

STRATEGIC NOTES REGARDING THE POLITICAL USAGE OF THE CONCEPT OF PLACE OF SPEECH / LAUREN OLAMINA AND I AT THE GATES OF THE END OF THE WORLD

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Strategic notes regarding the political usage of the concept of place of speech

1. Much has been said about how the concept of place of speech has been appropriated in order to bestow, or otherwise, the authority to speak about the political positions and marks that a given body assumes in this world, organised as it is by the unequal distribution of violence and access. The critical approaches to this do not seem to recognise the fact that there is a kind of politics (and policing) of discursive authorisation that precedes the rupture sought by place-of-speech activism. That is, place-of-speech activism is not what establishes the authorising regime, but the other way round. The regimes of discursive authorisation are inherently against such activism, so that, for example, the political gesture of asking a white European cis man to be quiet, to think before he speaks, essentially causes a rupture in the prevailing regime of authorisations. As such, if the concept of place of speech turns into a tool for interrupting hegemonic voices, that is because it is being used to encourage the possible emergence of voices that have, historically, been interrupted. So when place-of-speech advocates strip others of their authority, they are, ultimately, deauthorising the source of authority itself, i.e. that which built the world as an event of epistemicide. Furthermore, they are deauthorising the fiction that claims we all have the same access to speech and listening.



Fragment of the work 'A Ferida Colonial Ainda Dói', vol. 6 *vocês nos devem*, by Jota Mombaça for Videobrasil, 2017. Photo: Inês Abreu and Joana Maia.

2. Therefore, it is not about “who”, but “how”. Ultimately, what place-of-speech activism has deauthorised is a certain privileged way of speaking the truth, as characterised by the epistemic privileges of whiteness or cisgenderism, i.e. a way of communicating and establishing regimes of intelligibility, *speakability* and political listening. The point is not that white people are banned from speaking about racism, or that cis people are banned from talking about transphobia – the point is that they will not be able to speak as white, cis people: that is, they cannot speak as subjects who have been cast in the same subjectivity-producing mould which applauds ignorance, idolises freedom of speech, derides the task of listening and naturalises authority itself. In turn, this also entails the paradox that they will not be able to speak as if they were someone *not* cis and white, i.e. by erasing the very marks of race and gender conformity, to try and act as if cisgender and white privileges do not correlate with the system that oppresses the lives and voices of non-white and trans people.

3. It is also very common to come across critiques of the political concept of place of speech that pertain to a post-identity-based critique of the notion of identity. If it is always necessary to point out the limits of the forms of identity, in particular the fact that subjective and bodily experiences often go beyond the limits deemed normal for a given identity, then it is impossible to encompass in one single narrative movement the entirety of any given political experience. Meanwhile, on the other hand, and with the aim of critiquing the entry policies of the place of speech, it is easy to lose sight of

the fact that what is being revealed by most place-of-speech activism is not a question of identities, but rather, and more precisely, positions, and that the concept of position, perhaps in a different way to the concept of identity, already entails a certain degree of strategic anti-essentialisation. Thus, pinning cisgenderism to one certain experience is not an assertion of the perfect fit between the experience of a cis body and its categorical acceptance, yes it does demonstrate the way that certain cis bodies (that is, bodies that are relatively coherent with the compulsory gender assigned to them at birth), within the framework of cisnormativity, are undoubtedly placed in a position of power as opposed to those bodies that are not accepted in quite the same way.

4. The notion of situated knowledges needs to start working so that white people are situated within their whiteness, cis people in their cisgender, etc. In other words, this category came into our academic and political life due to how it remodelled the mechanisms of hypervisibility of the subaltern experience, piling on pressure so that the position of the politically oppressed would become, finally, narratable as a form of knowledge. The fundamental problem is this: we make use of situated knowledges to learn to speak about how the world fucks us over, about how power relations force us into precarious existences, but we do not contemplate the possibility of situating ourselves in our privileges too, in our ways of dragging out the ruin that is this world. That is, in the last few years we have had the opportunity to learn how to speak about the effects of the very subalternity as implied by our experience with the world, but, regrettably, this task has not correlated with the revelation of those positions of power whose existence is dedicated to the reproduction of subalternising regimes. This is why the concept of situated knowledges ended up limiting itself to reproducing the hypervisibility of the subaltern position as a discursive object, when instead the focus should have been on creating the right conditions so that when such subjects – i.e. those who are privileged in terms of cisnormativity, heterosexuality or white supremacy – are indeed situated, they could be starkly aware of their own position.

5. In general, the critiques of the place-of-speech concept that have been produced within white and cis positions are effects of the political resistance to signalling the fact that that these are positions of power. This resistance correlates with the practices of domination that lay the grounds for cisnormativity and white supremacy in the world as we know it. The very fact that these are unmarked, default positions is what allows them to access the political categories of person and subject; it is also by means of such non-signalling that the narratives produced from these positions manage to pull off the effect of truth and the appearance of neutrality. In this way, the cis and white critiques of the place-of-speech concept form part of a political struggle to maintain the structures of privilege and domination that configure

these positions as legitimately human, to the detriment of the subalternisation of countless others who are deeply and constantly marked by the cis-colonial and white-supremacist gaze.

