to the utilitarian calculus for the purposes of normative orientation. In other words, he sidesteps (at least initially) the kind of question that Rorty takes to be primary: has the sum total of human suffering (construed as mammalian pain) decreased in our society over the past century? Brandom would first ask questions like—have our political and social arrangements facilitated the cultivation of possibilities for novel performances of received practices? Have they fostered the capacities of communities and individuals to engage in, critically reflect upon, and thereby revise, expand, or alter those practices? Have those practices been expanded to recognize a broader range of practitioners and encompass increasingly diverse understandings and transformation of the practice itself? Ostensibly, Brandom could apply the same

questions to Foucault's conception of self-creation as criteria for identifying better and worse instances of self-creation.

Of course, even if Brandom's account here opens up a potential vista to a normative orientation for distinguishing between better and worse, acceptable and unacceptable sets of social practices and social and political norms, he leaves the political implications of his account woefully underdeveloped in his work. In other words, if Foucault errs in the direction of identifying the inescapability of power and domination in all social practices, Brandom errs in the direction of neglecting the ways that the social practices of which he writes are inscribed with systemic inequalities that often give rise to states of domination. In fact, Rorty suggests that Brandom's account of expressive freedom positively invites charges of "pseudo-aristocratic condescension and ivory-tower aestheticism" (2000, 189). Rorty writes,

[Brandom] courts [these charges] when he sympathizes with my suggestion that 'our overarching public purpose should be to ensure that a hundred private flowers blossom.' He courts [these charges] . . . when he goes on to say that 'pain, and like it various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a second-hand, but nonetheless genuine, moral significance' [2000, 189].

Notice that giving Brandom's notion of expressive freedom primacy of place as a criterion of assessment does not *preclude* attending to considerations of mammalian pain, or viewing such assessments as necessary to expressive freedom. In fact, freedom from mammalian pain is requisite for the cultivation of expressive freedom, just as certain basic physical and biological conditions are necessary for basic human survival and flourishing. Using expressive freedom as a normative gauge does *preclude reducing* our criteria for assessment to the sum total of human suffering. Nonetheless, Rorty's concern about the liability of assigning mammalian pain and suffering a secondary place raises important considerations. Does expressive freedom have a sufficiently sharp normative edge to accomplish what Brandom wants it to? Is Brandom's appeal to *bildung* (creative self-cultivation) yet another variation of privileged, bourgeois reformism? Lorde will suspect that expressive freedom is insufficiently radical in that it seeks to transform practices and institutions "from within." Can Brandom's account accommodate revolutionary *praxis*—the radical overturning of alienated conditions? This suspicion is all the more pressing because it might come not only from those who affirm that truly radical criticism must come from "outside," but also from thinkers who avow immanent forms of criticism as well. On precisely this basis, African liberation theologian Emmanuel Martey counters Lorde's repudiation of the master's tools in a way markedly different from the immanent forms of

resistance Brandom proposes. “Unlike Audrey Lorde, who might be wondering whether the master’s tools could indeed be used to dismantle the master’s house, African theologians are fully convinced that the gun, in efficient hands, could well kill its owner” (Martey 1994, 46).

A trumpet is not a gun. This banal observation is worth stating only in order to highlight the crucial distinction that these images convey in the present context—namely, the difference between the pretensions of revolutionary praxis and the resistant and transformative potential of expressive freedom. The former seeks to annihilate the conditions of mastery (and, ostensibly, the master along with them) in order to reconstitute altogether the context and self. Expressive freedom, by contrast, proposes to transform the conditions of mastery through innovative appropriation and application of the antecedent norms and structures, thereby converting the master to a position of non-mastery. The revolutionary impulse is exemplified by Jean Paul Sartre’s claims in the context of the Algerian War of Liberation against French colonial occupation that the colonized subject can reclaim and reconstitute his true humanity from subjugation only by exorcizing the colonizer. Thus Sartre writes that “killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free” (quoted from Fanon 1963, lv). Here the master’s tools (the colonizer’s gun and the violence by which he colonized) are necessary instruments for the eradication of the master’s house.

Of course, Sartre’s prescription for re-creation of one’s self through exorcism of one’s oppressor presupposes Sartre’s conception of “the self”—a self that is free only apart from, and in spite of, normative constraints external and antecedent to it. Such a self “surges up in the world—and defines itself afterwards” (Sartre 1956, 290–91). On this account, one extricates oneself from constraints through an act of self-creation conceived of as an assertion of one’s will. “The Other” is the source of restriction (“Hell is other people,” Garcin famously concludes in *No Exit*). Sartre’s conception is emblematic of a self that is authentic insofar as it unbinds itself from the context in which it lives and moves and has its being by projecting itself into the future in the interests of self-creation and emancipation. On such a view, annihilation of “the Other” is a viable—if not occasionally necessary—means for relieving one’s self of external constraints. Transposed into Sartre’s prescriptions for Algerian resistance to the French, “the colonized are cured of colonial neurosis by driving the colonist out by force” (quoted from Fanon 1963, lv).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Foucault contrasts Sartre’s conception of “self” to his own account of self-creation in “On the Genealogy of Ethics” (1997, 262).

