

Please note: included in this writing sample are *Machines of Dissymmetry*, an interactive multimedia performance; the textual component of the performance; and a critical statement on the project.

Machines of Dissymmetry is a work of digital scholarship/literature in the form of an interactive multimedia performance that explores, via the colonizing gaze, the complications of asymmetrical power structures, as power oscillates between those gazed upon and those possessed of the gaze when these roles are reversed, exchanged, or commingled, and how appropriation, as a tactic of resistance, is implicated in the creation of unintended asymmetries of power.

Machines of Dissymmetry

An archival recording of the performance was published in the journal *Technoculture*, and can be viewed at the following link:

<http://tcjournal.org/drupal/vol4/levato>

Critical Statement and Textual Component appear on the following pages.

Critical Statement: Machines of Dissymmetry

My theoretical work is focused on the formation a literary abject, as a mode of resisting the disciplinary structures of poetic canon formation and reinforcement, through considerations of the work of Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and Martha Nussbaum, and through oppositional poetic strategies, like chance operations, procedural modes of writing, appropriation, and bricolage. In this work I am aware of my own implicatedness in necessarily asymmetrical power structures; necessary in that the binary of abjectness requires the object, or thing, abjected, or the deject as person (by choice), and the subject whose own subjectivity is threatened by that object. In taking the position of the deject, I use tactics like appropriation as resistance, but in the process create unintended asymmetrical power structures between myself and the author of the works appropriated.

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The piece consists of multiple rhetorical streams, each serving a specific function, each intended to complicate the interactions and power relationships between audience, speaker, image, and text:

- A textual production (as a series of poems) that consists of appropriated language collaged together from numerous source texts. As this piece was informed by David Spurr's study of the colonizing power of language in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, the source texts were culled from books examined by Spurr in his project, including *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, *The Descent of Man* vols. 1 and 2, by Charles Darwin, *Prester John*, by John Buchan, *Discourse on Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Passage To India*, E.M. Forster, *Typee*, by Herman Melville, and *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the countries visited during the voyage round the world of H.M.S. Beagle*, by Charles Darwin.
- A background video layer spliced together from appropriated footage of the home movies of Stanley Zoobris. Those pictured in the films are made visible to our gaze, as viewers, and though visible are silent, and so denied the power to respond.
- A second video layer, consisting of footage of bone surgery, partially overlays the background video layer. This layer is keyed to the sound of my voice, being made visible only when the poems are spoken. The violence of these images is a visual representation of *abjection*, the horror with which we respond to violations of boundaries of the self, like that of the skin separating the outside *other*, the unclean, from the pure inner self.
- A live audiovisual stream of audience participants, captured via wireless webcam, layered onto all other video streams. Audience participants are meant to interrogate me as the speaker/producer/transgressor. I am to be accountable to them, to be made visible to their gaze while being denied the power of the gaze, yet their voices and images are appropriated

and subsumed into the live projection, thus denying them a degree of power. Further, as they are forced to look into the webcam I am obscured to them yet can observe them through the software and the projection, the webcam acts as a blind, as Spurr notes “the observer remains invisible to those who are the objects of surveillance, making the Panopticon what Foucault calls a machinery of dissymmetry, disequilibrium, and difference. For the observer, sight confers power; for the observed, visibility is a trap.” (Spurr 16).

The performance consists of the mixing and projection of real-time video and audio streams of myself, as speaker, and audience participants, as interrogators, whose voices and images are appropriated through a wireless webcam and incorporated into the live projected video stream, all through the use of club VJ software.

Audience participants are supplied with excerpts from the various critical theories that inform the piece, along with questions intended to interrogate the speaker-as-transgressor’s implication in the disciplinary structures being resisted, and the resulting asymmetries of power created.

I could not stop them, the effects of their jurisdiction,
the most useful and imperfect of human sciences,
the differing of colour and structure, a reality no other can ever know.

The third day afterwards I put up the shutters after dark, shifted my bed
out of line with the window.

tools and weapons

They were at a loss for an adequate motive, terror

acting in the same manner on them as on us,

muscles tremble, heart palpitates, the sphincters relax—

I do not know what the rising is about, what carries impurities away,

but the river was banked up, and thousands

deposited their germs in the pool. They had filed teeth,

queer patterns shaved into the wool of their pate,

and three ornamental scars on each of their cheeks.

