Lachrymator: Persuasion's Tear Gas

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My question today is pretty straight-forward: what's the rhetorical agency of teargas? This question first circulated while watching the nightly militarized police response to demonstrations in response to the killing of Darren Wilson by police in Ferguson, MO on August, 9, 2014 and again in the incidents of the Baltimore uprising when the city saw protests and intense police and national guard response following the killing of Freddie Gray in police custody. While these two displays of militarized policing in response to African American public displays of mourning and anger bookended a period of intense visibility for the massive problem of the police killing of minority individuals throughout this country, I was specifically struck by these two events because of the pervasiveness of the otherwordly, green-ish white clouds of various tear gases that hovered over fleeing crowds of unarmed Americans in nominally common spaces of American cities. Arguably the most famous image of the Ferguson protests was a bandana-masked protestor, wearing an American Flag t-shirt, throwing an ignited tear gas canister back at the police lines. Discussion on Twitter from Ferguson and Baltimore tended to focus on when and if the police had begun using tear gas on the crowd, where the tear gas was currently being dispersed, and how to avoid it. In other words, the class of substances we know as tear gas arguably provided some of the tightest contraints on public rhetoric in Ferguson and Baltimore during these periods of militarized police occupation.

When we speak of objects and politics in rhetorical theory, our arguments tend to revolve around democratic deliberation (as in Bruno Latour's parliament of objects) and questions of co-emergence (as in Ian Bogost's theory of carpentry where the philosopher is tasked with "making things that explain how things make their world"). As Nathaniel Rivers has perhaps most forcefully argued in this vein of thinking, the analysis "of public rhetoric should embrace equally the nonhuman, not simply as artifacts of rhetorical production, or as vessels of cultural meaning, or even as containers for rhetorical action, but rather as active participants in what Latour calls an object-oriented democracy" (Rivers, n.p.). Rivers's work is important for dramatizing the way a whole Latour litany of "permits, post-it notes, procedures, and petitions" churns beneath the surface, silently (at least from the standpoint of the scholarly gaze) enabling the more "famous speeches, widely read texts, and highly visible actions" that usually make up the canon of public rhetoric (Rivers, n.p.). I want to extend the model for a nonhuman political rhetorical agency in this paper because I am unwilling to claim that tear gas participates in *democracy*, object-oriented or otherwise. I, for one, am not okay with calling the deployment of a substance banned by the Geneva Convention against unarmed protestors in a populated urban area "democracy," unless we want to remix military theorist Carol von Clausewitz through Martin Luther King Jr and claim that the suppression of a riot is democracy by other means.

Given the prominent roll played by tear gas as a rhetorical actant in Ferguson and Baltimore, I think we need to think about rhetorical objects as actants in non-democractic systems as well as in democracy and how these actants rhetorically engage in public. In order to do this analysis, I shift my theoretical base away from the usual suspects of

object-oriented rhetoric (Harman, Latour, Bogost, Bryant, Bennett) toward theories of rhetorical objects that emerge out of Africana studies. Specifically, I will be looking at Simone Browne's "dark sousveillance" in *Dark Matters* and Alexander G. Weheliye's "racializing assemblages" in *Habeas Viscus* as examples of an alternative discourse of the object and its rhetorical agencies. In this other lineage of the object, we start to see theories that open up non-democratic ways in which objects attain rhetorical agency and how the complicated status of "object" can be more adequately troubled before it is fully praised in rhetorical theory. Watching the tear gas clouds billow each night over Ferguson and Baltimore on short, shakey videos shared via Twitter from reporters, activists, and people who don't want tanks rolling through their neighborhoods tear-gasing their children, I find the need to slow down in the face of claiming that merely including non-humans is a way toward a more ethical public rhetoric.

Teargas works as an object of analysis in this framework because, as far as I can tell, it has no purpose outside of hurting humans. The term designates a fairly wide class of weapons including pepper spray, mace, CR, and CS (the latter is the chemical deployed in Ferguson and Baltimore). Under the more scientific term *lachrymator* (Latin for "tear making"), these compounds are designed to do one thing: aggravate the tear ducts and other mucus membranes of the human body by producing intense, lingering pain. These weapons are banned from use in warfare after widespread use of lethal forms of teargas by the German Army in World War I. Given teargas's chemical action, producing tears, it would also seem a particularly potent site for investigating non-democratic theories of object-oriented public rhetoric: *pathos*, as discussed throughout

the history of rhetoric, takes the production of tears as a key strategy for producing emotional appeals.

