

## *Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception*

### **Part 4. “New Resistant Subjects (Bot to Bot)”**

**Rodrigo Toscano & Natalie Knight**

**NK:** In part one of our exchange, we talked excitedly about Squat Theatre, particularly its interventionary character in 1970s performance culture. We were both, if I can speak for you too, pretty charged by the somewhat dire political motivations and subsequent efforts Squat enacted in decades of intervening in its material and artistic neighborhood. We riffed off that energy, even though we got it through retellings, reflections, past-tense recounts—we were affected, despite our lack of attendance at any Squat performances.

This speaks positively to the archive as a socially valuable tool at unpredictable future moments, for unsuspecting individuals. I also think that it speaks positively to the *potential* (read: not necessarily actual) richness of viewpoints and thought/exchange/art archives proliferating in collections of information on blogs and listservs. *Potential* because a great lot of it just sucks up bandwidth. I feel very compelled at every move to justify, in some socially necessary sense, my actions made publicly available—that is, is this “contribution” really a contribution to contemporary conversation(s); have I even identified the conversation in which I’m participating; have I articulated myself in the appropriate venue, and in the right dialect; and most importantly, is this conversation going to bleed out of its discourse-zone into zones of action?

Which, I’ll pose about our exchange as it stands right here, because I think the question might get us to a lot of pressing contemporary concerns that culture workers must necessarily be grappling with now that Obama’s been elected and yet... there’s no health care, we’re in a global recession, military actions in Afghanistan are surging rather than decreasing, just as the historically most economically-accessible public education system in the U.S. has raised tuition by 32%. So, basically, how do we justify a conversation, daresay debate, about aesthetics and poetics when we’re attuned to a material reality that makes obvious nothing less than extreme mismanagement of resources resulting in incredibly uneven privilege and poverty distributed around the world? That is, living in sites of privilege globally, as well as nationally – this New York City metropolis for you, this upstate academic institutionalism for me – and being “poets” and “thinkers” no less – (performing a super self-reflexive moment, admittedly) how are we not simply sucking up bandwidth, *right now*? Well, I can answer myself quite readily with some things: For one, talking about appending and performing (as you do) bodily motion to poetics is one mighty stab in translating aesthetic, formal considerations into material results; but it’s not enough. Inserting some unlikely grist for the culture mill by speaking, printing, distributing some anti-normative poetry is one stab; but that isn’t enough. From your position, contributing your work-energies to the Labor Institute which advocates on the behalf of a working class and pushes policy debates and potential solutions into the foreground—well, that’s definitely something.

And for me, teaching in a New York state public college puts me in a position to have direct affective contact with individuals, and to share knowledge that, hopefully, contributes to students' self-awareness and social awareness.

Obviously, I can reconcile our aesthetic concerns with our political concerns as well as the next guy (that is, in an always-fraught manner). But I'd like to hear you on this, especially at this particular moment—where does a somewhat attenuated and yet still earnest conversation about aesthetics fit into more globally spread-out motions we would like to perceive as anti-capitalist interventions? How is aesthetic theorizing, about any art form, an important contribution rather than a mere luxury?

**RT:** First off, I totally agree with you that, up to now, there's probably never been a better time in terms of accessing aesthetic oriented archives (Ubu Web, Penn Sound, The Slough Foundation, Meshworks, Rabbit Light Movies, Text Sound, to name but a few). And also, people are more directly involved in their own archive making (or can be). It's not as passive as it used to be, you know, like artists being "caught in the act" by someone else (some artists even scrupulously avoided any media exposure)—to wit, the laptop itself is a portable archive unit with access to sites/servers all over the world. What's very positive about all this is that people can think more overtly (strategically, tactically) about the deployment of such materials. The deployment of aesthetic media can become (and largely is) one with the "productive" act itself. This makes for a potentially richer political conversation about the material-social "journey" of the art-object.

