

GOOD MORNING 1877, SIT DOWN: ON CIVILITY, RECONSTRUCTION, AND OUR REVANCHIST MOMENT



Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Tavia Nyong'o
POMONA COLLEGE AND YALE UNIVERSITY

Tavia Nyong'o and Kyla Wazana Tompkins' "Eleven Theses on Civility" blogpost to the journal *Social Text* (July 11, 2018) offers a bracing and pithy set of provocations around the political aesthetic of civility that is completely convincing in its capacities to distill and dismantle the race-/class-/sex- and other normative parameters ("the affective shape of administrative violence") of this discourse. Their post has been widely circulated and deservedly so.

When Kyla messaged me to say thanks for signal-boosting their theses on the *Capacious* Facebook page, she added that she'd just read the dialogue between Kate Hayles and Tony Sampson published in the second issue of *Capacious*—and that she and Tavia had been engaged in a months-long email exchange since the day of Trump's inauguration, culminating in their *Social Text* posting. Needless to say, I immediately asked for a peek: all with an eye toward seeking permission to share their epistolary to-and-fro with our readers. Such a boundary-testing, room-making conversation between two established scholars working in or around affect studies fits precisely with what will continue to be a special feature (a 'dialogue') in every issue of *Capacious*.

So in what follows you will encounter the fuller backstory that bled into those eleven theses on civility: unspooling with historically informed urgency, sounding out and perpetually refining each other's theoretically-nuanced readings of our contemporary and quite perilous conjuncture, exploring the stakes for all kinds of political/affective investments and disinvestments, threading the matter of race through the entirety of their conversation as the absolutely visceral register for any and every moment of coming cultural transformation in the body-politic as a whole. We could not be more excited and honored to publish this vital dialogue between Tavia Nyong'o and Kyla Wazana Tompkins in *Capacious!*

P.S. One more thing: keep an eye out for Tavia Nyong'o's *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* coming out on NYU Press in November.

—Greg Seigworth, co-editor of this journal

KYLA AND TAVIA

We wrote this dialogue across 2017 as a political crisis unfolded. In it we explore a term—civility—that we felt was being reshaped under the new political imperatives (the new 'crisis normal') of our present moment. In the following dialogue we ask: Why does civility seem like a pressing term to consider? What tools can we, as scholars of race, sexuality, and performance, in the United States bring to this current moment? And then too, what new pressures are being brought to bear on this term as the political sphere undergoes a traumatic explosion of uncivil affect? Is civility useful? Is incivility? What are their paradoxes or alternatives?

We are both trained as scholars of performance, race, and sexuality in the nineteenth-century United States. What we come to decide in this dialogue—particularly at this key moment of the twentieth anniversary of Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), is that the parallels between our moment and in the period following the failure of reconstruction in 1877 feel both real and illuminating as a way to parse the election of 2016, and to think about what is ahead of us as we try to survive, resist, and think beyond the Trump-Pence years.

Taking up civility and incivility as an aestheticized affect that recurs across histories of race, class, and governance in the United States, we ask: given civility's contemporary resurgence as a term punitively applied to leftist speech and activ-

ism while institutions support right-wing speech's stated desire to be 'academically freed' of left aesthetic imperialism under the guise of 'political correctness,' what do these terms offer us in the shape of future politics?

Part one: civility in relation to the present political moment

KYLA

Tavia, you had a throw-away line at your amazing 2017 MLA talk on a panel with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and Kimberly Juanita-Brown revisiting "Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* at Twenty," in which you said you were interested in thinking about civility, and I caught the line and I wanted to take you up on it and see what you're thinking about.

I've been interested in civility for a while on a number of levels. I've become interested in civility as a mobile disciplinary discourse that is enacted against political dissidence and, of course, unevenly applied according to class and race and gender and so on.

Much of my interest, of course, comes from my research into the early Progressive era. In my current work I explore the notion that civility is a bureaucratic aesthetic that functions politically while simultaneously pretending to be neither political nor aesthetic but rational. In short, I'm trying to think about the birth, in the progressive era, of what Dean Spade (2015) later comes to call *administrative violence*. In that sense—basically a Rancierean understanding of civility as a covert political aesthetic, or even a rhetorical mode which guards the boundaries of access to politics—civility is about naming the secret affective agreements of administrative biopolitical governance as they get instantiated in the name of civil rights, regulatory law, and the infusion of scientism and social scientism into the project of governance during the Progressive Era. And what is fascinating to me is that what I am calling civility goes hand in hand with federal-level solutions to the failure of the post-emancipation, Reconstruction project. This is not to condemn Progressivism as Bad; I'm not trying to be simple-minded here. Rather, I'm asking about the deeply encoded forms of classed and race violence found in the heart of progressivism that might in turn lead to its undoing. In short, how is the civility of progressivism also a form of violence?

I'll just say, by the way, that I also wonder, as I begin this conversation with you on the day of Donald Trump's unbearable inauguration, whether a critique of civility is hopelessly out of date. Like: 'wow! I have a critique of liberal goodwill?' How warm and comforting the moment in which I conceived of my project seems

from this moment, in which the stakes of the political just blew through the roof. Like, *I wish* the imperfections of the New Deal were our biggest problem. But on the other hand, what I'm trying to get at in this project is the ongoing refusal of the respectability project that underlies small-p progressivism—almost every form of progressivism—to allow for actual substantive change within left politics: that is to say, that I experience or have witnessed the civility of progressivism as a kind of active political negation based in certain kinds of classed aesthetics. That negation, for me, often happens at the level of aesthetic judgement about the discordant wrongness of being, or refusing legitimacy to, what are perceived as bad subjects or subjects acting 'in bad form.'

