

RHYTHMS

Concepts  
Under  
Repair

Center for Media, Religion and Culture  
University of Colorado Boulder

*Fall 2023*

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# Concepts Under Repair

Edited by  
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RHYTHMS chronicles a  
community of scholars — our  
vibrations arising through texts  
and conversations, in the flows  
of shared space and departure,  
making each other and ourselves  
to an uncommon beat.

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**Rory Fitzgerald Bledsoe**

# The Failure Manifesto

*(An Ode to Halberstam)*

Stop!  
Stop!  
Stop! Stop  
    your success, right now.

Take a break  
from your upwardly mobile  
status climbing, overachieving,  
shoots and ladders.  
Roll the dice out the window!  
Throw it in the pond,  
so it ripples.  
This isn't about chance.  
Move the piece wherever you want!  
Up the shoot, and down,  
around and around — to Candyland!

Shoots and Ladders  
is only a game,  
created by a corporation,  
to provide entertainment—  
a means to an end.

Teaching us to climb like Monopoly  
teaches us about money.  
But maybe ask the kid next door?  
Who knows the best trees to climb,  
and what happens when you stop,  
and sit, cushioned by its canopy.

Are you stuck?  
Are you stuck?  
Are you sttt—?  
Or are you happy?  
But even sttticking is good—  
glue binds your Bandaid,  
to the papercut,  
from the yellowed stack  
of your resume.

Bathe in yesterday's bathwater.  
Does it smell like victory?  
No!  
It smells like  
the labor of your losses:  
sage, rosemary and tears.

But what if the end isn't linear?  
And if the future evaluates differently?  
And if "failure" is like looking at time  
through a microscope, instead of a telescope.

Put your ego on hiatus!  
Take a vacation from waiting for vacations!  
What happens when you lose?  
Does the game start over ...  
or do you realize that  
it was never a game,

but a process.  
Collect \$200 as you pass go!

Hallucinations are sometimes  
exactly what the doctor ordered!

Excavate the records office,  
of "failure."  
What are in its drawers?  
A play? A song? A recipe? The directions  
to your ex-girlfriend's house?  
Go back to the napkins,  
the scribbles on matchbooks.  
Light a flame or don't.  
This new kind of failure,  
views attempts as architecture.

Strong foundations are invisible  
from the third floor.  
Rejections repave the downtrodden  
roads of our minds.  
Your boyfriend broke up with you  
so that your wife could propose.  
To fail is to object—  
to slouch against posture,  
and the prose of protocol.

Whether these attempts are maintained,  
as material, or lost to the ashes ...  
this records office  
will always be in the caverns  
of your soul.  
What does a failure-fossil feel like?  
Like fresh fruit:

fragile, but sweet, and sustenance.  
But also the pits!

What happens when a tree  
can no longer get nutrients from  
the sun?  
Is that failure its end?

Stop!

This failure calls for a new relationship;  
another tree provides its nutrients,  
a stronger bond is formed.  
A symbiotic entanglement.  
Failure's tendrils look a lot like roots.

Nature tells us that there is failure  
in death, but even in death,  
what does the corpse  
of the tree provide?  
An ultrasound ushering in,  
a baby — or maybe not — but instead,  
food for the racoon, the deer, the birds.  
Or dessert that you forgot to make!  
Make dessert, even if  
if it is only time for breakfast!

You didn't make the deadline.  
Hoorah!  
You missed the mark.  
Hooray!  
You were sleeping instead  
of working.  
Huzzah!

You missed your plane.  
Yipee!

Stop!  
Take two steps backwards,  
and three lefts right.

Stop reading this.  
Go back!  
And unread it.  
You haven't failed enough yet.

**Nandi Pointer**

## A Meditation on the Rhythms of Violence

*Mother, mother*

*There's too many of you crying*

*Brother, brother, brother*

*There's far too many of you dying*

*You know we've got to find a way*

*To bring some lovin' here today*

— Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On” (1971)

It was a sunny, idyllic April afternoon in Boulder, Colorado and I was listening to one of my favorite artists, Marvin Gaye, a prolific singer-songwriter whose life came to a violent and tragic end when he was shot three times in the chest by his father on the morning of April 1st, 1984. As I paused to make a cup of chamomile tea, I pondered the lyrics to his timeless classic “What’s Going On,” an inspired work released in 1971 at the height of the Vietnam War. The song speaks to Gaye’s growing outrage over the precarity of Black life in America. Over fifty years after its release, the lyrics remain deeply prophetic and relevant.

I was taking a break from the “weighty baggage,” the ceaseless rhythms of violence and brutality visited upon Black bodies, exposed and analyzed by the scholars (Baldwin, Fanon, Hartman, Sharpe), whose words I am now immersed in. A rhythmic, persistent hum, it always keeps pace, keeps time, keeps watch over Black bodies, particularly the bodies of Black boys and men. I feel dizzy looking at the plethora of indecipherable murderous acts swirling around me, commanding my attention, in an almost frantic need to materialize and stake their claim to visual authority; suturing this authority to power and rendering this abnormal sphere of surveillance “natural.” I find these sites of violence when reading texts, scrolling through my Instagram feed, on Twitter and various news sites, in podcasts or even in a casual conversation I had with my mother that April afternoon.

