_____THE RESENTMENT OF (BLACK) POLITICS___

... SLAVERY IS
THE THRESHOLD
OF
THE POLITICAL
WORLD

JARED SEXTON

> …how does one distinguish the desire to be black from its *ressentiment*?
>
> - David Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*

When I set out to write this essay,

I had in mind a fairly limited intervention and a more speculative departure. The intervention was aimed at the debate surrounding the allegorical qualities of Ryan Coogler's blockbuster 2018 film, *Black Panther*. Among film critics writing in the columns of news magazines from *Dissent* to *The Paris Review* and fans posting on social media platforms from Twitter to Instagram, those siding with one of the main antagonists—shorthanded as Team T'Challa or Team Killmonger—or, alternately, those looking to displace the featured patriarchal rivalry for the throne in favor of affiliation with the women of Wakanda—Nakia, Okoye, Shuri—were thought to be positioning themselves with respect to the matter of black politics—past, present, and future. That debate did, of course, become more complex in time and some interesting forums were devised to bring together the fuller range of commentary, interpretation, and reflection (Southern California Library 2018). At stake in every case were questions regarding the role and composition of political *leadership*, the scope and scale of political *organizing*,

the form and function of political *violence*, and a host of other topics familiar to those who have moved through black activist, academic, and artistic circles.

My hope was to say something in particular about Erik Killmonger as a cultural figure for the condensation of social anxieties about blackness and masculinity amid renewed attention to racial and gender justice within a broader historical moment declared both post-racial and post-feminist; a *figure* one *reads* (or not), rather than a *character* with whom one *identifies* (or not). I decided to forego that intervention in part because I had written about such dynamics at some length in a pair of recent books; one on black masculinity in popular film and media and another on the vexed relation between black men and black feminism (including discussion of several critically acclaimed commercial films directed by black men of late, like Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*). But I was also reluctant to broach the issue of resentment in contemporary black art and politics without first establishing some critical context for posing what would be, to my mind, the most relevant questions. Adjudicating pathways for the twin development of black cultural politics and black political culture presupposes a desire to be black, or a desire for black being, that cannot be understood separate and apart from the inheritance of slavery that Killmonger is made to index in his (ritually-scarred, muscular) *body* as much as in his (rage-filled, murderous) *bearing*.

Which brings me to the more speculative departure, an intimation of a more ambitious project. One of the aims would be to split the difference between the theme of "resentment" in the usual sense of the word—"an indignant sense of injury or insult received or perceived"—and the distinct but related concept of "*ressentiment*"—a "slavish" disposition geared toward reaction over action, abandoning ethics for morality—as Nietzsche developed the latter in his *Genealogy of Morals* nearly 150 years ago. I thought it important to venture something first about why resentment might seem ubiquitous to the status quo of the Global North and what political ideas might be repressed in and by public expressions of the affect. I say this because, for all the recent talk in media reporting and academic scholarship alike about the "politics of resentment" said to define the contemporary moment, in and beyond the United States where I write from, it seems to have precious little to do with politics as such. Rather, the *ersatz* politics animated by such resentment are perhaps better described as "post-political" social practices, dimly understood and poorly expressed collective reactions turning in the void of an insidious *de-politicization* wherein capitalism reigns supreme as the structural condition of everyday life and the apparent horizon of public discourse, and anti-blackness metastasizes throughout the institutions of state and civil society, giving the lie to the "glorious story" of a revised and expanded American history commemorated by President Obama at the National Museum of African American History and Culture near the close of his tenure in office.