In short, I'm frustrated with the inability of the left (and I direct this at myself as well) to really listen to people where and how they really are, in the bodies and voices and registers they arrive in; I'm pissed at the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party for abandoning all working-class people, not just whites; and I really feel like that abandonment contributed to the insane results of the last election, in which the sheer performance of Trumpian incivility just smelled and tasted like change to people who really want change. But how to line up that critique with a moment in which, as you said in your talk, the *revanchist*—amazing word—politics of the moment are coming at us via an avatar of incivility?

In terms of your own interests, can you tell me about the sites at which an idea like "civility" connects with or demonstrates what we want to call "politics"? What is civility to you? Why does it feel like a pressing term to you at this political moment? Why do you think *incivility* has so much traction right now? And then can you elaborate on your engagement with the term vis-à-vis *Scenes of Subjection*?

TAVIA

I can see that we have been grappling with some of the same questions and problems. In the MLA talk you refer to, I was responding to what I have perceived to be the overemphasis on reading the first half of *Scenes of Subjection*, sometimes an overemphasis on just its famous opening lines, which as you know contain Hartman's injunction against the casual reproduction of scenes of torture and violence under slavery in scholarship. To this day, we are sometimes under an injunction that sees all depictions or descriptions of black suffering and/or death as uniformly problematic, as opposed to always needing an effort of contextualization. The emphasis on reading the problematic of the first section of *Scenes*—the problematic Hartman terms the "Formations of Terror and Enjoyment"—has par-

CAPACIOUS

tially obscured the fact that half of the book is not about slavery but rather about the afterlives of slavery, specifically the postwar reinvention of white supremacy through segregation, debt peonage, and racial terror.

With this second half of *Scenes*—titled with pointed irony “The Subject of Freedom”—in mind, my MLA remarks were especially focused on the final chapter: “Instinct and Injury.” Hartman analyzes here the post-war deployment of the concepts of white “instinct” and “natural affinities” as part of how the preservation of white supremacy was justified in the wake of the “injury” of civil war. This section, I suggested, should be required reading in a post-Obama political landscape. On the 20th anniversary of Hartman’s text I was calling reader’s attention to her analysis of how the freedwomen and men were framed as *indebted* to the white race for their freedom; how whites experienced emancipation as an injury to their prior enjoyment of supremacy; and how quickly and imaginatively they sought to rebuild it upon new foundations.

As I’ve written elsewhere, “natural born” white citizens (contrasted in the white supremacist imaginary with blacks whose citizenship had been granted by the Fourteenth Amendment) had to rally around their innate and instinctual dignity so as to prevent the ruinous leveling of “practical amalgamation” and “social equality,” terms which took on new meanings in the postwar period (which also invented “miscegenation” discourse as we came to know it, as Elise Lemire amongst others have written). Basically, freedom and citizenship were held to be contingent upon segregation and the legal prohibition of “miscegenation.” This is where I pick up the story of civility. “Civility” was racialized from the start as a formula for preserving the freedom of the white race. But freedom as Chandan Reddy reminds us, never precludes violence. Ritualized and legitimate violence, often outside the law, could paradoxically be the first resort for defending this civility. The deep history of what Reddy calls “freedom with violence” (as opposed to the “freedom from violence” that liberal civility claims to extend) is key in this decisive period.

In my MLA talk I also called for resituating *Scenes of Subjection* within a cluster of books from that same period that include Robert Reid-Pharr’s *Conjugal Union* and Amy Dru Stanley’s *From Bondage to Contract*. What reading Hartman together with these other scholars reveals is, above all, the pertinence of change over time as something other than ‘progress.’ I want to push us to think categories like freedom, citizenship, civil rights, and civility not as ideological ruses, or not *simply* as ruses, but also as densely historical fictions that produced real effects that have to be grappled with. We don’t just live in the afterlives of slavery, after all, we also live in the afterlives of freedom and citizenship. The paradox is that all

these afterlives are so ambiguous in terms of what they bequeath to the present. And yes, what an awful conjuncture within which to try to think about these questions! But to push back a little on your closing implication that the topic you have proposed feels out of date in the age of Trump: I think to the contrary, that the newfound politicity of rudeness or rancor (or whatever the opposite of civility is) only underscores the ongoing relevance of the set of historical questions you have so ably outlined for us. If what Ranciere calls *politicity* can be thought in terms of the libidinizing of politics, a cathexis that is always interruptive of the placid and in fact dull norms we call ‘civil,’ then perhaps we can pose the problem you are presenting as one of *politics without civility*.

I’m a little fearful at the enthusiasm with which I see politics now embraced as a kind of sporting event and media spectacle, an embrace which I associate from my own experience growing up in postcolonial Africa, not with democracy but with authoritarianism (just as I experienced the upsurge of “show of force” armed police after 9/11 in New York not with greater security, but actually as a tacit admission of greater insecurity). Under authoritarianism, knowing the codes of civility was a life or death matter for everyone, and profanity, rancor, and rudeness held an explosive capacity they seem to lack in America’s much more raucous and bawdy culture. So, I may not be as reluctant as you to take refuge in civility’s affordances (even the affordance or privilege of being able to say, not *everything* is politics). I take this to mean that there will be now, and for the foreseeable future, a certain libidinal saturation of the political, akin to masculinist investments in sports and war. I guess this is the first sense in which I am not the only one to characterize our moment as “revanchist.”