Sartre's account of freedom and constraint provides an instructive contrast to Brandom's. Brandom rereads Hegel's account of normative constraints as generated when social actors hold one another accountable in mutual recognition. In fact, selves become synthesized in inescapably normative encounters of mutual recognition. As Brandom explicates Hegel, "To call something a self" is "to treat it as an I, is to take up an essentially normative attitude toward it. It is to treat it as a subject of commitments, as something that can be responsible—hence as a potential knower and agent" (2002, 216). The engagement occurs as reciprocal responsibility of practitioner to practitioner, and the accountability of all the practitioners to the norms constitutive of the practice in question. It is the norm-laden form of sociality that makes social interaction possible and makes a practice a practice in the first place. So understood, mutual recognition is an essentially social achievement. One becomes an "I" by recognizing another—"a Thou"—and, in turn, being recognized. However, while selves are synthesized in mutual recognition, this does not reduce "selfhood" to a product of intersubjective consensus. Mutual recognition is a normative engagement in the important sense that it is something about which any participant in the engagement (or everyone) can be right or wrong, can misrecognize another.

Say, for instance, that some "I" who recognizes other "Thous" as agents responsible for their attitudes and claims, and to whom he or she is responsible in turn, is refused recognition in return as a Thou. Say that she is recognized as an "It"—an object. Perhaps she is recognized as communicating and interacting with others in a derivative sense, and is ascribed something analogous to the status of a household pet or livestock. In a political framework that systematically denies the possibility of some group's capacity to participate in the practices of mutual recognition, each member of that group would be recognized not as an "I" or "Thou" but would be designated an "It." They would suffer some degree of what Orlando Patterson has called "social death"—a status that Patterson finds exemplified in practices of chattel slavery in the United States (2005, 5–9, 38–45, 337; see also Rawls 1996, 32–33). A society characterized by slave institutions and practices is predicated upon *misrecognizing* a group of people as lacking the basic capacities that make expressive freedom possible. Frequently, such institutional frameworks are structured in ways that intend to prohibit opportunities for the expressive freedom of those consigned to the status of sub- or nonhuman.

Of course, one might press, often in such frameworks expressive freedom has flourished among parties whose capacities for expressive freedom have been systematically denied. It was, for instance, in the context of slavery and Jim Crow in the United States that expressive

forms like spirituals, the blues, and jazz were born and thrived among the black population, as did improvisational religious practices such as “call and response” and the rhetorical extemporization of black preachers. In these contexts, was it not the repressive and inhumane constraints of slave-owning practices that made “possible for the individual an expressive freedom which is otherwise impossible for him” (Brandom 1985, 188)? Does the fact that these forms of expressive innovation occurred within political and social frameworks predicated upon slavery legitimate that framework? If so, does not Brandom’s notion of “expressive freedom as part of a process of cultivation of the self and of the community” lend legitimacy to that social and political framework?

Again, the institution of slavery and the cultural and political frameworks that sustained it were predicated upon systematic refusals to recognize a particular group’s capacity for expressive freedom. Moreover, the dominant practices and institutions within this framework produced and disseminated certain forms of knowledge that sustained those conditions. Many people living in the American slave-owning culture thought it quite self-evident that the creatures in question were less than fully human, created for labor, and thus to be property. The political framework instituted certain practices and prohibitions in order to perpetuate these understandings. Slaves were prohibited from religious instruction for more than a century. Once permitted to adopt the master’s religion, they were usually subjected to accounts of it that perpetuated the master’s understandings. Slaveholders deployed their own religious practices in innovative ways in order to perpetuate these understandings. Their practices of reading Christian Scripture, for instance, claimed that Jesus sanctioned the institution of slavery in his own day by having interacted with slaves lovingly, yet without ever condemning the institution itself. They claimed that God created a race of slaves by cursing Noah’s son Ham, and invoked St. Paul’s charge that slaves should obey their masters (Cannon 1996, 40–46). Slave masters justified slavery as a means of “converting the African heathen” to Christianity, portraying faithful service to one’s master as the surest way to be faithful to one’s heavenly Master (Raboteau 1978, chap. 6).