Chantal Mouffe writes in *On the Political* about the post-cold war dissemination of "a consensual form of democracy" that effectively "refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political' (Mouffe 2005, 2)." Couched in the cool language of bipartisanship, technocratic crisis management, evidence-based practices, and, above all, *viability*, the consensual (lower-case d) democrats of the last few decades no longer consider "politics as the art of the possible," as Bismarck famously put it after the Peace of Prague (and, as an aside, the conservative "Iron Chancellor" did not mean by this shopworn phrase that compromise is to be expected and accepted, but rather that true political actors must win and destroy their opponents or lose and be destroyed by them—politics as the art of *making possible* one's platform, what Mouffe, *pace* Gramsci, would simply call "hegemonizing"). "Politics" as we find in the liberal democracies of the Global North today, reduced to the governance of increasing mass misery and social insecurity, are a ritual of expediency for the elite. And so the mainline perspective that daily laments, or even attempts to diagnose, the entrenched policy positions in the two major parties in the U.S., the constant legislative gridlock, the threats of government shutdown, the widening divides in public opinion, etc. is actually in thrall to a pseudo-polarization, a *faux pas* of political contest, one performed, however cynically, in the place of a proper interpolation of agonistic conflicts and a reinvention of a discourse of genuine *antagonism* for our time—ending capital, not amending it.

Since at least the announcement of the ultra-conservative Tea Party during the first term of the Obama Administration—and stretching back, in this generation, to the 1994 "Republican Revolution" laid out by Newt Gingrich and Dick Army in their *Contract with America*—journalists, scholars, and pundits have homed in on the persistence of campaigns appealing to the demographic of "angry white men" with promises to defend the mythic "American way of life" in the face of the progressive initiatives for racial and economic equality, feminism and sexual liberation, immigration and multiculturalism that emerged in the 1950s and, against all of this, to restore to "real Americans" their pride of place in U.S. culture and society. The principal means of pursuing this revanchist project was, until the recent unpleasantness, the ideological proposition formerly known as colorblind racism. Hence the culmination of the twin processes of de-politicization and de-racialization in Barack Obama's rise to the most powerful elected office in the world: the post-political, post-racial President of Purple America. As he sought, like some tragicomic version of Paul the Apostle, to become all things to all people, he managed to save very few indeed.

Jonah Goldberg, writing for the conservative *National Review* just days after Donald Trump announced his 2015 presidential bid with white supremacist aplomb, argued that "our society is shot through with Nietzschean *ressentiment*" and claimed further that it characterizes the U.S. Left uniquely, a debilitating culture of reproach

that, in his view, proliferated during the Obama era. "*Ressentiment* is first and foremost the psychology of blame," he writes. "It surveys the social landscape and blames the failures and hardships of the alleged have-nots on the successes of the haves. It is more than envy, which is a timeless human emotion—and one of the seven deadly sins. It is a theory of morality that says the success of the successful is proof of their wickedness" (Goldberg 2015). Now, much as the author of *Liberal Fascism* would like to paint his opponents with this brush, the situation is, in truth, much *worse* than he imagines. For the disreputable term he bandies about—*ressentiment*—actually addresses a problem that, for Nietzsche, spans not only the entire modern political spectrum, from Left to Right, but also the whole history of the Common Era, from the advent of monotheism onward.

Where Goldberg conveniently misconstrues the epic struggle for power in human affairs as a banal defense of the organized violence of capital accumulation, Nietzsche's concept, whatever its limits within the purview of his aristocratic radicalism, offers no apology for private wealth in the unfolding of the manifold revolutions that roiled the Atlantic World in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Quite the contrary, the problem of *ressentiment* is not that it "blames the failures and hardships of the alleged have-nots on the successes of the haves." After all, such ascription of blame could very well signal an understanding of the dynamics of exploitation *per se*, i.e., there are "haves" *because* there are "have-nots." Instead, Nietzsche is

concerned—in fact, he is furious—that assigning blame, if you will, is all the have-nots seem willing and able to do, thanks to an ingrained piety, even under conditions of the most ancient and total form of domination: slavery.

Nietzsche, in other words, is not against the slaves' revolt in principle and he does not counsel slaves to know their place accordingly. That, at least, is how one might read the German professor if, following Robert Gooding-Williams in the edited volume *Critical Affinities*, we are "supposing Nietzsche to be black" and thereby aligned with the slaves' collective struggle for freedom; that is, "interpreted with an eye…to the typical concerns of black studies" (Gooding-Williams 2012, vii). Nietzsche chafes against the fact that the slaves' revolt takes place *in the register of morality*—as an "imaginary revenge" in which the enslaved, in their unearned worldly suffering, are deemed morally good in the eyes of God and their enslavers are deemed morally evil, slating each respectively for redemption and condemnation in the afterlife—and not *on the field of battle* where "the proper response of action" might transform the material and symbolic order of things, or, conversely, where it might be put down, properly, as it were, by violence from above. In either case, slavery as such, in its psychological hold at least, would lose out to the robust quest for freedom, the slaves' will to power triumphant in the very effort.

