

The poetics of justice: aphorism and chorus as modes of anti-racism

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Abstract

This article revisits accounts of the black radical tradition as a critique and alternative to institutionalised modes of knowledge and learning, reprising Harney and Moten's concept of the undercommons to think about the constraints of the university and the possibility for thinking differently together. The deployment of linguistic and conceptual difficulty as a tactic of political speech is linked to Sutherland's discussion of Marx's poetics, leading to the suggestion that the repetitive interspersing of poetic or theoretical fragments in the public speech of social justice actors operates to create a shared rhythm that establishes mutuality. The piece ends with a discussion of the refashioning of Audre Lorde as a voice punctuating the assertion of anti-racist and intersectional consciousness via social media.

Keywords

Anti-racism, black radical tradition, social justice movements, undercommons, Audre Lorde

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In this era of highly staged speech and seemingly irresolvable contestation over the basis of knowledge, there is something to be learned from the re-entry of older habits of creating collective voice into our virtual public spheres. In particular, there is a resurgent interest in the creation of spaces of alternative thought, including modes of thought that can critique the workings of power and suggest other ways of being with each other. For understandable reasons, much of this discussion has returned to the value of critique, debate and verifiable knowledge, as an antidote to the concerted anti-intellectualism of a resurgent right in many parts of the world.

This piece does not seek to undermine the honourable and necessary project to reinstate the recognition of intellectual life as a central aspect of achieving anything close to a good life for all. However, it is a reminder of the other modes of speech that can contribute to the articulation of critical alternatives. In particular, here I discuss the repetitious use of aphorism via communications technology as a version of contemporary chorus. I use the term 'aphorism' here to indicate the circulation of brief yet often highly learned phrases or couplets, with key phrases subject to considerable repetition, in a manner that could be considered choric. The choric, of course, is not the analytic or the critical. These are not modes of speech that practice argumentation or lead people through the processes of critical analysis. Instead the exchange of aphorisms in virtual space serves to create a mode of choric collectivity that harnesses critical ideas differently. In this piece, I offer an initial account of what we might understand through an engagement with the repetition of aphoristic exchange in the name of fighting racism.

Amateurism and the black radical tradition

When I think of the black radical tradition and the multifarious inspiration that it has spread through social thought and movements, the spirit of amateurism is a central aspect of its reach. By amateurism, I mean the wilful and insistent critique of professionalised and instrumentalist knowledges and also the importance of key work that has been undertaken in spaces other than the

academy. I use the term 'black radical tradition' in a manner that follows Cedric Robinson and Robin Kelley, that is, as an intellectual tradition devoted to the defeat of racialised injustice, overtly anti-capitalist, but without any over-arching orthodoxy governing either mode of analysis or model of political agency. Following Cedric Robinson, this can be understood as a tradition of thought that forwards the potentiality of revolutionary change but is not limited to one or other theory of agency. Instead, the black radical tradition pushes us to uncover the modes of resistance, criticality, imagination and agency for social change that emerge from the experience of systematic racism and dispossession. This is a tradition of political thought that stresses the role of ideas and expression in forming political consciousness, but which, equally, is alert to the exclusions of the formal academy.

These factors have led to work that looks for intellectual spaces beyond the academic institution (James, 2001; Ramdin, 2017), work that seeks to dismantle the exclusionary demarcations of the academy (hooks, 1994) and also work in the fields of expressive culture that remakes our understanding of what intellectual work can be (Kelley, 1996). What I want to suggest is that the expansion of intellectual space offered by the resources of this largely US-authored black radical tradition (which, of course, is only one incarnation of such thought) anticipates the proliferation of intellectual exchange arising in a time of insistent critique and re-engagement with the academy as a nexus of power.

As other contributors to this volume demonstrate with far greater expertise than I can muster (see Lisa Palmer's contribution on peer-to-peer practices of learning and solidarity), the black radical tradition has included an insistence on the multiplicity of learning experiences and the value of learning that takes place in and through community, including through the sometimes fractious learning experiences of political communities (for a discussion of some more canonical elements of these debates and ructions, see Roediger, 2017).

From this history of amateurism, I take two things. One is the overt critique of institutionalised knowledge production, with the lesson that institutional knowledge itself represents a facet of the edifice of power, never innocent or uninterested. The other is the reminder that the pursuit of knowledge can thrive in non-institutional settings, perhaps more than this, an implication that the amateur pursuit of knowledge offers insights that bypass the narrow instrumentality of official institutions. Recent re-articulations of the tradition refocus our attention on these questions of knowledge consumption-production and the continuing need to exchange ways of knowing that connect us to the past and the future and to each other.