In such a framework, the realization of expressive freedom on the part of those misrecognized and excluded as practitioners does not legitimate the framework. Rather, those instances of expressive freedom occur *in spite of* the best efforts of that framework to prohibit them and deny their possibility. As such, they constitute acts of resistance and critique. They challenge the legitimacy of the dominant framework by challenging the stories and understandings and legal practices used to legitimate and perpetuate it. In many cases they do



this by appropriating the dominant practices and transforming them by employing their elements for different ends and in different contexts. James Cone points out, for example, that the negro spirituals and the blues grew out of the stories and characters from the Christian Scriptures (2004). In some cases, slaves directly appropriated hymns from the master's hymnbook, and stories from the master's Scriptures, and resituated them in the context of the work fields and slave congregations, or in the secrecy of slave quarters and "hush harbor" worship services. So resituating them radically altered their meanings. They became tools for coping and survival by being recast in ways that captured in song the sounds of the suffering, longing, and hope of the slaves in the fields. Eugene Genovese argues in his monumental text, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, that for the individual slave, the stories of Jesus relativized the master's authority (1974). They "placed a master above his own master and thereby dissolved the moral and ideological ground on which the very principle of absolute human lordship must rest" (1974, 165). Just as importantly, "The religion practiced in the quarters gave the slaves the one thing they absolutely had to have if they were to resist being transformed into the Sambos they had been programmed to become. It fired them with a sense of their own worth before God and man" (1974, 165).

Appropriations and innovative applications of stories and hymns from the master's religion also provided subversive tools when deployed as coded speech that facilitated passage along the Underground Railroad (Blount 1995). In each of these cases, the master's tools were innovatively appropriated and improvisationally employed, enabling the practitioners to "use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house." Such examples illustrate how the norms that make expressive freedom possible are everywhere, and can be employed in novel, improvisational, and resistant ways. Moreover, in the process, new traditions of creative expression were created. Appropriation and application of the master's tools did not merely permit periodically "beating the master at his own game." They also made possible resisting the game, and in time altering and transforming it in fundamental ways along with the very tools that they appropriated and applied.

The legacy of slavery in the United States is one rather stark example of the kind of political framework for which Brandom's account is relevant when he claims that a political framework is illegitimate insofar as it is "not in service to the cultivation of expressive freedom of those who are constrained by it" (1985, 188–89). At first glance, this might seem to apply the account to an exceedingly easy test case. Do we need an account to provide a normative trajectory away from chattel slavery? Is not the path beyond such utter dehumanization of other



people fairly self-evident? In the contemporary United States, slave institutions and practices are no longer considered to be morally or socially acceptable or legal. Does this mean that the forms of domination and power that they quite publicly manifest have ceased to exist? The comforting sense that such is the case betrays the fact that the legacy of slavery and the ensuing era of Jim Crow remain alive in insidious and pervasive forms. Foucault describes these forms as invisibly inscribed upon our bodies and souls and shot through our personalities, desires, and the languages we speak.

The explicit institutions of chattel slavery in the United States have ceased to exist, as well as many of the more explicit forms of domination, suffering, and mammalian pain that accompanied those institutions. But this is precisely the point at which expressive freedom provides a helpfully trenchant mode of assessment. For, if we gauge the adequacy and justness of present conditions exclusively by the sum total decrease of mammalian pain relative to the days in which chattel slavery was a central institution in our society, then severe forms of domination and inequality will remain insidiously invisible. Black people and people of color, and the poorest and most at risk, continue to struggle for full inclusion in North American and European societies that have long outlawed slavery. Yet many struggle for recognition as full participants in institutions and practices subtly coded by race, sexuality, class, and age that often most directly affect them. For many of these, the forms of expressive freedom that they exercise—in spite of structures and conditions that would prohibit them—operate as strategies and tactics for bare survival and minimal resistance. As an ideal point of normative orientation, expressive freedom will serve not just as bare existence and minimal resistance, but as the ends of the cultivation and expansion of human flourishing.

Holding the lens of expressive freedom up to Foucault's latest writing helps to illuminate the normative orientation for power analysis that he was beginning to articulate at the time of his death. In his latest work, Foucault moved into a position that, at once, accommodates the best insights of Brandom's account of expressive freedom, and supplements its deficiencies by its unrelenting focus on the micro-operations of power and domination. Foucault rephrased his earlier claim that "you see power everywhere, thus there is no room for freedom" to read "if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere" (1997, 292). On this understanding, freedom is not merely a possibility, but a necessity that opens the way for multiple possibilities. Freedom understood as "ethical practice" becomes possible, according to Foucault, not in spite of but as a necessary correlate to inescapable relations of power. In fact, Foucault goes so far as to claim that the very possibility of

relations of power presupposes freedom—that freedom is “the ontological condition of ethics” (1997, 292). Foucault explained this complex relation this way:

[I]n power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all. . . . [P]ower relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other’s disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides [1997, 292].

