MEMOIR

CONTEST OF WORDS
High school debate and the demise of public speech
By Ben Lerner

Although high school debate is often considered the thinking person’s—the nerd’s—alternative to sports, my memories of it are primarily somatic: the starched collar of the dress shirt against my recently shaved neck, small cuts and razor bumps deepening the sensation; the constant gentle pressure of the tie; how my gait and posture adjusted under the direction of the suit; the way the slacks always felt high and tight because I normally let my baggy jeans sag to whatever level we white midwestern adolescents had tacitly established as our norm. The constriction in my shoulders would be extreme—less accumulated stress than a kind of constant flexing, an indication of battle-readiness. My hair would be drawn into a ponytail (though the sides of my head were shaved, a disastrous tonsorial compromise between skinhead and hipster that can perhaps stand for the irresolvable tension between the household of my lefty, loving, Jewish psychologist parents and the very red state in which they’d raised me), which heightened the already considerable tension in my temples. I recall a continual low-level nausea, anxiety about the next round mixing with the McDonald’s breakfast we would have stopped for on the road; I recall prodigious perspiration independent of temperature, periodic involuntary erection or the fear of it. Understand, I was not the only one who found “competitive speech” so physically trying. I can conjure—cannot not conjure—the image of two young women in nearly matching charcoal pantsuits hyperventilating into paper bags at Washburn Rural High School. I can still see a sophomore vomitting into his file folders soon after learning he’d be facing the defending state champions in a semifinal round.

Our tournaments were held in Kansas public high schools that appeared strangely altered on the weekends, the spaces subtly but profoundly transformed when emptied of students and teachers and severed from the rhythms of a normal day. Each room, with its hortatory posters, its rows of empty desks, equations or dates or stock phrases left on chalk- or dry-erase board, possessed something of the unreality of a theatrical set and yet something of the gravity of a postapocalyptic scene, as though a nuclear disaster had obliterated the population midlesson without affecting the building. You could occasionally even pick up traces of Speed Stick or scented lip gloss or other floating signatures of a social order now suspended. I remember trying combinations on the main hall lockers and touching a wrestling state-championship banner in the cafeteria with the distance of an anthropologist or a ghost.

To such a school that was no longer a school a small population of formally dressed adolescents from all over Kansas would travel by bus or van through the early-morning dark. See them arrive, wheeling plastic tubs of evidence through the freezing parking lot. They gather for a brief welcome assembly in a cafeteria redolent of bleach before dispersing in teams to the classrooms where a judge and timekeeper await. The lids come off the tubs, various papers are retrieved from hanging folders, and the round commences. The first few seconds of a speech might sound more or less like oratory, but soon the competitors will be accelerating to nearly unintelligible speeds, pitch and volume rising, spit and sweat flying as they attempt to “spread” their opponents—that is, to make more arguments and marshal more evidence than the other team can respond to within the allotted time, the rule being that a “dropped argument” no matter its quality, is conceded. (The judge, usually a former high school or college debater, hunches over a legal pad, producing a flow sheet of the round along with the competitors, recording argument and counterargument in shorthand, rarely making eye contact with the speakers.)

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If you could walk the halls like an anthropologist or a ghost and peer into the rooms mid-round, competitive interscholastic debate would appear to you not as an academic subject but as a full-bodied glossolalic ritual in which participants teeter on the edge of syncope, reducing what is nominally an exchange of ideas to an athletic display of unreason. Whatever its value to the initiated, whatever its jargon and rules, from the outside debate must appear more cultic ecstasy than “public speaking.”

And yet what I most want to describe is how in those weird rooms I experienced occasional accesses of power. I might be in Olathe on a December afternoon enumerating in accelerating succession the various ways implementation of my opponent’s health-care plan would lead to holocaust when I would pass a mysterious threshold. I would begin to feel less like I was delivering a speech and more that a speech was delivering me, that the rhythm and intonation of my presentation were beginning to dictate its content, that I no longer had to organize my arguments so much as let them flow through me. Suddenly the physical tension was all focused energy, a transformation that made the event vaguely erotic. I became in these transformative moments an acned rhapsode, and if the song that was coursing through me was about the supposedly catastrophic risks of a single-payer health-care system or the affirmative speaker’s failure to prove solvency, I was nevertheless more in the realm

“The World Is Everything That Is the Case,” by Cody Trepte
of poetry than of prose, my speech stretched by speed and intensity until I felt its referential meaning dissolve into pure form, until I was singing the oldest song, singing the very possibility of language. In a public school closed to the public, in a suit that felt like a costume, while pretending to argue about policy, I, in all my adolescent awkwardness, would be seized, however briefly, by an experience of prosody.