In their prose-poem-loveletter-philosophicaltract-calltoarms, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney reposition the black radical tradition in the 'undercommons', a place that is always bubbling under and within the locked-down institutional aspirations of capitalism, the university and all other carceral agencies. Although it is a read that assumes and offers a range of 'theoretical' knowledges, it is also an indictment and escape from a university (THE university, lest any pretend that it is not like that for them, in their place, among their friends and esteemed colleagues). This is a renewal of the black radical tradition that says, out loud, the things that unsettle scholarly space and all manner of worthy political projects. From Moten and Harney we are reminded, as if we could ever forget, that the university disallows study, (attempts to) discipline us away from co-existence, mutuality, learning. In an interview on this question, Moten elaborates,

'study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. ... The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities was already there.' (Moten in Shukaitis, 2012)

In the account of the undercommons, the university is the weight and constraint that militates against this doing with others. The university is eaten up with the imperatives of instrumentalism, its status reliant on enclosing the terms of knowledge and erasing or devaluing other modes of intellectuality, most of all those that threaten to escape the stifling accreditation of higher education in the market-place. Despite this, some traces of study and the undercommons can be discerned in the instrumentalist university. Moten articulates this point,

'Study has a relation to the university, but only insofar as the university is not necessarily excluded from the undercommons that it tries so hard to exclude.' (Moten in Shukaitis, 2012)

Yet this possibility is in battle with the instrumentalisation of something called 'knowledge' (and also other things) enacted as the ordering and containing hammer of policy upon the bodies and beings of those who have not yet learned to govern themselves. Through Moten and Harney's dreamscape narrative, we are reminded that the forced being together of the Atlantic crossing dismantles the terms of sentiment but is also the/a basis for the undercommons where we may feel through others, before and beyond differentiation. So give up on becoming a proper subject, forget the endlessly deferred aspiration to make a claim and be heard, refuse the seemingly unstoppable

instrumentalisation of learning and the colonising commodification of our life force, because something else is out there, in there, audible, touchable, feelable – in, as Moten writes, the break.

This is a proper seduction – a siren call – a lure not only to the bedroom but to the party, the teenager hearing their friends calling, the sound of music from the car, the street, the doorway, the giggle at the bus-stop, the distraction of each and every moment when, despite the might of the disciplinary institution and the imperative to be productive, you sense/remember another life. Of course, the register of this call is something like poetry.

‘is it not possible to recuperate something from this knowledge for practical advances? Or, indeed, is it not possible to embark on critical projects within its terrain, projects that would turn its competencies to more radical ends? No, we would say, it is not. And saying so we prepare to part company with American critical academics, to become unreliable, to be disloyal to the public sphere, to be obstructive and shiftless, dumb with insolence in the face of the call to critical thinking.’ (Harney and Moten, 2013, 34)

The amateurism of the undercommons has become not only a recuperation of the study that has taken place beyond the academy but a mode of survival within the academy, and perhaps a vehicle of (occasional? Temporary?) escape. In a moment where every shred of potentiality within academic spaces appears to be colonised, already weaponised in the service of a dehumanising productive economy that renders us unmade and insufficient, the undercommons wants us to mess with the boundaries again, ours and theirs.

In case we mistake this love-letter for another instance of the anti-intellectualism in the name of populism that has infected so much political life, including in the university, the seduction of the undercommons is one of (fugitive) planning and (black) study. The title of the work reclaims these practices, stealing study and planning away from institutional formations that squeeze out the music, the mutuality, the pleasures of study. This is an echo of critiques of the psychosocial wounding caused by the neoliberal university in its addiction to precarity, over-work and compulsive and compulsory competition (Gill, 2014) and also of the inadvertent anti-intellectualism of the university as business (Noonan, 2016). Yet against such laments, Moten and Harney suggest that study happens despite the stern and insistent injunctions of the university, but secretly, underground, in moments of unauthorised being together, but also that the project of knowing extends beyond and across the spaces of formal education. What differs in their account is the

critique and refusal of the instrumentalisation of this apparently generous conception of learning. When government and university conspire to accredit everything and to cajole populations into endless processes of self-making under cover of education but for the purposes of value-extraction, then only the undercommons with its wilful unfinishedness (no qualification!) can sustain us. Actually, Moten and Harney are pretty funny about the miseries, the oh-so-self-conscious miseries, of academic life and the very particular work that is achieved through this choric performance. I laughed in recognition but also longed to meet the call to rush out,

