

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Logical Horses: Or Several Historical, Aesthetic, Allegorical, and Mythical Vignettes

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wj2s3dh>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 15(2)

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**Publication Date**

2019

**DOI**

10.5070/D4152042666

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*The impulse to explore and learn is to colonize, curiosity's sinister side. New planets discovered--lit by the soft salmon glow of a smaller, slower sun. These are real and metaphorical planets. Empirically discovered, yet distant enough to project theoretical fantasies onto, too far for immediate sensual experience. The supposed outside that can be gleaned from, distant potential utopias. Like Gulliver, we risk crushing what we encounter that is smaller and more fragile than we are. We risk being annihilated by that which is larger and denser than ourselves. Hallucinating a potentially snail-like unfolding life-space in the cosmos, while having a hard time creating this unfolding within intimate phenomenological environments. Touching the rocks, touching the things, collecting, sifting, holding. Watching the snails move. Bending matter for the will of some, at the expense of others, earthly demons.*

## ***rustles/gestures***

### **A continuation (or is it pre-amble?) of Aesthetics. Authority. Sureness. Validation.**

During the 2017 College Art Association conference, I participated with Suzanne Herrera Li Puma, Cara Benedetto, Natalie Beall and Michelle Ty, in a panel titled *rustles/gestures* on the political potential and implications of subtle moves.

Here is the description we wrote for the CAA about our panel:

How does one avoid dominating matter while still lightly touching it, inhabiting it, arranging it? In this Open Panel session, we will discuss how abstaining from grand scales and gestures might inaugurate a different relation between aesthetics and politics.

Slight rustles or minimal gestures made by thinkers and artists often resist interpretation. By investigating the minor force of apparently silent things, we hope to discuss makers and thinkers working within marginalized and/or minimal zones, and ask how these light moves can have a larger impact, contesting more visible or dominant historical narratives. We are interested in thought / art practices that seek negotiation with the compulsion to arrange or possess matter, as we address why cultural producers choose to arrange material and language in subtle ways.

The panel will consist of artist presenters who find strategic ways to resist scale and dominance via light gestures and subtle moves--in their aesthetic and linguistic practices--aiming to counter power not with power, but with the persistence of the minor or small. In assembling this panel, we follow a maxim offered by artist Cecilia Vicuña, who has suggested inhabiting an aesthetic of "maximum fragility against maximum power." Our panel format will consist of a set of three conversations across speakers, followed by discussion with the audience. We suggest the format of the conversation as a radical opening toward critical engagement.

We wanted to question the sureness of disciplinary categories, revealing spaces of movement within architecture, language,

aesthetics. The anti-monumental hides and leaves notes, sifting through the realm of overt authority and material power.

Michelle Ty, in her presentation *Canto for the Supernumeraries*, called for a consideration of the validity of seemingly silent players, of the non-expert amateurs that are necessary to the full unfolding of an operatic story, of the “movable furniture,” as they are sometimes called within the theatrical world because of their non-acting/non-singing movements across the stage. After the conference, she told a side story about how a man at a party replied to her attempt to describe the presentation to him with “oh, so you are giving voice to the voiceless.” This wasn’t her aim at all. Instead she urges we listen to the “silent” as silence, rather than to recreate situations of hierarchy based on imposing language on the non-speaking. She hoped to reveal the super necessity of the supernumeraries. Not singing or acting, still crucial to the working of the narrative. Tremors of Enlightenment ideology betray the position that forces action or speech, we all must rise, phoenix-like, into a progress-fueled future. As suggested by *The Great Chain of Being*, reaching for an ideal transcendental level, rather than sifting and shifting on the low level. Climb the Ziggurat to reach the sun god, to become it. There is little room allowed for beings or creatures that move through space without trying to dominate it.

My own presentation that day, *Light Moves, Haunted Histories*, co-authored with Natalie Beall, started by invoking Francis Ponge (1974):

Ideas are not my forte. I do not handle them with ease. They handle me instead. Give me a queasy feeling, nausea. I don’t like to find myself thrown in their midst. Objects in the external world, on the other hand, delight me. They sometimes surprise me but seem in no way concerned about my approval: which they immediately acquire. I do not question them. (p. 93)

Suzanne Herrera Li Puma provided me the introduction to Ponge several years ago, influencing my thoughts, writing, and art ever since. Ponge expresses his uneasiness with polemics, the authority of language over the world of things, a language that he himself feels compelled to speak and write in. In this spirit of Ponge, our presentation deviated from the polemical, consisting

of vignettes of poetry and short stories in tandem with images describing material encounters and their attendant haunted social/historical relationships.

Herrera Li Puma and Cara Benedetto's presentation, "shuffling, shifting, sifting, folding," addressed printmaking as a visual/tactile extension of the idea of the echo. Herrera Li Puma has described Spivak's contributions to the discourse:

Spivak's argument is finely wrought, a complex lacework of critique, but I am distracted as I read it by a more basic shock. I am shocked to remember that Echo really only repeats. It is an allegory of repetition, of speech being mouthed (or is it even mouthed?) by an only ever extremely spectral Other, who is Echo. The myth is also therefore about the way in which—what do I call it—"we," a subject, an "I" a non-I, mouths patriarchal discourse back to itself both keeping and transforming its meaning.