At this point Foucault’s position is quite close to Brandom’s. To be an agent is to be constrained as a user of norms. To be a user of norms is to have the capacity (in principle) to resist prevailing practices and structures of domination by utilizing the normative constraints constitutive of the practices and structures. In fact, these constraints presuppose freedom for their very existence. To render the other as a “thing,” as Foucault describes it here, is analogous to the kind of social death that occurs when a Thou is recognized merely as an It in the terms of Brandom’s I/Thou account. This would require the eradication of the capacity for expressive freedom altogether. As we saw in the case of chattel slavery above, it would result in social death.

Of course, at times, the most freedom that ethical practice makes possible is tactics of resistance for momentarily transgressing domination—miniscule cracks and fissures in the edifice of the master’s house. Foucault explains,

In a great many cases, power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow an extremely limited margin of freedom. To take what is undoubtedly a very simplified example, one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marital structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; women had quite a few options: they could deceive their husbands, pilfer money from them, refuse them sex. Yet they were still in a state of domination insofar as these options were ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation. In such cases of domination, be they economic, social, institutional, or sexual, the problem is knowing where resistance will develop [1997, 292–93].

Such cracks and fissures may remain short-lived and incidental. They might also give way to larger rifts and gaping holes. In any case, Foucault’s later account of freedom as ethical practice—and of the care of the self as an ethical practice in particular—retains his concern with the systemic and immanent character of power analysis. Brandom’s

account of expressive freedom helps us see that power analysis need not jeopardize a normative orientation by which to discern better and worse states of affairs or the possibility of agency (however slim) through which to resist those states of affairs. In the final section of this paper, I consider several objections to the social-critical potential of expressive freedom and self-creation.

### 3. Objections and Replies

Demonstrating the normative orientation for critique and agency for resistance at a theoretical level will invite objections at the level of practical application. It will be claimed, for instance, that the innovation and improvisation made possible by expressive freedom could be assimilated by the circumstances of domination, and applied in ways that (however inadvertently) perpetuate and aid those circumstances. It was about such a reality that the American sociologist and social critic W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903, when he described black people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States as “born with a veil”—a “double consciousness”: “this American world . . . yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (2003, 5). Du Bois continues,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [2003, 5].

With these words Du Bois identified conditions of self-loathing inscribed (often tacitly) in the personalities, upon the bodies, and self-conceptions of the people most disadvantaged in the white-supremacist ethos of the United States. His notion of double consciousness points toward the ways that expressive freedom might be co-opted and deployed in ways that perpetuate states of domination. So, for example, while Armstrong remains one of the premier innovators in the history of jazz, in the eyes of many of his fellow musicians, all of his genius and transformative impact upon that art form never fully escaped its service to the prevailing conception of what a black entertainer could be and should do within a social and political context predicated upon white supremacy. In terms of Lorde’s trope, in other words, Armstrong became a house entertainer for the master—applauded and admired so long as he fulfilled the master’s expectations and kept his customers satisfied. For all its beauty and expressiveness,

such innovation and improvisation exemplify the oppressors “keep[ing] the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (Lorde 1984, 113). Similarly, Frantz Fanon wrote disdainfully of the intellectuals among the colonized who had absorbed “the manners and forms of thought” from the colonialist bourgeoisie (Fanon 1963, 38–39). He thought that they had been insufficiently traumatized by the struggle for liberation. Their assimilated selves remained largely intact and, thus, in service to their colonizers. Do these concerns lead us back to Fraser’s criticism of Foucault with which we began, namely, with the claim that power so suffuses all practices that there can be no way to critique, resist, and transform it? Is a double consciousness or assimilated self inescapable for those who are subjugated or have suffered under colonialism? Is any innovativeness thereby forced to reflect and perpetuate the master’s rules and the master’s system, even if in a novel formulation?

It is at this point that Brandom’s account of expressive freedom provides a crucial addition to Foucault’s account. As we saw above, Brandom identifies the general result of expressive freedom as the ability to perform the practice in question in ways never before seen or heard and, thereby, contribute to the transformation of that practice (toward the end of new possibilities of what practices there are and what practitioners might be). Again, this entails the expressive capacity of making explicit the norms implicit in the practices and subjecting them to examination and criticism. Such critical explication makes those norms candidates for critical inspection and revision. From the vantage point of expressive freedom, then, it is no trivial occurrence that the assimilation of Armstrong’s genius into mainstream, white supremacist culture was a point of contention between Armstrong and Dizzy, Miles Davis and John Coltrane—at least as much as their musical differences. The social and political implications of their music and musicianship—along with the terms under which they were praised and admired—all became objects of critical reflection and contestation. The arguments that ensued highlighted the ways that their practices were bound up with—and beholden to—various institutions, and laced with certain insidious dynamics of power. Jazz musicians and critics brought the institutional modes of exploitation to the level of conscious reflection (for instance, so-called “junkie labels,” such as “Prestige,” came to be known as “plantations” for underpaying musicians in small bills cash to make it easier for them to get from fix to fix) (Nisenson 1995, 66). They questioned why black musicians were prohibited from recording with whites early on, and what parts they were permitted to play or sing when such collaboration was later permitted. Illuminating the conditions that made the practice possible, the institutional structures that sustained it, as well as the implications of the practice were means of critically interrogating the past and

