



PROJECT MUSE®

Combat-Débat: Parataxis and the Unavowable Community; or,
The Joke

Stuart J. Murray, Tad Lemieux

Philosophy & Rhetoric, Volume 52, Number 1, 2019, pp. 78-85 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/721922>



Combat–Débat: Parataxis and the Unavowable Community; or, The Joke

Stuart J. Murray and Tad Lemieux

ABSTRACT

Invoking the work of Maurice Blanchot, this text is situated in the (im)possibility of contemporary debate and the impossible, but necessary, question of (un)avowable community. Arguing that identity politics today forecloses debate in the syntactical closures of the named name, we follow Blanchot to open onto a paratactical politics of community. The parataxis (polysyndeton) is here the key trope of community and communication: the side-by-side arrangement of fragments that puts into play the seeming self-evidence of contemporary conjunctions, relations of subordination, and temporal sequence. The parataxis configures relations of alterity, radicalized in death, where the (non)being-in-common of self-other and self-self are exposed. Taking as instance the disaster of Donald Trump's presidency and the digital conveyances of identity, we explore this joke, its common currents, and the possibility for a paratactical politics of community when the joke is on us.

KEYWORDS: alt-right, Maurice Blanchot, death, identity politics, polysyndeton

◆ Writing is per se already (it is still) violence: the rupture there is in each fragment, the break, the splitting, the tearing of the shred—acute singularity, steely point. And yet this combat is, for patience, debate. The name wears away [*s'use*], the fragment fragments, erodes.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

There is much talk today but little speech, or rather, little speech that could be received and responded to absent the vows of the unavowable community of its speakers. There is combat but debate is foreclosed by the absence of asignifying absence. To avow that a community is unavowable—when the name wears away—is not to say that it has been disavowed, subjected, though in many cases this is so, for often the name names sovereignly. Neither subjection nor subject, rather, unavowability is given in the fecundity of plural speech, community, in exposure that does not redound upon the individual, identity. “The community is not the place of Sovereignty,” Maurice Blanchot writes. “It is what exposes by exposing itself” (1988, 12).

In talk today, identity politics presides over the subordination of the political to a politics of naming, pious annunciations: the self-regulative, reiterative enclosures of ego, essence, individual—phantasmatic sovereignty, hypostatization, theological avatar, digital in-joke. Identity has become a political tactic and steely talking point. It polices what passes as (permissible) “speech.” But neither does “debate,” in its contemporary politico-academic or popular guises, imply community or plural speech: “dialectical communication, requiring two antagonistic poles charged with contrary words and provoking a common current through this opposition, is itself, after brilliant bursts, destined to die out in entropic identity” (Blanchot 1993, 81). “Debate,” today, is territorializing, tied to identity.

In response to a syntactical politics of identity, this essay invokes the work of Blanchot—as rhetorical *contretemps*, so to speak—to open onto a paratactical politics of community. *Merriam-Webster* defines “parataxis” as “the placing of clauses or phrases one after another without coordinating or subordinating connectives” (“Parataxis” 2018; rhetoricians might call this polysyndeton). In between, in its lacunae, caesuras, the parataxis unsettles the common current of the text, its topography and durational field, whose movements and metrics become more fluid; sequence and coherence yield to anacoluthia; grammatical conjunctions are unavowed or unavowable, anagrammatical; metaphysical relations of ordination and subordination are ruptured, *dérangées*, neutral-ized; and we become uncertain of the relation of (presumably heteroclite) parts to the (presumable) whole. Diagonistic comma, (semi)colon, dash, breath, full stop—diacritical cut, crisis, cry. These contrapuntal relays are at play in Blanchot’s “fragmentary” writings, a “play of limits in which no limitation plays” (Blanchot 1992, 44). “The fragment, as fragments, tends to dissolve the totality it presupposes . . . but to which it exposes itself in order, disappearing—and

along with it, all identity—to maintain itself as the energy of disappearing” (Blanchot 1995, 60).

Paratactical fragments, side by side, epitomize the relation of alterity, the nakedness of every relation. Self and other are no more contiguous than the panel-texts of a graphic narrative. Dissonant contents split by spatiotemporal interstices: in the gutters: disappearance, patience, *attente*. Here, between and from, relationality is community cleaved by death. “What, then, calls me into question most radically?” Blanchot asks. “Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death [*d’être à la mort ou pour la mort*], but my presence for another [*à autrui*] who absents himself by dying” (1988, 9). My presence-to and being-for another, as other to an other, at the other’s death: this is not “witnessing” because death cannot be put to work—it is *désœuvrement* (unworkability)—and moreover because “when I take upon myself another’s death . . . this is what puts me beside myself [*hors de moi*], this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of community” (9). There, then, I “find” myself in a paratactical relation with the other, but moreover with my self, *hors de soi*: the exposed openness of community exposure in the time and (un)timeliness—the *contretemps*—of death. And it is in death that the community “gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech” (12). Plural speech: the “speech of writing”—*écriture*—which “common etymology makes . . . a cutting movement, a tear, a crisis” (Blanchot 1993, 28).