“Did you hear about the shooting in Kansas City?” she asks after we exchange common pleasantries. I told her I had. Ralph Yarl, a Black 16-year-old band student was shot twice by an elderly white man, on April 13, 2023, after accidentally going to the wrong address to pick up his young brothers. He was first shot in the head at point blank range and then shot a second time while lying defenseless on the ground. “It’s just escalating,” my mom added, “it’s almost as if there’s a virus in the air. It’s just getting so scary!”

*Woah, mercy, mercy me  
Ah, things ain’t what they used to be  
Where did all the blue skies go?*

*Poison is the wind that blows  
From the north and south and east  
— Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me,” *The Ecology*  
(1971)*

As I gingerly walk through the rooms of Black history to sit with these scenes of violence, I find myself wishing I had a magical golden key that could unlock its origins, its motivations, its anger, its movement and rapacious thirst for American souls, with a peculiar propensity for the souls of Black men. I believe that violence is the defining attribute of American society, both in material, psychic, ideological and mediated forms. More than Christianity, freedom, democracy or even homemade apple pie and bright fireworks on the Fourth of July, violence has been integral to the formation of the American identity.

I’ve personally experienced these ruptures of violence in my own family. A distant cousin, Mack Charles Parker, was lynched on April 25, 1959, three days before his trial for the alleged rape of a white woman, June Walters. A band of 10 masked men, let in by the jailer, snatched Parker from his jail cell, beat him, shot him, and threw him into the Pearl River. My cousin Paul Silas, an accomplished athlete and former NBA coach, lost his brother, Bill Silas, in 1961 to cardiac arrest after he was taken to an institution and given shock therapy without the consent of his parents. Confronting these violent ruptures, in both personal and mediated forms, has forced me to wrestle with the relentless abjection on Black life.

It is a force I can’t escape, temporally or psychologically, as I traverse its sites of rupture, exposed



through my research on Black male identity and its (re)formation in Black expats. Violence is not a force I have any hope of abolishing but one that I wish to attend to, in the hopes of moving toward small moments of repair, through the disruption of what Nguigu wa Thiong'o (2023) refers to as the "normalization of abnormality." Speaking of whiteness as a "cultural bomb" that normalizes abnormality and sanctions a way of seeing (and killing) blackness, wa Thiong'o cautions us to silence our inner colonial voice. Disrupting the normalization of this corrosive abnormality can work to free the Black psyche from the fatal implications of accepting the disposability of the Black body.

Violence is the ultimate form of power and a particularly destructive force when tied to a visual complex that derives its authority through the segregation and classification of Black bodies. It is this visual authority that Andrew Lester, an 84-year-old white male, was acting on when he shot Ralph Yarl. Lester, too, is a victim, in this unfortunate scene, of a colonial ideological violence that made him see a 16-year-old Black boy, standing on his doorstep, as a threat; nothing more. Kill first, ask questions later, seems to be America's new motto, where citizens have the right to stand their ground, no matter the cost or injury to human life.

The ceaseless rhythm of publicly mediated acts of violence, starting with the cellphone-recorded murder of Oscar Grant (2009), and continuing up to and through the spectacular public murder of George Floyd (2020) by a Minnesota police officer, have worked to normalize violent witnessing in American society. As of July, there have been over

400 mass shootings in the U.S. Is the spectacle of death required to incite citizens and our government officials to action? Does our repeated exposure to a ceaseless rhythm of murder lessen the American public's appetite for violence? As Christina Sharpe, an insightful scholar of the Black American experience, stated in a recent interview (2023) with David Naimon on *Between The Covers*, "I think that we can say across all experiences in which atrocity is attended to by a materialization of more atrocity that it doesn't do the work that we imagine that it's doing." The repeated witnessing of violent acts might be numbing us, as a society, into an immobile state of ambivalent acceptance in which the vision of the Black man remains suspended in a falsely constructed articulation that is only realized in the white man's mind.

On May 1st Jordan Neely, a homeless Black performer with a history of mental health issues was choked to death by Daniel Penny, a 24-year-old white ex-Marine, on a New York subway train, after reportedly exhibiting erratic, threatening behavior. As the sites of violence, from subway trains to grocery stores, schools and doorsteps, continue to grow in number and frequency, our ability to reach an interiority of quiet that Kevin Quashie speaks to as a retreat from the loudness of Black death, seems to be an increasingly elusive dream. The mediation of the repetitive act of violence produces a twisted effect that is only wholly realized materially, symbolically and psychically in the minds of Black people, working to restrict the formation of a fluid Black identity, free from the enclosures of difference, violence, and death. The question Gaye asks, "What's going on?" is not just a question. It is

a moral obligation to study the times, the present conjuncture, to echo Stuart Hall, and the conditions of today and yesterday that continue to make Black life so visibly disposable.