But what sort of libidinal politics are we faced with? I hear two possibilities in your opening propositions: the first being that the politics of 1877 (coincidentally Rutherford B. Hayes victory in the 1876 election was another time the loser of the popular vote nonetheless took the electoral college). That victory led to the end of Reconstruction and the triumph of *white revanchism*. The avatar for such a politics today is probably Steve Bannon or Stephen Miller. The other possibility, the politics of 1933, offers a sort of pre-emptive challenge to your own critique of mainline US progressivism and its accompanying politics of uplift and respectability. The avatar for such a politics today is undoubtedly Bernie Sanders. If the New Deal is our high-water mark for welfare state progressivism (despite all we know about the racial bias of the welfare state, as recounted by everyone from political scientists like Ira Katznelson, to journalists like Ta-Nehisi Coates), what is the purpose of a critique of civility? Does it matter if we are dealing with revanchist racists, color-blind liberals, or both at the same time?

When you ask about the uses of civility and incivility today, I think about that dramatic moment of the campaign, when Black Lives Matter activists “rudely” interrupted a Sanders speech (I think the accompanying social media hashtag, hilariously, was #BowDownBernie), temporarily infusing the preferred scenario of the New Deal bitter enders with some “black girl magic.” Without taking ideological sides in that particular confrontation, reflecting back upon it now, it does seem to provide a kind of dialectical image for the present conjuncture: #BowDownBernie was a *clapback* against resurgent social democracy seeking to politically represent and speak for black movements against state and vigilante violence, but also a *calling in* of Sanderistas to a renewed engagement with the ethical critique of the movement for black lives (different, at any rate, from the Clintonistas and their cynical deployment of “intersectionality” as a cipher for neoliberal multiculturalism). That Sanders’ moment of potentiality and emerging strategy culminating in the upset victory of a rightwing candidate promising law and order and presaging a threatened clampdown on the rights of even nonviolent demonstrators, should not cause us to lose site of the promise of this robust disruption of civil politics by black feminist righteous discontent.

To return to the burdened subject of freedom—which you ask us to think of in terms of an aesthetic of governmentality—that is precisely what I am also seeking in a reading of the second half of *Scenes*. The *other scene* of black subjection, if you will. On the subject of this scene of civility, I read Hartman to be arguing that post-bellum white revanchist politics are driven by sentiments of racial injury, resentment, vengeance, anger, and humiliation. Racial democracy is actually experienced as a humiliation of white settler futurity. The deep, historical origins of what we now call “toxic white masculinity” may lie here!

And if we had to identify your aesthetic form of governmentality, one that concretized this double bind of civility and rudeness, we could do little better than consider the dominant popular culture of that period: blackface minstrelsy. In minstrelsy, after all, black incivility redounds to the political detriment of the race, while homeopathic elements of that same incivility *in blackface* can actually enhance the authenticity of white *herrenvolk* democracy. Read politically, at least, the rough music of blackface entailed borrowing a rude and vulgar vitality attributed to the black for purposes of libidinizing white cultural politics, in such a way as to render those resources absolutely toxic for the would-be black political actor. I struggled to articulate this in my chapter on “minstrel trouble,” in part because I did not follow out the progression of the form, as I would now like to, into the post-bellum decades. But that work was already accomplished, I think, by Michael Rogin!

Part two: civility and questions of academic freedom relevant to the current political crisis

KYLA

Let's talk about the pushback to so-called political correctness, which is terrifying on the one hand but also, I think, the return of U.S. anti-intellectualism but with the gloves off. I mean I'll just say that I live in an institution that has a civility clause in its faculty handbook, reserving the right to evaluate someone on "how they get along with others" and incivility is absolutely the term, locally, that I see applied to any kind of internal dissent. And as I talk to colleagues across the country I hear particularly women of color, but also others, saying: I'm told I'm too aggressive. So, the dislike is obviously political, but it is generally phrased as an aesthetic evaluation: too pushy, too outspoken, discordant etc. It's not *what* you say but *how* you say it! Couldn't you ask more nicely? What I see you pointing to in the confrontation between BLM and the Sanderistas is a strategic deployment of uncivil disobedience toward the reshaping of leftist civil politics: a calling out that is a calling in as you elegantly say.

But the paradox here is that the resurgence of white nationalism as a cultural formation, as you key into what you've already said about the relation of white supremacy to settler colonialism, is also organized around incivility, albeit one with a different genealogy. The freedom to be rude! The freedom to express oneself! So white incivility is freedom, but brown and black incivility is violence. It must be Tuesday.

Here again I want to return to the point that civility is an aesthetic mode, within which regulatory models coercively operate, that feels like unfreedom. And I think that we really need to think about the fact that whether on the left or on the right, many of us are agreed on that point *even as we are diametrically opposed in our political desires*. We want to be free to say the thing we want to say that seems true to us. We want to be less disciplined, less regulated. And yet: regulation is the mode in which small-p progressivism and large-P Progressivism meet to ascertain that change will happen; formalized compoment agreements are what have historically been put in place to structure protections against violence.

CAPACIOUS

Adjacently then, we are talking about infrastructure and process, both of them the gum and the gunk in the gears of the dream of friction-free capital as well as efficient and immediate Fascism. Which brings me to another sense of the word civil: that of the civil service. Because like many people I am counting on the work of longtime civil servants, Mueller, the EPA, the scientists, and others to slow the violence of this rank government down. The revenge of the mid-level bureaucrat! The mid-level bureaucrat who is paradoxically one of the symbols, as far as I can tell, of this other new figure of political critique, the microaggression. Because if you've ever had to apply for welfare, as I had to when I was in graduate school in Canada, or engage the state and ask for help in any way, you know that that dude, or that lady, sitting between you and what you need is the person who can make the whole thing feel like an exercise in shame—an aesthetic of affective violence—or the moment of respite you are entitled to before you can gather your resources again. In short, we are relying on the very people whose limited sites of agency and evaluation are often the sites where survival is or is not determined, or alternately, where daily grinding indignity is meted out.