Death *cleaves*; speaking does not *parse*. The side-by-side (para-) arrangement (taxis) yields to rhetorical movement, verbs equi-vocably transitive and intransitive, when their claim on or to any grammatical object is set adrift, adeictic, and that relation becomes a question for and the impossible responsibility of the passive subject. As movement (taxis), the arrangement itself becomes ancillary or derivative, breaking with or defecting from (para-) a certain order, or syntagmaticity. “To speak is always to put into play an essential duplicity. . . . But to speak according to the necessity of an irreducible plurality, to speak as though each word were its own indefinite echoing within a multiple space, is too heavy a burden for one to bear alone” (80). The burden is, for patience, shared.

The “voices” of plural speech resonate across Blanchot’s own political writings. In the first issue of *Comité* published on behalf of the Student-Writer Action Committee in the wake of May ’68, Blanchot writes anonymously: “language is given not in the content of the texts nor in their form but through their relations,” as a “disharmonious ensemble” marked by “temporal irregularity,” “discontinuity,” “nonclosure,” and “rupture” (2010, 86). These texts are “anonymous” so as “to constitute collective or plural speech: a communism of writing . . . fragmentary: precisely to make plurality possible (a nonunitary plurality) . . . in order to find meaning not in themselves but in their conjunction-disjunction, their being placed together and in common [*mise en commun*]” (85). Blanchot suggests here that the master trope of community and communication is parataxis, which retreats from any exemplarity. Its speech—already (it is still) streaming violence—is the right to insubordination (*désassujettissement*): un-writing, un-saying (*dédire*), de-composition, dis-appearance.

But that community *could* be unavowable—essentially but impossibly so—might, or must, in the age of identity, be dismissed as some kind of joke. More to the point: that its unavowability—its incommensurability with recognizable political identity categories—could open onto the fecundity of its speech, its vows. By what paradox or wizardry, it might be demanded, could an “unavowable” community ever make a claim to recognition if it is unnamed and unnamable? To which, one reply: “We are an illusion. And we have to find the means for making the illusion vanish. This is the whole problem of salvation. “This joke of God is what we are” (Blanchot 1993, 116). Or: Your identity, your sovereignty, your recognition, your very names named—the *real* joke. “It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak—upon an imminent and immemorial disaster—just as we say nothing except insofar as we can convey in advance that we take it back [*que nous le dédisons*], by a sort of prolepsis, not so as finally to say nothing, but so that speaking [*le parler*] might not stop at the word [*la parole*]—the word which is, or is to be, spoken, or taken back [*dite ou à dire ou à dédire*]. We speak suggesting that something not being said is speaking” (Blanchot 1995, 21). Something not being said speaks, something unsayable, unavowable, patiently wearing away, effacing, and opening against the closures of the named name. “All speech is violence,” Blanchot writes, “a violence that is already exerted upon what the word names and that it can name only by withdrawing presence from it—a sign . . . that death speaks . . . when I speak” (1993, 42). And yet, we refuse

this speech, naming it and naming what it withdraws, and refusing what is withdrawn in our own naming—identity eliciting “unceasing combat” (35), or, today: tweets, hashtags, memes, comment sections, twaddle.

N. Katherine Hayles (1990) once argued that “the parataxic experience” is the hallmark of our “postmodern” age: the “I” fragmented between its particular corporeal immanence and the transcendence of ubiquitous digital subjectivity. And Bob Perelman would claim that parataxis is the “dominant mode of postindustrial experience”: “on one side, narrative, totality, the subject, presence, depth, affect; on the other, fragmentation, simulacra, schizophrenia, surface, pastiche” (1993, 313–14). But parataxis is here reduced to “experience,” a certain cognitive dissonance, perhaps, and yet one that ultimately shores up an “entropic identity” for which dissonance becomes no more than a matter of rational choice. According to Shuja Haider (2017), for example, the “mainstream apologists” of neoliberalism must choose between two paths. On one path they embrace the so-called hyperracism and pseudoscience of Silicon Valley. On the other, they reject the economic inequalities “generated by market society.” Inequality is wed to algorithm and AI, where network and machine learning excretes combat in on- and offline gathering spaces. Only shutting the machine down, she writes, renounces this combat. But what free choice is this, and in whose terms? Distorted dialectics, “debate,” defection? “In common we have: burdens. Insupportable, immeasurable, unsharable burdens. The community does not secure itself [*ne s’immunise pas*] against such disproportion; it has always left behind the mutual exchange from which it seems to come” (Blanchot 1995, 87).