**Reily McGee**

## Repairing the Unworthy

There is a popular subset of strategy games known as 4X, which stands for eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate. For all these games, such as those found in the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, there are volumes of works that exist which critique the coloniality, hegemony, and white-washing of history which exists and persists in these games. Yet, games continue to be released that invite players into these colonial narratives. While there have been many critiques of the genre from an academic perspective, what is clear is many players are still drawn to the 4X genre. Rather than adding another critique, let us expand on them in consideration with those who play these games and think through what repair might look like.

Transgressive play has often been turned to in order to break out of colonial frameworks. We can see this in games such as *Pokemon GO!*. This game transgressed the boundaries of digital play, bringing the game into the world through augmented reality technology. But, as noted by Omari Alki,

Black players are encouraged to transgress boundaries of play that keep them safe. This is because *Pokemon GO!* operates in the space and environment that surrounds a player, pushing players out of the home where many digital games are played and into the world that surrounds them. This can lead to the subjection of harassment for many players, which can lead this game to being one that Black players wish to avoid despite the transgressive nature this game seeks to operate from. While game and play scholars have pointed in the past to transgressive play as a way of repairing, simply saying transgressive play is the solution ignores the Western White hegemony present throughout the 4X genre.

In orienting play, Aaron Trammell's recent work on repairing play has opened up new realms previously under-explored within the broad realm of play theory. As Trammell explores, play theory has long ignored the play of BIPOC, LGBTQIA2S+, Disabled, and other marginal play theories. The dominant play theory continues to hold true, that play is both voluntary and fun. As such, Trammell notes that in order to repair our idea of play, scholars must start "with the assumption that play is not necessarily voluntary and is a potentially hurtful and traumatic activity." 4X games highlight the dichotomy between White players and Black players with explicitly Western colonial history (at least in the case of *Civilization VI*). While, in writing this, there is the hope to repair a specific form of play that is found in 4X games, the encompassing work on repairing play outlines varied approaches to doing such work that will be expanded upon for this specific genre. The case is clear that the way to

repairing 4X is difficult, as it has been built into a colonial framework. Many games force players to situate themselves within a Western context in order to find a pathway to victory. We see this in cases such as First Nations peoples who are not typically an option to play. When they are an option, such as the Iroquois in *Civilization V*, they have to follow the Westernized tech tree in order to progress and keep up with other players.

One interesting way some players have navigated this difficulty is by choosing not to play certain aspects of a 4X game. This started with player-made challenges like the "One City Challenge" in the *Civilization* series, where players purposefully do not expand their civilization beyond a single city. This has since expanded to what a small community of *Stellaris* has called "decolonial playthroughs," where players do not explore, expand, or exterminate other players. They also work to utilize in-game strategies to minimize exploitation. This is considered to be a rather extreme challenge, as it challenges what the game demands of players. Players take it upon themselves to challenge the empire, attempting to find ways to break through the colonial and Western in order to find their way to a place that better fits a decolonial stance. Yet, even in this act of repair, players continue to play within these structures of empire. In order to play this challenge, players must accept the rather high challenge, especially in how these structures persist in the game.

Even if someone transgresses play, there is a certain trauma in the erasure of history, culture, and existence that persists in these sorts of games.

Trammell invites us to remember that “repairing play is aligned with the messy imperfect and everyday values that are at ease with the postindustrial landscapes we inhabit where things are often imperfect and broken, and people are just ‘making do.’” From the code to the terms that players and the game use to describe things are deeply enshrined within a militaristic hegemonic order that demands players push as hard as possible to fight “others” in order to establish oneself as the best amongst the rest. What seems possible is the need to broaden the frame of 4X games, going beyond the colonial nature of the genre’s underpinnings in order to build a cohesive structure that does more to give players options for how to progress through a game.

What could this look like? In my own experience, this has typically led to modding. One modder in *Civilization VI* has heavily broken down the way technology progression happens to allow for a dynamic and varied approach for each player. Another modder has attempted in *Victoria III* to make colonization more complicated by making it take significantly longer and forcing players to confront decisions of colonization head on rather than it be a simple bar that fills up over time, in which reaching 100% means you own the territory. Whilst these are not perfect repairs by any means, it shows that players themselves are able to take the power of the game into their own hands and search for what experience they seek and how they can fight the colonial code to achieve their goals.

## Nathan Schneider

# Meta

By the time Mark Zuckerberg renamed Facebook to Meta in 2021, he was already at risk of plagiarizing many of his peers also vying to name the next big thing in tech culture. The metaverse was the dream *du jour*, as Covid-induced videoconferencing seemed poised to converge with the NFT-fueled crypto bull market. Podcast gurus were riffing on the “metacrisis,” a shorthand for all the ways in which the world is in trouble at once, and longing for the coming of “metamodernism.” Those dissatisfied with the normal political divides of right and left could transcend them together as the “meta-tribe.” At the time, I confess that I too was building a research organization with “meta” in its name.