On Saturday evenings I would return home from a tournament, change clothes, have a late dinner with my parents, then get picked up by my best friend, Stephen, who’d drive us to a party. These gatherings tended to take place at the middle-class home of someone whose parents were out of town. Most vivid are my memories of basement spaces, though what most remains with me is their indeterminacy; I can feel myself descending carpeted stairs into a twilit domain of smoke and music. The composite odor of malt liquor, perfume, weed, and maybe cat litter returns—not, it surprises me to say, altogether unpleasantly. The main activity, of course, was getting fucked up; there were drinking games and outside bongs, and there would eventually be the spectacle of someone puking, passing out, or otherwise committing a severe party foul. There was plenty of making out, and, when possible, couples would absent themselves to private rooms. There were rumored orgiastic scenes I always managed to miss, but I remember sexual activity as secondary to inebriation, though the former was of course all but unimaginable without the latter.

There was always a reasonable expectation of violence, that somebody would get his nose broken or a bottle shattered on his head, usually as a result of talking shit, vaguely disrespecting someone, something; the constriction of my shoulders at parties was extreme. The violence was as a rule weakly motivated, sometimes totally random. I remember one gathering in a basement that had a pool table in its center; nobody was playing. At one point the lights were cut, there was a loud crack, a scream. When the lights were restored one of the partygoers was splayed on the floor in a small puddle of blood; someone from Topeka West had hurled the cue ball through the dark, not caring whom he hit, and fled. Luckily, it struck someone in the jaw and not the temple.

The violence I witnessed tended to arise not from conflicts over traditional American forms of difference or from conventional gendered rights of passage but from an identity vacuum so total that even its vocabulary of brutality had to be borrowed, however awkwardly: I remember watching the son of a prominent businessman working his fingers into an array of gang signs before he hit a rival with a bat—or was it some sort of pipe?—in the driveway of his family’s McMansion. The more preposterous the pose, the more extreme the violence required to hold it. Handguns were occasionally flashed, if never discharged, in my presence (though I did once see a freshman pistol-whipped). Our misogynistic language, our manner of dress and address, our ways of abusing substances and one another, were largely modeled on gangsta rap and its videos.

This feedback loop in which middle-class suburban white boys imitated the exaggerated image of urban African-American violence, an image they (or their parents) helped finance through record sales, was largely a response to the cultural poverty of a thoroughly franchised landscape. The downtown had long since fallen to the pressures of a provincial mall; the neighborhood and family-run restaurants had been replaced by Applebee’s (“America’s Favorite Neighbor!”) and Olive Garden (“When you’re here, you’re family!”). Violence was a response to the numbing effects of a suburban standardization so total it solicited increasingly extreme forms of reality testing; violence was a mechanism for “keeping it real.” We had to appropriate even our jargon of authenticity.

For me, violence provided a crucial link between the arena of competitive speech and the realm of the white middle-class pseudogangster, the wankster, the wigger, which constituted the upper echelon of Topekan adolescent society. My participation in debate and competitive speech could just barely escape nerdiness if I narrated it to nondebaters as a form of linguistic combat—the only kind of conflict, despite my constant weight lifting and tough friends, into which I was really prepared to enter. Moreover, verbal jousting was as close as I could come to reconciling the culture of my household with the world beyond. I could never be one of the fighters, and not just because I’ve always been a physical coward but also because I was my parents’ son: I grew up in a home full of books and music; I had been at every moment of my life supported and loved; I was always going to leave Topeka for college and did not feel trapped there. If many of my friends were fake gangsters, I was a fake fake gangster; I’d debate and speech, by transposing conflict to a verbal and comparative intellectually registers, offer at least a partial synthesis of these two worlds. I became a bully, quick and vicious and ready to spread an interlocutor with insults at the smallest provocation; I dominated; I made other debaters cry. If this occasionally brought me to the brink of getting my ass kicked, it generally served as a deterrent.

