

THE NEW SCHOOL

VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness
Seminar 4: Say It Like You Mean It: On Translation, Communication, Languages

Monday, March 11, 2019

SUMMARY

Participants

Natalie Diaz, Mojave poet, language activist, and educator

Aruna D'Souza, writer and art historian

Suzanne Kite, Oglala Lakota composer and performance and visual artist

Stefania Pandolfo, professor and director of the UC Berkeley Medical Anthropology Program on Critical Studies in Medicine, Science, and the Body

Ross Perlin, writer and linguist; Co-Director, Endangered Language Alliance, New York

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, artist, writer, and educator

Moderators

Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics

Laura Raicovich, independent curator and writer

Two astounding performances framed Seminar 4: “Brighter Than the Brightest Star I’ve Ever Seen” is the title of **Suzanne Kite**’s language class that opened the evening, to which **Natalie Diaz** responded with the poem “The First Water is the Body” at the closing, both offering attempts at translating Indigenous concepts. In-between, two panels were convened on translation, communication and languages, moderated by Laura and Carin respectively.

From behind the lectern, Suzanne staged her lesson as lecture, coaching the audience in the pronunciation of some Lakota words and their meaning as she shared (in English) the interlacing stories of a paranormal encounter between a girl and a ghost; the collusion of law enforcement personnel with defendants in a historical sexual assault case that happened on an Indian reservation in the 1980s; the linear orientation of both Settler colonialism westward and Christian eschatology; and peppered her lecture with examples of Indian names claimed by cities and towns throughout the U.S. As the audience gained confidence in pronouncing the Lakota words, the story unraveled, the room became awash in red light, and we lost sight – literally and metaphorically – of the narrative and its meaning.

Are translations possible, even desirable, was the key question of the first panel. Speaking about the Endangered Language Alliance of New York City, **Ross Perlin** discussed various paradoxes, among them how a wealth of language diversity in one location might in fact exacerbate linguistic extinction in

another; how in times of political strife, environmental crises, and global migration, cities often serve as last-minute hold-outs of cultures endangered where they originated. “[The city] is where linguistic diversity comes to die.” Other paradoxes include the need to make languages visible with maps that remain inadequate to represent them. Ross’s demand for implementation of a principle of linguistic equality was taken up by **Kameelah Rasheed**, who spoke about her current project “Scoring the Stacks” at the Brooklyn Public Library. “Why is my stuff, my voice not in the library?” she asked, and with this project she demands the reader perform the text as they write it. It is only in this co-authored, collaborative experience, she proposes, that writing can amount to a performance of democracy. **Aruna D’Souza** shattered all assumptions of decorum and community by forcefully demanding that expectations of empathy, which is based on the assumption that we can understand one another if we just try hard enough. She posited that empathy be replaced by the acknowledgment that there is value in incomprehension. “As a political project, I want to think about what it means that we don’t have to understand in order to care for each other or create spaces in which people are cared for.” This first panel closed with a discussion on how to sit with incomprehension, how to defy capitalist notions of efficiency, and what that might mean for politics and engagement outside of understanding.

The second panel focused on how our bodies are implicated in language and knowledge production – in **Suzanne Kite**’s words, “you cannot not involve the body [...] It requires the body, in a space, an entire lifetime, to comprehend even a little bit of a story.” She described how she often uses a computer interface in her work, offering new forms that invite the body into conversations that are not based on facts or information. The Lakota word for “sacred,” she pointed out, refers to something that is actually incomprehensible. **Natalie Diaz** compared Western languages to data systems, in contrast to Mojave which “pulls us back into our body.” She returned to the term empathy from the first panel, explaining how it does not exist in Mojave because the energy in the stone is the same as in a person, neither is knowable. Given that only 30% of communication is verbal, can touch or other experiences account for it? This would not necessarily be a comfortable position – referring to “discomfort,” a term from Seminar 2 – but as she said, “I’ve learned to sit in the luck of an energy of living.” **Stefania Pandolfo** read from the introduction to her book “Knot of the Soul,” describing a walk across the roof of a crumbling house that to one person seemed precarious and to another comprised a map of the world. The resemblance was uncanny to a key scene in Amar Kanwar’s film *Such a Morning* where a house gets dismantled while the heroine remains seated in what used to be the foyer, ready with a rifle on her lap. From there, Stefania arrived at incomprehension or incommensurability of language and time via references to post-colonial studies (Fanon), psychoanalysis (Freud), and her extensive engagement with notions of consciousness or “madness” in Islamic communities in the Maghreb.

In the closing discussion, comprehension and understanding were further unpacked: how it might be safer not to be legible; how literacy can be an exercise of power (for example disruptive speech (such as protest) may become illegible because it’s not recognized as associated with power); how language is an index of time spent with others, establishing conditions of possibility. Considering the conditions of language embedded in all the connotations of Freedom of Speech, the seminar came to a close with Natalie’s demand for a new shape of language that is not complacent, that demands imagination and struggle for yet-to-be-realized possibilities. Stefania reminded us that Amar’s film comes from a

complete black-out, an attempt to create a space where something can again enter the world. As coda of Seminar 4 , Natalie sent us off into the night with her poem to the Colorado River, spurning linguistic conventions that distinguish between body and land, internal and external energy.

*The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus *If Art Is Politics*. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. This seminar is copresented in partnership with the National Coalition Against Censorship.*

Further information on each seminar, including SUGGESTED READINGS, PROGRAM, SUMMARY, and VIDEO DOCUMENTATION, at www.veralistcenter.org.