The myth (and its re-readings) opens towards the relegation of the role of listening, of repeating as a lesser than position to the authority of stating, or talking. Herrera Li Puma would like the "echo as the repetition" to be validated, not simply as a mirror/void position—but as an acknowledgement that nothing about Echo's repetition is empty (note: Echo is the female counterpart to Narcissus male personage). Narcissus is more interested in his own reflection than he is in the listening nymph before him. As Herrera Li Puma and Benedetto evocatively describe—each copy bears shifts and changes, like a fingernail scratch appearing on a printing plate ensuring that subsequent prints bear the marks of time and process.

Trauma lives in architecture, it lives in words. Trauma lives where we cannot reconcile the ideas we hold solid/rigid, with the ideas of others. In the days before the panel, Suzanne and I reflected that one of us addressing these topics alone, in the manner of address we preferred could possibly be met with hostility. But together, we form a small and quiet force field, with simmering ripples underneath constructed of historical trauma we witness/have witnessed. Our panel recounted experiences of oppressions, of witnessing oppressions, of feeling angry about oppressiveness as it is expressed through hierarchies and binaries (e.g., Supernumeraries and the Narcissus/Echo paradigm), of hauntings sometimes visible and

other times subsumed through time, desiring instead of a rising or transcendence, an allowance to be, to sift and shift at these slower smaller temporal scales. One description encapsulates the complexity of trauma: “all she can do is double each last word, and echo back again the voice she's heard” (Ovid, 2008, p. 64).

*A melting sifting sinking creature comes across a wall. A monument. A building. An edifice. The melter cannot liquify in the presence of this authoritative monolith. This structure is for some a commemoration of a past nostalgic historic time, for others a site of ancestral trauma that elicits fear and aggression. Remembrance's double edge. The structured monoliths that are handmaidens to oppression--claimed to be historical remnants that we preserve as a shared past. But that past was not experienced the same by all, is not experienced the same by my/our ancestrally haunted bones. When the liquid comes up against the solid, the desire is to go around and underneath, but the solid makes this difficult in its persistence/insistence. Sometimes the solid forces the liquid into a contained shape. I feel this fear at the foot of certain buildings, we feel fear at the continued presence of certain monuments. The continued realization that violence is not a pre-existing condition--it is a bubbling bursting forth due to encounters, traumatic forces and the authority of some forms/states over others. The radical/fundamental. The sensitive empath is taken in, taken over. When agency is ripped from a being, that being sways with the panicked anxiety of hopelessness. A state of reversal, where the oppressed becomes oppressive. The projection of an afterlife is the solace for some of what cannot be achieved in this realm, the projection outside into the interstellar. Away from the swampy earthy mess. I/you/we cannot pass, I/you/we cannot melt. Fear gasps outward intensity. Burning an object or a structure is a destructive act. No doubt. When is that burning a deletion of history, when is it a negotiation, when is it a letting out of trauma in a puff of smoke, like entropy that allows for new growth. What do we learn from fragments and remains/reminders. When is burning, destroying, pulling down and tearing up a survival response. Pushing smoky density up to the cosmos in honor of what can be done and what cannot be known. When is folding not enough, when does the fold repeat the trauma without actually destroying or altering the underlying*

structure. What is reclaimed in the ashes of something that should never have existed, that existed at the expense of the multiple for the benefit of the singular.