Fortunately for me, this shifting of aggression to the domain of language was sanctioned by one of the practices the cool kids had appropriated: after several hours of drinking, if nothing had broken up the party, you were likely to encounter some of us freestyling. In many ways this is the most embarrassing of all the poses, the clearest manifestation of a crisis in white masculinity and its representational regimes, a small group of privileged crackers often arrhythmically recycling the genre’s dominant and to us totally inapplicable clichés. But it was socially essential for me: the rap battle helped translate my prowess as a public speaker into something cool. Even now it’s hard for me to believe my luck, that there was a ritualized poetic insult exchange bridging the gap between my Saturday after-
noons and Saturday nights, allowing me to transition from one contest to the other.

And yet during those house parties, as some eighty ounces of Old English malt liquor coursing through my body, I might again be seized by an experience of prosody that transcended the stolen and perverted materials out of which it was made. "Freestyle" is a misnomer for a radically formal activity in which the pressure of rhyming in real time forces a speaker to prioritize the material attributes of language, its sounds and stresses, while still performing narrative tasks. Freestyling isn't about fitting preexisting content into rhyming and rhythmic forms but rather about discovering content, what's sayable, in the act of composition. I would sometimes manage to rise, I beg you to believe me, above the stupid violence of our battles and enter a zone in which sentences unfolded at a speed I could not consciously control. At that point it didn't matter what words I was plugging into the machinery of syntax, it didn't matter if I was rhyming about bitches or blow or the Canadian health-care system; it didn't matter that I looked like an idiot; what mattered was that language, the fundamental medium of sociality, was being displayed in its abstract capacity, and that my friends and I would catch a glimpse, however fleeting, of grammar as pure possibility.

The activity in debate and forensics that most closely corresponded to freestyling was Extemporaneous Speaking, not Policy Debate. ("Forensics" refers to competitive interscholastic speaking events other than debate, whereas "Policy Debate" denotes the evidence-heavy team debate in which the spread is dominant; all are governed by the National Forensics League.) I won the National Championship in International Extemp—there was also a Domestic Extemp—my senior year, after having finished second my junior year. I won the state championship all four years. I never became a junior year. I won the state championship all four years. I never became a national competitive policy debater; that would have required endless hours of research, filling those plastic tubs with evidence and briefs, summer "institutes," and a similarly committed partner. As the name implies, Extemp emphasizes improvisation: a competitor draws three questions at random—on international affairs if you're in IX, domestic if DX—chooses one, then has thirty minutes to prepare a five- to seven-minute speech that he or she delivers without notes. Topics might be frighteningly particular ("Will the Ukrainian Parliament ratify the new constitution next month?") or frighteningly general ("What is the future of Mexico?")). We Extempers had our own smaller plastic tubs of hanging fold- ers specific to countries or issues that we'd stuffed with articles from magazines and newspapers, and we were supposed to cite sources in our speeches to substantiate our claims, but this was much lighter research than that required by Policy Debate; you just read several magazines a week, highlighted, photocopied.

Extemp required less preparation, but it could be so nightmarish that even serious policy debaters respected it. They scoffed, meanwhile, at Original Oratory, in which you delivered a polished, memorized speech on any topic. Imagine your sixteen-year-old self in a "prep room" before a final round choosing among three questions of almost sadistic obscurity. (At local tournaments, the prep room was in the high school library, competitors wandering around mumble- ing to themselves like lunatics as they tried to commit outlines to memory.) You go with the question about water disputes in Djibouti because you at least know what water is, but how are you going to project fluency and authority on a topic about which your tub is horribly silent? Or imagine transitioning to your second major point in the third minute of a speech that's going swimmingly only to realize you've forgotten it; you have no notes, you have no way to call a time-out. I saw novice Extempers begin to stammer, fall silent, freeze the room.