Imani Perry said something on social media the other day that really struck me: she said that this moment of the criticism of identity politics in the name of political correctness is actually sublimating the really good critiques of identity politics, which do exist. So, just to try out a thought: what if these conjoined sites of critique, from left and right, are simultaneously a call for a different aesthetic form of governance? Where does that leave us in thinking about how infrastructure, process and regulatory governance?

TAVIA

I think a parallel to Imani Perry's comment about identity politics could be made. Just as the right-wing attack on identity politics makes us all defend it in public, however nuanced our classroom or written critiques. Similarly, the right-wing pushback against campus sexual harassment politics has made it more difficult to surface the *queer* and *feminist* critique of the limits of Title IX. So, for instance, at least one critic of Laura Kipnis, Ann Stoler, has gone so far as to accuse Kipnis of collaborating with right-wing opponents of feminism. While there are many zestful instances of profane and inspiring feminist publicity pushing back against patriarchy—from the Slut marches to protest signs reading “Pussy Grabs Back”—it still remains to be seen if this call for a “difference aesthetic form of governance” as you call it won't settle for good old repression as a response to so many abuses of power.

Part three: multiple temporalities we are working in; the importance of thinking through the present in relation to the post-reconstruction period

KYLA

Maybe this is a moment to clarify how we are thinking about the multiple temporalities within which we are writing and here I'm reminded of my text to you on the morning of the Trump inauguration: "good morning 1877, sit down." We are both thinking about the crisis of the Trump election and the rise of rightwing and white nationalist politics via our understanding of the post-1877 period; I hear us both saying that the critique that Hartman levels at reconstruction politics is the critique to be leveled at Obama/Democrat politics and is also a critique to be leveled at the basic terms of U.S. historiography, which seeks to laud those precious twelve years between 1865 and 1877 as the years in which *we almost had it right*. But actually, that moment already had, and fundamentally contained the seeds—the trace!—of its own undoing.

I'm going to take a moment to stake my own argument here, for the importance of a return to historical work in American Studies and in other interdisciplinary sites, which we obviously share and which you named above as the need to think "conjuncturally." There is so much great interdisciplinary historical work happening now, around re-reading the archives of slavery, around resurrecting moments of failure and political defeat in the name of excavating possibilities for future freedom. But much of it is happening from people living in disciplinary homes. And it drives me somewhat mad that—and excuse me if this seems like an overstatement—somehow work on any period prior to 1950 has to be relegated to particular disciplinary piles, like Literature or History, and rarely finds a foothold in the sites where we are doing our political thinking, like Ethnic Studies, Performance Studies, Gender Studies or American Studies. The presentism or even immediatism of those sites, by which I mean a tendency to prioritize the contemporary period, is, it seems to me, a missed opportunity to deepen critique by thinking across periods. And for me, the urgency with which it seems to me we have to return to the post-1877 moment, in order to excavate the festering traces of this moment, and the foreclosed possibilities of that moment, only testifies to that.

Following your lead in returning to Hartman's prescient critique in *Scenes*: what do you think of the moment in the opening sections of the chapter called "Instinct and Injury" when she is taking up the apparently liberal Louisianian author

CAPACIOUS

George Washington Cable—one of the vaunted “nice white guy” authors of nineteenth-century literary studies, alongside Mark Twain and Herman Melville—on the totally loopy terms of his opposition to segregation. In the essays she cites Cable as arguing against segregation as it was upheld by the Supreme Court’s 1883 overturning of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. But Cable’s argument is this:

Cable argued that the separation of the races presumably necessitated by the danger of the black presence in fact resulted in a far greater danger—the commingling of the upper ranks and the lower orders imposed by the color line.[...] Instead Cable advocated the “just assortment” of refined and uncouth elements indifferent to color, thereby displacing issues of race and class with those of decency and refinement....[He] advocated the policing and normalization of the abhorrent and degraded lower orders, primarily because of the danger they posed—the fear that the stupid, the destitute, and the vicious [would] combine against them [the upper ranks] and rule by sheer weight of numbers (165-166).

Hartman then says:

what is interesting here is the displacement of race as the central question of the social qua social and the recommendation of a more encompassing and, dare we say, nefariously “egalitarian” mode of social incarceration targeted at the lower classes...Cable hoped that the abolition of invidious racial distinctions would lead to a social order structured by preferences and affinity and, of course class differentiations (166-167).

I’m skipping a lot here. But I think that what Hartman is saying in this chapter—about what she comes to call the “social”—is that the shell game of racial biopolitics under liberal capitalism is that it, in actual fact, polices and produces the space of the private, understood here as the “social” and therefore the apparently “personal,” all the while claiming the social/private to be unregulatable and thereby leaving racism intact. So then, what is aversive—the uncouth, the unwashed, the unpropertied—is a personal thing, and indeed the Supreme Court used ideas of the private to protect new state laws and step away from regulating aversion. And this is what makes a decision like *Plessy*, enforcing segregation as long as it happens between putatively “natural” differences, possible.

Admittedly, Cable’s logic is a bit eccentric to the period so maybe we don’t want to work from there without reservation. But I think what’s key here is that Hartman builds her analysis of this space she calls “the social” out of a critique of a so-called progressive agenda. In short, the point for me here is that even progressive politics have also been undergirded by a hygienic policing of bodies—what she calls bourgeois civility—that almost but not exactly mirrors the less polite racisms (you elegantly call it “a readiness to violate those norms”) which is a formulation I want to think more about; on her blog and, in her *Social Text* piece, Lauren Berlant (2017) called it “the feeling of being free” of the “other side” of the political equation.

