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ABSTRACT

At the End of the World there is blackness doing the (im)possible. This essay considers the (im)possibility of debate in our contemporary crisis through an examination of the domestication of potentiality in rhetorical dialectic. Debate, in its presupposition of stasis, parallels sovereignty's ontologizing operations of antiblack racial terror that suspend contingency. Meanwhile, blackness was already getting it done. The U.S. Civil War serves as a privileged example for thinking through blackness as the groundless constitutive outside to the possible that yet gestures toward other generative moments found in refusal of the disappointing options that pass for politics offered to us today.

KEYWORDS: antiblackness, stasis, contingency, debate, abolition

We are haunted by the specter of civil war. Liberal and conservative politicians and commentators openly express anxiety about the possibility of outright hostilities and the “unravelling [of] our national fabric” (Gambino 2017). Increasing polarization, identity politics that destroys persuasion, an atmosphere of conspiracy regarding the deep state or foreign puppet masters, apparent disenchantment with institutions, general mistrust in electoral politics, a gridlocked and weak congress, and open skirmishes between white nationalist and antifascists are put forth as signs of the end times (see, e.g., Blight 2017; Wright 2017; DeGroot 2018; Smith 2018). The looming crisis of the end of politics that everywhere drives the nostalgic desire for a return to a normalcy and civility invites us to rethink debate and to pose a different question that does not seek to redeem a past that never

was and continues to come at too high a cost for the wretched of the earth. Rather than “make debate great again,” I’d like to sit with the vertigo so as to consider debate’s (im)possible outside. Such a quest for a horizon that is before-after-immanent to the End (of politics or history or the world) will require that we rethink the spatiotemporal coordinates of the entire liberal project that secures the parameters of debate as the dialectical and agonistic contestation of the possible. My central interlocutor here will be blackness: that (non-)ontological constitutive outside of the modern grammar that is relegated to the realm of absolute necessity, negativity, incapacity, and pathology that subtends the political and the rhetorical. As that which is always already outside the World/History, blackness provides an anoriginary nonplace from which to think crisis and a politics of actualizing the impossible.

Imminent civil war is an interesting but unsurprising anxiety; it is unsurprising because the U.S. Civil War informs so much of the popular narrative of the United States and its ethical position that confirms the progressive nature of time, and because liberal sovereignty was always a war waged against civil war.¹ And it is interesting because the Greeks referred to civil war as “stasis.” Today standing, state, and stability are also meanings of stasis, as it emerges from *histemi*. Stasis then doubles both as sovereignty and as sovereignty’s undoing and evokes a constant permanence of war even in peace. Stasis in rhetorical studies takes on the meaning of “issue” and serves as a hermeneutic for coming to consensus on the point of contention from which debate proceeds. Stasis here also means standing in the sense that there is some “ground” in the form of prior consensus on the nature of the disagreement.² The somewhat paradoxical relationship between consensus and dissensus found in stasis speaks to a kind of disavowal of ungroundedness that precedes even the point from which to begin speaking. Must one have a presupposed potentiality for a common ground to be able to proceed in argument? Refusing this disavowal of groundlessness as it emerges in contemporary figurations of agonistic debate might enable us to more accurately think of rhetoric in its modern inflection as the presupposition of a ground as a war against its own void via antiblackness. The inversion of Clausewitz’s proposition is salient: rhetoric is the continuation of war by other means; rhetoric as a mode of war in an effort to ontologize itself against its groundless outside.³

The (im)possible is always at stake in debate since rhetoric regards the contingent as its necessary presupposition. According to Dilip Gaonkar,

this “key, but largely unnoticed, assumption in contemporary rhetorical theory” finds its basis in Aristotle’s response to Plato’s charge of the unspecifiability of rhetoric (2004, 5). Instead of freeing us to reflect explicitly on the nature of contingency, Aristotle’s domestication of rhetoric by placing rhetoric within the domain of the “contingent, yet probable” has prompted most rhetorical scholars to forgo consideration of contingency in favor of the thematic of probability: doxa, constraints, norms, ideology. Contingency in these schemas tends to be considered as a property ascribed to statements, propositions, and rhetorical acts—to the ontic world that constitutes the context of the rhetor—rather than as a mode of the subject or the singular encounter that constitutes a rhetorical situation. The possibility of rhetorical dialectic, that exigency that provides the opportunity for agonistic argument that can be sublated into judgment, animates historical progress and places debate as the ground for civic life. In the liberal understanding of contemporary debate, contingency takes on an interior spatial dimension as the possible content through a disavowal of the contingency of debate’s outside that is rendered impossible.

