

engineering fictions

a poetry of protection through the dazzle-dark

Jessica Foley | IADT | 07.05.21 | Obfuscation Workshop

Hello. I'm so glad to be here to speak with you today. I'm going to share with you some Sonnets, taken from a corona of sonnets — that is to say, a sequence of sonnets where the last line of one sonnet becomes the title of the next. I don't want to explain too much, or tell you how to think about them. But I do want you to listen. Maybe even close your eyes. Let your sight go dark, let yourself listen.

Afterwards, I'll give you more context...

I'M DOING MY BIT FOR SOCIETY STILL

I'm just a bit of cloth, fabric or material,
I'm not the enemy, I shouldn't be feared,
I will protect you from the real enemy,
the virus you cannot see, so cannot blame.

Some of your actions are irrational, like a child lashing out,
and yet I don't blame you for that.
I will still shield you and look after you,
like a parent or guardian, protecting you unconditionally.

Blame me, resent me, and hate me if you must,
but don't blame those trying to help you.
They will make some mistakes, they're doing their best.
Scared and needing protection like you.

It's easier to blame me and I don't mind.
I'm just a bit of fabric after all.

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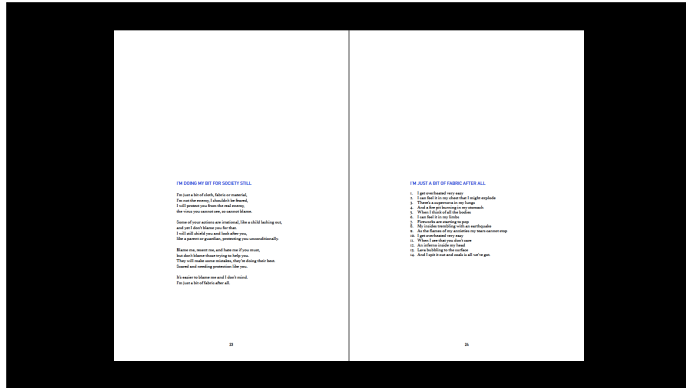
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I'M JUST A BIT OF FABRIC AFTER ALL

1. I get overheated very easy
2. I can feel it in my chest that I might explode
3. There's a supernova in my lungs
4. And a fire pit burning in my stomach
5. When I think of all the bodies
6. I can feel it in my limbs
7. Fireworks are starting to pop
8. My insides trembling with an earthquake
9. As the flames of my anxieties my tears cannot stop
10. I get overheated very easy
11. When I see that you don't care
12. An inferno inside my head
13. Lava bubbling to the surface
14. And I spit it out and coals is all we've got.

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The sonnets were written over the course of two Engineering Fictions writing workshops, by representatives from policing, government, health, academia and civil liberties groups in the U.K.

Engineering Fiction is a writing-workshop and meeting-place for engaging otherwise with words and worlds of information and communications technologies.

The workshops were hosted in the spirit of the Chatham House Rule, which states “participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”.

Hence, the decision to combine the participants voices under the ancient pen-name, Anonymous.

ANONYMOUS
Nobodies
& Somebodies

"In some intellectual circles, however, anonymity is understood as an attribute of power. Here, I am thinking of power in Foucault's sense: anonymous, diffused, lacking definite location, we can never identify it with this or that class, party, group, institution, state regime, leader, or business interest. Power in this sense is everywhere and nowhere, without apparent aims or personality and hence virtually nothing— a nothing that nonetheless manages to determine the fate of nearly everything else."

*Gregory B. Stone,
The Nameless Wild One, 2006*

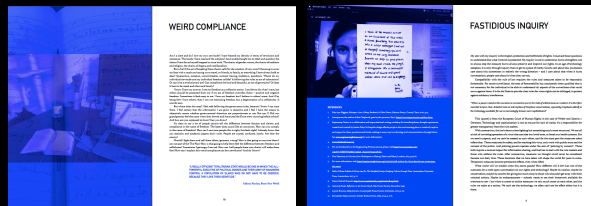
But there is a tension inherent in taking on this moniker — on the one hand, this name produces statements that have, as E.M. Forster wrote in 1925, “a universal air about them. Absolute truth, the collected wisdom of the universe seems to be speaking, not the feeble voice of man.”

Chiming in with this sentiment, Gregory B. Stone writes that “frequently, anonymity is a synonym for failure: we speak of ‘nobodies’, those who toil a lifetime yet fail to ‘make a name’. [In the Western tradition] anonymity means impotence. The nameless are those who are most powerless to differ with, or from, others.”