So, if we are working towards a definition of civility, perhaps civility is about the extra-legal calcification of the lines of aversion which undergird the organization and local practice of the juridical and the biopolitical. I mean, there's an aesthetic logic resting behind the fact that "reasonableness" is a key legal concept; *because any other approach is uncouth.*

This brings me then to my second point, and that's where I'll stop. My question at this second moment is this: is Hartman's idea of the "social" analogous to, or correlated to, what you are calling "culture" above, when you cite Benjamin? And can you elaborate on what you mean when you say the left must respond by making culture political again? But also, am I saying that the left is the problem, and are you saying that the right is the problem, and aren't both of those things true? Obviously, both are true. Are we "genre-flailing", as Lauren so beautifully put it?

TAVIA

No doubt we are "genre-flailing," if by that term we understand Lauren to be calling attention to the necessary, and necessarily improvisatory, work of struggling for ways of getting out of the current deadlock and into a new conjuncture, by means of genre. I'm unafraid of genre-flailing, which is what I understand Benjamin's open-ended dialectical conclusion to have been about. No doubt "communism" was as uneasy a genre for him to rest in as it is for us here and now. The genre of the academic conversation we are presently engaged in, thinking together and across each other's critical terms and investments, is one sign of the productivity of this flailing (although that is for the reader to judge).

Another sign of our flair for the flail, I think, is the spectacle of two nineteenth-century scholars trying to "build a bridge to the nineteenth century" by discovering the origins of the present crisis in the unfinished work of reconstruction. But why not embrace that contradiction? A flail is, after all, just a self-deprecating word used to describe a certain velocity of critical thinking that, perhaps, can take on a sort of self-cancelling quality to it. When we flail it is often because we have tried to, and failed, to hit (the ground running). Instead of landing a telling blow, we have spun around and only further disoriented ourselves. I'm pretty convinced that we are not alone amongst left intellectuals in knowing intimately this kind of "epic flail."

At the same time/rhyme, what Lauren Berlant finds between "fail" and "flail" makes me also hear the word "flair." Can we fail with flair? After flailing around, can we recover a sense of poise? I'm reminded here that Sianne Ngai associates the flail with

CAPACIOUS

the zany, the aesthetic category she in turn connects to figurations of the mode of production in contemporary capital. While the zany flail is not exactly uncouth or uncivil, I hear you wanting to make a case for some sort of associative diagram of these terms as indexing a class-conscious opposition to demands for civility on liberal bourgeois terms. And I, in turn, am hesitant to believe any diametrical contrast to bourgeois civility will do the trick of negating neoliberal governmentality. Again, I want to think conjuncturally, which may be a punk-ass way of saying, I want to reserve the right to ape civility when it suits me.

And yet I couldn't be more sympathetic to your case, particularly when you bring up Cable's vision of "the social," which does sound for all the world like a nineteenth premonition of the neoliberal multiculturalism that Jodi Melamed so effectively critiques, and that has gone mainstream in the Obama-Clinton mainstream of the Democratic Party. I feel very much in solidarity with your radical discontent about *that* particular version of civility (for example, we see it in the "love trumps hate" messaging, that attempts to shift partisan rancor into a juxtapolitical realm of niceness and manners: I much prefer "pussy grabs back" and other "rude" replies).

KYLA

First, I think I might want to push back on the idea—maybe I'm misunderstanding you—that if "civility is a form of violence...we needn't fear it...insofar that civility and incivility are tactics adopted by a range of political actors..." I guess what I might say here is, I am completely in agreement with you in aligning civility with a history that biopolitically polices racial uplift and that thereby undermines the revolutionary potential of reformist movements. But I think the missing term for me here is capital? As in: what is the algebra of race and class [and gender of course, because as Glenda Gilmore tells us, it's black women who form the front line of racial, which is to say community, uplift labor, literally labor because black women are the people who can get actual work and find some political traction during the worst periods of Jim Crow] that makes it impossible for working-class people to organize together across racial lines and against capital. This is not a Pollyanna-ish plea to negate or ignore the material harm of whiteness as a prized possessive investment across Euro-American class lines; nor am I trying to claim a priority to class over race. To be clear, both of those would be bankrupt political positions for me.

But I do really want to say that civility for me is about the embrace of class mobility and therefore about the abandonment of the crucial and necessary work of articulating class and race together as intersecting—I'm citing Crenshaw here on purpose—and simultaneous. And at the same time, I want to say that discursively race and class strategically bifurcate the key demographics—working class whites

and people of color—in whose united hands the only revolutionary possibilities for the United States actually lay, in the late nineteenth century and in the twentieth [and twenty-first] centuries as well. The concretization of whiteness as a privilege to which working-class whites were happily persuaded to adhere is the greatest political sleight of hand and the worst political disaster that ever happened to the potentialities of the post-civil war moment. Whiteness defeated anti-capitalist and anti-racist revolution, if that revolution was ever going to happen, which it probably wasn't, but let us live as if it were.

But jumping more than one century forward, for me I want to say that the abandonment of labor, the abandonment of the union base—and let's remember how important unions and unionized civil service jobs were to working-class African Americans in the mid-century—was the moment for me when the Democrats, most recently in the form of Hillary Clinton, lost the country. Not that the unions always did it right either. That's when the so-called liberal left lost their location on the left and made this disgusting white and nativist revanchism—the return of this revanchism—possible. Because it's only from radical socialist, which is to say, anti-racist *and* anti-capital organizing, at the base, that real left organizing can emerge. And what I want to think about is how returning to that base might be an uncivil, or, riffing off of Cathy Cohen's words, a “deviant” interracial and interclass political formation. So in the sense that civility as a discourse is always an anti-working class—understanding the working class to be not only white but also black, immigrant, illegal, queer and otherwise as well—and here I'm thinking about Janet Mock inciting the women's march on Washington to chant “sex work is women's work!” or Rod Ferguson's invocation of the black trans sex worker in *Aberrations in Black* as the key figure from which to imagine a new historical materialism—from this analysis I am loathe to agree that we should fear incivility in and of itself.