This great chain of cribbing leads back to Aristotle, whose speculations about the universe became especially influential long ago, after one of his students conquered much of the known world. Aristotle’s book after *Physics* became called, simply, *Metaphysics*, because meta means “after” in Greek. The name didn’t even come from Aristotle,

but from a later curator trying to label the book with the most straightforward possible identifier. *Metaphysics* is about everything underneath and beyond physics — the nature of being, the types of causation, and the existence of God. Over centuries of meaning-creep, the prefix meta- came to signify the transcendence of whatever topic is at hand. Millennial computer nerds like Zuckerberg and me fell for the word in old copies of Douglas Hofstadter's 1979 book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, which spoke of “going meta” as kind of a spell for ascending layers of abstraction, whether in math, art, music, or code. The famous early social network The WELL called its space for chatter about the rest of the chatter “meta.”

Transcendence is a welcome drug during a crisis. At the time of Facebook's renaming, the company was undertaking damage control for the leaks of former employee Frances Haugen. She documented how, once again and in many simultaneous ways, Facebook had betrayed the public interest for pecuniary gain. Going meta was a way of transcending the bad press — not denying it outright but not taking responsibility either, making televised testimony at the U.S. Capitol seem parochial. If everyone in this universe is mad at you, zoom out to the metaverse.

This is not to say that going meta is available to just anyone. The vast majority of the human race remains stuck with solving problems the regular way, in the regular universe, with remedies like solidarity and behavior modification. But Zuckerberg was not the only tech CEO who had been dragged before Congress in recent years and was ready to change the subject. The whole industry

had been reeling under a “techlash” that threatened to impose this-worldly politics on tech's sci-fi aspirations. The hyper-partisan Trump years challenged the old Californian ideology: the belief that technology plus capitalism could make politics obsolete. Silicon Valley's world-changing rhetoric had become the running joke of the *Silicon Valley* TV show. Yet as pandemic-suppression measures inhibited in-person interaction, tech stocks soared. The transcendence of meta was a way out of political trouble, as well as providing a place to put all the speculative cash.

When the problems of the world start to drag you down, turn to the meta-problems. You could focus on how your company is harming small businesses or facilitating genocide in the present, or you could theorize instead about fictional problems such as the artificial general intelligence and mass automation of jobs. These are problems imperceptible to almost everyone else. But if you go meta, you can claim these problems are actually bigger than the problems people face in their lived experience. Things like poverty, mass shootings, and flailing democracy won't matter if robots take over and exterminate humanity. Race, class, nationality, and gender — they are all just distractions to the eye of meta-consciousness. Now there is a justification for being a jerk in the view of the world: you're a “first principles thinker” focused not on the peculiar realities of the present but on the “catastrophic risks” and “black swan” opportunities that will someday supplant the basic premises of regular people's problems.

Conveniently, meta has a business model. The venture capital paradigm that dominates tech fi-

nance relies on people willing to see past the world as it is, so as to better imagine how to colonize and displace entire industries. Investors love to hear meta-talk, at least when it comes with a convertible-note offering. Meta is the ability to represent cruelty as optimism. It is a shorthand for the tech bro's burden to rule the world on behalf of the masses who are insufficiently disruptive to raise the capital to rule themselves. But the risks whose remedies lack a quick return on investment, like nuclear war and genocide — these are just insufficiently meta.

A concept that had billions of dollars in Silicon Valley Bank will surely resist attempts at repair. Perhaps the word simply needs to be done away with, or at least be tainted long enough to squelch its speculative value. If that means demoting a book of Aristotle's in the process, so it goes. Zuckerberg has gotten part of the way there on his own; since renaming his company Meta, it has suffered a collapse in its value and shed tens of thousands of people who were supposed to be building the metaverse. The meta-craze may be collapsing under its own emptiness.

Without meta, there are still other words. We will still need to speak of wholes greater than their parts. The activist-writer adrienne maree brown uses "emergence," for instance, drawing on complexity scientists. Emergence is like meta in that it refers to distinct layers of abstraction, where the rules are different than among their component parts. But emergence bears more of a tether. What emerges still includes, and is tied to, what it emerges from. The sky still touches the ground.

Another kind of repair for meta could be simply returning it to that more mundane meaning, before the word got stretched to its present enormity: back to "after." Reject the transcendence. Deny that option. Deny anyone the claim of meta-escapism, because we are all actually here in this world together, as it is. You're going to pay your taxes and innovate what the rest of us actually need. What comes after depends on what happens here, in the present.

Reclaiming meta as "after" does not make the word entirely dull. Consider the double entendre in the title of Mark Taylor's neo-Hegelian book *After God*. It avers that the age of theism is over and past, and yet many of us find ourselves in hot pursuit of something divine. Likewise, it would be helpful to know what the technologists are really after, what they are pursuing. What precedes? What follows?

Under repair, meta must become not the conversation stopper it is now, but a starting point: for questions, for demands, for interrogations. We will not let meta claim to transcend us, because we are not going anywhere, and neither are those vying to escape.

## Conversion

*Were we writing the story of the mind from the purely natural-history point of view with no religious interest whatever, we should still have to write down man's liability to sudden and complete conversion as one of his most curious peculiarities.*

— William James

My current research explores the relationship between Protestant revivalism and the origins of modern advertising. An important term these phenomena share is *conversion*. In the context of a revival conversion refers to a transformative religious experience, while in advertising it is a metric used to determine an ad's efficacy— of the total audience who engaged with the ad, how many responded to its call to action? In both cases, there is a subtle but distinct American flavor as well. Conversion means taking a decisive step as an autonomous agent in a free market. It represents a Frostian/Faustian fork-in-the-road moment as we

proceed along in our constitutionally promised pursuit of happiness.