innovating forward in increasingly explicit and self-reflective forms of awareness and resistance. Any innovative move that did not facilitate opening up the practice to critical scrutiny, and thus to transformation, did not contribute to genuine freedom.

Even so, some will say that the possibility of deliberative assessment of explicated norms implicit in practices remains at a potentially troubling level of abstraction. Critical tasks of holding one another accountable to the inferential proprieties of their claims and commitments often takes the form of a “disembodied logic of immanent critique” (Connolly 2001, 11). Moreover, it often deposits these tasks in the hands of professional logicians and philosophers trained to explicate and examine the logic implicit in ordinary practices. Brandom opens himself to this charge when he suggests that, because “making explicit what is implicit in concept-use generally is precisely the expressive role distinctive of logical vocabulary,” it follows that “the road to ethics is paved with logic” (2000a, 372).<sup>4</sup> If that is the case, such heavy reliance upon the tasks of deliberative explication risks passing over both the potential validity and the intransigence of “tacit” forms of knowledge such as sedimented intuitions, feelings, and perceptions that often resist explication, as well as the usefulness of nondeliberative modes of expression for purposes of resistance. As a result, the deliberative character of expressive freedom risks missing the full gravity of Du Bois’s point about forms of self-loathing and disdain for the shape of one’s body and skin color, which resist correction through deliberative interrogation, even after having been identified and made explicit. Embodiment is messy; the prejudices, intuitions, and desires that participate in actors’ normative attitudes become entrenched, and do not easily respond to conceptual explication, deliberative interrogation, and willed adjustment. At the same time, acquiring an increasingly self-reflective and critical awareness of a practice might take forms other than the logical explication of inferential proprieties.

Foucault, by contrast, pointed out time and again that the norms of practices are inscribed upon our bodies as much as they are shot through the words we use and ways we speak. They configure the spaces in which we live and move and the practices and institutions in and through which we dwell. These manifest themselves as habits and dispositions that often simply are not amenable to adjustment on the basis of explication, criticism, and argument. William Connolly provides an example to amplify the point:

<sup>4</sup> Brandom does not fully endorse this characterization, but sets it forth as a possible reading of his project in *Making It Explicit* that will most likely appeal to Habermas. Hence, this criticism may be better addressed to Habermas’s project. For Habermas’s assessment of Brandom’s project, see Habermas 2000, 322–55.

Suppose you become wary of the sense of disgust or panic you feel in your gut when, say, atheists or gays articulate their orientations to death, marriage, or sex in public forums. The gut, we now know, contains a simple cortical organization; and the cultural transactions through which it is organized issue in thought-imbued intensities that make powerful claims upon your habits, actions, and intellectual judgments. Such heartfelt intuitions may not be movable by will or deliberation a lot, then. But they might yield a little to arts of the self and micropolitical practices that enact new versions of those interactions between sound, feeling, image, touch, concept, and belief through which the intuitions were organized in the first place [2001, 11].

Connolly's insight here about the often extreme difficulty in refashioning one's self fits more readily with Foucault's notion of "micro-politics" of the self than with Brandom's appeal to the logical explication and interrogation of norms implicit in practices and cultivation of expressive capacities. Of course, if this is a particular strength of Foucault's analysis, Charles Taylor points out that he never employs that strength at the level of association in common action. The politics of "self-creation" remained for Foucault "a completely solo operation, the achievement of lone virtuosi, who could learn from each other but did not need to associate with each other" (2001, 94–95). If Brandom's account can be made to accommodate Foucault's attention to the micropolitical dimension of self-cultivation, it might have the virtue of expanding that insight and applying it at the level of social and political frameworks.