That said, you are so right when you say that you are “hesitant to believe any diametrical contrast to bourgeois civility will do the trick of negating neoliberal governmentality.” I suppose I am methodologically experimenting in how far we might take an aesthetic critique, how large we can scale it up. I would like an aesthetically uncivil left based in a critique of racial capital and I think we should counter Trumpist incivility with a different but related incivility—like let's go *lower*—but also with a politics that builds critique from the theoretical and practical, political and cultural, production of a multi-racial coalition of working-class peoples. And I guess in some ways what I'm talking about here is style: a left with

an affective style that speaks across class and race demographics. A left that takes up the evacuation of the rational public sphere, what some used to call “politics” (in distinction from what Ranciere would call “the political”), as a question of effective affective political aesthetics.

TAVIA

Let me take up your proposal to think towards a definition of civility as “the extra-legal calcification of the lines of aversion which undergird the organization and local practice of the juridical and the biopolitical.” I think we are talking here about governance through norms and may have a different relation to what may lay outside “the rule of law.” I probably need to say that I grew up around a very “call me Mr. Tibbs” version of postcolonial black civility. In that milieu, we employed manners, rectitude, and social ritual as a way of enforcing the equality that white colonizers and ex-colonizers never really wanted to give us. Robert Reid-Pharr’s *Conjugal Union*, which came out at about the same time as *Scenes of Subjection*, and remains under read, is very good on this point. The postbellum black novel of domesticity imagines “clean houses” and “peculiar people” as a constricting aesthetic of governmentality that is *better than the alternative* (slavery, impoverishment, madness, “the black outdoors”). This is a proto-class, or class-aspirational ethic as much as it is a class-consolidating norm. We won’t get very far, for instance, by misrecognizing *The Garies and Their Friends*, as a hegemonic text! Reid-Pharr is perfectly lucid as to what kind of prison this domesticity is (and a version of queer black studies emerges in the sequel to this book, “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh,” which he later publishes separately in *Studies in the Novel*, and which is sort of “the part that had not part” in the original dissertation). And yet, in terms of the historical imagination, Reid-Pharr seems unwilling to surrender the possibility that in certain places and times in our history, these counter-civilities have been viable tactics of resistance, survival, or protective coloration.

When I evoked Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” I was riffing off your prior placement of civility within an aesthetic of governmentality. Also proximate to our current discussion, I now realize, might be Homi Bhabha’s essay “Sly Civility,” an essay where he suggests that one of the stratagems of the colonized is to ritualize the encounters of colonial rule in such a way as to maximize an apparent “symmetry” between their cultures. Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horsemen* would be an excellent text to consider in this light. Part of the power of sly civility—or could it be counter-civility?—is that it reserves the right to respond to the policing of civility with a range of tactics and stratagems, rather than being baited into the hysteric’s posture: why am I who you say I am? In it is one way of saying, to quote Maxine Waters: I am reclaiming my time!

Let me turn here to what I see happening in your own work on the racial bi-politics of health and queer feeling in the Progressive Era, if I may. Reading your work, I see an afterlife of slavery on view in the white determination to retain the black body as a generator of value and well-being for white supremacy, while rendering incoherent black attempts to lay claim to those social goods of citizenship and the good life. Not to turn constantly to the present regime, but at one point I became curious as to who Donald Trump “follows” on Twitter: of the forty odd accounts when I checked, only one was Latino (conservative commentator Geraldo Rivera), and the black account was authored by a pair of modern day minstrels! That Trump should feel the need to respond to the trauma of a black presidency by turning to this deep restorative fount of racist well-being tells us at least two things: the flagrant quackery and snake-oil salesmanship of this post-truth moment in politics is really anything but new; *and*: the response of the Clinton-Obama Democratic Party to lump these profane elements into a “basket of deplorables” was elitist to the core.

This is all to say that many days I locate myself within what I understand to be one point of agreement between the afro-pessimism of a Frank J. Wilderson and the undercommons of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. While these theoretical positions are increasingly presented as incommensurable—in the same way Moten and Hartman were for a long time imagined to be occupying radically alternate positions on questions of subjectivity and resistance—what they share, if one reads *The Undercommons* and *Red, White, and Black* in counterpoint, is an unrelenting critique of the manner in which the US sociopolitical order renders blackness pathological. Or to use your terms: renders it unhygienic and unhealthy. I’m not trying to ignore the very real differences and stakes in their positions when I say that, for me at least, this returns us to your opening evocation of Rancierean “politicity”: a term that I am finding very helpful to think with if I understand it correctly.

Politicity makes me think of “politesse” and, through that association, to the covert traffic between “politeness” and “politics.” I think that is part of the rub here. The undercommons and afro-pessimism both keep returning us to a traversing of the classical fantasy of democratic politics as that activity which is conducted by elites *on behalf* of the women, minors, slaves, and barbarians who are to be excluded (violently if necessary) from that sphere. The Ancient Greek *agora*, we might say, was the first site for what Trump now calls “locker room talk.” Politics is the kind of words men can use amongst themselves when they do not have to

fear being overheard, challenged, or clapped back by women and other social inferiors. This is indeed part of what the Marquis de Sade, at the birth of modern democracy, savagely satirizes in his pornographic manifesto “Frenchmen, one more effort if you would be citizens.”