Even so, so much U.S. poetry is on the barely-discursive level of what I'll call "prayer," public prayer to be precise. In the monotheistic mode, prayer stands in as a "speaking" to an all-powerful unseen godhead; it is a total and ultra-locative act. There's not much concern as to *specific* cultural-distributive locations that the prayer is journeying through. There's *gonna be* a "connection," or perhaps there's *gonna be* the drama of *not* connecting to the all-everywhere. Likewise, a poem (in the secular public prayer mode) is conceived as journeying through an everywhere-already (the poem "happens to be" the poem *itself*, the journal is the journal *already*, the poem *in* the journal—is as it is—"there"). So often I page through poetry journals reading poems that just mount up, one upon the other, eye-less geckos squirming on rectangular planes. There's no speaking to the location (the journal) within a location (a journal cluster) within another location (journal cluster constellations) within wider locations, the movements of aesthetic genres, academic "disciplines," or even gritty street-level argots of the zeitgeist. That is, there's very little attention to *limits*. I mean this in terms of *approaching* limits (not in the liberal-schliberal way in thinking of constraints to the "creative processes"). These (as you say) "bandwidth-sucking" majoritarian poems/public prayers are "limitless" in their concerns, topics, passions, and "limitless" in their cultural-predictive effect. A probabilistic material calculus of the national (or trans-national) cultural moment—people don't talk about that, they leave out the odds in their poetry (scratch the poem with a coin, you always win something, right?). These poems/prayers speak to an Arcanum somewhere, somewhere far, which, in Protestant Prayer

Mode, is always the most in-close. One of the standard metaphysical hideouts (an “in-close” place) for such work is “these poems’ passion for” “the materiality of the words.” That’s the new public-prayer containment zone. Makes perfect sense in an ideological, re-absorptive sense, right?

The “materiality of the words themselves,” once the provenance of historical-materialist based linguistics (i.e., consequential radical tracings of causal instances from the now-as-not-just-now— from formative dawgs like Voloshinov & Bakhtin, or newer dawgs of the applied aesthetic-material sciences like Barrett Watten)—all that’s been Iowafied. It’s been recoup city for some time now. A watered-down, made-tame “materiality” surrounds us. Everybody now is a “materialist”—on the page. Everybody back to the page! Back to the hymnal books.

So when you and I were (vicariously and curiously and frustratingly too) studying the Squat Theatre notebooks (scrapbooks comprised of traces of events, conversations, happenings, and excerpts of performance texts), we were imagining—what? *a different world*. Since Squat Theatre’s world was so explicitly foregrounded (arrest warrants, passports, rent receipts were all imbedded in the book) as being elementally contributive to Squat art-form, it got us thinking about—well, along the lines of—what *is* materially politically-contributive to each of our respective practices, and more so, how *do we* “send” that—elsewhere, and what might “it” “do” there once it “gets there” (again, not by “knowing” outright, but by subjectively-reflexively enjoining that probabilistic material calculus of the national—or trans-national—cultural moment). So for sure, meditating on the Squat Theatre notebook brought us to this point of thinking in terms of “discursive break-out” potential. So let’s infold this concern/drive/desire for deployment of *this* media right here (this initiative moment), and in as naked a way as possible by tracing our steps and motivations around this project.

No sooner than we began part one of *Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception*, than the question/anxiety of its eventual location started burning a hole in our pocket. What did we want? For one, admittedly, we wanted a wider “splash” rather than a narrower one, something that would enable us to announce and refer to all subsequent installments with ease. We considered magazines like *Slope*, *Conjunctions*, *Chicago Review*, and others (in our haste, we submitted to some of these places, without really hunkering down on the problematic of location). Then we hit on the idea of Jacket (on-line) Magazine. One major consideration there is that there wasn’t a strict page limit. And since part one (“Squat Theatre and Crises”) had readily given way to part two (“Body Capacitance and Edging in Poetics Theater”), we submitted both parts. The flow was good (not too viscous, not too clumpy), and the transition to part two felt significant (which for me, that means a compelling ratio of attraction-plus-repulsion between parts). Luckily, the good folks at Jacket were cool about running both parts in an upcoming issue. So, what kind of “discursive-zone” location will that be? In my opinion, it’s still *reverse-incursive*, that is, from poetic discourse to poetic discourse, broadly along the lines of an anglo post-avant landscape. And one way to, as you say, “reconcile” this “always-fraught” moment, is to think of the publication moment as an initial mooring, a place to tether a critical conversation about

(financial, cultural) “crises.” Otherwise, it runs the risk of becoming just another supplication for a plot in yet another electronic poetry mausoleum.

Ok, as part three (“Ritualized Sacrifice, Gauging the Material Social”) rolled around, we had to again re-think the productive act as a whole. Where and how angle it. Very soon we thought we had to go northwest (or rather, *southwest*, the Canadian Southwest), a literary region where historical-materialist inflected concerns around poetry have a long established base (*Parser*, *Poetic Front*, *West Coast Line*, *Capilano Review*). So what to call this type of cultural-critical locating? “Shoring up the base?” “Bolstering the base?” “Extending the base.” I’m actually ok with either of those (it “fills an organizational need”). But the overriding (nagging) question still is what constitutes “a (discursive) breakout?” And so I ask again, anxiously, *is* there an “outside”—for poetics—anywhere? And would it be a qualitative or a quantitative problem?