To say that debate is impossible is then to beckon to war on the horizon. It is to recognize the state of emergency as the end of the state of debate. The historical legacy of the U.S. Civil War will not let us end it there however, because blackness haunts even civil war, and threatens *stasis* in both its senses with incoherence. To leave raciality by the wayside is to repeat the endless disavowal that what we are threatened with is *civil war* and not *race war*. It is to still recuperate this World though the dialectical resolution that can adjust antagonism to agonism. It is to wage liberal sovereignty’s war against civil war all over again. Polite discussions that acknowledge racial terror only so as to explain away racial violence as the unique domain of extremists maintain a sense of white innocence that not only individuates a structural condition, but also pathologizes and prohibits black utterance (especially when that utterance might take on the form of rage) by adjusting the impossible demands of blackness back to the acceptable terms of debate. Within such discussions, blackness can only appear as an afterthought, as what Denise Ferreira da Silva terms the *affectable I* or outer-determined rather than self-determined subject in the onto-epistemological modern text (da Silva 2007). Raciality is intrinsic to modernity because it is necessary for the construction of the Subject—it names the materialization of the spatiotemporal forms that make the modern grammar. It creates the grounds for the self-determined subject. For da Silva, nothing short of a fracturing of the spatiotemporal formal principles of understanding that

subtend historical and scientific knowledge will redress the totality of racial violence, especially as it concerns black folk.

Let us then take seriously Du Bois's insight into the actual U.S. Civil War that animates so many antiblack pathologies today: that it was the black slaves, not Lincoln nor the Union, who won the war; and that it was the slaves, and not the South, who ultimately lost. For it was in the chaos and crisis of civil war that fugitivity realized freedom only to have it snatched away in Reconstruction: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. . . . Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk" (Du Bois 1935, 30).

In *Black Reconstruction*, we are gifted a tale of the violence of antiblack dialectic and the potential of black fugitivity. The common narrative that the North fought a war to end slavery and to preserve the Union figures the U.S. Civil War as a political battle concerning sovereignty and succession, or in the radical imagination as a battle for the future of capital between an industrial North and a pastoral planter economy in the South. For Du Bois this cannot be the whole or even essential part of the story, as both narratives naturalize the position of the slave and her nominal emancipation as derivative rather than active. In Du Bois's account, black liberation was never the terms on which the war was fought; the war was fought over competing concerns to limit the competition that black people posed to whites, both as slave labor and as free labor. The North for its part desired neither the abolition of slavery nor its expansion into the western territories. Northerners desired a resolution to an untenable status quo thrown into disequilibrium by competing visions for how best to subjugate the black population to secure the white settlerist way of life. It was not until the slaves, through the waging of the General Strike, showed the North the way to win the war that Lincoln reluctantly issued the Emancipation Proclamation (Du Bois 1935, 82). The General Strike was the moment in which the impossible was actualized, through an incisive refusal to continue under the terms presented: "This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations" (Du Bois 1935, 68).

Significantly, Du Bois's analysis of the Civil War extends beyond the Confederacy's surrender in 1865 to the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow in 1878. The democracy to come was quickly sealed off in the compromises made between the North and the South that we call

Reconstruction. Here debate, both as contestation on common ground and as the resolution to war, could only re-elaborate black suffering through nominal emancipation. In Reconstruction we witness how the bargain was struck for a newly transformed American whiteness produced through the sublation of the “Southern way of life” (the fantasy of which still animates grievances on the Right), but against black life. The reinstatement of master-slave relationships in confederate amnesty, black codes, the Thirteenth Amendment, vagrancy laws, convict leasing, extralegal terror, and the ongoing sentimental and material expropriation of total value from the slave that sustains global capital constitutes the emergence of the “afterlife of slavery” that characterizes our present (Hartman 1997).