Part four: civility as a key site for thinking into and planning beyond the impasse of the political present

TAVIA

So, all this is to say: one tension I hear emerging in our conversation is that you keep saying: civility is a ruse, I want to smash civility. And I keep saying: civility is a ruse, and the least civilized are those who pretend and enforce “civility.” I want to reserve the right to play along under certain circumstances for certain experimental purposes (no guarantees!) Civility, I think I am coming to believe, is a biopolitics that enforces a certain scandal of the impolitic upon dangerous bodies in advance of anything they say or do. We are always already uncivil because we are always already uncivilizable; white masculinity gets to be rude, savage, violent, wild, whatever, because at the end of the day these behaviors can be construed as renewing or regenerating, rather than serve as disqualifications from, white civilization and supremacy. For instance, we live in a political culture where a former Republican candidate can pick a fight with a hip hop star using excremental language, and the exchange works to demonize black masculinity while confirming white male rhetorical command of a streetfighting idiom.

KYLA

Oh, man. Back to our texts. At some point in the middle of March 2017 you texted me, “Why is Mike Huckabee helping resuscitate Bow Wow's career? The public sphere has become an episode of Rugrats.” And after figuring out what you were talking about—some awful public back and forth between Bow Wow, Snoop Dog and the 44th Governor of Arkansas in which the latter called Snoop “Poop”—I said: “It's all bad reality tv. Like actually the tv has gone inside out and we are in it.” And we both wondered: is this the end of politics? And: are they acting out, which you called repressive desublimation or are these nasty little battles serious?

I mean, can you really have a conversation about incivility and not end with poop and dog? Aren't excrement and animality and blackness the limit? And if I'm hearing you right that *is* what you are saying, about the place of blackness in Western aesthetico-politics and about the ultimate incommensurability of blackness and so-called civility, in your citation of Wilderson's afro-pessimism,

wherein blackness is the case limit for where the human as both an avatar for rights and as a collapsed political project ends (a point, we need to say, that Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers got to first). Huckabee's vulgarity only brings to the fore those connections, which if I understand you, you see as the mask of civility falling away temporarily in order to re-assert or re-energize itself.

I hear what you are saying about sly civility and I am convinced, not least because I hear you saying something about the strategic deployment of civility as drag that really seeks to weaponize, as it were, the slyness in "sly civility" as strategy but also non-consent. That said, I agree that civility is a ruse, but I don't believe that the structures and institutional actors who benefit from civility believe that it is so. In my experience, those institutional actors really believe that the class and race-based logic of civil performance actually adheres to their essential selves. Most of all I don't believe that the least civilized are those who pretend and enforce "civility" because in saying that I feel like we are still holding on to civility as a virtue. What I do think that statement gets at is the deep well of disdain that some of us have for ruling demographics, with their terrible shamelessness and uninhibited bad manners: that freedom to be so unerringly vile—to grab pussies—and to never doubt their own value. My favorite person on this is Koritha Mitchell who has this unerring way of skewering the hypocrisies of institutional racism. And my favorite meme about this is #whitemediocrity. Or, from my childhood growing up with many West Indians in Toronto: "no home training"! Or basically, #noshame

What Trump has, that we as intellectuals, as educated people with post-secondary educations, do not have, is a rebellious relation to civility that, while obviously narcissistic and increasingly the ravings of an isolated would-be sovereign (cf his insane Twitter account), did ring effective both emotively and affectively during the election precisely because it was a critique of the classed aesthetics (or facticity as Steven Shapin has documented) of rational civility and therefore of the left. Even and while in the academy and on the streets. some of us are variously read otherwise and made to pay for it, and even and while I want to make this point here without saying that this is a guy with an actual political critique. So like yes: I despise and fear Trumpian incivility not least because I also think it signals the kind of violent bawdy white terrorism that I talk about in my *Social Text* piece, in which I draw on Mbembe's ideas of the intimate terrorism of the colonial carnivalesque. But I also admire it, a tiny bit, because I hear in it an impropriety or an anti-propryety that I wish left politics could return to—on her blog Lauren referred

to it as “the noise in his message” (and she too cites Hartman)—and I think the pull to sound here, to the sensory reordering of his interventions, is really important.

I suppose I might invoke my own upbringing right now as the child of very, very poor working class whites and very, very poor North African immigrants, the latter of whom emigrated to the Americas with a boatload of tenuous cultural capital inherited from living under French colonialism. I am solidly middle class now, but I desperately miss the sound of working—class or at least non-college-educated people, in English, French and Arabic, talking politics to each other, taking each other seriously as thinkers and theorists, being impolite, loud, brash, rude. I miss it the way I miss smoking sometimes, you know? As a sense memory or as background noise. I feel like I heard some of the sound of those politics in the noise emerging from the least crazy of the Trump voter's, when they talked. And although I excuse no racism and no violence and no classism, and I don't accede to the idea that working-class whites voted for Trump, nonetheless I mourn an entire culture, this United States, that has been trained to not know how to make the connection between their immediate grievance and structural change. Or even worse, to think of structural change as the defeat of individual freedom.

Again, I'm not attributing class consciousness to Trump! For god's sake, no. But I am saying that his incivility—exactly the crudeness of his attempts—sounds and smells like an ‘outside’ to the classed aesthetics of the left-which-is-not-a-left-anymore. And I wish we could find a way let that outsideness in without letting all of his other violences in.