6. Finally, it is necessary to respond to the critiques that denounce place-of-speech activism as violent, due to its reproducing of the tools for signalling subjects according to their positions in the social stratus that has been established by the logics of the world as we know it. I am not interested here in stating the non-violence of this activism, but rather I aim to situate it in relation to the primordial violence which it faces. I mean, advocates of place-of-speech activism are operating a wide-reaching movement of the redistribution of violence, which means that, by marking something which is unmarked, we are shaking up the way violence has been socially distributed, projecting onto those positions which have so far been exempt from this kind of marking and, therefore, unjustly accepted into a privileged part of the world as we know it, and the responsibility to face the violence that so shapes their ontological comfort.

Lauren Olamina and I at the gates of the end of the world

In *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney break new ground in their rethinking of what it means to study, especially 'black study', understood there as studying "without an end", studying as fleeing, as an escape route, that is: escaping with no set destination, indefinitely, in the middle of the black night of the undercommons. Like when we realise that this planet is doomed and there's nowhere to run apart from towards escape itself, towards the opaque, blurry, shifting and speculative domain of the escape. Studying is escaping. It is about studying to escape, to inhabit the exile, the catastrophe and the other possible worlds that loom over us as this one comes to end.

Lauren Olamina, the main character in the book *Parables of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, realises that the world that she grew up in is about to come to an end. Lauren is hyper-empathetic: she is able to absorb the pains and intensities of all the living things that surround her, and, while debilitating her, this seems to allow her to connect with all the surrounding forces in a unique way: a connection made of pain, in a shared affective space in which the effects of violence, of traumatic episodes, as suffocating as they are, also harbour the possibility for learning. For studying.

Most of chapter five is taken up by a conversation between Lauren and her friend Joanne, who concedes that reading the future must be impossible. Lauren responds: "It's scary, but once you get past the fear, it's easy". Here, reading the future is not a miraculous operation, but rather a case of studying, of focussing on the force diagrams and the choreographies of time, and it is not limited to the skill of sensing bad omens – Lauren refuses to stop there. Reading the future – or rather, the forces at play in the production of the future – is just the first step towards an action whose meaning is to shape it, to act upon it.

Each chapter in *Parable of the Sower* begins with verses from another book, written by Lauren and called *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. It is an experimental theology that repositions God and classes him as Change – a force as overpowering and relentless as it is malleable and chaotic; God exists to be shaped. He exists to be moulded, just like the future. So, for Lauren, the end of the world is not the end of the line. Her consideration for the future should not be confused with optimism, because things will undoubtedly get worse, but it is exactly this tragic awareness of the ongoing collapse that allows her to draw up the paths and strategies for her escape.

I began reading Octavia Butler just over a year ago. *Parable of the Sower* was the first book I connected with, and since then I have gone back to it several times. My attitude towards this book was and has been the same as Lauren's attitude towards the old books in the house's library: I go back to it with the aim of learning, in the lines and between them, certain things that might help us get through the apparently rough times ahead.

The big idea of speculative fiction is to represent, in the future, what is at play in the present. If the world we find ourselves in happens to be different to Lauren Olamina's world, it is still possible to perceive how the connections, the encounters and the way that forces work now might lead to the situation imagined by Butler. In the end, it is not difficult to look at this time, the time in which I am writing, and discern the signs of a world coming to an end. I mean, as I learnt from Lauren: "It's scary, but once you get past the fear, it's easy."

The sheer velocity of the ongoing collapse in the immediate present and its echoing of the historical necropolitical processes have turned me into an invariably pessimistic creature with regards to the future. Being a pessimist, however, does not mean renouncing or accepting a set image of the universal apocalypse as the final destiny for all life forms. I speak of a live pessimism, capable of indefinitely reworking the cartographies of catastrophe, paying close attention to the displacement of forces, and the repositioning and choreographies of power. Essentially, I refer to a kind of pessimism that is nothing more than studying, in the sense brought here by Moten and Harney: an escape route.

For Lauren, looking into the abyss of the future and facing realities, as devastating as they may be, is crucial for survival. In the same way, I like to perceive this time in all its cruelty and misery, in its cruelty and disillusionment, because I suspect that we cannot simply get over or transcend it. What is everywhere is not left behind, yet also we cannot accept that what is everywhere will be there forever. If the future is there to be modelled, and the present is the collapse, then "learning to despair"¹ is the condition of hope, and exhausting what exists is the condition of opening the doors to the impossible.

Notes

¹ I borrow this expression from Rita Natálio in her text: "The End of the World – The Bending of the World, available online at: <http://departuresandarrivals.eu/en/texts/focus-artists-texts/the-end-of-the-world--the-bending-of-the-world-553>. [Translator's Note: the verb 'despair' replaces the adjective 'desperate', here.]