Extemp was officially about developing such a command of current affairs that one could speak confidently on a range of topics, but it was of course as much about the opposite: how a teenager in an ill-fitting suit could speak as if he had a handle on the crisis in Kashmir, how polish could compensate for substance as one determined the viability of a two-state solution. As in freestyling, the scariest and yet most potentially exhilarating aspect of Extemp was how much of your content you had to discover in the act of speaking, so that when you did catch the right rhythm, it felt like channeling.

I'm not disputing the very real synthetic intelligence of many of Extemp's participants, but the speeches required decisiveness: clear rather than complex answers won rounds, and you learned to study a speech with sources the way a politician reaches for statistics—to provide the affect of authority more than to illuminate an issue or settle a point of fact. Much of your coaching and practice focused on how to use your body to lend your speech structure, when and where to mark transitions, when and how to gesture. Unlike Policy Debate, in which the spread eclipsed all oratorical values, style and presentation remained primary in Extemp, even if the goal was to project an image of erudition. One common defense I heard of Policy Debate's addiction to the spread was that students interested in the niceties of speech could go and do Extemp.

Or they could do L-D. In 1979 a representative of Phillips Petroleum, then the primary corporate sponsor of the National Forensics League, observed a round of Policy Debate at the national tournament and found it incomprehensible. Phillips expressed its concerns about the direction Policy Debate was taking to the executive council of the National Forensics League. The result was the formation of a new, one-on-one debating activity, Lincoln–Douglas Debate, which emphasized values, its format intended to prioritize oratorical persuasion. Speakers were expected to argue from a moral framework, not an empirical one. L-D—there were lots of jokes among policy debaters about the initials standing for "learning disabled"—featured resolutions that explicitly
invoked justice and morality; e.g., “It is morally permissible to kill one innocent person to save the lives of more innocent people”; “In a democratic society, felons ought to retain the right to vote.” In terms of short-circuiting the spread, the content of the resolutions was ultimately less important than the fact that the resolutions changed every couple of months, eliminating the tubs of evidence and encouraging competitors and judges to focus on the quality of delivery.

I’m not interested here in attempting to present these various activities in their considerable internal complexity but rather in noting the fearful symmetry between the ideological compartmentalization of high school debate and what passes for our national political discourse. It almost outpaces parody: in the year of my birth—the year before the Iranian Revolution, the year before “the Great Communicator” thrashed Carter in a televised debate by dismissing points of fact (“There you go again”) and focusing on framing—Phillips Petroleum helped formalize the sundering of values from policy in high school interscholastic debate. The parallel isn’t perfect, but it’s undeniable: the supposedly disinterested policy wonks debate the intricacies of health care or financial regulation in a jargon designed to be inaccessible to the unininitated while the more presidential speakers test out plain-spoken value claims on “lay judges,” i.e., civilians. And this division was underwritten by petrodollars. High school L–D is infinitely more intelligent than our actual presidential debates, and I’m not claiming policy debaters never made an argument about right and wrong, but I can’t believe that the existence of a corporately sponsored separation of value and policy in high school debate can be separated from that separation in the political culture at large.

One of the most common criticisms I’ve heard of the spread was that it detached Policy Debate from the real world, that nobody used language the way policy debaters did, except maybe auctioneers or rappers. Those are significant exceptions, but I’d also note that corporate persons use a version of the spread all the time: think of the spoken warnings at the end of television commercials for prescription drugs, when risk information is disclosed at a speed designed to make it difficult to comprehend. Or think about all the various forms of “fine print” one receives from financial institutions and health-insurance companies; the last thing you’re supposed to do with those hundreds of thousands of words is comprehend them. These types of disclosure are designed to conceal; they expose you to information that, should you challenge the institution in question, will be treated like a “dropped argument” in a fast round of debate—you have already conceded the validity of the point by failing to address it when it was presented. It’s no excuse that you didn’t have the time. Americans are always getting “spread” in their daily lives. Meanwhile our politicians speak very, very slowly about values utterly disconnected from their policies.