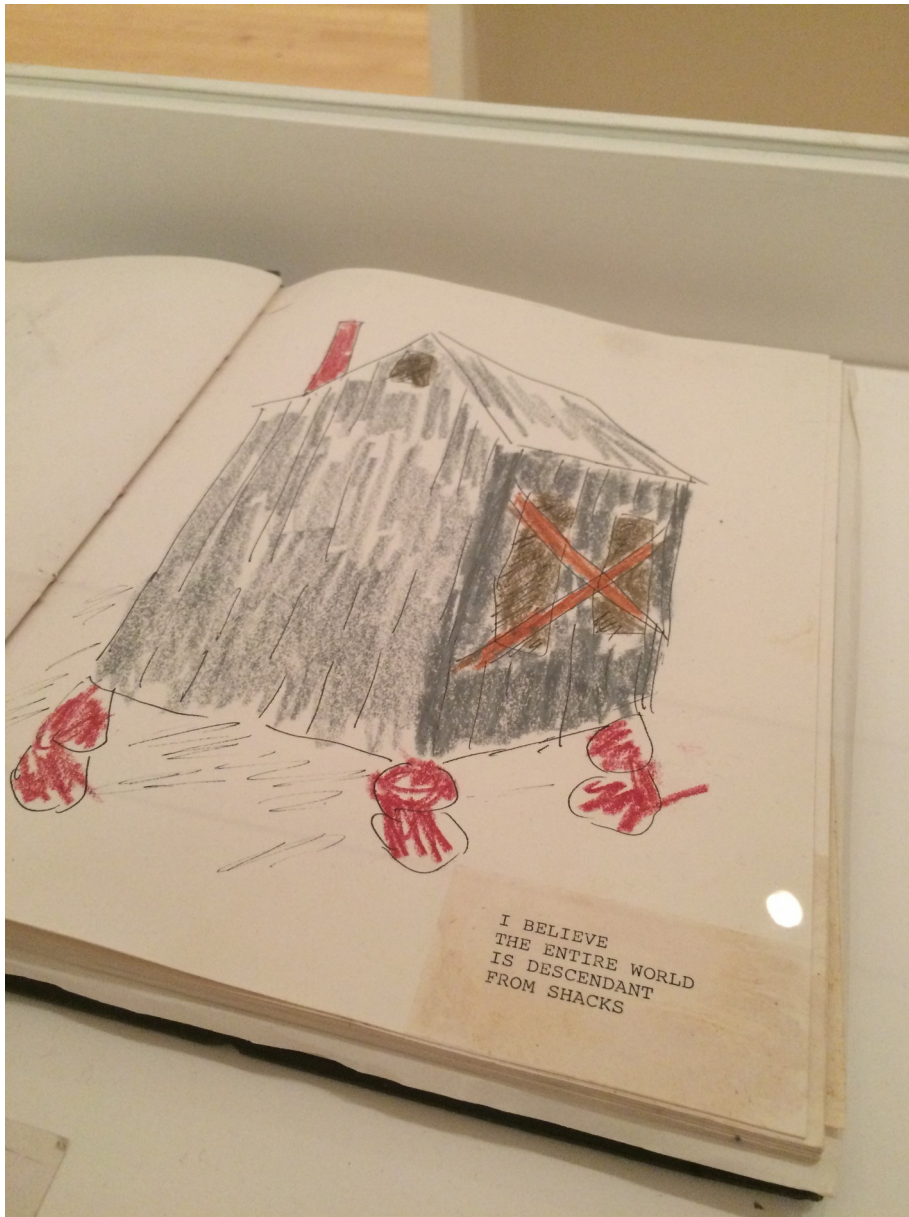


Figure 1. Beverly Buchanan notebook image used with permission from Monica Park and the Brooklyn Museum. From "*Beverly Buchanan - Ruins and Rituals.*" By Czacki, 10/21/2016-03/05/2017.

We visited Beverly Buchanan's exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum later the day of our panel, encountering another force field. Her writings and sculptures approach entropy and monumentality, honoring ingenuity as it seeps through the fissures. Ripples made by ghosts, a materiality of the available and accessible. Swampy rock objects that could be altars to some ritual past, structures harkening to the DIY architecture of plantation extremities. Speaking to a longer temporality, to unreconciled pasts, where all things that humans see as solid melt back into the earth. Bottle trees, memory ware, clothing, small-scale replicas of shelters, little monuments. She was concerned the dolphins might be watching her while she did one of her outdoor projects. She knew the materials, no matter how seemingly innocuous and basic were haunted. Buchanan's concrete structures are filled with little bits of sea-shells.<sup>1</sup>

Buchanan's work is a physical representation of a hope for a side-temporal future that negotiates trauma with a measure of beauty, letting the haunting seep through, resuscitating the vibrant life of doing what one can with availability. Titles of her works allude to chronic illness, notes and small objects together make a grander arc statement about all the things we touch with bodies and make with hands. There are few objects, the scale is small, many cast off and remnant things. Deep underbelly meanings sneak through the materials and the language attached. The non-monumental, the covered over with moss and seashells, little bugs slipping through the cracks and temporal unfoldings revealing that we are not only witnessing negative entropy, but the curious nature of time and regrowth that seems to both move forward and cycle back. Making due with the materials at hand, "survivances" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 146)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie tells me this is a common building material in the South, indicative of the troubled history of plantations. Buildings constructed on the margins of slave-owners properties were frequently made of this stuff.

<sup>2</sup> "Celebrating survival is a particular sort of approach. Non-indigenous research has been intent on documenting the demise and cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples. Instead it is possible to celebrate survival, or what Gerald Vizenor has called "survivance"-- survival and resistance. Survivance accentuates the degree to which indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism. The approach is sometimes reflected in story form, sometimes in popular music and sometimes as an event in which artists and story tellers come



managing to carve out vibrant little swampy existences congruent to the more powerful, visible hierarchies.

*Turtles all the way down, until the turtles reach the base. That absent turtle shelled underbelly where there is no luxury, just soft and precarious parts in danger of being punctured or boiled into soup. Underbelly underthings.*

### **Liquid Languid (Responses)**

Lauren Cramer, Derek Conrad Murray and Alessandra Raengo addressed the concept of liquidity as related to blackness during a panel titled *Black Sentience* at the prior-mentioned CAA conference. Liquidity is both a state of survivance and a description of how bodies move through aesthetic spaces. The panel stemmed from a research group *Liquid Blackness*, a collective (of which the panelists are members) that seeks to engage the way aesthetics are produced and perpetuated as “transnational artistic and intellectual flows.”<sup>3</sup> Liquidity is a state assumed and projected, perceived as less solid yet capable of viscously pushing through cracks and fissures--though fluid, still visible.

One of the most compelling features of this panel came during Cramer’s presentation, where she performed a mathematical demonstration with a sheet of white paper, illustrating catastrophe not as a rupture but as a fold, her use of the concept is based on René Thom’s Catastrophe Theory. The catastrophic, as I understood from her presentation, was the folding of the flatness of a single plane into an overlapping form, curves that confound and create a ripple effect that extends throughout the structure.<sup>4</sup> These fissure spaces, created by folds, render the “stability” of a plane questionable. Flatness is then the state where things disperse evenly, while the folding creates unpredictable results, defying uniformity or easy

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together to celebrate collectively a sense of life and diversity and connectedness” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 146).

<sup>3</sup> Liquid Blackness, March 08, 2017, accessed June 21, 2017, <http://liquidblackness.com/research-projects/>.