The slaves' revolt thwarts itself from within to the extent that the constituency becomes attached to morality itself and to the corollary preoccupation with survival.

Therein lies the existential decision, according to Frank Chouraqui, between "two antagonistic pairs": values and survival or truth and life (Chouraqui 2014, 64). In the absence, or repression, of the political antagonism between slavery and freedom, politics as such (including its extension as war) withers away and moralism fills the ethical vacuum. Once inside the universe of morality, however, further de-politicization feels like a deeper, more authentic form of politics because it is guided by reference to traditional (moral) values and buttressed by the felt need to survive. Meanwhile the prospect of re-politicization, which requires cultivating an *antagonistic* sensibility driven by an uncompromising ethic of freedom, feels like an insult to cherished (moral) values and, moreover, a threat to survival, individual and collective. In fact, it *is* such a threat. But, on this account, a threat to survival is not life-threatening here, but rather life-affirming.

We might rightly wonder why a conservative stalwart like Goldberg would turn to Nietzsche to describe the supposed finger pointing of the contemporary Left, precisely the question Nicholas Birns asks in an article for the *Nietzsche Circle* on the twentieth-century Euro-American "reaction against equality." Birns shows that, far from challenging "the psychology of blame," the true function of the conservative discourse of leftist *ressentiment* is to authorize and incite the "counter-*ressentiment*" of the largely white (and ever more multiracial) "Silent Majority" against the dreaded egalitarian ideal. Here's the rub: "the replacement of

straightforward antagonism with insidious envy" is the hallmark of *ressentiment* and in seeking to reverse modern trends toward equality, the Right cannot simply return to a politics of domination, hierarchy, and inequality grounded in some ancient naturalism (Birns 2005, 4). Nietzsche's observation that "God is dead" entails the loss of all such grand narratives of legitimation; even the need for the ideological justification of a society structured in dominance (by religion or science or culture or all of the above) suggests that ideas of equality have already taken hold among the *demos*. Counter-*ressentiment* indicates, then, that the values of "the slaves' revolt in morality" have been inscribed *among the elite* (as well as their deputies and junior partners), an attempt at usurping even the compensatory enjoyment of the have-nots' moral righteousness while redoubling elite efforts to hoard greater shares of wealth, power, and resources; something like a desire to be black for tax purposes.

None of this constitutes a return of the repressed, however. There is in the new international of rightwing populism, like its Confederate or Fascist or Nazi antecedents, no resurgence of a negated antagonism fundamental to the political domain. Such populism is firmly on the side of state and capital, drilling deeper into the wells of anti-blackness en route. The "politics of resentment" exhibited by the enemies of equality, whose hatred of democracy is consolidated today under the heading of Trumpism, contributes *en masse* to foreclosing the possibility of legitimate dissent as much as the bureaucratic proceduralism of the centrist establishment

politicians it rails against, all the more when it does so in the name of dissenting from an imaginary liberal orthodoxy and "draining the swamp" of government corruption. Trumpism is thus a false alternative to the administered society that Herbert Marcuse railed against at midcentury; it is as one dimensional as its public icon. But so too is the tepid "democratic socialism" of Senator Bernie Sanders and the newly branded "Justice Democrats," promoting a defense and expansion of the welfare state in the spirit of European social democracy rather than a socialization of ownership (Stuart 2018). There is, of course, no equivalence between the appeals of Trump and Sanders (the latter offers a range of ameliorative, downwardly distributive policies while the former seeks to consolidate oligopoly and reestablish racial dictatorship under a new autocratic state), but their coincident emergence in the 2016 election cycle should lead us to view them as aspects of a common political *malaise* rather than a accomplished shift in the political culture or a manifest threat to the system of governance.