‘out into the world, the other thing, the other world, the joyful noise of the scattered, scatted eschaton, the undercommon refusal of the academy of misery.’ (Harney and Moten, 2013, 118)

This is the black radical tradition as the unleashing of the pleasures of study and an ease in being with each other that disrupts the will to order, to productivity, to incarceration. Not for the first time, the implication is that how we speak to each other, the words and the cadence, the music and the texture – that is also, or maybe most of all, the secret to unlocking new worlds.

Poetry and justice

While writing this piece I had the good fortune to see Keston Sutherland speak on Marx’s poetics, an arresting performance that argued, among other things, for the importance of registering the poetics of *Das Kapital* and the work done by the linguistic difficulty and invention of Marx’s writing.

A central thread of Sutherland’s argument related to the difficulty and jarring quality of neologisms coined by Marx to stretch language to register the monstrous combinations of capital. This is poetics as linguistic violence, designed to cause discomfort, because the object under discussion demands discomfiture. In an earlier incarnation of this argument, Sutherland writes of Marx’s account of the fetishism of commodities and their secret as,

‘a work of sustained, aggressively satirical “détournement” in which risks and failures of style are arguments in themselves, irreducible to theoretical propositions.’ (Sutherland, 2008, 5)

Sutherland makes this case not in a spirit of literary enjoyment ('Ah, the pleasures of Marx the literary scholar') but in order to force a point about the working of language as more than explication. In fact, Sutherland ridicules those who relegate the language of Marx to the realm of entertainment or delectation.

'so long as Marx's concepts can be specified, Marx's style need only be enjoyed.'
(Sutherland, 2008, 6)

Against this, Sutherland proposes a reading of Marx's language that registers the jarring impact of jargon and/or new terms coined to shake readers into recognition and also the deployment of stylistic innovation not in the pursuit of beauty but as 'arguments in themselves'. This includes failures of style that operate to satirise the bourgeois reader, that is, the work's primary (but not sole) audience.

Sutherland points to the shifts in meaning that arise from attempts to translate the term 'gallerte' - a term translated as 'congelation' or 'congealed quantities' as a figure through which to understand the character of abstract labour. Sutherland highlights attempts to excise jargon and satire in translations of Marx, in favour of what is described as an Althusserian push towards 'theory', with 'theory' required here to be 'not literary'. Sutherland expands on this idea by focusing on what comes to be translated as 'congealed', contrasting 'flussig' (which combines the concepts of flow, frozenness and the possibility of reversing the process) with 'gallerte', a word significant because it is not an abstract noun but an actual commodity widely consumed among the projected readership of the first publication of *Das Kapital*. In Sutherland's argument, the loss of this jargonistic/poetic licence obstructs our understanding of what Marx seeks to communicate in the image of abstract labour as a gelatinous mass of undifferentiated animal products and the attendant disgust at this image that should be embedded in the reception of this concept.

At this juncture, we might pause and consider how this highly particular and focused reading of one exemplary text can assist us in grasping the far more varied and variously authored outcomes of a 'tradition'. The satire that Sutherland identifies as central to the workings of Capital as at once a theory and a poetics, both a way of understanding and a mode of literariness that cannot be reduced to argumentation, does not map readily onto the diverse body of material that might be considered as belonging to the black radical tradition. After all, we are considering something close to a mode of being here, not a single-authored founding text (however capacious and multi-voiced

that text might be). However, if we shelve Sutherland's interest in a kind of intentionality for a moment, the aspects that he names as satire, literariness and style may offer some insight into the linguistic performances remaking the spaces of black and other radicalisms.

By this I mean that the exchange of brief snatches of highly theoretical material can become a form of literariness as linguistic and conceptual difficulty is presented as display without explanatory context, that the interspersing of such theoretical language among other forms and registers represents an innovation in style that can work differently to 'pure theory' yet still offer another route to insight. To Sutherland, Marx's language, if saved from the over-zealous tidying of the will to theoretical purity, can guide the reader to 'inhabit the dead end of a terminally obdurate contradiction' (21), because this dead-end is the heart, the very essence, of capitalism.