To be fair, the term "deliberation" is insufficient by itself to capture the full scope of the irreducibly social character of expressive freedom. Brandom draws the sphere of the "discursive" inclusively. This means that nonlinguistic moves such as all forms of perception and action are inferentially significant. They interweave with explicitly inferential practices of logical deliberation as "entryways" into and "exits" from chains of reasoning and speech.<sup>5</sup> This means that what I attend to in a given context, how I pay attention to what is going on around me, and the ways that I act and interact in response to those goings-on are all discursively part and parcel of the deliberative practices that Brandom describes. It cannot be denied that Brandom does little to explicitly develop the implications for embodiment and a spatial situation of the embedded character of his inferentialism. However, because observation and embodied action are both part of the substance of discursive formation and activity, Brandom's account is, in principle at least,

<sup>5</sup> See Sellars 1991, 321–58; Brandom 1994, 330–33, 618–32; and Stout 2002, 25–52.

amenable to explicit attention to embodiment, spatial configurations, and all forms of perceptual and contextual considerations.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, if Brandom's account attends to community concerns while Foucault's does not, we must see if it can avoid erring in the opposite direction and losing any sense of the individual. Brandom anticipates such an objection when he addresses "I-we" accounts of social practices (1994, 593–601, especially 599). On such accounts, the individual (I) stands individually over against the composite collection of individuals that takes the form of the community (we). Here, consensus of the community based upon intersubjective agreement cannot provide a final authoritative perspective. Rather, both communal consensus and individual claims are accountable to the norms implicit in the practices as well as the practical and empirical constraints that fill out the context (1994, 631–32).

Consider, for instance, the extemporaneous speech delivered by the black abolitionist, Sojourner Truth, to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in May 1851. On that occasion Sojourner Truth rose to the podium and addressed the audience in the face of protests from many of the white women there who feared having their cause mixed up with blacks and abolitionism ("Don't let her speak Mrs. Gage. It'll ruin us!" several insisted). According to Frances Gage's observational account of the event, from the perspectives of most in attendance that day, Truth was to be either lumped in with the general category of "women" by those who were willing to include her in their struggle for recognition, or she was to be excluded from the relevant sense of that category altogether because she was black and had been a slave. In this context, her very act of rising to the podium was a discursive incision in the deliberative engagement.

Truth first responded to the white Protestant ministers who had addressed the convention the previous day. She began by selecting from among the resources they had invoked, yet was using their reasons to challenge their conclusions, holding them accountable to the substance of their own commitments and affirming her own conclusions as correct. One had claimed that the biblical witness commends that women should have fewer rights than men because "Christ wasn't a woman": "Whar did your Christ come from?" Truth responded, "From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him" (Buhle and Buhle 1978, 104). She addressed a second objection that claimed that women were the fairer and frailer sex, and thus their status should be contingent upon that of men. With this response she replied both to

<sup>6</sup> For trenchant criticism of Brandom's project along these lines, see Rouse 2002, 210–33, especially 222–25.



those who would assimilate her to a general category of “woman,” and to those who would exclude her altogether:

‘Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!’ And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked. ‘And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power). I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?’ [Buhle and Buhle 1978, 104].

Truth’s response assuages two persistent concerns about immanent criticism. First, it exemplifies how immanent criticism need not take the form of philosophical “logic-chopping.” In this instance, Truth challenges and corrects her interlocutors’ misrecognition of her in an immanent fashion. Specifically, she invokes her body as a black slave, her experiences as a mother whose children had been sold into slavery, Christian Scripture, and the fact that her grief and anguish—even if refused recognition by white masters—was not refused recognition by Jesus. This is anything but “logic-chopping immanent critique.” This encounter might be redescribed as Truth challenging her interlocutors on the basis of the norms implicit in the practice of mutual recognition, saying—again, in effect—“You may think that you have deliberated effectively by factoring my standpoint into your assessments” (either by absorbing it into a general category of “woman” or excluding it altogether with the qualifications of “black” and “slave”). “However, here is how my standpoint defies your claims and commitments—and ‘Ain’t I a woman?’” For her purposes of correcting the uses of the word “woman” that prevailed in that situation it was no less discursively significant that Truth “bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her muscular power” as it was that she coupled that action with the explicit edge of the question—“Ain’t I a woman?” Her body entered into the deliberation in a way highlighted by Foucault’s account, but only implied by Brandom’s.

Second, Truth’s speech demonstrates that a social-practical account of critical deliberation does not lose the individual in a morass of intersubjective consensus about what is or is not, should or should not be, the case. Rather, Truth’s was an instance of a lone voice standing against the consensus prevailing in a deliberative encounter and saying, in effect, “I am right and everyone else here is wrong!” and, indeed, being correct about it. The normative traction of her claim

came from the norms internal to the practice in question as well as from those implicit in the commitments of her fellow participants. Every perspective is accountable to these normative constraints, including the deliberative (intersubjective) consensus of the group itself.<sup>7</sup>