At this point I’m extremely tempted to dish out a laundry list of instances of extra-endogenous poetic practices that might stand as examples of “breakout” —I’ve even compiled a hot list of people doing it. I’ll roll this out later. But, for now, why do I feel an *extreme* resistance to unleashing a balustrade of empirical instances? I think because...I feel strongly...that it’s time to build *from the bottom up*, New Resistant Subjects. Time to go bot, and not just “document”—however adroitly, “events.” So a deeper question here is, do we *feel* like making bots—like, tonight? Rudimentary bots, imperfect bots, bots that can—for the moment—withstand the high heat of several recoup fields in their midst? See...that’s why I mess with poetics, still, I suspect. Save for putting together New Resistant Subjects, messy piece by messy piece, honestly—what’s the point of newer “installations?” All the same, received speaking subjects, with newer wares, collapsing back into out-dated bot schemes?

**NK:** What you say about the state of avant-ist poetics now, “that everybody now is a materialist,” is a key insight for me, and I think it pushes my initial question further, about the importance of aesthetics in political resistance and interventionary movements. And I think there’s a really fascinating link (and subsequent divergence) between those old dawgs you cite and the wispy prayer book, page-heavy *materialism* that’s rather prevalent now. At the risk of, I don’t know, reflecting my cultural position real transparently (academia), I want to talk about Kristeva, particularly some of her words on Bakhtin, and then her totally naïve, in hindsight, celebration of the avant-garde a la Joyce. In *Desire in Language* she describes Bakhtin’s view of the “literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning) and a dialogue among several writings” reflecting the writer, the character, and the cultural context. Bakhtin, “by introducing the *status of the word* as a minimal structural unit, situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them.” Sounds really familiar right, as in what many writers we might trace our influences to have been doing for the past 50 years... but there’s more: “Diachrony is transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, *linear* history appears as abstraction. The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing this abstraction

through a process of reading-writing; that is through a practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure.” Here’s the *formal* call to arms, to make a splash in history by creating tension and disjunction in linguistic structures of meaning. Who can do this, of course, but the avant-garde: “the literary avant-garde experience, by virtue of its very characteristics, is slated to become the laboratory of a new discourse (and a new subject) because it rejects all discourse that is either stagnant or eclectically academic” and “stimulates and reveals deep ideological changes that are currently searching for their own accurate political formulation.”

You ask if there *is* an outside, and part of what I read into your question is that how we respond also implies how we might situate ourselves in relation to the idea and existence of an avant-garde, which could be a vehicle or stage for throwing ourselves headlong into some “edging” activity that might contribute to one of those “discursive breakouts.” I want to frame this discussion we’re having about materialism in terms of political constitution – a political constitution of both an artwork and an individual. There’s two parts to this, that reading Kristeva has really gotten me to think about lately, and that I find to be truly complicated places of tension: the *general* idea of an avant-garde, in particular one indebted to Structuralism and Russian Formalism, and its prickly relationship to political effectivity; and theories of resistance that are (in my own sloppy articulation) inward versus outward facing.

What I mean is—right now, the insufficiencies I see in Kristeva’s theory of resistance (that asserts language as the in-the-last-instance revolutionary field) are partial resolutions to really difficult *complications* that exist for *anyone* who is interested in both language play and political resistance. Kristeva wants a text that can insert itself into history, and also resist the expression of socially coercive forces through tension-producing collisions of multiple layers of structures of language (this is her unique sense of “intertextuality”). Even more, and here’s a major point on which much turns: the “semiotic” – those playful, subversive, open, fluid, one might say “hysteric,” and, you might of guessed, *feminine* elements or undertones in language – is that which “condenses the shattering of the subject, as well as that of society, into a new apportionment of relationships between the symbolic and the real, the subjective and the objective.” Kristeva begins with the most *historical*, outward, socially concerned motivations and concludes by locating a revolutionary field so *subjectively* manifested that she can even admit that if her poetic language “sometimes falls in with deeds brought about by the same rationality, as is, for example, the instinctual determination of fascism, poetic language is also there to forestall such translations into action.” A poetic language that is both there to forestall while it is just as likely to fall in line with political forces Kristeva began trying to resist seems like an empty container, an empty “subversive” form, that can be put to anyone’s use. A theory that turns so far inward into psychology, libidinous desires, identities, and repressed traits that the social becomes *an actual afterthought*—this seems to me to be the real risk of an “inward facing” theory of resistance, as well as avant-gardes that locate their revolutionary fields very narrowly, perhaps solely, in language. I feel like we can’t really be *too* careful about our empty materialisms.