Again, Mouffe suggests that a "lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal model of globalization is…at the origin of the proliferation of discourses and practices of radical negation of the established order" (Mouffe 2005, 82); foremost for present purposes the rallying cries of the alt-right to "[deconstruct] the administrative state," as former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon put it (Michaels 2017) and, more ominously, to "kill all normies"

(Nagle 2017). If political antagonism cannot be translated into agonistic conflict and a relationship between the two modalities cannot be established where erstwhile *enemies* can be approached now as *adversaries*, then the only recourse available to those objecting to the status quo are impotent eruptions of violence or passively aggressive forms of scripted protest; impotent because they cannot posit new terms of analysis and rules of engagement in the aftermath. The lack of effective political channels is the outcome of the negation or denial of antagonism, but we should emphasize that this *structural* negation is, for Mouffe and fellow travelers, coextensive with the *historic* collapse of communist regimes and the *ongoing* repression of socialism throughout the Western nations and their neocolonial spheres of influence.

Over a much longer historical series, however, we see that the moralizing closure of politics, in and beyond the U.S., revolves especially around matters of black freedom and equality, preceding its revolutionary founding and exceeding its most pivotal events. The ideological and repressive state apparatuses have been and continue to be arrayed against the struggle to truly abolish slavery and its myriad preconditions, an abolitionism aiming well beyond the emancipation proclamations of the nineteenth century. We can cite some well-known impression points: the inaugural sanction of slavery and the Three-Fifths Compromise on Congressional apportionment at the Constitutional Convention; the "Gentlemen's Agreement" at Appomattox that ended the

3/1/2019

Civil War and condoned the violent undermining of Radical Reconstruction; the blinkered dismantling of Jim Crow segregation and the wholesale ghettoization of black migrants since WWI alongside the exclusionary dispensation of the New Deal after the Great Depression; the launch of the post-civil rights era carceral state and the expanding machinations of finance capital from predatory lending to the privatization of vital public services. These are but a few entries in the database of an antagonism between slavery and freedom that is not only inherent to the political (and so formative of the struggle for democracy as such), but also so massive and so radical that its foreclosure is constitutive of the polity *in toto*: slavery, as I've argued elsewhere, is the threshold of the political world (Sexton 2016). Small wonder, then, that the *ressentiment* of slave morality continues to hold sway as the kernel around which every freedom dream must elaborate itself—in theory, culture, and politics.

What is more, a bizarre and distressing structure of feeling permeates the cultures of the post-emancipation slave societies. Frantz Fanon, ranging across three continents during the postwar ferment of black radical internationalism, from his native Martinique to metropolitan France to colonial Algeria, produced one of the most searing critiques of slavery and colonialism to that point and since; but it was his theorization of the peculiarities of "negrophobia" that distinguished a body of work whose prescience and relevance seems only to grow. David Marriott writes in a definitive study of Fanon's

thought that "the racialized body has often been the point of reception through which racism has become readable and natural but also…formed a complex limit to the experience of the body as first of all belonging to a self" (Marriott 2018, 67). Black corporeality within an anti-black world cannot become a direct or unmediated experience of *embodiment*, but only of a kind of perpetual *disembodiment*, of flight or eviction from a body and its "phobogenic" signification, neither of which can be escaped or expunged, notwithstanding persistent forms of celebration and embrace. Negrophobia traverses black lived experience as a persecuting *external* force that nonetheless comes from *within*, like an internal foreign object or an *extimate* enemy. And the imperative imposed by such anti-blackness is, for Fanon, depressingly familiar: "turn white or disappear."