To return quickly to Dean Spade here, but also to think about this question of noise: civility is a critical term for me because it allows me to work analytically across multiple scales of analysis, from the governmental to governmentality. If, for Dean Spade, the space and exercise of administrative infrastructure is a key site for activist intervention because it is precisely where violence takes place against trans folks trying to survive the system, my interest, as a nineteenth-centuryist must necessarily turn to the moment in which that infrastructure gets institutionalized, which is precisely the period Hartman is talking about. Hartman turns our attention to the deep political violence of the post-reconstruction period; it seems key then that the current civil service—and you see here how the “civil” might be a key analytic form to follow here—is founded in 1883 with the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act. Can we draw a line from the politics of respectability and the history of civility as it is linked to different and divergent class formations to these seedling moments in the creation of the progressive state? And what interdisciplinary methodologies—perhaps an attention to the haptic, to the distribution of the sensible—might aid in that project?

TAVIA

So, returning again to your call to conjugate the politics of 1876 and 2016 in some kind of historical sequence, leads me to suggest another antonym for civility. That is to say: in both the historical and personal registers of your account of the depoliticizing effect of the enforcement of norms of civility, I understand you to be suggesting that the antonym for civility is neither incivility nor rudeness, but militancy. It is the militancy of black Reconstruction that the Compromise of 1877 brings to an end. It is the militancy of Black Lives Matter that Trump's call for "law and order" reacts to. And, when one turns to student activism on campus—which liberals love to disparage and bemoan as illiberal in form and therefore somehow a greater threat to American democracy than the inequality, anti-black racism, xenophobia, and militarism they are standing up to—where here clearly the target of civility is quite transparently a new militancy that owes little, for better or worse, to the establishment. Is thinking of the contrary civility / militancy helpful for you?

As for your use of Dean Spade's work, I think you are onto something that trans theory and activism has been attuned to in particular: what I might want to think of in terms of micropolitics. I want to hear more about the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, and the construction of a system of administrative norms that, in turn, must be confronted through militancy (which is, in a way, civil rights 101: confronting segregating lunch counters, schools, pools, waiting rooms, public accommodations). Elsewhere I suggested we might think of the sequel to such "civil disobedience" a kind of "civility disobedience": a tactical and strategic disruption (as opposed to spontaneous and emotional) of the norms that reproduce in the present the same kinds of structures of administrative violence that civil disobedience was so effective in contesting.

KYLA

I think that I may want to go bigger than just militancy without disavowing militancy itself. I think what I may want is a reordering of the boundaries of what counts as political thought, political performance, and strategy in the context of this total political epistemic and need we say ecological crisis. One way of reordering politics against rationality might be to say that we stop looking for one political solution and instead understand that any effective political opposition is going to happen on many fronts, from the antifa to peaceful protest, including militancy and including the deployment, from within state bureaucracy of a kind of sly civility. And I think that change will have to lead with *what speaks to feeling* before we ever get to what rebuilds infrastructure and social nets, if we

CAPACIOUS

have time for that given the planetary apocalypse. But more than that, when I think about incivility, I think about a political openness to speaking or making affiliations across the aesthetic boundaries that order the sense of what a valid political actor is. What happens when we make the most unexpected affiliations?

References

- Benjamin, W. (1996). *Critique of Violence, Selected Writings; Volume 1 1913-1926*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Berlant, L. (2017). Big Man. *Social TextOnline*. January 19. Available at: <https://socialtextjournal.org/big-man/> [Accessed 22 August 2018].
- Berlant, L. (2018). Genre Flailing. *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*. Vol 1 No. 2: 156-162. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2018.16> [Accessed 22 August 2018].
- Bhabha, H. (1985). Sly Civility. *October*, 34 (Autumn), 71-80.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. and McCall, L. (2013). Toward A Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38 (4), 785-810.
- Cohen, C. J. (2004). Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 1 (1), 27-45.
- Crenshaw, K. (2005). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color (1994). In R. K. Bergen, J. L. Edleson, & C. M. Renzetti, ed., *Violence against Women: Classic Papers*. Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson Education New Zealand, 282-313.
- Dru Stanley, A. (2011). *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer Of Color Critique*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gilmore, G. E. (2013). *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and The Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Carolina: UNC Press Books.
- Hall, S. (1992). Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies. In *Cultural Studies*. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler, ed., New York: Routledge, 277-294.

- Harney, S, and Moten, F. (2013). *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Minor Compositions (Autonomedia). Available at: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>
- Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Katznelson, I. (2013). *Fear Itself: The New Deal and The Origins of Our Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lemire, E. V. (2002). *Miscegenation: Making Race in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mbembé, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. California: University of California Press.
- Melamed, J. (2011). *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in The New Racial Capitalism*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mitchell, K. (2011). *Living With Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Ngai, S. (2012). *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nyong'o, T. and K. W. Tompkins. (2018). Eleven Theses on Civility. *Social Text Online*. July 11. Available at: <https://Socialtextjournal.Org/Eleven-Theses-On-Civility/> [Accessed: 22 August 2018].
- Nyong'o, T. (2009). *The Amalgamation Waltz*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ranciere, J. (2006). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum.
- Reddy, C. (2011). *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reid-Pharr, R. (1996). Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and The Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity. *Studies in The Novel* 28, (3), 372-394.
- Reid-Pharr, R. (1999). *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House and The Black American*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Soyinka, W. (2002). *Death and The King's Horseman*. WW Norton & Company.
- Spade D. (2015). *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and The Limits of Law*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tompkins, K.W. (2012). *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*. New York: NYU Press.
- Tompkins, K. W. (2017). You Make Me Feel Right Quare: Promiscuous Reading, Minoritarian Critique, and White Sovereign Entrepreneurial Terror. *Social Text*, 35 (4): 53-86.
- Wilderson III, F. B. (2010). *Red, White & Black: Cinema and The Structure of US Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.