When I left Topeka for college in 1997, having graduated as the National Forensics League’s all-time point leader, I’d already put debate and speech behind me, and thought of myself as a serious young poet. My college application essay was about moving from debate, which conceived of linguistic exchange as a contest with winners and losers, to a more poetic understanding of the nuances of language in which writer and reader collaborated on the construction of meaning. Or something like that. It was true that I had started reading and writing poetry in high school in part to correct for the combativeness of my wankster/debater profile, in part because I had a vague and hackneyed idea that it could transform my mere sensitivity into romantic genius, thereby making my competitive lack of masculine virtues at least potentially attractive to the opposite sex. I also had a genuine fascination with language, and great mentors, two of them former Topeka High School debaters.

I remember lying in the dark on a dorm-room floor in college beside two fellow freshmen who had just split a horse tranquilizer when someone put on a recording of the British poet Tom Raworth reading one of his poems at an unusually rapid pace. The reading seemed to transpire at a speed that just exceeded comprehension, and yet I had a range of affective responses to the quick juxtapositions and syntactic disjunctions that felt like a species of understanding. If this was new to me as poetry, I nevertheless had a moment of recognition—it reminded me of the first time I’d heard the spread, and certainly resembled fast debate more than any poetry reading I’d attended in Kansas. And I recall sitting in an almost empty black-box theater that first northeastern winter and watching a sound poet perform excerpts from Kurt Schwitters’s “Ursonate”; he appeared to me at his most intense like an alien delivering a negative rebuttal.

Poetry, whether or not it could deliver, seemed to my adolescent self to promise both a sensitization to the present moment, a lyric intensity, and a connection to an archival past, a longitudinal community. I thought of poetry as the opposite of debate. What I never anticipated was that poetry would become another domain where I would encounter something like the spread’s reduction of reason to intensity, and a connection to an archival past, a longitudinal community. I thought of poetry as the opposite of debate. What I never anticipated was that poetry would become another domain where I would encounter something like the spread’s reduction of reason to intensity, and a connection to an archival past, a longitudinal community.
ures with fluency or speed; transcribed, such basically insane speeches could be mistaken for certain experimental poems.

If I have recognized the spread in drug warnings and financial double-speak, where the corporate use of language approaches the absurd, where the shell of a communicative form is used to foreclose communication, I have also recognized it in forms of poetry that deliberately push us to confront the contingency and craziness of our culture’s use and abuse of words. When I participated in fast debate or caught the rhythm of freestyle or Extemp or discovered in the act of poetic composition energies I did not possess prior to the activity of writing, I was making contact, however briefly, with the generative, transparent powers of language. When I was in my Dillard’s suit spewing arguments in a largely empty school, when I was a belligerent little wankster rhyding in a basement, when I was an ignorant undergrad abandoning the clichés of my macho midwestern romanticism for the clichés of poetic vanguardism, I was, in all my pre-posterousness, responding to a very real crisis: the standardization of landscape and culture, a national separation of value and policy, an impoverished political discourse (“There you go again”) that served to naturalize our particular cultural insanity. I was a privileged young subject—white, male, middle class—of an empire in which every available identity was a lie, but when I felt the language breaking down as I spoke it—as it spoke me—I felt, amid a general sense of doom, that other worlds were possible.

And then I was in another dorm room watching the helicopter footage of Columbine as the extent of the massacres became clear and the passionless nihilism of midwestern white boys achieved its apotheosis in a high school library I couldn’t stop imagining as an Extemp prep room. And then George Bush won the millennial election he actually lost, in part because his halting, ungrammatical speech
allowed him to present himself as a NASCAR everyman. And then I watched the towers fall and our military “strategery” unfolded in Afghanistan and Iraq and white boys could once again define themselves in opposition to racialized others and the Foxnewsefication of the language outpaced parody and a Bush or Rumsfeld press conference dispensed with logic and linearity more thoroughly than did experimental poetry. Then he won again, war crimes in plain sight. Then Obama briefly energized the nation by addressing the public like adults and race hatred flared and white people reverse-engineered themselves as a threatened ethnicity as Hussein Obama who wasn’t even born in this country advanced his Islamofascist socialist agenda and was elected as the bubble burst despite the warnings of the hockey mom and avid hunter who spoke in slow non sequitur. When she was unable to name a newspaper she read or a Supreme Court case with which she disagreed, she blamed it on “gotcha journalism.” The Tea Party, with its assault weapons and slurs and tragicomic signs, with its justified if misguided outrage at the so-called elites, managed to shift the Republican base further toward violent unreason while our supposed communist president oversaw the greatest consolidation of capitalist class power in the country’s history, increased drone strikes, and so on. It all seemed to happen so fast.