For those educated to be *actional* against the racist injunction of "hallucinatory whitening" (Fanon 2008, 73), for those moved to fight the power, a difficult question of freedom emerges, one ostensibly raised and then buried again in the hoopla surrounding *Black Panther* in the Trump era. Marriott parses the matter as "what it could possibly mean to freely choose to be black when the decision necessarily means to embrace the world that condemns you. And to choose it knowing, but without being able to foresee, that such a decision will result in a pathological feeling of vertigo" (Marriott 2018, 214). If, as Fanon avers in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "one cannot be black with impunity" (Fanon 2008, 118), as is the wont of the slave master and the *sine qua non* of racial whiteness, then the

decision or *choice* to be black—to claim or reclaim, to affirm or avow—is incurably fraught as well and, in another sense, fated. "Say it loud—I'm black and I'm proud" and you might protest too much. We are returned, on this score, to this essay's epigraph and prompted to speculate about the perennial drama of what might be the quintessential problem of modern life for *everyone* involved: the "cleavage," as Marriott has it, "between sovereign life and black being" that motivates and rationalizes the transformation of slavery through the modern invention of race and the ascendant regime of private property (Marriott 2018, 228). Black being would be that unsovereign life animated by a commitment to the ethics of truth over the morality of values, passing through the will to nothingness toward a freedom beyond the felt need for survival.

If the contemporary post-political liberal consensus has frustrated for the Right the reactionary desire for a return to an overtly racist state and civil society fully subsumed by capital and has all but dashed for the Left what W.E.B. Du Bois once called "the dream of socialism," then it is not hard to imagine how, from the considerably longer historic vantage of what Manisha Sinha (2016) calls *the slave's cause*, the struggle for abolition and reconstruction since the fifteenth century has seemed utterly impossible, lost from the start, irrespective of the political winds of the citizenry, the proclivities of a given administration, the changes in means or relations of production, or the international balance of power. That said, Steven Hahn argues

persuasively that "a case may be made for a much larger and perhaps even more successful slave rebellion in the United States" than "what is known as the Haitian Revolution and currently understood as the greatest and only successful slave revolt in modern history" (Hahn 2009). How might our fidelity to the event of *that* rebellion—and the whole history of resistance it enlists and enjoins interminably—reconfigure the most basic coordinates of the political today? Here is Birns once more on that note: "Basically, if one sees *ressentiment* as able to be transcended…[then] the time of *ressentiment*'s ascension is placed relatively recently…. If you, as Nietzsche largely does, put the time of *ressentiment'*s ascension two thousand years ago you are, in all practical terms, suggesting that there is little one could do about it without bursting society's bounds in an apocalyptic way" (Birns 2005, 17).

We might resent such a pessimistic prognosis concerning the antagonism of slavery and freedom, but I suspect we wouldn't have it any other way: seeking justice in the non-moral sense, beyond good and evil, supposing us to be black too.

_____

SOURCES

Birns, Nicholas. 2005. "*Ressentiment* and Counter-*Ressentiment*: Nietzsche, Scheler, and the Reaction Against Equality." *Nietzsche Circle*, Jan 1: 1-37.

Chouraqui, Frank. 2014. *Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2006. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Goldberg, Jonah. 2015. "The Nietzschean Concept That Explains Today's PC Culture." *National Review*, June 19: goo.gl/NMaZDZ.

Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2012. "Foreword." *Critical Affinities: Nietzsche and African-American Thought*, edited by Jacqueline Scott and A. Todd Franklin. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, vii-xviii.

Hahn, Steven. 2009. "On History: A Rebellious Take on African-American History." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 3: goo.gl/uBUVf7.

Marriott, David. 2018. *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Michaels, Jon. 2017. "How Donald Trump is Dismantling a Pillar of the American State." *Guardian*, November 7: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/07/donald-trump-dismantling-american-administrative-state.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. New York: Routledge.

Nagle, Andrea. 2017. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. London: Zero Books.

Sexton, Jared. 2016. "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign." *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4-5 (July): 583-597.

Sinha, Manisha. 2016. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Southern California Library. 2018. *Reading Wakanda: Reconciling Black Radical Imaginations with Hollywood Fantasies*: http://www.socallib.org/reading-wakanda/.

Stuart, Tessa. 2018. "Can Justice Democrats Pull Off a Progressive Coup in Congress?" *Rolling Stone*, November 21: https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/who-are-justice-democrats-758447/.