The focus of such an analysis of the poetics of political thought is language. The point here is to think about what happens when new coinages and portmanteau words and the bringing together of extreme linguistic dexterity and extreme anger at injustice all combine in the making of a text that, according to Sutherland, summons up the experience of living death through capital by the very jolting difficulty of its language. Not, we must understand, the difficulty of the esoteric. This is not about displaying elite knowledge as a test for the reader. Instead, this is a bending of scholarship and culturedness and (educational) privilege in the service of registering the dark excesses of capital's voracity. In this process, the shock of recognition that arises in response to new coinages that must emerge to meet the horrors of new conditions but which trip up the tongue and disturb consciousness reveals a poetics in service to movement building, although it is the most unlikely of recruiting methods. In our own moment of crushing but mundane violences, I wonder if the odd difficulty of some academic language might enter processes of mobilisation for similarly counter-intuitive reasons.

The black radical tradition, although we might debate each component of the label, surely seeks to register another monstrosity, the monstrosity of racialised violence at the heart of capitalism. When Cedric Robinson coins the term in his ground-breaking work *Black Marxism*, he presents a critique of both the dehumanisation of Africans in the extraction of value through violence and of the failure of a Europe-obsessed Marxism to register what can be learned from the histories of the African diaspora. Central to Robinson's account is the assertion that resistance can arise and be informed by a shared history and a reserve of shared reference, and that this oppositional agency in the face of

oppression may not, has not, fitted tidily into more orthodox accounts of the emergence of the class for itself. Reflecting on Michael Craton's description of slave rebellions as a series of heroic failures that led to a regrouping of hegemonic forces and the entry of other modes of exploitation such as wage slavery, Robinson writes,

'whatever the forms primitive accumulation assumed, its social harvest would also include acts of resistance, rebellion, and, ultimately, revolution.' (Robinson, 1983, 164)

The point here is not only to register the array of variously forced labour that continued and continues after the Atlantic slave trade, although that is also an important corrective to how we might think about the world-shaping place of labour. The aspect that describes the particularity and promise of the black radical tradition is the unexpected social harvest, the eruption of resistance in apparently unlikely sites. It is in these other political and cultural resources that the tradition is spoken, not emanating from a constitutive contradiction within the production process but instead as a result of an improper, informal, backward mode of integration into processes of accumulation. Robinson views these other resources as an outcome of a silenced shared history and as a possibility that arises in the process of resistance itself. Although theories of revolution have overlooked the actually revolutionary actions of those forced to labour,

'collective action has achieved the force of a historical anti-logic to racism, slavery and capitalism' (Robinson, 1983, 240)

As a model of resistance articulated as the expression of shared will, referencing the slave rebellion as a direct response to oppression and subjugation, the ability to share experience and consciousness is highlighted. The resources of 'culture' are central to this account. Culture is what makes collective action possible here. Yet in a context of subjugation, 'culture' must animate consciousness through coded or indirect or stylistic means.

These aspects have been consistent within the black radical tradition. As intellectual work done on the hoof, despite or alongside or beyond the institutions of formal learning, the black radical tradition has exemplified the possibility that 'risks and failures of style are arguments in themselves'. This is apparent in Cedric Robinson's presentation of Dubois, C.L.R. James and Richard Wright as emblematic figures of the tradition, each employing one or other stylistic mode to avoid the crass literalism and limitations of the bald argument. When, twenty years later, Fred Moten publishes *In*

the Break, we might understand this as picking up Robinson's thread, with an explicit nod to Robinson's influence in the opening epigraph from *Black Marxism*,

'black radicalism cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis ...'

Unlike the satire designed to puncture the self-image of the bourgeois reader identified by Sutherland, enunciations in the name of the black radical tradition are targeted at those who might benefit from this movement, those who might recognise their belonging to this submerged tradition that flows in and out of everyday life and high (and low) theory. However, now in this moment of proliferating 'public' enunciation through technology, we might think again about who is addressing whom and in what register.

In particular the performance of political allegiance through social media greatly enlarges the potential audience of such speech. Whereas in previous times we might have considered the articulation of black radicalism in political and scholarly writing and the relatively confined arenas in which such matters might be discussed, including streets, protests, meetings and rallies, now the possibility and frequency of such explicitly political speech has increased greatly. The terrain of political speech has enlarged and with this enlargement there has been a renewed attention to the role of political speech in occupying political space, shaping the imaginable extent of debate and in both rallying solidarity and identifying enemies. For those with political memories that predate the ascent of social media, we might consider our current phase as something like being in a meeting that never ends, so that the battle to make the definitive point that will lever audience opinion to the next stage in consciousness (ever the objective of earnest speech-makers across the left) may continue across time and time-zones until a new topic of interest redirects the conversation. For those with no political memory before social media, please remember that some of us, albeit a dwindling group, consider political speech to consist largely of a series of transitory skirmishes where a momentary advantage may be achieved but may not be consolidated through speech alone. I highlight this slightly embarrassing generational difference only to remind readers that there may be more than one understanding of the operation of political speech in play, even among comrades.