Truth's address that day in 1851 has been far more than a crack along the foundation of the white supremacist, misogynistic house of the master in the United States in the intervening century and a half. Her indictment has proved to be at least as searing, incisive, persuasive, and inspiring as Lorde's remark about the master's house would be roughly a century later. When read through the lens of expressive freedom, it models how the I/Thou encounter avoids investing the community—or even a prevailing consensus—with unassailable authority, and thereby losing the individual in a tangle of intersubjectivity. It is crucial to note here that this is not a recipe for the celebration of standing particularities and, thus, a tolerant multiculturalism or politics of difference. On this point, Lorde is correct that the talk of “toleration of difference” so common in the mainstream Academy in recent decades amounts to easy reformism. “Difference”—understood as the normative particularity of the individual perspective—is a basis for resistance. It is a central feature of a framework of discursive exchange based upon accountability and judgment, and thus (plausibly) confrontation and agonism. It is a framework within which each voice and perspective can, in principle, challenge any (and potentially every) other participant in the exchange.

Of course, in practice, there is no perfectly level discursive playing field. And, in spite of the potential for Brandom's thought to be expanded in the above directions, clearly it needs something like Foucault's unrelenting attentiveness to the forms of domination and inequalities inscribed within—and perpetuated by—the very expressive practices that Brandom explicates. If I am right about the ways that their projects might be utilized to supplement one another, then the work of freedom—while “undefined”—is not without direction. Freedom becomes aware of itself as ethical practice (Foucault 1997, 286–87).

Some inquiring skeptic will want to know why “freedom” is to be preferred to oppression from the vantage point of expressive freedom. It is important to keep in mind the nature of the central claim in Brandom's account. On one hand, it is essentialist in the sense that to be a “self” is to be an essentially norm-using creature. To be essentially norm-using is to be constrained in ways in which freedom is the

<sup>7</sup> Brandom makes this crucial point when he draws a distinction between I-Thou and I-We accounts (1994, 593–601, especially 599).

necessary result. This banal freedom is reflected at the workaday level by the fact that originality is the norm rather than the exception in the most basic acts of human speaking and acting. Even the most concerted and perhaps well-trained efforts at exact replications of an action or performance will be nonidentical and, thus, unique. Of course, the ethical and political import of expressive freedom (for Brandom and in Foucault's later work) becomes actualized only insofar as it is identified, critically reflected upon, innovated and improvised with, and expanded. This is what it means for freedom to become aware of itself as ethical practice. Does this not tie Brandom's account to a troublingly *teleological* claim—a claim that expressive freedom is the given end of what it means to be human, that humans ought to be able to pursue that end? Have we finally identified a point at which Brandom and Foucault must part company? Perhaps not.

In expressive freedom, Brandom agrees with Foucault that one can never tell in advance from which quarter, or in what forms, innovation and resistance will come. So understood, the teleological element of freedom thus “undefined” is intrinsically open-ended. The particular form of this freedom will be conceived within and in response to particular social and historical circumstances. The forms it will take, and precisely how it might press against its antecedent constraints and concrete circumstances, are impossible to predict beforehand. What it will entail is the increased agency of the people involved in those circumstances, as well as their accountability to one another and to the practices in which they engage. Using the example of linguistic practices, Brandom describes the increased agency afforded by expressive freedom as the increased “capacity to transform the vocabularies [and practices] in which we live and move and have our being” by the practitioners who use these vocabularies (1985, 178). This is an “open-ended” *telos* in the sense that “transforming the vocabularies in which we live and move and have our being” transforms the particular conceptions of the *telos* in question, and thereby “creates new ways of being” (1985, 178). In other words, the *telos* of expressive freedom can be fulfilled only insofar as any particular conception of what the *telos* is remains subject to critical assessment, expansion, and revision, and is, from time to time, rearticulated and transformed. To become an adept user of a vocabulary (and thus, to fulfill the *telos* of a language user, so conceived) is to speak in ways that no one has ever spoken before, thereby enriching the vocabulary, the practice, (potentially) to alter the vocabulary itself, and thus, to revising (however subtly) the *telos* of the practice as concretely conceived at that point. It is gradually to be able to formulate and articulate ideas and intentions that were previously unknown or not possible for the speaker, and perhaps for the community of speakers. This contributes to what a vocabulary

is and what it means to be an adept user of a vocabulary. As such, expressive freedom is “teleological” in a formal sense. Its goal has no endpoint or form that is not subject to revision or expansion, just as Armstrong’s mastery of the trumpet redefined what it meant to “master” the trumpet. Armstrong’s virtuosity at the practice altered the practice and the normative conceptions organizing it. He exemplified freedom through normative constraint in which the telos of a practice can be fulfilled only in so far as that telos is simultaneously challenged, enriched, and transformed.