And yet, I totally hear you about New Resistant Subjects. Obviously, there's much to gain by examining language as a process that connects, mixes, muddies messages and subjects too – their real physical beings, even. Kristeva even tells us she's in the business of subject formation with this avant-garde “slated to become the laboratory for a new discourse (and a new subject).” So, in terms of political constitution, via an avant-garde, via subjective vs social theories of resistance (psychoanalysis- vs Marxism-informed, in other words), I guess I want to constitute these New Resistant Subjects (NRS) in such a way that poetic language won't simply “fall in line,” queuing up like a robotic, brainless tin man *while also* not becoming a reworking of some “outer edge” being who bases its political and social identity on illusory, nearsighted perspectives of a “peripheral” relationship to structures of power. That is, not an avant-garde that must think itself in relation to an “outside” or a Trotskyist vanguard (because we might both agree [do we?] that such an outside simply *doesn't* exist) or one that plays in sandboxes of semiotics forever either. How to build this bot, then, this NRSbot, in a way that “maintains” precariousness between, *among*, these kinds of seemingly opposed positions... how, in other words, to invite this precariousness into ourselves?

**RT:** To be honest with you, in my “last instance” of assessing a given cultural-linguistic practice, to justify it, as it were, I've never been able to get quite past Kristeva's conception of a “laboratory” for subject making. And it's true that “avant garde” poets are (or can be) in an excellent position to take a crack at plumbing those ultra subjective, repressed libidinal forces, because they can unbuckle discourses at the level of the word. But cultural-linguistic practices are themselves constantly under siege, and not only by direct economic forces shaping them into all forms of functionalism (militarism being the worst of them) but also by body-related social pressures, even forces like fashion, body-image culture, to be precise. These coercive body-practices which create hierarchies of behavior that cannot be countered by words alone (hence my turn to body-movement poetics as a widening of the resistant manifold). But, to be fair, Kristeva's notion of “lab”—her ambition is much larger (“to insert a text into history, that also resists the expression of socially coercive forces...”). My tendency is to read that as two distinct moments. First, the actual making of “intertextuality” (writing, speaking), and second, the collocation of said object into history. It's that second moment that's been troubling us ever since we got into these space suits.

Is literary canonicity plus mounds of criticism of the resistant variety an “insertion into history?” Perhaps, partially. Is mass popular opinion-influencing books like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, or Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a subject-forming insertion into history? Perhaps, enormously so. I'm thinking, why, specifically, does this question of the “avant garde” (a.g.) keep reappearing? Do Roberto Bolaño's books still count as avant garde? (Bolaño being one of the founders of Infrarrealismo in Mexico in the 70s.) I'm saying that because his most famous book, *The Savage Detectives*, is largely a recounting of 70s a.g. goings on and perspectives. Seems like avant garde appears—when avant garde calls it up! I mean this. What if we don't call it up, this

ghost, is it really there?

But I also want to say something about poetry and theory in general. To a great extent (by way of being self-critical here too), I think that poetic pieces these days have to make “sense” (click, exacerbate, stimulate) to the non-theoretically initiated. Theory can be infused, referred to, messed with, but the poetic forays from one’s own botness-in-motion—as it impacts a thinking non-theorist—*that* contact must *itself* move, make a cut into the rocky gut of the frustrated “free American.” So, contact zones of discursive displacement sensed as movement, social movement, can be a major area of exploring a purposed precariousness. Also, I think it’s important to never assume one is being “received” on the other end of any zone, but instead, one might safely assume that there’s constant pushback on the whole activity itself (witness a roomful of grumpy “critically oriented” poets at a poetry reading). That’s why I really relate to a rap artist like 50 Cent. Humor becomes hard won in a scenario where one is being both “received” (a vanity of self-identification on the part of the audience) while at the same time being pushed back (discomfort building as the rapper/poet is distancing him/herself from the listener). In lots of popular art there’s this sense of threading the social-political as a gauge for one’s own involvement in making it. And the sense of peril that you speak of—an invited sense of peril, can come by way of languages of not only violence, but languages of repair. The NRSbots we’re talking about are already out there, colliding. And the ever-changing chronicities in which the NRSbots shatter and re-fuse is what’s to be “found” “out there.”