Du Bois’s analysis disrupts the spatiotemporal coordinates of the political to think the (im)possibility of black politics and liberation. To think with and through blackness means that we cannot think the Civil War as a demarcated event distinct from Reconstruction and Jim Crow, or think the *stasis* of contestation between the divisions of a polity. We must abandon the liberal notion of progress that “accumulates . . . [and] . . . captures” black suffering in the name of securing an antiblack future as well as the appeal of universality and particularity which spatially “arrests Blackness’s creative potential” (Dillon 2013, 42; da Silva 2014, 84). According to da Silva, “such an understanding of total value [of slavery for the creation of the World] requires a suspension of the view that all there *is* is in Time and Space . . . the radical force of Blackness lies at the turn of thought—that is, Blackness knowing and studying announces the End of the World as we know it” (2014, 84, emphasis mine).

Da Silva joins a growing number of black scholars in many different disciplinary homes thinking through the metaphysics of blackness as that which is ungrounded and ontologically null with respect to the modern onto-epistemological paradigm.⁴ In the World that ontologizes antiblackness and racial capitalism, the calculus of racial terror exceeds and makes possible recognition through the reduction of blackness to the figure of the Slave. The middle passage here is metonymic, naming the production of anagrammatical blackness through the ongoing logistic of being captured and shipped, that reduces blackness from body to flesh, “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (Sharpe 2016; Spillers 1987, 67). Such a proposition returns raciality, specifically blackness and antiblackness, to the analysis of what grounds debate’s (im)possibility.

What would it mean to think debate as a praxis of the impossible? To think a blackened debate not as the presupposition of a ground through approximation to an antiblack human genre of Man, the Subject or the transparent I, but as Harney and Moten say, “jurisgenerative black social life” (2017, 15)? We would need to rethink the cherished terms of rhetoric itself. We might think debate not as dialectic that both precedes and proceeds from stasis, but as the refusal of “the call to order” that opens up black forms of life, even as form is placed under erasure (Halberstam 2013, 9). From this vantage point of blackness, which is not really a vantage point at all, but a being out of place and time, of Being under erasure in the condition of mutual dispossession, we might begin to sketch other visions that deactivate rhetoric’s ontologizing premises, to hold for a moment, in the hold and in the wake, not grounded but oceanic movement, decay and life, where even dead things become something else. It is here and happening all the time in the marooned spaces of the world. In studying debate’s (im)possibility, we might theorize at the End of the World as a praxis oriented toward its abolition.

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NOTES

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1. The modern state as the operation of war waged against civil war becomes apparent when we consider the Reformation and the wars of religion as the context for its emergence. Tiqqun and Agamben both turn to Greek antiquity and Hobbes in their insightful investigations of *stasis*. Their studies however are limited by the spatiotemporal scope of the European tradition. See Tiqqun 2010 and Agamben 2015.

2. For more on rhetorical stasis, see Crowley and Hawhee 1999.

3. Heiner persuasively argues that Foucault’s inversion of Clausewitz’s proposition was inspired by his time with the Black Panther Party, which had already developed an analysis of politics as war for the black colonized population of the United States. Foucault’s unacknowledged debt to black radicalism for his own intellectual development and his resituating of subsequent analysis back into the European tradition ironically speaks to the gratuitous vulnerability of black existence and black thought. See Foucault 1997, 15 and Heiner 2007, 322.

4. Many but not all black scholars working through the metaphysics of blackness think with Afro-Pessimism, but regardless of identification we can distinguish such scholars from critical race theorists in that they do not offer sociological accounts of race as exclusion or as additive. For more on Afro-pessimism, see Sexton 2008 and Wilderson 2010.



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