<sup>4</sup> See also Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* for a discussion on how the catastrophic as a current form of everyday life has historical roots in transatlantic slavery.

prediction of outcomes. As Cramer put it, this is the act of overturning but not of breaking. If breaking happens, then there is actually no “ground” to start from, but if it is simply a matter of folding, the structure hides corners. This is a version of catastrophe that hides its catastrophic-ness. Appearing unbroken but bent, structurally unsound, unquantifiable according to mathematical rules. Cramer described the “joints” of architectural spaces, components evocative both metaphorically and actually, concrete ways of “holding” things together, that aching space that serves the larger apparatus via connection.<sup>5</sup> It is in this jointed space that things happen, things shift. Potential becomes available in the very movement of the parts. Architecturally, these could be hallways and accidental closet spaces--places to hide or just breathe, undetected to those unaware of the joints. Places that defy the hegemony and control of the larger project of architecture and resist total visibility.

### **The Critic/*Connoisseur* (or, Validation Machines)**

In her book *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Sally Price discusses the power the art connoisseur held in the dissemination of modernist aesthetics. Essentially, the connoisseur supports some artists being elevated, others remaining anonymous. Anonymity is required of the latter to retain the mystique desired of certain types of objects. The critic/connoisseur decides what art is craft, what art is high, what art is authentic or inauthentic, who is included and who is excluded. Arguments regarding authenticity, validation, good versus bad art continue to reveal how aesthetics follow similar social rules as other human constructed ideologies. Forms of taxonomy, illustrated by the naming of artists by categories: *outsider, indigenous, female, other*. Additional is the socio-economic factor, an artist who does not have property or money, will thereby have less control over how their work is seen, circulated and preserved or not--decisions having little to do with their desires to bury or monumentalize their *ouvres*. The

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<sup>5</sup> Lauren Cramer, e-mail, June 20, 2017. Cramer clarified in an email correspondence that her particular approach to the catastrophe in architecture comes from the collection of essays by Greg Lynn: *Folds, Bodies, & Blobs*.

designation craft when talking about the production of objects by artists outside of gallery, museum, and academic contexts is a categorization that sets apart makers of things. The collector, museum curator, or art historian is the authoritative entity that rescues the objects from daily life, transforming them into objects of high culture.

In turn, careers in these institutions are gained through canonizing particular artists, elucidating the merits of one biography versus or in relation to another, an act of discovery and reframing that validates the artist and the persons and institutions attached to the artist. The poor or marginalized are accused of not caring for their objects properly. Altruism on the top hides the depths of judgment of the actions and aesthetics of others. The cultural drive, on the part of institutions, is to rescue the objects from their entropic doom at the hands of their makers. If they take their objects back to the woods and melt them all down, is that not a valid and real thing to do? And what about radical redistribution? A significant shift in global-cultural aesthetics would occur, if all of the holdings in all of the world's ethnographic collections were returned to makers or their descendants and communities.

*There are aesthetics that happen in hallways and hidden spaces, objects and people who interact in space and time other than in galleries and museums. This may sound like I'm saying that these spaces are all artificial, but they are part of real life too. Galleries, museums and archives just happen to uphold a real life of division, inclusion/exclusion, property and possession. Inside/outside. And we are implicated in the system, I am implicated in the system every time I write about artists, present at conferences, teach a class picking one over another maker to illustrate a complete history. The preservation of cultures isn't possible simply by recording them and placing their objects in collections, preservation requires care and understanding of how that culture sees itself and its aesthetic/social contributions--allowing space to grow rather than dictating/predicting the outcome. The decisions of preservation versus letting go--to be decided by makers and their communities, in their hands. Culture evolving in fluid moves, life spans and cycles--sideways temporal moves.*

## **Part II: Gulliver's Travels**

Colonial logic trips over itself, falls into itself. Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century *Gulliver's Travels* is an allegory on many levels--for slavery, for human mastery over animals, for otherness as an impassable gulf of subjectivity, for dichotomizing of logical and illogical ways of being in the world. Gulliver travels to lands where he is the outsider. In one land he is a giant in another he is miniature. There is a land populated by horses and humanoid beings--the horses are the bearers of "culture" and "civilization," while the humanoid beings are categorized as savages. The laws and cultural practices of each new country seem strange to his European mindset. Reading the preserved, not updated for readers of modern English, version of the text is disorienting. Many capitalized words, as was the style of the time. A language-rift showing the distance of then-language from now-language, annotated editions correct the temporal shifting. In the final section of the book, he falls in love with what he eventually describes as *his Master*. This Master, by all descriptive language, is a horse. Gulliver's love for him is based on the logic he sees the horse culture possessing. He returns home whinnying and galloping, imitating the horse culture. In the land of Yahoos and Houyhnhnms the humans are the savage other seen by the horses as not having reason, logic, order. He becomes indebted to the order and reason of the horses. This debt is the debt of love. A love that is uneasy in its asymmetry, its possession/possessiveness, the captive falling for the charisma of the captor, the seemingly superior logic of the one deemed above. Convincing the conquered to want what is offered by colonial ideology. Meritocracy, progress, new things, big things. Purchasing into the system. Gulliver returns from his adventures with possessions, valuable things, collections and accumulations.