I know the imperial crack-up is older than all this, at least as old as the ’70s, when the country’s industrial strength began to wane, when its military was defeated in Vietnam, when oil became a perpetual crisis, when derivatives markets were developed; at least as far back as 1979, the year of my birth, when Phillips separated value and policy in debate, the year before Ronald Reagan was elected and did the same to our politics. As Earl Shorris wrote in this magazine last year:

[Reagan] removed ethics from politics. Everything followed on his elegant excursion, an operation performed so deftly on the body politic that it did not feel the wound.

It’s in the incredibly slow speech of politicians, of the new right in particular, of the Bushes and Palins and Bachmanns and others, that I feel the wound, the void: the valorized slowness of fetishized stupidity, politicians flustered in advance by any question that pertains to anything but guns and faith. When a reporter asked Bush to name his biggest mistake since 9/11, he replied:

I wish you’d have given me this written question ahead of time so I could plan for it… I’m sure something will pop into my head here… you just put me under the spot… and maybe I’m not as quick on my feet as I should be in coming up with one…

There’s no need to multiply the examples of gaps and gaffes— which are not aberrations in the speaking style of the far right but rather its basic unit of composition. Their linguistic world is that of the anti-Extemp, where failures in fluency are marks of authenticity, ignorance is often a point of pride, and tautology supplants cogitation. Romney, earlier this year: “I’m not familiar precisely with exactly what I said, but I stand by what I said, whatever it was.”

It is a stubborn slowness that appeals to so many “spread” Americans, particularly white ones, for whom everything seems to be happening too rapidly: suddenly gays are getting married and there’s a black president with his hands on my Medicare and all these people speaking Spanish and a perpetual news-crawler’s worth of other outrages committed against the greatness of God and country. More generally, the rhetorical and intellectual poverty of the presidential debates, of the national discourse, of both parties, compensates for the disastrous effects of our policies: the lightning-fast trades of bundled debt, the remotely controlled drone strikes, the oil flowing into the Gulf. Everything public has long been up for auction, and the politicians across our very narrow spectrum run interference by speaking so slowly we’ll forget they represent a class of auctioneers. Obama himself is such a measured if eloquent public speaker that some on the far right have asserted that his “unnaturally slow” pace is designed to induce mass hypnosis.

But recently I have encountered another kind of slow speech, one that does not attempt to cover for the spreadsheets of Wall Street or tranquilize the public and that incorporates its audience into the speech act itself: the people’s mic. The human microphone, wherein people gathered around a speaker repeat back what the speaker says in order to amplify a voice without permit-requiring equipment, is by necessity deliberate, requires breaking a speech into easily repeatable fragments. I admit I always feel joining in a little embarrassing, as I have always found chanting and choral speech of whatever form embarrassing: I am embarrassed to yell around others, fear that my voice will be conspicuous somehow or fail to blend in, am embarrassed to yell before I know what the statement we’re building toward is.

Nevertheless I do participate and as I participate I feel, despite all my awkwardness and occasional frustration, that this is poetics, “making,” an attempt at rebuilding our language in the wake of the various spreads, an attempt distinct from the regressions of our national politics. We are turning away from the thoroughly evacuated public discourse that serves primarily to further the interest of its corporate sponsors in order to form a grassroots corporate person. Because the public mic, no matter what it’s being used to say, is saying: This is a corporation of an older and more basic sort, a subject constituted around something other than private gain. No demands are being made within the dominant language of the day, because the demand is for a new language. I’m not claiming that demand can be actualized, I can’t prove solvency, as debaters would say, and of course language can always be perverted or co-opted, but I believe its collective haltingness is an eloquent expression of the necessity of our learning as a people how to speak.