Two immediate outcomes of the extension of political speech into the realm of social media are (i) an enormous increase in the visibility of such speech as an aspect of how participants in social justice movements speak to each other and in how movements are presented to an 'outside' world, and (ii)

a stretching out of political geography with far more transnational exchange but also a disproportionate representation of speakers based in the United States. Taken together, these two occurrences create a terrain where social justice activists may be in a continuous and often explicit dialogue with mainstream politics and also with a wider public, with the reference points of highly located struggles also entering this expanded landscape. For a detailed account of the most famous example of this amplification of local struggles through use of social media platforms, see Wesley Lowery on the trajectory of BlackLivesMatter. In this extended terrain of political speech, the exchange of fragments of thought, emotion and analysis increasingly becomes the manner in which political community is articulated.

Intersectionality in the street

Somewhere sometime, but in the last five years, I started to see the term intersectionality on placards and political statements not only on course handouts or bibliographical lists. The maxim ‘my feminism is intersectional or it is bullshit’ was seen (by me) at protests and not only on the internet. Sisters Uncut proclaimed themselves as intersectional – and tweeted a link to a piece on transversal politics by my colleague, Nira Yuval-Davis (1999). At the Black Workers’ Conference of the TUC, (some) delegates started to talk about intersectionality as a valuable and necessary addition to the repertoire of black trade unionism.

The take-up of intersectionality appears to represent a genuine push to integrate intersectional learning into the spaces of social movements. Intersectionality is not a forced portmanteau or even quite an original coinage, but as a term it is a linguistic innovation. This linguistic innovation is central to the narrative of intersectional understanding. We learn, from the now canonical texts of intersectionality, that existing conceptualisations of discriminatory injury do not, cannot, register the multiple and simultaneous injury experienced by black women. This is the most proper account of linguistic innovation. By identifying a gap in the language, we are encouraged to register the aporia in our thinking. It is that most perfect of jargon words, the one that reveals its own hitherto unseen object.

However, this jarring jargonism and precision of theorised observation seems far from the push to populism that has characterised some other mobile forms of political speech. More often the populism of the right relies on comfort and familiarity to elicit the intended response from

audiences. For the right the register is nostalgia and that requires a very different way with language. If there is a poetics, it is one that is wilfully cliched because the repetition of cliché is what buoys up the fiction that these are widely held feelings that are based in a shared history.

Of course, the left can use this kind of choric nostalgia as well, as can be seen in both the attempts to re-purpose 'patriotism' (read 'nationalism') for the project of a renewed centre (or centre-left or old-style labourism) and the attempts to mythologise the creation of the welfare state as a reference for a shared history of mutuality (a well-known incarnation of this project is 'Blue Labour', an attempt to meld together social conservatism with economic redistribution, see Geary and Pabst, 2015; for a critique, see Smith, 2016). In each instance, from right and left, this is use of repetition and myth-making that seeks to create the sensation of pre-existing connection (to some, for some) among the population. The point here is to persuade the audience that they know and live this register of language already and need not interrogate the conceptual claims of these utterances because they represent a shared structure of feeling that does not require defence through argumentation. My suggestion is that the poetics of social justice movements employs similar tactics but deploys poetic and/or jargonistic speech to imply/access a shared space that is not registered by argumentation but might exist alongside conceptual analysis. This can include the repetition of jargonistic terms or poetic fragments in order to create a choric wordscape, enacting Rickert's account of the chora in an age of new media where,

'minds are at once *embodied* ... and *dispersed* into the environment itself, and hence no longer autonomous actants but composites of intellect, body, information, and scaffoldings of material artifacts' (Rickert, 2013, 43)

Here the chorus does not replace the work of political analysis and analytic alternatives also are expressed and exchanged, but the chorus intervenes differently creating a continuum of speech/sound/words that positions participants as simultaneously speakers and listeners with mutuality affirmed through the rhythms of mantric poetics.