At the same time, writes Stone, “In some intellectual circles, however, anonymity is understood as an attribute of power. Here, I am thinking of power in Foucault’s sense: anonymous, diffused, lacking definite location, we can never identify it with this or that class, party, group, institution, state regime, leader, or business interest. Power in this sense is everywhere and nowhere, without apparent aims or personality and hence virtually nothing— a nothing that nonetheless manages to determine the fate of nearly everything else.”

There are three roles which define participation in Engineering Fictions sessions. The first is the role that I play, that of the host. During the sessions I am facilitator and time-keeper, but, in the preparatory phase of the workshops, I am also midwife to the seed topic of the catalyst. In response to the seed, I create a flexible script for each session and devise generative writing constraints that will support exploration, inquiry and reflection. The second is the role of the catalyst. The catalyst is a person who has something at stake that they wish to speak about, to ask about, to open up about, with others. This 'something' becomes the seed for the session, but the seed is a darkening of the 'something' — it often takes the form of a text, written by the catalyst, as a kind of soliloquy script, that begins the session and prompts conversation. The third role is that of others; a temporary community of interest who directly or indirectly share a stake in the seed topic of the session and are willing to listen, respond and write honestly together.

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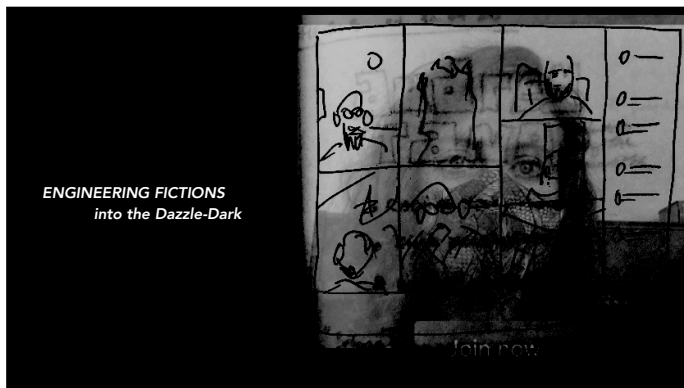
The main aim of these two workshops was to open up a constructive, honest and creative conversation amongst stakeholders of state powers of online surveillance. While Fastidious Inquiry spoke to the necessity of holding those in power to account through a commitment to individual inquiry for the collective good, Weird Compliance confronted the identity crisis felt by many on the political left, as they struggle to reconcile, for example, the right to protest with the problem of disinformation.

Through these workshops, a meeting-place was formed where participants could enjoy a certain quality of anonymity, under the cloak of poetic fiction.



Participants appreciated the time and meeting-place afforded by these workshops to, and I quote:

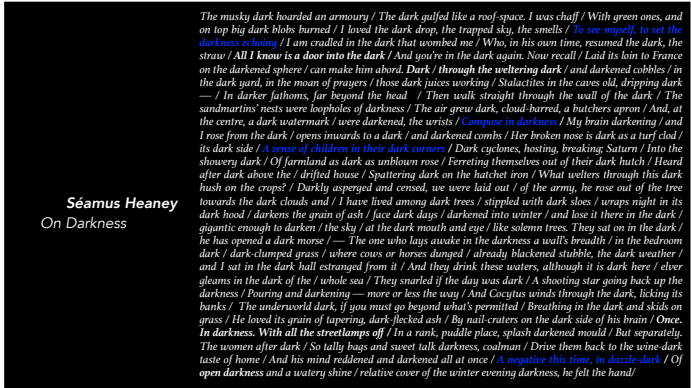
“metabolise the things you are working on”; “to allow emotion to come”; “to process thinking and feeling” and “to consider the contract between the state and the citizen”.



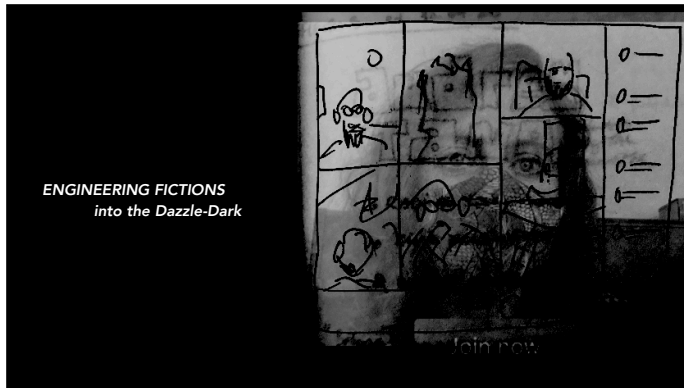
In preparation for the workshop today, I wanted to think about the practice of Engineering Fictions in terms of obfuscation, in terms of darkness. In doing so, I thought about the work of the Department of Ultimology who undertake the artistic and curatorial study of that which is dead or dying.