As it relates to Christianity, the origin of the concept of conversion represents a point of synthesis between the Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions which comprised the early Christian movement. The Hebrew scriptures contain a term, שׁוּב or *shubh*, which connotes turning around, bringing back, or restoration. It often evokes a turning away from something and towards the divine. The convert's attention is redirected, and their life is reoriented as a result. Hellenistic teachings had a comparable term, μετάνοια or *metanoia*, but theirs suggests a more intellectual sense of changing one's mind, and often simultaneously conveys a sense of regret over past actions or beliefs. The convert decides to turn away from the past.

The two most influential Christian sources with regards to conversion illustrate the distinction between these terms. First, there is the spectacular experience of Paul being turned around on his way to Damascus, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter nine). Paul's is a dramatic moment of divine encounter which is overwhelmingly compelling yet defies rational explanation. Second, there is the more processual, gradual transformation recorded in Augustine's *Confessions*. His moment of conversion is more like an arrival at the logical conclusion of a long deliberative journey. In their own ways, each of these has been a kind of template or formula for conversion narratives throughout the history of the Christian tradition ever since, including the appropriately

self-centric "born again" variety popularized by American Protestantism.

Thinking about conversion has typically centered around two enduring tensions: conversion's unique temporal sensibility, and questions over how conversion happens. First, whether instantaneous or gradual, conversion represents an inflection point which is understood as punctuating the past and present from the future in a meaningful way. Converts are typically animated by a fundamental desire for tomorrow to be better than, or at least substantially different from, today. But in some cases, this is born out of a desire to restore or reclaim something which has been lost, while in other cases it stems from an ambition to abandon or abolish one's current situation. Accordingly, advertisers offer us a chance to regain our youthfulness or cure our unhappiness while revival preachers promise the restoration of lost innocence or a cosmic antidote to earthy despair.

Second, the concept of conversion raises important questions about the nature of how people are compelled to change and how transformation is enacted. Does it begin with a changed mind? Is it an intellectual project built upon a sturdy modern epistemological foundation? Or does it start with something more emotional, primeval, and affectively charged? Revivalists and advertisers (especially the industry's early leaders) alike have long debated whether sense or reason is really at the helm steering human behavior, especially in those rarified moments when behaviors and beliefs make a sharp, sudden turn. At issue here is whether appealing to the head results in an ontologically different outcome than appealing to the heart.



Many of revivalism's critics throughout history have contended not that provoking an emotional reaction is ineffective but rather it produces the wrong kind of outcome. Igniting people's passions merely whips up an evanescent enthusiasm destined to dissipate as quickly as it has been conjured. Four out of five advertisers agree: full conversion into a cult of brand loyalty is a cultivated effect, not achievable by magic bullet. But on the other hand, says the fifth, "sex sells."

The concept of conversion is also deeply entangled with histories and legacies of colonialism. The West's imperial exploits have often been packaged and sold to their own, and imposed and inflicted upon others, under the ostensibly righteous cause of sowing religious conversion. The United States in particular was deeply and enthusiastically invested in globe-spanning foreign missionary projects aimed at spreading a distinctly American Protestant version of the faith throughout most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. There was widespread support for these activities because, through a Western lens, conversion can be made to seem like a noble goal: we will merely present all the wondrous glories of our way of life and let *you* decide if you want to embrace it, join us, and flourish ... or not. Eventually, the scales fell off our eyes, thanks in part to some American missionaries who became uneasy about the nature of their own efforts. Those in the West began to recognize, though still through a glass, darkly, just how coercive and non-consensual many of these missionary endeavors have been, and the fraught legacies they bred,

regardless how pure some of the original intentions might have seemed.

Conversion as a kind of framing device has been an important means of misdirection in service of the sleight of hand trick that is cultural imperialism. The logic of conversion is useful because it insists that subjects have agency as they participate in an individualistic, voluntary, and ultimately beneficial transformation. Calling it conversion seems to negate any insinuation of heavy-handed, propagandistic manipulation. Moreover, if you are a zealous believer in the goodness of what is being offered — whether it's free internet, fast food, capitalism, or Jesus — wouldn't it be selfish *not* to evangelize? Ultimately, offering an opportunity to convert sounds much more amicable and benevolent than cultural imperialism.

It is worth reconsidering certain digital conglomerates (you know, the big ones) through this lens. With advertising as their primary source of revenue, these companies are in the business of generating conversions on a global scale. But unlike older types of advertising which kept track by tallying sales increases and product performance, this new digital approach surveils and monitors how effectively each individual user's behavior has been modified. Our Pavlovian clicking, tapping, and swiping become a kind of algorithmic anxious bench. These platforms are designed to be conversion (i.e., behavior modification) machines, but they do not even pretend to serve some singular higher calling. They are remote, unapologetically mercenary missionaries for the church or mammon, ready to peddle whatever product, ideology, or otherwise at the highest bidder's behest. If

these companies and their platforms looked a little more like what we recognize as religion, we would almost certainly be condemning such tactics as forced conversions. Then again, maybe our tacit support for digital colonization, with its mission of making converts, is because we are converts ourselves? The culture being promulgated is not someone else's — it's our own.