Poetry as political analysis

Against this backdrop and twenty-five years after her death in 1992 the writings of black lesbian poet and activist, Audre Lorde, are circulated widely via social media, in the main as part of the

making of a public space for the exchange of ideas, feelings and values in the pursuit of social justice. In particular, a number of key phrases from her work have become mantras, repeated as touchstones to a larger body of thought and as a mark of affiliation.

By mantra here I do not mean the snide derision that so often accompanies this borrowed term in English usage. 'Mantra' is a way of thinking of language that should be considered as akin to poetics. Although meaningful, the power of the mantra arises from repetition. It is the rhythm of repetitive chanting that promises a shift in consciousness, a way of using language to unlock another vista but through bypassing signification and returning to language as physicality.

The sharing of aphorisms as part of marking a political affinity does not entail an erasure or absenting of meaning. Instead, very brief fragments of thought are exchanged in an echo of other modes of religious practice. In the shared and circulated aphorism, we encounter a compressed world-view and a salutation towards better times.

I began this piece with an attempt to tabulate the references to key theoretical terms and/or literary or theoretical texts among activist groups. However, immediately this has felt too close to the intrusions of the state and the frightening detail of surveillance that has characterised recent decades of UK political life (<http://undercoverresearch.net/>). Therefore instead of quoting directly from publicly available material such as blogs, facebook sites and twitter feeds, here I prefer to indicate more generally the mobilisations that have informed my reading of the terrain. These include:

- The renewal of feminist direct action, both by large and famous groups and by smaller more local initiatives;
- The multi-faceted battle to decolonise education and to challenge the embedded racism of educational institutions;
- Critique of and actions against borders, including the extension of no borders thinking (an extension that can reach into battles to retain public services and into prison abolitionism);
- A queer politics remade for the twenty-first century, deeply influenced by battles for trans rights and recognition, but also enacted through grassroots solidarity with migrants or for housing rights or against state violence;
- The transnational sharing of discussions that arise from BlackLivesMatter but that range more widely to consider many varied manifestations of contemporary racism.

All of these strands of activism have referenced theoretical debates about intersectionality and the work of Lorde in particular. I am sympathetic to the exasperation voiced in relation to the popularisation of intersectionality as 'a mainstreamed shortcut that can instantly 'politically correct' your output, the pain-free way' (Erel et al., 2010, 72). However, as well as appropriation, the repetition and sharing also suggests a longing, a push towards the poetics of love that Grattan discerns in Lorde's work and in the renewed street activism of BlackLivesMatter (Grattan, 2017). Here I offer no more than some initial thoughts on how we might build an understanding of the circulation of political speech as always simultaneously theory, jargon and poetics through a consideration of some of the most quoted fragments of Lorde's work.

'The master's tools will not dismantle the master's house'

This phrase, perhaps more than any other, has come to represent Lorde's work in this new phase of popularisation. It has been claimed by movements to decolonise education, but also retains its earlier implication that we must all, and women of colour in particular, seek resources of understanding, critique and sustenance that do not emanate from those who dominate and exclude us.

This phrase also has ignited some of the most angry responses – from the right, because it is seen as a refusal of the gains of civilisation, from the left because it seems like an abandonment of immanent critique in favour of a form of nativism (for an attempt to mediate between these readings, from the left, see White, no date).

However, in the context of the black radical tradition, this phrase has served to refuse the de limiting of argument and analysis by the terms of the powerful and as a reminder of other resources and ways of understanding that emanate from elsewhere. It is precisely the aspect that is derided as utopian or non-dialectic, the gesture to a space beyond, that can lead to an appreciation of the promise of the black radical tradition. Many will never know the context of the original piece, written as a critique of the absence of black women speakers at a conference to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Instead, the phrase has expanded to become a mantra for movements critiquing institutional dominance and seeking an elsewhere from which to speak. As both a critique of reformism and a corrective to closed accounts

of the emergence of political agency, this fragment indicates the trace of the black radical tradition as it moves across many movements.

‘Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.’

Lorde’s account of her experience of cancer, *The Cancer Journals*, predates much of the testimonial-style accounts of serious illness and treatment that have become so prevalent. In fact, she anticipates the emergence of feminist and other political analyses of illness and care by many years.

