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english 15: literary theory

monday the 19th of november 2012

the final words in the glossary of William Burrough's *Junky*:

It should be understood that the meanings of these words are subject to rapid changes, and that a word that has one hip meaning one year may have another the next. The hip sensibility mutates. For example, "Fey" means not only white, but fated or demoniac. Not only do the words change but the meanings vary locally at the same time. A final glossary, therefore, cannot be made of words whose intentions are fugitive. (181)

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translation is inevitably betrayal

– Nicole Masangkay and Erika Bleyl:

Niko Martell
“Wingdings”

sad face
flag waving right
christian cross
hand pointing left

he was dressed in wrinkled khaki pants, a rumpled blazer, and a crumpled, half windsor tie that hung off his neck like a broken shovel.

he needed a haircut almost as bad as an ironing board.

this was not a look he rocked.

but it fit,

like the old wallpaper he never bothered to change.

he called me, “Ayuthaya.”

*when i told him this was not my name he just smiled and said
he knew that.*

he was telling me because he thought

i'd like to know.

“Ayuthaya tries to be like Times New Roman,” he said.

“it wants to blend in but always gives itself away.”

he explained that microsoft word

only comes with 251 fonts

but

there are tens of thousands on the internet!

he had memorised

seven hundred

and thirty-eight.

he said

this was not

an obsession, just another

tool,

like a magnifying glass or a yard stick.

he memorised each curve, the angle of the lines in every letter.

he did this with the deliberateness of a

lover, that attention which memorises freckles, the deep blue

flecks in her irises, the way he

pronounces his vowels.

sad face
flag waving right
christian cross
hand pointing left

he always carried a battered, black briefcase.
inside was an orange composition notebook.
its pages held columns
filled with the names of people he'd met.
he wrote each one
in the typeface that explained them. it was a dictionary
of people, a catalogue, a new
science for understanding humanity. when i asked
if i could see his list *he*
wasn't sure i'd understand
but he opened the notebook anyway.
“see this one, Ayuthaya? timothy burghman?
he's American Typewriter Condensed.
means he's an impatient southern gentleman.
and samantha harter?
she's BLAIRMDIDC TT
a techy with business aspirations.
aga mcgee is Chalkduster,
worn down but still optimistic.
chelsea fairweather is Haettenschweiler, italics, bolded,
and underlined,
haughty, because no font needs to be that complicated.
sara kline is Impact;
she's blunt.
jonathon sanders is Scriptina, italics;
he's hard to read.
kevin west is *Comic Sans*
and we all know what that means.”

sad face
flag waving right
christian cross
hand pointing left

the notebook was dog-eared,
and the spine was breaking.
the last page was overrunning with ink.
his name was written
neatly on the left. to the right
was a list of typeface – everything had been crossed out
except for a line of
incomprehensible symbols.
when i asked him what they were, he said, “Wingdings!
my font
is Wingdings. it is the most useless font *because no one*
can read it. most people don't even try. Ayuthaya,
no one's ever asked to see my notebook before. i'm the third

william smith jr. in a family
of doctors and lawyers. you can write
failure
in any font;
you can hide it with wingdings.
i don't know which symbols spell love."

sad face
flag waving right
christian cross
hand pointing left

i'm stuck wondering whose language(s) i speak.

interpolated as i always already am/have been/will be, linearly or not, it strikes me that
these words are not my own; simultaneously they are tethered to my self and my con-text,
which are inseparable. as Roland Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author,"

a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning ... but a
multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original,
blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable
centers of culture. (876)

text here isn't merely a written, published, bound collection of words. this text is world.
this text is all we could read. every space for reading is a site for interpretation, each word
(and here i mean "word" to greater and lesser metaphorical extent) a site of polysemy,
each utterance a dispute of source. we, i, speak no originality. we have long since
destroyed the myth of the origin, decentred our discourse along derridian lines Derrida
alone did not discover. our origins escape us while our history speaks through us, echoing
in every textual construction. Barthes continues:

the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His
[sic] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others. (876)

i am left speechful without origin, knowing i have taken words and rearticulated them
ignorant of where they were taken from and taken from and taken from up the curves

through history and time. sans originality, we inherit the past and re-formed snippets of its language. hybrids of history, always somewhat absent from the present, we become heirs to bloodlines, culturelines, languagelines. we are hybrids, cyborgs of language and flesh-culture. American poet of Vietnamese parentage Hieu Minh Nguyen in his poem “Buffet Etiquette” describes identity as formed around the impossibility of assimilation: “i am white paint and i can still feel the brushstrokes on the roof of my mouth.” here Nguyen describes how part of his being is to whitewash his production, the words that pass through his mouth, leaving brushstrokes. he is aware of his divergent histories enough to recognise their otherness to each other as well as to himself, but his production even in this sentence is a simplified narrative, one for an audience not his history’s. he is speaking from none of his historical origins, though his words are assimilated, appropriated, stolen, subverted, resisted and resistance.