The preface of the book takes the form of a letter where Gulliver describes how language is a slippery thing that can both serve as a tool for communication and aid dominance--or, in the case of encountering other cultures or species, language can only be a mis-communication. In his retrospective, nostalgic account of his adventures, he says that he loves the horses the most of any culture, including his own, because in two years they taught him how not to lie. He sees their culture as bearing truth

through logic and order--“Europeans are masters of deceit” (Swift, 1999, xix).

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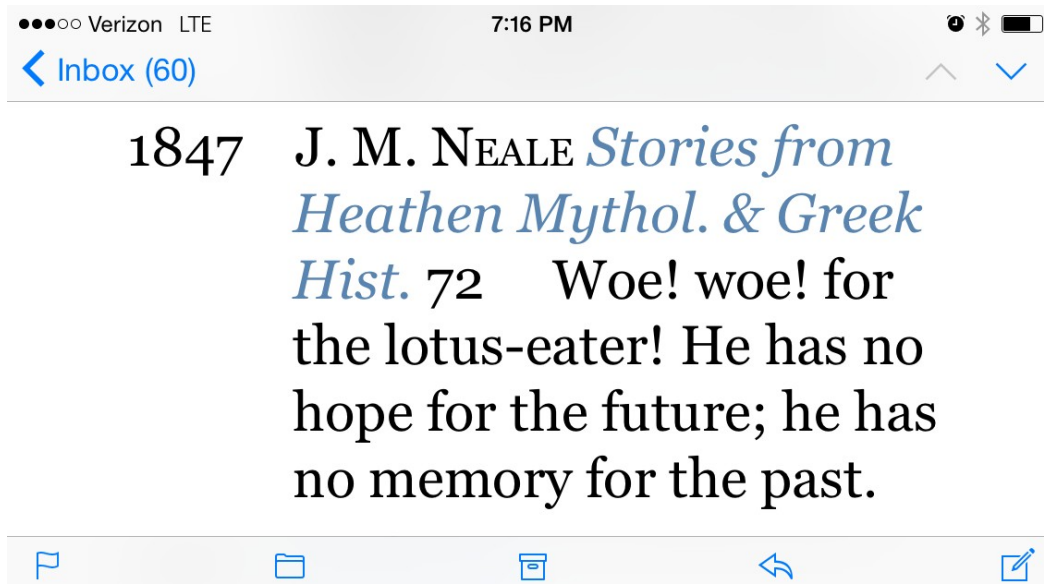


Figure 2. Phone Screenshot of Oxford English Dictionary's *Word of the Day Service*. From "Heathen," by Czacki.

The allegory of otherness is evidenced in historical literary examples. Homer's Odysseus calls the Lotus Eaters "heathens." They are said to have no concept of time. Seen as a-temporal, non-historical, pleasure seeking and lacking logic. The accusation of barbarism bestowed on one human culture from another is constituted by acts of judging via logic, beauty, temporality, all systems of ordering. Barbarian is a name bestowed by the colonizer on the so-called outsider (even if that outsider was there first). Naming the other a barbarian/outsider/other makes acts of violence permissible, domination possible. Comparing religious beliefs, superstitious customs, social organization, aesthetics in the service of relegating said systems to a lower strata. The name given to the other is an insult. "Barbarism," a patterned cycle of domination.

Travel to other lands in the name of military conquest or gathering of resources or establishing cheap labor becomes a

routine practice of situational judgment of others, based on the distance from what is known to be true and good and right as established by the colonizer. Checking in, taking over, checking out. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, asserts that all cultures create systems of order. She was accused for decades by the discipline of anthropology of being overly universalizing--however, her work serves as a poignant acknowledgement that colonized societies are/were not without order, they simply had different systems of ordering. What her examples reveal, is that each culture reaches a consensus about what is taboo, establishing social rules and codes based on a relationship to purity/impurity. This difference of ordering is a means of denigrating the other, whomever the other happens to be in a particular context. Barbarism is an accusation related to cultural concessions--definitions of barbarian/barbarism include: "1. *etymologically*, A foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from the speaker's, '3. a. A rude, wild, uncivilized person,"<sup>6</sup> the "absence of culture and civilization," and/ or "extreme cruelty or brutality."<sup>7</sup> A presumed generalized absence of culture and an assumption of a predisposed penchant for violence. Accused/assumed heathen-hood.

### **"Sausages and Champagne"**

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx (2008) accuses the proletariat, particularly soldiers, of being easily plied to fight any war with "sausages and champagne," desiring these delicacies instead of standing for social change (p. 107). His criticism is comically discomfiting, and telling. Disquieting, like the revolting body language that convulsively springs from the body of the tickled. Walter Benjamin (2006) suggested that the joke, or the resultant fit of laughter, is a rupture in logical everyday ordering--it looks to "nearness" and opens up a space unseen prior. The logical security of a well-behaving body is subsumed by seizures of laughter. The joke boils up a something-else response from within that cannot be contained. It is revulsion. The joke reveals of itself the

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, accessed June 21, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15380?redirectedFrom>.

<sup>7</sup> Google definition search, accessed June 21, 2017, <https://www.google.com/#q=barbarism>.

parameter required of its working mechanism to elicit laughter--that it is an accusation, that it is at the expense of someone. Jokes, or unintentionally comedic assertions, leap through a text, make the reader/recipient uneasy because the joke reveals tensions in the social realm.