In response to systematic depletion and the epidemic caused by what Danny Dorling calls the tenet of injustice that despair is inevitable, the call to self-care as an act of political warfare enables a recognition of self as an importance and valuable entity. While the dehumanisation of day-to-day racism and other forms of exclusion and othering erases a sense of self and value, belittling the need for recognition and care, the assertion of the need for self-care speaks to the deep need to see our lives and selves as intrinsically valuable. This, too, is a deep theme in the black radical tradition, the reconnecting of body and mind and the affirmation of the intrinsic value of this human capacity and frailty.

‘Your silence will not protect you’

Taken from a piece titled ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action’ included in *The Cancer Journals*, this phrase has been re-circulated as a call to courage against sexual violence, against racism, against homophobia and transphobia and, very importantly, as a call to end the silence of bystanders. Much of Lorde’s work returns to the importance of voice and the assertion of being through voice. This call to speech for those who have been hidden and unheard has become another repeated mantra, an affirmation and a prayer. The words to whisper while you walk through the valley of death, or to pass on to a friend in a moment of mutual terror. Most of all, it is a call to speech for all those rendered speechless or left unheard or without words, because the noise is a disruption of the order of the powerful. In an expanded arena of speech, the exchange of this fragment also serves to affirm the value of participating, of speaking and of connecting. Without any clear sense of what might happen after the silence is broken, this is an affirmation that speech is the first opening of possibility.

‘There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.’

This dictum, extracted from Lorde's famous speech/essay 'Learning from the sixties', has served as a popularising summary of intersectional politics. As a corrective to the feminism that is not intersectional, but also to any pretence at progressive politics that cannot see feminism or deal with racism or challenge heteronormativity or welcome different bodies, this phrase appears as an assertion of our interconnectedness and as a blueprint for intersectionality as practice. It is the adornment on t-shirts and badges and banners but also, more spikily, a retort to the allegation that so-called identity politics has narrowed political imaginations. In common with other popularised fragments made aphorisms, it is a phrase that demands that we revisit our understandings of how claims are made and what politics is for. Even if the message only hits home some of the time, it remains transformative.

I present Lorde as one example of the re-use and recirculation of aphorism as a tactic of political speech. This claim is complicated by the strong sense of ownership of Lorde and her work expressed by a new generation of black feminists (Ince, 2018; Grattan, 2017) and also by wider fractious debates about the appropriation of the cultural and intellectual property of the racially subordinated. However, against this, here I suggest that in an echo of the derided practices of sloganeering, where political demands and analyses are reduced wilfully to memorable sound-bites, retelling political analysis as aphorism enables a far wider audience to have a sense of ownership in relation to (something like) political theory. Lorde's writing, spanning poetry, written prose and spoken word, lends her work to such renewed circulatory practices with a poetic phrasing lifting key statements about political ethics or practice to the status of possible aphorism. Put otherwise, she knew how to write a good slogan, a slogan that could speak to people's hearts and fit the political times. Most of all, and this sentiment is repeated alongside the repetition of Lorde's own words, she could speak/write in a way that seemed to sum up and articulate what people already felt. This is political education that raises consciousness by saying, you know what, you know and live this already. It is an affirmation of the listener and it is phrased in a manner that encourages the taking of the words as your own, as a re-articulation that can express the thing you already knew but could not yet say. I want to argue that this structure of political speech and understanding is central to the black radical tradition and the extended recirculation of this aphoristic thought represents its continuation. This is one, perhaps the overwhelming, insight of the tradition – that we are, none of us, lacking. That to be silenced is not to be without voice. That another knowledge exists, however muted. That the potential for freedom resides in us all and always has.

The attempt to remake political space through sharing speech acts across media platforms employs more than one register. There is, always, the attempt to convey an alternative analysis and to sell the over-arching insight of the theoretical account. However, in an arena so insistently multi-vocal, there is also another register that we might understand as riding cacophony. By this I mean that this is not the singular and amplified statement that rises above (and silences) other voices, but instead represents enunciations that echo, amplify or ride the rhythm formed by collective voices. We know already that this might entail a stretched out (across space and time) call and response (Gosia, 2012). It might also be understood as arising from the insistent simultaneity of repetition and adaptation.

As a mode of making mutuality and staging collective voice, only religion has inhabited similar practices. In saying this, I don't wish to suggest that this is the derided discourse of unquestioning belief. Instead, we might think of this as a register of political speech that operates beyond 'the analytic', beyond 'the emotional', to enable an amplification and sharing of linguistic practices that can gesture to other modes of experience and mutuality. While this parallel world may not map onto the undercommons in any straightforward way, we might consider the will to repetitive mantras as a hailing of other imaginaries.