## ***Matau Setshase***

# Stay Woke, and Keep That Fist in the Air

## *Five Ways toward Conceptual Safeguarding*

I was five when I finally got to wear a brand-new minty tracksuit my mother fought for at a red hanger sale at Edgars and when, that morning, the secondary school students had congregated outside our gate, singing and dancing to protest their school principal. My second grandmother and I turned a corner toward the gate heading toward my crèche. My uncle, who was sixteen, was screaming “Amandla!” with his fist in the air and fellow students also raised their fists, responding “Awethu!” “The power is ours,” they said. We hurried to get to the gate, but a few feet inside our yard, tear gas detonated, and the students scattered, and we ran back into our house. At that time, protesting students were not unusual in South Africa, but for me in that winter I remember teenagers who raised their fists in the air insisting on their power, on self-determination, and on freedom from oppression.

A year or so later, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. In the image that circulated on tele-

vision, he's in a crowd, accompanied by Winnie Mandela, with their fists in the air. Before I got teargas in my face, I saw my uncle and his classmates raise their fists. Before I saw Mandela on television with his fist in the air, I saw children insist on their own power in the face of Apartheid with their own fists in the air. What meaning then is there to wake up on a spring morning thirty years later, 9,564 miles away from my childhood and see news alerts blasting the image of millionaire, former president, Donald Trump with his fist in the air? Is he obfuscating the nature of oppression anew, swaggering, and self-inserting into the history of the fist, into the history of resistance?

I am someone who took refuge in words, symbols, and concepts. Lately, I am anxious about safeguarding ideas that were deployed to liberate, to set free, to dismantle oppressive and dominant structures. If these words, ideas, concepts and symbols, had died a natural death and we built a world in which they were no longer needed, then we could hold a wake: stay awake for seven days and nights drinking endless cups of tea and beer brewed in our backyards, singing and reminiscing about the ways they liberated us, the ways in which they changed our minds, the ways in which these words course-corrected our trajectories, how these words shifted paradigms, and awakened dark nights in our souls. We would slaughter a cow, cloak the remains of the words in the animal's hide and gently lower them into the earth and their beginnings reciting, "in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God." If there were no longer a need to be woke and to constantly be in

the "wake," then an entire state's education, like in the case of Florida, would not be under careful revision to comb out woke ideas, to manage access to so-called woke material that flatly does not allow for enslavement to have developmentalist and "advantages" for the enslaved. Woke as a Black American communal signifier toward historical and systemic racism would not be hastily getting emptied of meaning and deployed to reify and maintain a diverse array of subjugations.

It matters very little that conservative alt-right author Bethany Mandel struggled visibly on television to define the meaning of woke while there's two chapters in her book, which is premised on wokeness. She insists that being woke has brought about considerable deterioration to American society. It happens that emancipatory concepts and ideas are uprooted from their contexts and then deployed elsewhere. These words are wielded obviously untruthfully, but what is startling is that these words then become weaponized to minimize contexts, critiques, and purpose of the first intentions. These meanings become obscured in the shadow of new work they are now asked to do. Meanings and purposes are historically produced, and here today woke is being used to reify already existing structures of domination and oppression, and potentially reintroduce old modes of inequality. But how then do we take care, and nurture our words so that they do the work we mean them to do?

The first and most popular way is deconstruction, that is, locating the kernel of meanings. Here we can treat woke as a Zizekian *sinthome*: in this light it functions as a knot, a point at which all the

lines of the predominant ideological argumentation of the alt-right meet. Right now, woke is used to uphold the grand myths of foundational greatness, the problem of the border, the black “Little Mermaid” and the black “Spiderman” ... To touch the strand that is woke is to pause the efficiency of the ideological movement to make America great again. The proponents must revisit their arguments and find new covers to rearticulate their aspirations.

The second way is the genealogical method, which allows us to re-articulate the historical context. For instance, the history of abolition has helped in making a contemporary case against the abolition of the prison industrial complex. In this way, we’re able to understand that the historical calls for abolition and the contemporary calls for abolition exist on the same spectrum of challenging black enslavement in the U.S.

The third way is pragmatist. This approach is about current usage; it is to be explicit about what the word is currently doing and in this way to allow for its repair. Bethany Mandel, by being asked to clarify what the word “woke” means in her argument, lost her footing and struggled to galvanize support for her book. Because as others have succinctly pointed out, “woke” has acquired the shorthand job of replacing “black” or even “inclusivity” and “diversity.”