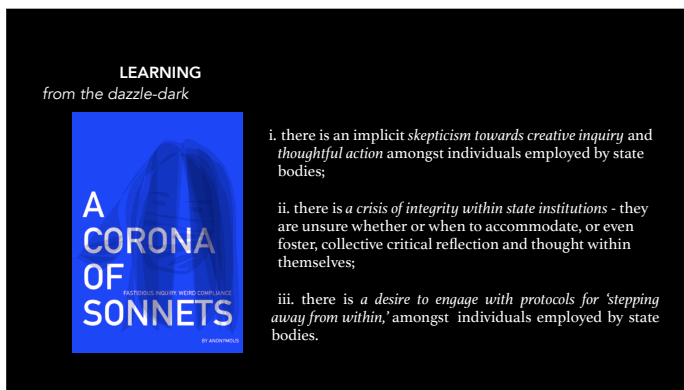
Ultimology embraces darkness as part of its methodology: — “When we speak of darkness here it does mean the absence of light, but it is not solely a description of the visible domain. It can encompass that which is unquantifiable, overlooked, no longer credible, beyond surveillance, peripheral to the brightly lit path of progress.”



I also thought about the work of poet Séamus Heaney, whose lines so often embrace the dark — darkness, darkening, darker, darkly, darkened and on, into the dazzle-dark, to set the darkness echoing.



When I prepare the seed topic with the catalyst of each Engineering Fictions session, we are shifting and playing with words, meaning and intention in a way that can generate a dazzle-dark mood within the meeting-place of the session. This mood accommodates in-betweenness, ambiguity, uncertainty, unknowability, unspeakability. Here, questions, assumptions, feelings and language can be handled differently, shared and touched under cover of darkness, or at least under a half-light. Here, learning can take place and insight can emerge.

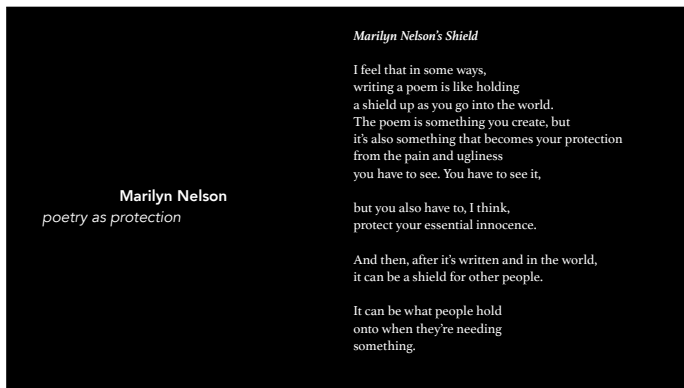


Through Engineering Fictions with stakeholders of online state surveillance and policing I learned the following:

- i. there is an implicit skepticism towards creative inquiry and thoughtful action amongst individuals employed by state bodies;
- ii. there is a crisis of integrity within state institutions - they are unsure whether or when to accommodate, or even foster, collective critical reflection and thought within themselves;
- iii. there is a desire to engage with protocols for 'stepping away from within,' amongst individuals employed by state bodies.

In other words, I learned that while stakeholders of online state surveillance and

policing can be skeptical of creative inquiry, they also express a contradictory desire for protocols that can support both creative inquiry and critical reflection. This contradiction is anecdotally reflective of the ways that state institutions, such as policing, can be structurally inhospitable to critical thinking at the level of the individual, because of their hierarchical, command-and-control procedures and bureaucracies. In short, I learned that stakeholders of online state surveillance and policing are, anecdotally at least, conflicted by a contradiction of integrity across their institutions.



And so, this brings me to the idea of poetry as protection, a way of inviting thinking and making and listening with others that can, as Heaney says, set the darkness echoing.

In a recent interview, the poet Marilyn Nelson talked about poetry as a kind of shield. I've transcribed this interview and lineated it into a sonnet, and I will conclude my presentation with this:

Marilyn Nelson's Shield

I feel that in some ways,
writing a poem is like holding
a shield up as you go into the world.
The poem is something you create, but

it's also something that becomes your protection from the pain and ugliness
you have to see. You have to see it,

but you also have to, I think,
protect your essential innocence.

And then, after its written and in the world,
it can be a shield for other people.

It can be what people hold
onto when they're needing
something.

New Yorker Poetry Podcast

Radical Imagination: Marilyn Nelson, Tracy K. Smith, and Terrance Hayes on
Poetry in our Times

<https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/poetry/radical-imagination-tracy-k-smith-marilyn-nelson-and-terrance-hayes-on-poetry-in-our-times>

www.engineeringfictions.org

@JessicaDFoley

Thank you for listening in the dazzle-dark with me.