Imagination and politics

Alongside the stretching and playfulness and wilful jargonism of battles against racism, there is also in the black radical tradition a recurring insistence on the place of imagination in political life. This is more than an injection of creativity into the otherwise sour-faced endeavours of both revolutionaries and reformers, although it is that also. However, more than offering a cultural wing to the left, the black radical tradition has encompassed ways of thinking about political life that collapse the divisions between genres and forms of thought and can take sustenance from the visual, the aural, the bodily, as well as the more obvious resources of the literary, the philosophical or the theoretical. This has been an arena of endeavour that celebrates not only the pleasures but also the insights of what McKenzie Wark might mean by 'low theory'.

Into this realm, the question of poetics enters as a practice of performance and of understanding. Keston Sutherland employs the concepts of jargon, satire and poetics to identify the multiple address embedded in the construction of *Das Kapital*. As I have tried to explain above, his framing cannot be slipped across to our discussion of the renewed engagement with the black radical tradition, but there is something in his account that suggests a way of understanding

Although the concepts of capitalism and of racism may share a certain elasticity, we lack a founding text of anti-racist analysis to match *Capital*. As a result, the emanations of anti-racist thought cannot (should not?) be traced back to any attempt at scriptural analysis. The point that Sutherland makes about *Das Kapital* makes sense as a critique of a particular mode of canonisation – this is not only a matter of translation and mistranslation but also too narrow an understanding of intended audience. The assembling of various insights and aphorisms in the project of revealing and dismantling racism patches together a kind of canon, but it is a canon in a state of constant remaking. Although we know that this is the only possible state for any canon, the absence of an agreed object, philosophy or method intensifies this sense of making on the hoof. Inevitably, political speech in the name of anti-racism takes on a heightened importance in this context.

The articulation of doctrinal tenets of anti-racism has been hampered by the responsive mode of the movement/s. Anti-racism can come into being only in response to racism. Inevitably this means that anti-racism is a necessarily belated gesture, always answering the last attack or inequity, shaped as the mirror of what racism is becoming. Racism, on the other hand, need not respond to anything. Racism can adapt to appear new, to speak to old and new fears and needs. Racism gets to be exciting and ground-breaking and innovative and also traditional, familiar, familial. Much of the continuing power of the black radical tradition has arisen from this refusal of the responsive posture of anti-racism. This is a tradition that is presented as already and always pre-existing racist dehumanisation. The assertion of this tradition acts to reframe political speech, from rebuttal to affirmation. Not only does it allow a different choreography of the conversation, so that values, experiences and sensations can be spoken as elements of the tradition in and of themselves, without the constraints of showing opposition, it is also a reorientation that shifts the implied audience of political speech in its name. Through it we consider again who we are speaking to and listening for, learn again to hear otherwise. In a discussion of a plenary talk, Steve Osuna reports Cedric Robinson's retort to the suggestion that those enslaved in the Americas underwent 'social death',

“That’s nonsense”, he argued, “because they were something more than what was expected of them – they could invent, manufacture, conspire, and organize way beyond the possibilities.” (Osuna, 2017, 23)

Osuna argues, through Robinson, that white supremacy could not make sense of the sound and action of these other possibilities – that all of this, song, religion, survival strategy, rebellion-in-making, was reduced to no more than noise. Robinson concluded his talk with a call to hear differently, beyond the terms of respectable speech or authorised politics,

“What is the noise of 2013? That’s what we have to ask today ... Record the noise.” (Osuna, 2017, 23)

The black radical tradition refuses the constraints of systems that operate through dehumanising racisms, choosing instead to excavate other ways of being and of being together that exist submerged within and alongside the most brutal regimes. When fragments of this tradition become the stuff of repeated exchange and circulation, that unending murmur also becomes part of the noise, part of the submerged world that can rally, sustain and oppose.

Sometimes the story is not clear, or it starts in a whisper. It goes around again but listen, it is funny again, every time. This knowledge has been degraded, and the research rejected. They can’t get access to books, and no one will publish them. Policy has concluded they are conspiratorial, heretical, criminal, amateur. Policy says they can’t handle debt and will never get credit. But if you listen to them they will tell you: we will not handle credit, and we cannot handle debt, debt flows through us, and there’s no time to tell you everything, so much bad debt, so much to forget and remember again. But if we listen to them they will say: come let’s plan something together. And that’s what we’re going to do. We’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else. (Harney and Moten, 2013, 68)

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