Of course, the question about revolutionary praxis implied by Lorde’s claim about dismantling the master’s house remains to be answered. In contrast to Sartre’s claim to free the self by annihilating the self’s oppressor, Brandom’s expressive freedom and Foucault’s self-creation are both deeply suspicious about claims that a self can ever wholly “disencumber” and refashion itself from scratch. Likewise, they are both deeply suspicious of claims that the ground of a given context can be cleared and entirely reframed. In fact, it is usually the revolutionary pretensions to accomplish just such conditions—promises of an “absolute emancipation”—that result in the opposite of what they intend.

Foucault remained convinced that it is not sufficient (though perhaps it is necessary) to simply speak of *liberation from* repressive circumstances. “[W]hen a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense,” he wrote, “but we know very well . . . that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society” (1994, 282–83). Expressive freedom affords an orientation by which to gauge the development of those practices of freedom, namely, in the direction of expanded and more encompassing forms of expressive freedom. These will be marked by the increased capacities and opportunities of those who had been dominated—or been denied candidacy as agents for whom expressive freedom was even possible—to participate in the dismantling of that domination, refashioning and transforming oppressive conditions.

In my judgment, the resistant and transformative potentials of expressive freedom do not present one horn of the old revolution/reform dilemma. Rather, they aid the kind of analysis that might mediate this dilemma. The best scholarship on slave religion in the United States has already articulated the standing complexity between reform and revolution that occurred in that context. In his landmark study, *Slave Religion*, Al Raboteau made the case that the roles of slave religion defy an either/or categorization of resisting/sustaining the status quo (1978). He writes,

Institutionally, the egalitarian impulse of evangelical Protestantism, leveling all men before God and lifting some up to declare his word with power and authority, gave slaves and free blacks the opportunity to exercise leadership. Usually this leadership was not revolutionary and from the perspective of political strategy it was overwhelmingly conservative. Yet political action is not the only measure of resistance to oppression. Despite political impotence, the black preacher was still a figure of power as an unmistakable symbol of the talent and ability of black men, a fact which contradicted the doctrine of inherent black inferiority. As white slaveholders occasionally recognized, black preachers were anomalous, if not dangerous, persons under the system of slave control precisely because their authority could not be effectively limited by whites [1978, 63].

It is this anomalous element characteristic of the black preacher's role in that context (among other roles, practices, and institutions) that most needs analysis.<sup>8</sup> This practice became effective as a form of resistance precisely because it fit easily on neither side of a revolution/reform antinomy. Nat Turner and John Brown had both led slaves to rise up against their masters. The perspective of expressive freedom is compatible with the claim that they were morally justified in doing so insofar as they employed just and proportionate means. However, in both cases, revolutionary violence presented a highly manageable form of resistance. The masters knew precisely how to quash resistance in that form, and both uprisings were quickly put down by military responses.

That said, used as a gauge for assessing the acceptability and deficiency of social arrangements—and thus when and how to challenge and resist those social and political conditions—expressive freedom provides grounds for declaring the portions of such structures that support those conditions deficient and for defying them. Revolutionary activity could not be precluded in principle.<sup>9</sup> And yet, what the term “revolutionary” describes has come to be reconceived within a framework of expressive freedom. It can no longer be conceived of as

<sup>8</sup> I do not have space to extend the present article to include a more detailed analysis of the roles of slave preachers and black preachers as exemplars of expressive freedom. The literature on slave religion is mixed on this point, and calls for cautious consideration in light of the framework I am developing here. While Genovese's assessment is compatible with Raboteau's above remarks, Genovese further emphasizes the political limitations that accompanied the forms of resistance and innovation that slave and black religion make possible (Genovese 1974, 280–84; West 1997; and West 2002, 32–36).

<sup>9</sup> I do not propose to answer this question once and for all in this essay. Richard Bernstein helpfully frames the conundrum by juxtaposing John Dewey's faith in the reformist capacities of critical intelligence to Karl Marx's claims on behalf of revolutionary praxis (1999, 80–81). I do think that the resistant and transformative capacities of “freedom as ethical practice” provide a means of mediating this dilemma.

the forever-deferred arrival of a new age (or reinstatement of a previous epoch) in which all that was is finally overcome with the result of absolute emancipation. It is, instead, reframed by the recognition that freedom is an ever-unfinished but ever-possible practical project made possible by normative constraints presently available, rather than the absence or alleged eradication of those constraints.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I presented an earlier version of this paper to the Pragmatism and Empiricism Group at the 2006 American Academy of Religion annual conference in Washington, D.C. I benefited from Wayne Proudfoot's response to the paper and from criticisms and questions raised by Eddie Glaude, Tal Lewis, Jeffrey Stout, Mark Cladis, Mark Lance, and Matt Bagger.

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