In this case, the comment about "sausages and champagne" that caused me to laugh with discomfort, which I read *as if it was a joke*, was a rupture. It interrupted an otherwise authoritative description of the shapes and structures of revolution. Those who rise to power, even in progressively termed paradigms still judge others, rib them for wanting the luxuries they don't have. The phrase reveals problems regarding material/social inequity as it imports into the contemporary social milieu. Under the veneer of humanism, socially constructed systems of altruism and judgment require the poor and those in structurally unequal positions to reveal and perform their inequity in order to receive aid in a decidedly rigged system of divvying resources--prostrating before the state to obtain services such as welfare.<sup>8</sup> Telling and re-telling stories of poverty and trauma to get the scraps. To "sing for their supper." Those seen as living in the absolute margins are stated as not being able to rise above, without much discussion about how colonialism is one of the factors deeply rooted within the distinctions of developed versus underdeveloped, the very force which creates categorizing terms.

## History From

Cedric Robinson and Jodi Byrd address the problem of "logical horses," from within academic disciplinary fields. Revealing that even the most coherent explanations or histories frequently produce gaps that require future investigation. A "cacophony" of cultural forms of gathering and transmitting

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<sup>8</sup> As Robin D. Kelley points out in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, welfare is not redistribution. Redistribution could be, and would require an even more radical alternate model that considers how many in contemporary structurally unequal positions are there because of a lack to inherited resources, as well as the historical ramifications of slavery that still haunt everyday life. Redistribution wouldn't be based on implicit judgment of those needing assistance as being "lacking," reparations would need to be free of systems of judgement to counter historical racism, sexism and ableism.

knowledge (Byrd, 2011). Robinson (2000) asks us to question the sway Marx has over the ideas of the left in his book *Black Marxism*. Though he holds the sway critically, he is also clear to advocate for Marx's important contributions. He is asking us to address our wholehearted reliance on an economic theory that was created from a primarily Eurocentric viewpoint. Robinson points out how irrevocably tied the history of slavery is to capitalism, and how this haunting ghost is sometimes all too briefly footnoted, quickly passed over, or altogether left out in written histories and analyses of economic history--an avoidance of acknowledging what capitalism required to get started, the bodies of others. (e.g. profits obtained by Caribbean sugar plantations that allowed for the rise of the English Bourgeoisie, or gold extraction in Côte d'Ivoire, Colombia and Ghana that merchant capitalism depended upon, particularly in France, but also in the rest of Europe; Boahen, 2012). Marx's founding economic critique reiterates the colonial language that classifies enchanted ways of dealing with the world, placing animism and fetishism in the negative. Even if unintentionally, this results in lasting classifications of the aesthetic/artistic/social/ritual/material moves on intimate, personal as well as larger cultural levels.

Byrd, in *The Transit of Empire*, addresses the tensions between diaspora and indigeneity unfolding through global imperialism and Empire, calling this tension "cacophony" (Byrd, 2011, xiii), the inherited space of contemporary "biopolitics" where representations and belief systems compete. Byrd asserts that challenging dominant narratives of continuity could create a space of interplay, working with the cacophony. An oscillation between things and ideas, concepts and materials, logical empiricism, enchantment and myth. A balancing that could constitute changes in ways thinking and gathering knowledge used as forms of recuperation, even if reconciliation is impossible. Byrd gives the example of the transit of Venus as a scientific marvel in terms of empirical observation that ushered in specific ideas about the ordering of the world. This transit is an interstellar metaphor for the continued movement of colonial encounter, transition not fixedness--an excuse for Enlightened conquest, to "civilize" and alter cultures (Byrd, 2011, xxi).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Byrd uses transit based on the event of Venus moving, as it "served in 1761 and 1769 as global movements that moved European conquest



Tying together all the loose threads, temporalities, histories. Byrd and Robinson voice challenges to how history has been written in the past. The pressure to make linear and disciplined that which sometimes defies linearity, disciplinarity. Accepted histories written from narrowly-grouped subjective standpoints. They point out what should be the obvious, and urgent to contemplate terms of engagement between selves and others, personhood and the material world, including the problem of freedom being written about and pontificated upon from above. By subjects who wish to explore moral issues, but who can do so from a relatively secure social position. Their analysis addresses continual penury, subjugation and exclusion of particular subjectivities, the colonial logic that stumbles over itself again and again towards progress. One of Byrd's strongest examples ties the threads to aesthetics, describing the writing of Guyanese (now London based) writer Wilson Harris. His novels defy linear narratives in style and content. Characters become other selves, time seems to push and pull rather than unfold in a line, making it hard to read his works as straightforward novels. Byrd discusses the critiques launched against his work, as relegating cultures engaged in "myth" to a temporality of "pastness," exotification of the "noble savages" of non-western cultures. Despite these criticisms, Byrd sees his body of work as opening conciliatory space. Harris brings the rendered absent into the present. By dealing with semi-subsumed histories brushing up against authoritative historical accounts, the troubled factuality of history as a discipline is laid bare. Pulling at loose threads that many subjectivities must pull to unravel a very tight ball.

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towards notions of imperialist planetarity that provided the basis for Enlightenment liberalism. The imperial planetarity that sparked scientific rationalism and inspired humanist articulations of freedom, sovereignty, and equality touched four continents and a sea of islands in order to cohere itself. At its center were discourses of savagery, Indianness, discovery, and mapping that served to survey a world into European possession by transforming indigenous peoples into the *homo nullius* inhabitants of lands emptied and awaiting arrival. As I use the term here, transit as a concept suggests the multiple subjectivities and subjugations put into motion and made to move . . ."