I do not bring this up to be flip. There is something really interesting going on in teargas's chemical pathways as displays of public rhetorical agency. As we all know, post-Sophistic theorists of rhetoric in the Classical period are often suspicious of *pathos* as a strategy because it is a form of manipulation (part of the flattery that gets rhetoric made analogous to pastry making by Socrates in *Gorgias*). However, teargas, as a producer of tears, apes this *pathos*-as-manipulation and instead, produces tears through coercion. Where many in the Classical tradition are suspicious of the orator's ability to produce false emotions in audiences, teargas short circuits even this falsehood: producing tears by acting directly on the body's chemical structure, making tears by force, mirroring the coercive public rhetorical performance embodied by teargas deployment. Where we have reports of the Athenians being suspicious of Gorgias's ability to hypnotize his audience by his ringing style, teargas hijacks not the hearts and minds but the bodies of its audience. This is, if anything, a kind of chemical eloquence that, I wonder if we can even call an emotional appeal.

Moreover, teargas's hijacking of the body and its coercive production of the outward appearance of *pathos* mirrors the theories of objectness I am interrogating in this paper. Both Weheliye and Browne base their projects around differing, though intertwined, interpretations of what Franz Fanon calls "epidermalization" in *Black Skins, White Masks*. Explaining the supposed inferiority complex felt by black people, he writes that

> If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:

—primarily, economic; —subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority. (Fanon, pg. xv)

Browne clarifies Fanon's use of epidermalization as "the imposition of race on the body" and goes on to explain how under the white gaze, blackness is imposed from without, not emerging from an internal experience of selfhood. Browne connects this to a transhistorical analysis of surveillance of blackness from plans for slave ships (authored just three years after Bentham's publication of the panopticon scheme) to treatment of black bodies and hair by TSA agents in post-9/11 America. For Browne, these practices of quantification create the identity as external: embodied in the skin as well as the documents and other accoutrements of slavery that shape this experience of subjectivity. Browne goes on to argue how surveillance practices, as we experience them today in our broadly photographed and quantified publics, most often first emerged as means of performing epidermalization and of enacting anti-black racism. From this Browne suggests that the surveilled black subjectivity often, because of this imposition of an external identity through coercive and omnipresent racializing gaze, encounters embodiment as an object rather than a subject. Browne's account of surveillance reminds us of the high psychological costs, enumerated in Fanon's lectures in Tunisia on surveillance, of being made object by an omnipresent set of racializing technocratic processes.

Both Browne and Weheliye read Fanon in concert with Slyvia Wynter's development of Fanon's concept of "sociogeny." For Fanon as interpreted by Wynter, the human is always produced through two sets of processes: genetics (ontogeny) and, as Weheliye explains, "a symbolic register, consisting of discourse, language, culture, and so on." This latter dimension is the space of "epidermalization," though as Weheliye

explains, Wynter creates "an approach of thinking of the human … where culture and biology are not only not opposed to each other but in which their chemistry discharges mutually beneficial insights" (Weheliye 25). From this insight, Weheliye concludes that racialization happens, for Fanon and Wynter, "in the domain of being rather than the realm of epiphenomena, showing how humans create race for the benefit of some and the deteriment of others. Yet because race is thought to rest in biology, it necessitates different analytic protocols … , namely ones that draw on both ontogeny and sociogeny" (Weheliye 26). Weheliye puts forward "racializing assemblages" as a conceptual figure for tracing these social and linguistic processes that map social prejudices onto biological traits, erase the traces of these social origins, and thus manufacture race and racialiazation as natural. As he clarifies, his project is a "taking leave from considering racial categorization as a mere ideological imposition of scientifically 'wrong' phenomena" toward a concept that "networks bodies, forces, velocities, intensities, institutions, interests, ideologies, and desires in racializing assemblages" (Weheliye 12). Importantly, these assemblages sift humanity into "full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye 3). That these assemblages do this sifting not through biological but rather through semiotic and scopic means is the key insight Weheliye imparts in *Habeas Viscus*.