in similar tone, Nicole Masangkay and Erika Bleyl in their poem “Double Consciousness” declare: “there is a history i fail to speak. am i american or lost at sea? who am i responsible for? who am i guilty for?” the self-awareness of lost history and stolen language mirrors my own. there is definite agency here: some i *speaks*, but as it speaks it remains silent. history is absent, leaving present questions. because history both is and is not spoken, because history echoes without articulation of itself, the present also is and is not spoken, is both itself and its absence. we are left answerless, knowing not whose languages we speak or whether we can call them our own, knowing not whether our speech is present to us.

i’m struck pondering whose language i steal.

i don't know whether *this* language* is mine or whose language(s) i have taken involuntarily and without compensation. because the presence of speech retreats into absence through its lack of origin, its uprootedness, the matter of owning language comes into play through a *passing* of time, from two points connected/separated by a *line*, by repetition. repetition, though, does not constitute identity; indeed, it defies it. one thing is never the same thing twice; one thing can never be one thing *again*; one thing cannot across time be itself. even simply by the virtue that something has happened before, it cannot identically happen again. in seeking identity, we imitate the structures of the past, but this *changes* them. in seeking revolution, we subvert the structures of the past – this is to imitate with irreverence, to create. regarding gender, Judith Butler writes,

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that “imitation” is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but the hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety suggests that heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, that its effort to become its own idealizations can never be finally or fully achieved, and that it is consistently haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself. In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality. (“Gender is Burning” 125)

gender is just one example of performance and performed identity, an interpolated one. gender understood as drag acknowledges that it is performance – repetition, imitation, for even improvised theatre recycles the past. this fact demonstrates that aspects of ‘identity’ repeat but are not identical. if we take “the heterosexual project” as one example of hegemony, complete with ideology of monolithic naturalness, the repetitions that form

* let us continue to consider “language” as “all that is readable.”

that 'identity' do not form it identically. similarly, the repetitions that subvert it, the queer project, for example, also do not repeat identically. all text i produce, all my performances, is repeated and contextual – surrounded by other performances. i thus make text of the past text of my absent presence; i appropriate past performances for my own purposes.

i am unsure whose these practices have been and whether my practice is rehearsal. Aimee Le discusses the act of *cultural* appropriation, how something that is not protected as property still becomes stealable: “To repeat another person's use of a word in common speech is not typically marked as ‘production’ (in that it does not produce an *object*, but rather a *linguistic trace*) but is still subject to claims of ‘appropriation’” (23). the texts, the performances, i have made my own properties through using them. i stand a postmodern heir, however, and the walls of category collapse around me: identity is absent, essenceless, unstable; past seeps into present through repetition and reinterpretation; i appropriate culture no one owned until i took it, which is not to relieve responsibility (or to place it), only to say that culture can exist without property and that one can steal without the concept. i am the child of colonialism. i am the imperialist of performance. i am the historian of absent history.

but i am not the hipster. firstly, i am not a white man from the 1940s-1960s involved in narcotic culture and trying to imitate jazz culture. secondly, i am not, as Le quotes, any of the “Generation Bubble bloggers pretending to be Zizek in response to n+1's *What Was the Hipster* writ[ing] that hipster is ‘the dislocated site of imagined and imaginary resistance. The taint of hipster is the vehicle of this resistance that, through the magic of surplus value, contains within itself the voiceless ejecta of the Lumpenproletariat, as seen through the gaze of the bourgeoisie’” (44). i do not know whether my

appropriations, which i cannot cite, function as resistance to hegemony or whether my accidental claims to property uphold propriety. i do not know the extent to which my imitations are imperial, my performances impositions. postmodern play is hiding my Marx from me. Le continues, “Hipster never elaborates into a politics because, like any neurosis, it just repeatedly stages the transgression of the Law which it re-founds” (44). the hipster is the expert of repetition as reinforcement, deviance as delusional, appropriation as production – or, rather, consumption.