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Joanna Russ (1993), writing across the disciplines and genres of Science Fiction, Feminism and Literary Criticism, revealed additional parameters of the accusation “you are doing it wrong,” particularly through the dichotomous lens of male/female in her book *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*. I extend this idea from writing to how individuals and communities judge any form of aesthetics: storytelling, music, art, daily workings in life (including what is necessary for survival: e.g. shelter, food). It is significant that Russ uses science fiction as a polemical tool. Allegories need not only be in the past, and are less beholden to the apparatus of truth as related to power. Russ’s (1977) science fiction narrative *The Female Man* describes multi-temporal time travelling through the past, present, and future, by sometimes amorously or gender bending/gender non-conforming characters. Stories overlap and shift similar to those of Wilson Harris. One character, from a future, has retractable fangs and claws; another hails from a fantasy feminist lesbian utopian farm world, a third is a familiar historical figure, a woman from the 1970s who works as a librarian. We return to old cycles, they shift each time, hitting road-blocks. The peoples of different time periods push against each other’s belief patterns of what it means to be a woman, to be a part of a socially patterned environment. They have difficulty communicating due to their temporal incongruence. The time-traveller moves across terrains of subjectivity within veils of acculturation, patterns of social behavior, and changing systems of ordering that relate to language and aesthetics, style and representation. Cyclical renewals, letting go’s and hiccoughs. More sideways temporal movings.

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A hierarchical system for judgments of possessing logic and agency comes to us from *The Great Chain of Being*, a system devised in the Middle Ages that places white/male/European subjects at the highest apex closest to God, with women, others, animals, vegetables and minerals beneath in several layers.

Avery Gordon (2011) suggests that we perceive haunting as an “un-reconciled” event or part of history, the story not quite told or visibly coherent, the stories of the oppressed or “disappeared.” *The Great Chain of Being* does not need to haunt, because it is the base criteria, though it is haunted by those pushed beneath. It is what empirical sciences are based upon, otherwise known as taxonomy. Though modern science hopes to distance itself from a taxonomy that categorized humans within these layers, the categorization of states of animacy given to material life is still prevalent. Arguably, by basing our structures on it, we can’t escape the poisoning effect on human cultures--no matter how badly we try to relegate the problematic to the distant past. The “mimicry” of power as Robin D. Kelley points out, is a danger Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire warned about. Through trying to gain freedom via old models, we risk becoming “colonial masters” or “new jack American corporate rulers” (Kelley, 2002, p. 180).

*The animal/mineral/vegetable/female/other gets sifted to the bottom. Dancing and doing and living, hiding in pockets and corners, sometimes refusing to do what they are told. Sometimes met with resistance, other times allowed a little bit of wiggle room in the caged house of logic/patriarchy/colonial domination. Dancing with all the categories seen as illogical, beneath, or outside. We are culpable, I am culpable, too. Mimicking the master, not only in language--via acts of domination, to get a little foothold. Falling for logical horses. Upholding categories dictated by the root of the structure, the occasional veneer of equality providing a smokescreen. New paint can be applied, something else is always underneath if you know to scratch at it. Some scratch from within structures and disciplines, following rules strategically in order to create spaces where cracks and fissures show through.*

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### **“Metaphysical Pathos”**

To speak of aesthetics is to speak about how we choose to believe in one idea over another. Our philosophical leanings piggyback on our visual predilections. We choose our

philosophy, ethics, moral positioning, gravitating towards that which speaks to us. As Arthur Lovejoy (1936) posited in lectures delivered in 1933, later published as *The Great Chain of Being*, this is “metaphysical pathos,” a concept suggesting that a person will find most authoritative or true messages delivered in ways that are already familiar and trusted. His lectures trace the history of empirical knowledge as interwoven with the way we see truth. The irreconcilable disagreements based not only on content, but style of delivery. Visual and verbal messages are likely to land the hardest with audiences already primed for their arrival. Our systems for understanding the metaphysical and physical world are irrevocably tied to the stylistic sureness of an argument.

We seek what we already know. We search for what we expect to find. When incongruity arises we become uneasy. In *I Swear I Saw This*, Michael Taussig (2011) notes that if we have our “eyes open” as we gather knowledge—sometimes the sureness of our assumptions or arguments or logic will come under question. It’s risky to allow oneself to follow a trail with an unknown outcome, to let the threads lead the way. This is not how discipline or aesthetics is supposed to work. Taussig points out that we are not separate from that which we witness. Witnessing is a form of experience, experience is not separate from the subjectivities we touch, that touch us, lightly or with force. The tragedy of miscommunication is happening before the utterance dares to escape our throats.

Allegory creates temporal confusion. A present-ness is cast to the past. In science fiction, the future. Storytelling is a space of access, like poetry, disciplinary lines shifted. Language can fly its freak flag. Ursula K. LeGuin and Octavia Butler packaged their critiques in allegory and science fiction. They have an oracular feel because of the illuminations in their writing, being keen observers of the social pasts and presents that they satirized into futures. Familiar fogged messages available to those who are attuned to a facet of acculturated “metaphysical pathos.”