Racializing assemblages, Weheliye explains, are "a set of sedimented political relations" that get discussed and uses as natural (Weheliye, pg. 68). Though Weheliye's treatment of racializing assemblages primarily deal with human bodies, especially with the violence these assemblages perform on certain bodies, and the human actants that work within these assemblages. However, there is nothing inherent in his definition, as I've been summarizing, that precludes us from imagining nonhuman actants at work in

racializing assemblages, and I think we can articulate teargas as such an actant. In other words, while I am suspicious of claiming teargas as an agent of a democratic public rhetoric, I think we can safely consider it an actant in a racializing public rhetoric. This shift of emphasis is important as a reminder that not everything that happens rhetorically in public happens *for* democracy and not everything that happens rhetorically in public is something we can hail as good. Not only does this complicate our understanding of nonhuman rhetoric, basing a theory of object-oriented rhetoric around racializing assemblages and epidermalization further complicates, in ways similar to Rivers's use of Latour, our understanding of public rhetoric.

Further, thinking with racializing assemblages as shaping constraints on public rhetoric, we can begin to imagine new networks of human and non-human rhetorical investment that shape rhetorical ecologies in the wild. Specifically, the responses summoned by these rhetorical situations might take the form of what Simone Browne calls "dark sousveillance." Sousveillance, the master term in contemporary surveillance studies, is Steve Mann's term for "enhancing the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance and to neutralize surveillance" (qtd. in Browne, pg. 21). Browne extends this concept, within the context of black experiences of surveillance, "to situate the tactics employed to render ones self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight" (Browne, pg. 21). In the context of teargas, we can find dark sousveillance as Browne defines it in the fascinating global response to Ferguson. Specifically, groups such as The Melbourne Street Medic Collective, who offer first-aid and medical assistance to primarily anti-globalization protests, circulated manuals for how to treat teargas inhalation both on the ground and

online during the police violence in both Ferguson and Baltimore. Similarly, many news outlets reported on the number of Palestinian youths who shared similar tips for preventing, avoiding, and dealing with teargas to activists in the US through Twitter. During the police violence in Ferguson and Baltimore, an international community manifested to share knowledge of dark sousveillance strategies for dealing with the brutal rhetorical constraints imposed by these substances.

Generally teargas can be treated in the moment with an application of a 1:1 Maalox and water solution (what street medic collectives refer to as "LAW" (Liquid Antacid and Water)) or, if necessary, milk. However, these documents also stress the importance of isolating cloths and skin exposed to teargas due to the threat of contamination. It is probably a little known fact outside of activist circles, but teargas, especially CS, is extremely sticky. Favored by law enforcement because (unlike the cheaper CR) it is non-carcinogenic *and* because it disperses out of the air quickly, dispersed CS gas lingers on surfaces for days if they are not cleaned and can contaminate pets, furniture, carpet, cloths, and even bottles of LAW until the gas residue is washed. I mention this by way of a conclusion to return to my point about the coerced simulation of *pathos* produced by teargas. The anonymous author of *Rhetorica ad Herranium* emphasizes the importance of the appeal to pity as a kind of last-ditch, though effective, recourse in courtroom cases, though he cautions: "the Appeal to Pity must be brief, for nothing dries more quickly than tears" ([Cicero], pg. 153). With teargas, however, the chemically induced tears, symptoms of the coercive political, racializing rhetoric embodied within the substance does not dry quickly and the effects of this *pathos* can linger if not properly treated. In its coercive rhetorical action, short-circuiting the

hypnosis of emotional appeals straight for the end-product, teargas reveals a different dimension of public rhetorical objects than ones that participate in democracy and, I have argued, reveal the dangers of rushing to declare objectivising others as the most ethical stance. By sourcing our understanding of the rhetorical object from blackness studies, instead of the universalizing perspectives of continental philosophy, we come away with a very different understanding of objects, publics, and rhetorical agencyThese other theories and the world of violence they manifest, suggest a need to go more slowly in our rush to build an object-oriented public rhetoric and to think of the ways, for the people labelled "not-quite-human" by our culture's racializing assemblages, that objects participate in other political processes beyond democracy.

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