i’m watching the commercialisation of counter-culture pretending to counter commercial culture. what was once queer is now cool, and you can sell it, and you can buy it. i’m watching the commerce of resistance, the consumption, the capitalisation, the coopting. and i’m wondering how to resist a culture that imitates resistance. i’m wondering how to counter a culture constantly consuming my counters with capital. i’m wondering how to escape capitalism without appropriating property that’s becoming, how to stop stealing when property is theft.

i’m drugged, stumbling, choosing language to conceal.

when i speak, i have audience. when i speak, i have intent and interpretation of my own intent. when i listen, i am audience. when i listen, i have interpretation and interpretation of intent. it is possible to manipulate language, text, performance. it is possible to communicate multiply. as Lacan pronounces in his essay “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,”

if I know the truth, make it heard, in spite of all the *between-the-lines* censures by the only signifier my acrobatics through the branches of the tree can constitute, provocative to the point of burlesque, or perceptible only to the practiced eye, according to whether I wish to be heard by the mob or by the few. (1135)

Lacan's insight, seemingly framed in significantly a more negative outlook towards the masses than my own, is that language can be doubled (tripled, quadrupled, ... n+1-ed). the sliding signifiers slide in different directions towards different people or groups. these different directions of slippage, different spaces, different means and meanings of appropriation, allow resistance, allow imitation and repetition, reverberation and echo, in a single moment. when Barthes declares writing "truly revolutionary" through its refusal "to assign a 'secret,' an ultimate meaning, to the text" (877), he directly questions 'truth' or ultimate meaning while implicitly questioning legibility – secret to whom? Lacan continues, "What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility that I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says" (1135). the sliding scale of signifiers slides not only in terms of semantics but also in terms of pragmatics. language opens up to code in the more traditional sense of the word – legible to some but not to others.

appropriation, assimilation, cooptation, hegemony, and resistance become far less clear or even binary when we discuss this linguistic, this performative, ambivalence.

Phillis Wheatley, an educated slave in the british colonies in america, in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which was published in the 18th century and passed as pious, uses double voicing to point out all the hypocrisy of european christians who justify slavery with christian conversion. take also, for example, the invention of women's languages. in china, the language Nu Shu arose as "whispered writings ... passed on from mother to daughter and the closest of friends, 'sworn sisters,' carefully guarded, written on the folds of paper fans, embroidered on handkerchiefs or written discreetly inside the slippers that bound their feet" (Williams 157). language is secret. it

requires literacy, but we must always question our abilities to read – whether we are reading what we are reading. the difference between appropriation (of negative valence) and resistance, then, is power. appropriating hegemonic culture in order to subvert it carries different flavour than appropriating subversive culture in order to sell it.

postmodern play is hiding my Marx from me

“this is all very well,* but what of the material effects of linguistic and theoretical imperialism upon the material facets of people’s lives?” you surely cry. “give me effect that extends beyond academia and prove to me your politics!” you surely demand.

while refusal to *entertain* your imposition remains possibility, it happens also to be my own Other’s inquisition also.

let† us take the example of indigenous nationalisms in a post-columbian era. earlier i stated: i appropriate culture no one owned until i took it, which is not to relieve responsibility (or to place it), only to say that culture can exist without property and that one can steal without the concept. one material example of stealing from those who previously did not own property is the colonisation (stealing) of the lands (and lives) now known# as the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and i’m sure many others. one material example of ideological imperialism is the concept of *indigenous nationalism*. as Benedict Anderson explains in his famous book *Imagined Communities*, nationalism rose in europe due to the rise of print capital – the dissemination of commodities that formed imagined communities through forming linguistic communities, ‘nations.’ after european imperialism swept the globe, nationalisms drawn *along the borders of the colonies* arose in colonised territories. the populations eventually threw out european rulers, but not their ideas. this is an example of the imperialism of theory but also of appropriation, imitation, and repetition as subversion.

* read: “this is the opposite of very well,” but you follow.

† in the sense of “allow.” the reader will note both zer agency and passivity.

now known? by whom? give me answers, passive construction!

history

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