In a *New Yorker* essay, Emily Nussbaum (2017) poses the question differently: “How do you fight an enemy who’s just kidding?” This joke has many names: “shitposting,” “lulz,” “trolling,” and “meme” are among the most common. In these names are arranged the productive identities of the “in-joke.” When it is defined, *the joke* typically designates this feature of online identity. Such was the case in Angela Nagle’s *Kill All Normies* (2017), in which the “in-joke,” circulating through digital spaces like 4Chan, moves (in) the composition of the “maze” (20) of irony, allegory, auto-immunity, and meaning production, from contemporary aesthetics to political and cultural discourse. The connective tissues of *débat-combat*. While any political or cultural identity is now ostensibly memetic in advance (*commun*), trolling and shitposting is the worm at the core of the joke’s truth-telling, culminating in the liar president Donald Trump, his jokes and vulgar

locker-room talk, and renewed white nationalism, open discrimination, and the gaping maw between identity and community. Since Trump's #MAGA presidential campaign (LOL), commentators have taken up this "joke" as ground and urtext for NRx, the alt-right, and as the new tools of hate (alt-free) "speech." In this way, in-jokes solidify a syntactic identity, as body-politic-under-threat, against its named others, and coordinated through the normie, SJW, chad, stacy, shitlord, incel, otherkin, thot, cuck, libtard, redpiller, Wojak, beta, brainlet, Bernie Bro, NPC, and beyond. The joke stands (in) for the new identities of reproduction, and nihilist resemblances, behind campus lecterns, White House podiums, and free speech platforms. And identity, we are told, is no joke—the only thing that is no joke, not-funny, on the right as on the left.

But "getting" the joke, as Nussbaum remarks, means not being the subject of it. In purporting to tell the story of the culture war through the (in-)joke, critics have variously argued that Nagle has only reproduced the alt-right's story, the disfigurements of the real, that names the joke's combative identity. So: *Normies* was captured, the subject of the joke. But if so—if Nagle's joke was the wrong kind—this is because the joke is only realized, again, *as* her book and its reviews. We can't talk about the joke without being captured by it; we can't be in the joke while being its subject—the joke is the risk of identity (capture). In this risk, the joke is the taking back of what is-not shared, not the political identities that re-occupy by talking against speech. The risk is nonidentity, the disaster.

If the joke is known only by misogynistic forms, as with GamerGate, or racist and nationalist forms, as with /pol/ and /r/the_donald, or with the recursions of ironic detachment, memetic content production, meta-self-referentiality, pop nihilism, wholesomeness, in identity politics or in the form of a historical origin, the "glittering abyss" as Foucault once put it, the joke will give (in). That is, if the joke names, that naming transforms what is named, what "is" disappearing in the naming, in saying "only what is not . . . being the becoming speech of death itself and yet interiorizing this death, purifying it, perhaps, in order to reduce it to the unyielding work of the negative through which, in an unceasing combat, meaning comes toward us, and we toward it" (Blanchot 1993, 35). And if, then, finally but first, the politics of identity is the extending of the joke itself—as "it"-self—into an exegesis of "debate" that trails behind its

repercussions, the joke is yet not apprehended, because it is not “in-” but always “is” (in) the wearing away of the named name. Blanchot writes:

[W]hat was most personal could not be kept as the secret of one person alone, as it broke the boundaries of the person and demanded to be shared, better, to affirm itself as the very act of sharing. This sharing refers back to the community and is exposed in it; it can be theorized there—that is the risk it runs—becoming a truth or an object that could be owned while the community . . . maintains itself only as the place—the non-place—where nothing is owned, its secret being that it has no secret, working only at the unworking [*désœuvrement*] that traverses even writing, or that, in every public or private exchange of words [*de parole*], makes the final silence resound, the silence where, however, it is never certain that everything comes, finally, to an end. (1988, 19–20)

In *response*, to a politics of identity, and its syntax, we follow a paratactical politics of community that would be *the shared undoing of what wants to give itself into something that (it) cannot be*. That’s the joke.

*Department of English Language and Literature
Carleton University, Canada*



WORKS CITED

- Blanchot, Maurice. 1988. *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.
- . 1992. *The Step Not Beyond*. Trans. Lycette Nelson. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1993. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1995. *The Writing of the Disaster*. New ed. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- . 2010. *Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953–1993*. Trans. Zakir Paul. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Haider, Shuja. 2017. “The Darkness at the End of the Tunnel: Artificial Intelligence and Neoreaction.” *Viewpoint Magazine*, 28 Mar. www.viewpointmag.com/2017/03/28/the-darkness-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel-artificial-intelligence-and-neoreaction/.

- Hayles, N. Katherine. 1990. "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information." *American Literary History* 2 (3): 394–421.
- Nagle, Angela. 2017. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Alresford, UK: Zero Books.
- Nussbaum, Emily. 2017. "How Jokes Won the Election." *New Yorker*, 23 Jan. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election.
- "Parataxis." 2018. Merriam-Webster.com. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parataxis.
- Perelman, Bob. 1993. "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice." *American Literature* 65 (2): 313–24.