It ought not be thought surprising, that the rulers of a civil society

should have the welfare of their communities at heart,

but we had arrived at the sub-kingdom, lost in its beauty,

in regret that such a scene should be hidden in these remote seas,

this unusual degree of atmospheric, this accompaniment by lightning.

One knew what happened next; the tower stuck,

someone climbed up and cut off a branch,

there was protest, religious riot, the troops had been sent for.

(new stanza)

My first sight, widely distinct groups, modified in an analogous manner,
 a state bordering on delirium, an organ used for musical cadence,
for the utterance of signal-cries,
 this vast space which must lie between a pure state of nature
 and that in which languages had become necessary.

consequent changes of structure

I heard tales of heat, the impossible to comprehend laws of nature,

of subtle casuists and profound metaphysicians,

one of them venomous, the other doubtfully so,

but I had a job before me, which promised better things,

a blaze running in the plain, a flash of lightning in the clouds;

for what else are we born,

the higher social instincts, these relics before me?

I had never before thought of providing anything extraordinary,

nothing that deserved to be called even beautiful:

ruby-coloured marks on backs, the talk of sordid buccaneers.

We were enabled without much trouble to rear breeds almost symmetrical,

rock-bound coasts, the surf beating high, broken deep into inlets,

no body has been so completely subjugated,

no boundaries so fixed. The glim was dowsed,

I did not know how truly I spoke.

(new stanza)

Audience Excerpts/Questions:

Audience participants can either read their passage aloud, respond to it, pose the questions accompanying their passage, or ask their own.

...

In *The Rhetoric of Empire*, author David Spurr discusses transgressing the boundaries of literary form and how there is “inherent ambiguity in the relation between the author and the text [...] Is it the voice of the individual writer, the voice of institutional authority, of cultural ideology?” (Spurr 11)

Questions:

How does this ambiguity complicate your role in resistance?

Are you the individual writer “transgressing the boundaries of literary form”?

Are you the institutional authority denying power and visibility through the surveillance of the webcam, through allowing participants speech only when they’re requested to speak?

How are you implicated in Spurr’s interpretation of power through Foucault: “For the observer, sight confers power; for the observed, visibility is a trap”?

...

“The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. [...] he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.” (Kristeva 8)

Question:

How effective a resistance can be mounted if you as the deject include yourself among your abjections?

...

The “inherent ambiguity” in writing, Spurr posits, “joins with the the logical incoherence of colonial discourse to produce a rhetoric characterized by constant crisis, just as colonial rule itself continually creates it own crisis of authority. The anxiety of colonial discourse comes from the fact that the colonizer’s power depends on the presence, not to say consent, of the colonized. What is power without its object? Authority is in some sense conferred by those who obey it.” (Spurr 11)

For Kristeva, the deject is a “deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.” (Kristeva 8)

Questions:

How are these two ideas linked in your work, and what are their implications?

As the deject, and via your practice, are you producing your own colonial discourse, “a rhetoric characterized by constant crisis”?

...

According to Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, “The act of invention for women, begins in a different place from Aristotle's conception of invention: women must first invent a way to speak in the context of being silenced and rendered invisible as persons.”(Mattina 50)

Questions:

In developing tactics to subvert the disciplinary structures of exclusion and silencing in the poetic canon, to transgress those boundaries so as to speak in the context of being silenced, what is the impact on those silenced when their work is appropriated for use in one of these tactics?

Appropriation effectively silences those whose work you might be attempting to render visible, how then not to engage in such disciplinary actions?

...

In “Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness,” author Jennifer Beech comments on “the stock we writing professors put in the transformative capacities of language.” She also warns of the importance “to pay heed to the powers of language to harm and to misinform” (Beech 1).

Questions:

As the appropriation of language, and its reassemblage through bricolage, disrupts the original authors intent and creates new, unintended meaning from the assembled language, how can this new language “harm” and “misinform”?

What responsibility do you, as the appropriator, bear for such potential misinformation and harm?

...

Contact zones, according to Mary Louise Pratt, are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” (Price 195)

Questions:

Can a digital space, like an interactive multimedia performance, serve as a *contact zone*?

How can conflict effectively be enacted, as a way to “grapple” with asymmetrical power structures, in this performance when the structure itself limits the agency of the participants?

...

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