In rap, specifically, one is invited to view that subculture’s participation in its own volatile collective meaning-making. And the “invitation” is often about a “when”—literally, *when* to rap. I’m talking about a Kairos here, in the way neo-orthodox Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich used it in his *The Interpretation of History*. For him, “the kairoi are those crises in history which create an opportunity for, and indeed demand, an existential decision by the human subject” (the coming of Christ [for him] being the prime example). In the Kairos Document, an example of liberation theology in South Africa under Apartheid, the term kairos was used to denote “the appointed time,” “the crucial time” into which a text is spoken. Looking closely at early videos of Grandmaster Flash what really struck me was the poetic protocol when one of the group’s members chimes in. Often there’s a form of announcement as to *who’s* chiming in (self-identification, usually a nickname that has a dramatic character quality to it), and then a sort of parable-like reason as to why the social content is being covered, and then, what follows is mashing up and discriminative parsing of different types of time (city-wide-events time vs. work-time vs. home-life time vs. jail-time vs. personal-memory time, etc). Late modernist furniture arrangement design culture misses this crucial point. Chronicity *is* the place (if not the “thing”). There’s—what? a desire? in Late modernist critical theory of wanting to *forestall time* – of wanting to clear the slate clean to make way for the New Sacred Object. Adorno’s beautifully panoramic critical promontories and Kristeva’s “labs,” I get this feeling of a dream, a walking-waking dream of forestalling time *just long enough* for the Indicator/Leader Art-Object to gel onto the mass (something about negativity-retaining abstract art, something about how it was supposed to “stabilize” just long enough to alphabetize the civilization a new freedom). Me, I’ve

heard enough of it, have *had* enough of it. Any “availing” of a new secret grand cultural weapon – is mad rumor. The T4’s are on the banks of the Elbe, a feckless *too late* “ja” spills out of trembling mouths...everyone was *really* KPD or SPD “secretly the whole time.”

The Conceptualists™ (circa 2010) in my opinion, have really hit on something: the super-grid of meaning-making today is media in full saturation mode; and the C’s have rightly guessed that *wanking off* [a postmodern super-gliding on the surfaces of social phenomenon - as the dominant form of readability] has become the main way of dealing with said saturation. The C’s positive programmatic response to that drama is to tactically filter, document, and give order to that saturation’s “poetic” (as it were). The results are often lasting and, from the point of critical social discourse, quite viewable/discussable, and often very debatable. Hats off. Seriously. But one of the by-products of extolling the writer-as-machine has been to evacuate one’s *actual* body as a *phenomenal* player in the transformation of social media. For the C’s, the very *act* of material cultural reapportionment—as ritual—must never be sullied! (tainted by any “authorial” “personal” “hang ups”), it must be as pure an architectural intent as possible. The completion (as completion) of an avant garde (a.g) object becomes *the* imperative. You might say that 180 degrees to that architectural ambition is kari edwards’ full-body undoing of a future body as search in the present (search being wholly different than “found”). edwards was anti-documentarist to the core, in my opinion.

One way that edwards invited the precariousness that we’re talking about (“not an avant-garde that must think itself in relation to an ‘outside’...or one that plays in sandboxes of semiotics forever either”) was by incorporating biological-physical *death* as an inbuilt limit to key life-making processes (labor, art, sex); and by extension, the “freedoms” that these processes suggest, that they must be embraced as completely as possible. But I would suggest too that these same “life-making processes,” – that they too, be understood as constrictions to yet other life-making processes, ones that are as yet *unidentified*. This would suggest a rather strange embrace of anti-“purpose” (even as voluntary degradation!) so that we have to *make* curiosity, *make* the chimerical, *make* the evanescent even, that is, in contrast to “research.” Perhaps, after a while, NRSbot wave-form patterns can begin to be seen and traced. And then the earthquake hits, the bomb explodes, the Supreme Court gives corporations the right of habeas corpus, Wall Street execs get a super bonus for having squandered, or rather funneled 20+ years of social wealth into less than .5% of the population’s personal accounts. All this. But still, what’s to be said—about what’s to be done, and when.

[Parts 1 and 2 of *Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception*, “Squat Theatre and Crisis” and “Body Capacitance and Edging in Poetics Theater” appear in *Jacket Magazine* #39. Part 3, “Ritualized sacrifice, gauging the material-social” is in print in *West Coast Line*. Part 5, “Transitions of Capitalist Hyperspace (shake your booty),” appears online in Issue 2 of *Critiphoria*.]



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