The difference between myth and allegory is that myth tells stories from the inside. Reflections of how things happen and attempting at a grander why. Allegory presents idealized scenarios for moral teaching. Magic and enchantment are

dangerous within the structure of Enlightenment based thought, because they are superstitious orientations, acknowledging unseen and uncontrollable forces. Superstitious orientation requires a direct engagement with chance, the obscure, as the world of the unseen can yield potentially harmful results that are not always controllable. Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony*, describes the dichotomizing of reason against myth and fable. This contrasting act means that societies with alternative epistemologies are seen as un-reasoning, and un-reasonable with, as “originaire” and “incapable of uttering the universal,” or so called Western logic (Mbembe, 2015). Each allegory, truth, fable, myth, fact is tied to the particular form, style of metaphysical pathos that a group of people, a culture, agree upon, as a truth or something close enough. That which lies outside is rendered false. Reason and myth both become dangerous through scale, or the wielding of either as tools for domination.

*To be unsure is to supposedly lack a position. But what if being unsure is to be open to the validity of many positions? When is this unsure-ness a benefit, and when is it a detriment? When is unsure-ness a position of apathy, backing down--and when is it an act of kindness towards difference? Who do we believe as the authoritative creators of social/political/aesthetic messages? Who do we believe and why do we believe?*

No text is ever totally rigid. At least I hope not. Or it shouldn't be. This is what publishing does, renders thoughts and ideas solid, imposes linearity on ideas that ephemeral conversation does not. The record becomes concrete. But it does and can change through revision because our interpretation changes, our opinions change with exposure to other things. Our languages change, the meanings of the words change. The printed word can communicate or alternately miscommunicate intentions. We can continue to think through hierarchies and debts and try to sift. Following Ponge, I try to understand the ways in which “ideas handle us,” how we fall to their power.

### **Our Debts / Alternative To**

Refusal, redistribution, intimacy, shared accolades--the boundaries could shift. I perform this boundary making, I can try to change it. Focus on the narrow, the very small, the everyday,

the less than, the underneath. Seeing process and outcome, making new processes all the time. Slowing the pace that requires instrumentalizing others, knowing that regardless of speed, we will always be calling in favors. Consider dependencies and what depends. Watching disparate things push up against each other, intertwine into “cacophony.”

Collecting rocks. Feeling their smoothness, hiding them in pockets for later re-discovery. Holding them, massaging them, without classifying them or attempting to remember their provenance. Understanding what it means to want to possess them, that even the small gesture of putting a rock in one’s pocket and taking it home to put on a shelf is an act of possession. Glean from their material silence, non-speaking, the lack of words, advice for the future. The rocky terrains they inhabit and disperse from, the years it takes for water to wear down their forms, shaping.

Think about science fiction fantasies manifesting in the now time, instead of distant planets with salmon colored soft lighting and slowly unfolding species. Refuse the logic of ASAP, remove it from the collective vocabulary, create spaces to see what is front of us obscuring truths and falsehoods, or letting either the true or the false be designated too quickly. Toss things around on the tongue for a moment and taste before swallowing. Ride uncertainty like a wave, engage the help of others. And also, do it yourself. Question how genius requires exploitation or exceptionalism to uphold a one magical being that creates without influence or help from the minds and bodies of others. Promote multi-faceted many non-geniused forms. Think about what is it that we are sitting on, touching or eating at any given moment. If we want to think about how to use exception, have it be a way to empathize, care outside of the very immediate-of-one selfhood. Face the hidden by scratching at the surface, face culpability. See many avenues and shapes. Communicate through small circles, rather than imposing large systems from a hierarchical position (Graeber, 2004). Instead of falling in love with the logical horses, seeing into the right here, right now. All the horses. In Donna Haraway’s (2016) words, “staying with the trouble,” whatever that trouble may be.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Haraway suggests moving away from the term “Anthropocene” towards an interlinking of human/nonhuman as a way of thinking through troubled ecologies/histories/futures.

Being nomadic, being stable, being parasitic, being “together in homelessness” and having “positive debts” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 96). to communities, lovers and other species and material forms, creating debts alternative to capital, while becoming comfortable to saying no to what feels wrong. Because “refusal” is not “inactivity.” Redact, retract, burrow down and in. Not giving up, but slowing it down. Soaking in small intimacies, focusing. Aware of what close forms of contact mean. Still present mammals that burrowed during the dinosaur apocalypse (however it actually happened or is happening still), waiting for their time to emerge and feel the sun again on their fur. Strategically and softly collecting what is needed. Insisting and persisting that being outside, on the edges and on the margins is not suicide, it is living. Alternative to.

*Favor of a collective of fragile puddle forms, sinking deeper into each other's sea spines making tendrilled networks of support. Gummy multi-legged pathos webs adjusting to collective precarity. Paddle through steamy veils of viscous muddy softness. Feeling the gooey insides. Dealing with the need to liquidize, consume, cannibalize--negotiating what dominance means. Accepting that total, permanent, or sure solutions are evasive, careful survivals will return. Refusals echoing forth from alternative temporalities, firm and edgy corners of inhabited universes, in the company of microbes and species and lovers and friends. Particularly the rocks we listen to in their silence.*

(\*Additional thanks for editorial work and general as well as particular idea sharing to Lauren Hanson, Lev Kalman, Lauren Cramer, Suzanne Herrera Li Puma, Michelle Ty, Josh Kline, and Carolyn Lieba Francois-Lazard.)

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