The fourth way is conceptual scaffolding: seeing concepts as living in networked relations with aligned and connected purposes and in this way, we can come to latent distortions and obfuscations. #RhodesMustFall, a movement that began as a quest for epistemic decoloniality

in South African universities, could seamlessly become #FeesMustFall, which was a student movement about economic challenges and access to higher education. #ZumaMustFall couldn’t latch onto these movements because this iteration was politically partisan, non-student led, with discordant ideologies. #StayWoke moves in the same economy with #BlackLivesMatter despite linguistic difference. These slogans gained visibility around the same time, but their positions, origins, and purpose speak to the same ideological roots. #AllLivesMatter and/or #BlueLivesMatter seek to uphold the systemic status quo: these could arguably be in the same sphere, but their positions, origins, and purpose alert us to the distance between them and #BLM. #StayWoke can also be scaffolded through linguistic etymology and cultural use to “awake,” and “wake.”

Finally, we can protect words my way: we can look to indigenous specificity and approaches to knowledge and black futurist studies. I was imagining future-safeguarding of emancipatory symbols, ideas, and concepts in the future and this seemed impossible. How do you pre-emptively guard words and meanings beyond their immediate sphere of influence so that they retain the capacity to do the work they are meant to do? Botswana in southern Africa refrain all that time that words do not return once they’ve been uttered.

In 2021 Philip Butler imagined Newhampton, a future, black city that is not a utopian metropolis but instead one that operates with awareness of its neighbors’ propensity for violence and extraction and accepts good faith and good will as ahistorical. For Butler Newhampton dedicates itself to

liberation as a way of living and being; it is built around collective ways of co-existence, co-evolution and an investment in overlapping system(s) of self-determination and defense. South Africans speak of Ubuntu often, this concept itself being another one that has been deployed beyond meaning, but which essentially means that material and subjective well-being of a person is possible through connectedness to other persons in community. Through both these ideas, I wonder, could we have communities and people devoted to anticipating co-optation and bad faith, and whose task would be to singularly safeguard liberation and emancipatory concepts, symbols, and words?

Inside and outside of normative education systems, could we have linguistic mechanics, healers, necromancers, and custodians to protect our words in the shared vision toward dismantling oppressive structures? If we could, we'd also host a wake, convene for seven nights, start a fire, brew ourselves beer using recipes held by our custodians, slaughter for the words we can no longer say and for words we hope to keep using. Gathering around the embers of the fire we made, and over the smoke going up into the night sky, I'd tell them that I was five years old when I learned that teenagers could and did raise a fist to say Power to the People with nothing but their bodies, black, grey, and white school uniforms, dust on their shoes, a song on their tongues, against colonialism, apartheid, and military might. I'd tell them that anywhere in the world, any black person can lift that fist and we would understand the stakes, like during the 1968 Summer Olympics when Tommy Smith and John Carlos held their fists up as they

were on the platform being given their medals, as the U.S. national anthem played. I'd tell them that most of us are stunned that Donald Trump had his fist in the air before his trial, and I can say that he absolutely meant to mock and make light of the history of black and class struggle that the fist has represented and that he tried to introduce manufactured white and patriarchal suffering into the same arc of injustice.

**Nabil Echchaibi**

## On Fugitivity and the Seminar

*“On ne met pas en cage un oiseau pareil”* (We do not cage a bird like this). This was the title of the last journal of Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, the Moroccan poet, novelist, and playwright, who wrote with an infectious rage to change the world. His poetry and prose defied ruthless rulers and challenged their mindless and complacent followers. His words had an incendiary effect in the tender years following his nation’s independence from France’s rule. “Royalty,” he wrote in the wake of a violent crackdown on social protests in Casablanca in the 1960s, “has become a roadblock of cops and soldiers, its imbecility was pushing the blood to delirium.” He coined a phrase for his subversive poetics: “Linguistic Guerilla,” a style that indicts the conventions of mortifying nostalgia, colonial language, and orthodox religion alike. Khaïr-Eddine was a fugitive, an errant writer animated by a deep antipathy for dogmas, canons, and tamed words. This is perhaps why he was not part of the official school curriculum when I was growing up

in Morocco. Alas, I discovered his writings much later in life. I became intrigued by how he conceived and enacted his own sense of fugitivity as both a physical and imaginative flight to emancipation and a fierce and inconstant struggle between theft and gift. The theft of wealth viciously defined through the logic of authority and profit and the gift of life capaciously reimagined as the uncollectable debt of remaking ourselves anew in the wake of catastrophe. Like other writers, Khaïr-Eddine saw his project as one of tearing an inherited world down and building something else in its place despite the impossible odds. His masterpiece novel, *Agadir*, was an insurgent tale of defiance and hope after an earthquake devastated the city where he lived on the Atlantic shores of Morocco. This gift, this debt of digging up the ruins to replace them with other possible worlds, is perhaps why he deemed it necessary to close his writing journey with a title of radical freedom pleading not to condemn him to a cage. Khaïr-Eddine's last journal was penned during a long battle with cancer.

