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“The Fire This Time”: The Politics of Contingency

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Abstract

In this brief essay, I connect conceptualizations of dispossession with those of conjuncture, specifically conjuncture as an ethico-political category. Interested in the long history of racial capitalism and its iterative spatialities, I seek to foreground the contingency of the present and the politics made possible across time and in time. Drawing on postcolonial thought, especially that attentive to Blackness, I make an argument about the necessity of understanding urban transformations in relation to the present history of colonial settlement and removal.

Keywords

dispossession,
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"To speak in the vocabulary of the contingency of the present, then, is to affirm an *ethics* of action."

David Scott, 2005: 7 (emphasis in the original text)

In a series of evocative images, of which I share one, artist Eden McNutt draws our attention to the Hill District of his city, Pittsburgh. A neighborhood with deep histories of Black settlement, the Hill District is emblematic of spaces restructured through urban renewal in the mid-20th century. McNutt depicts the Hill District on fire, its homes ablaze in a seething swirl of destruction.

In December, 1962, James Baldwin published a letter to his nephew in *The Progressive*. The letter, "My Dungeon Shook," penned on the occasion of the "one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation," appears in Baldwin's epochal book, *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin famously tells his nephew: "This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish [...] You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason."

I put forward McNutt's art, linking it to Baldwin's letter, as a provocation to think about what Scott (2005: 7) calls "the contingency of the present." Baldwin reminds us of the rigid and violent patterning of racialization in the United States. As shown by Michelle Alexander (2010) in her influential monograph, *The New Jim Crow*, at different historical conjunctures, the system of racial caste has been renewed through different means. It has been transformed in order to persist. The closing chapter of her book is appropriately titled "The Fire This Time." While insisting upon the inevitability of racial discrimination and subordination, Alexander (2010: 22) also argues that "the adoption of the new system of control is never inevitable."

As an urbanist concerned with geographies of dispossession, I am interested in the politics of contingency. Why does it matter to think about contingency? In what ways does contingency trouble the through lines of history? If the renewal of racialized power is not inevitable, why does it nevertheless happen... repeatedly?

Such questions run through my current research. Departing from established scholarship that is con-

cerned with market-driven displacement in the age of neoliberalization, I study racial banishment in Los Angeles, by which I mean state-organized violence against racialized bodies and communities. I view banishment as a form of disappearance, one that exceeds displacement through its effects of civil death, and what Cacho (2012) has called “social death,” or racialized rightlessness. In a city such as Los Angeles, there are many sedimented histories of banishment, from the elimination of native people to the repatriation of Mexican citizens to Japanese internment. Today’s regime of banishment, I argue, builds on, and yet departs from, these earlier forced removals. Legal tools of banishment, such as gang injunctions and nuisance abatement, combine to push working-class communities of color to the far edges of urban life. Municipal ordinances target the houseless, criminalizing ordinary acts of urban living. Banishment is also a transnational geography of dispossession. Tracing the deportation of Salvadoran youth, Zilberg writes: “the Central American barrio in Los Angeles is haunted with voices from, and banished to, El Salvador.” Racial banishment can be understood as “the contingency of the present,” David Scott’s felicitous phrase that seeks to pinpoint a vitally important aspect of Stuart Hall’s many theoretical contributions to social theory. Scott (2005: 9) presents Hall as “preeminently an ethical theorist of the present and its ineluctable contingency.” Indeed, contingency plays a prominent role in Hall’s rethinking of Marxism, or what he calls “Marxism without guarantees” (Hall, 1986). Challenging the “determinancy of the economic,” Hall (1986: 42–43) insists on “the necessary ‘openness’ of historical development to practice and struggle,” or “determinancy without guaranteed closures.” Central to this argument is Hall’s (1986: 43) emphasis on the “terrain [...] of social forces” that embody “the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture.” As Scott (2005: 8) explains, this conceptualization of contingency is to see “the conjunctural *effect* of a multiplicity of articulations and determinations that cannot all be known in advance” (emphasis in the original). But most important, for Hall, as Scott (2005: 9) underscores, “a conjuncture is not merely a cognitive category in a social-historical reconstruction but a *moral-political* category in a strategic intervention” (emphasis in the original).

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In Los Angeles, the lives of the banished and banned are shaped by structured uncertainty. As I write this brief essay, a controversy has erupted over Mayor Eric Garcetti staging a photo opportunity with a houseless woman, whose life belongings were confiscated and destroyed shortly after the visit through one of the city's infamous sanitation sweeps (Matthew, 2019). Such dispossession of property and personhood is the fire this time. While inevitable, its spatio-temporal routines are fickle and uncertain (the sudden eviction notice, the unexpected sanitation sweep) and generate unbearable uncertainty (to where are the banished to go?). Uncertainty is not contingency. It is a necessary part of the violence that is racial banishment. The contingency of the present is, as Scott, learning from Hall, reminds us, an ethics of action. Racial banishment is at once the politics of disappearance and the politics of collective memory. Racial banishment is at once territorial exclusion and a terrain of mobilization. If violence against the houseless marks city government today in Los Angeles, then the outcome remains, to borrow a phrase from Hall, "without guarantees." As a fire this time, such violence is the grounds of fierce legal and social contestation, creating rebellions that reshape the city and its histories.

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