I began reading Khaïr-Eddine at the same time I started reading the work of the cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten, who writes eloquently about fugitivity in the black radical tradition. Black life for Moten is a long quest to make blackness breathe in excess of the historical and structural conditions of misery and suffering that have coded and commanded its existence. Breath in this formulation is no longer just a physiological ability to draw a sigh for life, but an urgency to escape those conditions and reimagine a possibility for retreat into something else, an otherwise of being

and dwelling in the world. Fugitivity is the movement that enables the imagination and the enactment of that otherwise. It is a way to recuperate the insurrectional capacity of breath to lift everyone out of the grip of a hegemonic order and an extractive view of the world. Fugitivity then is not a place you arrive at as much as it is a praxis of repair, of rehabilitating life so it can cohere differently and justly. R.A. Judy, whom Moten invokes a lot, speaks about “poiesis in black” as a way to think in disorder and exit a world grasped only through the destructive power of universalizing ontology and binary antagonisms. Black poiesis is a fugitive practice of imagining a world of possibility that has not been visibilized and documented yet but has existed all along.

This quest for a different coherence beyond mere resistance has proven immensely generative for my work on Muslimness and its aesthetics of fugitivity, but in this brief reflection I'm interested in a quieter form of insurgency, another potential space of escape which evades our attention because it has become an overly fluent part of our academic infrastructure: the seminar. What does it mean to lead a seminar in the tumult of our times? Can we imagine the seminar as a fugitive practice? If so, where do we escape to?

But perhaps we must establish first what we are escaping from. Public academia today is a grim chorus of receding budgets, labor casualization of adjunct teachers and graduate students, and neo-liberal priorities that favor hard skills and resort-like campuses to thinking and basic infrastructures of decent education. Graduate education has become a futile struggle of relevance and where

it persists it is a tale of difficult survival. The seminar, that intimate space of deep instruction, is in retreat as programs get cut or students are rerouted to more “lucrative” fields of study. In the face of these impediments, what can we possibly do?

In their book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten tell us not to worry about the university or call for its reform as many have done in the past. Instead, they call on us to harness a different social energy and build fugitive spaces within and beyond the enclosures of the university. Teaching, as a creative and insurgent form of instruction that is passed on, figures prominently in their reflection: “But it is teaching that brings us in,” they write. “Before there are grants, research, conferences, books, and journals there is the experience of being taught and of teaching. Before the research post with no teaching, before the graduate students to mark the exams, before the string of sabbaticals, before the permanent reduction in teaching load, the appointment to run the Center, the consignment of pedagogy to a discipline called education, before the course designed to be a new book, teaching happened” (27).

The seminar is that elemental place of clandestine labor that arguably escapes the organizational structures of the university and the crude logics of its capitalization. We can either safeguard that space as the hidden undercommons of study or cede it as the privileged site for training professionals who will safely guard the barricades of their academic disciplines. To lead a seminar with a sensibility of the undercommons is to open up

that space to other forms of assembly, modes of learning, locations of knowledge, and poetics of congregation and fellowship that are rooted in a duty of radical sharing and collective sociality. Harney and Moten think of fostering an under-common space as a risk of institutional breach. They write: “But if the critical academic is merely a professional, why spend so much time on him? Why not just steal his books one morning and give them to deregistered students in a closed-down and beery student bar, where the seminar on burrowing and borrowing takes place” (39).

This endorsement of the seminar is not a romantic plea to simply restore something we have lost. Invoking a sensibility of fugitivity means that we are running towards something new, a different kind of harvesting that overturns and seeds in its path. This publication you are reading is proof of a slow and careful harvesting of an alternative sociality of the seminar. For the last few years, we have gradually built a weekly seminar at our center that exists outside of the regulations of credit and debt usually associated with academic coursework. That freedom from transaction has allowed us, faculty and students, to gather without the compulsion of a contract or the performative imperatives of grading. What we have instead is an invitational practice to lose and find ourselves in a social and intellectual dynamic of pure relationality, of reading, thinking, and writing together for the sake of being together. And our gathering holds different tasks, styles, and emotions. We read and edit one another, we discover other archives, we rehearse our presentations, we revise lectures, we listen to other frequencies of thought, we invite



farmers, artists, environmentalists, scholars, and teachers, and we share deep moments of vulnerability, confusion, loss, solidarity, failure, audacity, patience, and hope. Our labor is not measured by the metrics of output and productivity but rather by the restorative power of a fugitive sociality animated by a pedagogy of the exit. In this space, theory is not a show we perform, a safe home we want to return to, or a prize we bestow on one another. Instead, theory is a gateway to something, somewhere else, a refusal to foreclose our thinking inside narrow disciplinary containers or hollow liberal gestures. In this quest, we are haunted by one guiding question: what is the role of the seminar in times of impossible odds?

Our center has not invented this kind of seminar. They exist in many places, but the labor of these small fugitive spaces is seldom recognized when we think of the university. They are sites of quiet insurgency, of slow incubation, and of invisible nurturing. We must denaturalize this critical infrastructure of academia so we can build these spaces anew and preserve them as the philosopher Jonathan Lear would say, “a possibility for new possibilities.” The seminar, when imagined right, is the unsung symphony of academic labor, an antagonistic practice destined to harmonize with the world, that is not just to understand it but to dare to change it. As Achille Mbembe reminds us in his book, *Out of the Dark Night*, we need both the dark diagnostic of critique and the illuminated roadmap of possibility. That is the promise and the demand of the ungovernable fugitive seminar: to always reach for an opening despite the bleakness

of impasse and to arrange for escape in spite of the enclosures of our times.

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