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Authors

Nash, Joshua
McShane Lodwick, Leslie
Wander, Maggie

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Am I a Generalist or a Linguist? Or, How Relevant Are Emotions and Refracting Methodologies to the Academy? An interview with Joshua Nash

Joshua Nash, Leslie McShane Lodwick, and Maggie Wander

In his piece “Linguistic Spatial Violence: The Case of the Muslim Cameleers in the Australian Outback” (this volume), Joshua Nash utilizes innovative methodological approaches, spatial writing, and sensuous scholarship to explore the architectural and linguistic traces of Muslim cameleers crossing the Australian desert in the late 19th and early 20th century. *Refract’s* editorial board saw a unique opportunity to highlight interdisciplinary methodologies and diverse approaches to scholarship through an interview with Nash, who is currently Associate Professor at Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies in Denmark. Editorial board members Leslie McShane Lodwick and Maggie Wander interviewed Nash in August 2018 to learn more about the methods he employed to write his contribution to this issue. The following is the result of the email exchanges between Nash, Lodwick, and Wander.

What drives your unique interest in the cameleers of Australia? What has been missing from the study of cameleers that you address through this text, and potentially others? Your own biography seems very important to the reading of your scholarship. How are you thinking about your own history and experiences in the *telling* of this history?

My background as a linguist educated in psychology, environmental studies, and Indian eco-spirituality brings a distinct depth and focus to my work. I am a South Australian. In my childhood, I saw *The Ghan* leave Adelaide north toward Alice Springs and beyond countless times. This passenger train commemorates the

route, role, and personage of the Muslim cameleers in exploring the inland of Australia.¹

My interest in the Muslim cameleers of Australia is founded in my teaching of architectural history and theory at the University of Adelaide. In 2014, I was invited by my colleague and friend Peter Scriver to participate in an Australian Research Council project documenting the architectural, settlement, and cultural history of the cameleers in the Australian outback. I transferred my background in linguistics and environmental studies to architecture and cultural history and in so doing sketched a self-mandated experimental and speculative course. The exploration of the built environment and its relationship to natural, cultural, and linguistic landscapes is a logical extension of my educational training and personal interests.

I felt there was a large gap in how the story of the cameleers, especially in South Australia where I was born, could be represented in a creative and hyper-personal manner. This is summed up in a single line in my piece: *I simply look around, take in the view*. I wanted to package an aesthetic thought pilgrimage within the corporeal and literal four-wheeled drive journeying I undertook in 2014 with my colleagues.

I have written about the aesthetic ardour of the fieldwork enterprise. I have brought sexuality, embodiment, fear, and humour to bear in my scientific probings. I have lived in India, Denmark, Australia, and the South Pacific. I have wanted to share these stories for a long time with whomsoever wants to listen and interact. It is both satisfying and humbling to have an active audience, any audience.

What is spatial writing and how do you engage with it in your work?

Spatial writing is not exactly well-established in architectural history or architectural critique. And bringing in a linguistic and placenaming dimension to spatial-site-creative architectural writing is certainly not commonplace either. Very few linguists have ever drawn in meaningful ways on the fertile-enough methodological and theoretical offerings of architectural history. This puts me in a novel position as a theorist and writer: I am a trained linguist-cum-ethnographer dipping into the benefactions of the micro-field of spatial writing and its placement within architectural research more generally.

While the spatial writing of Burns, Frichot, Rendell, and Stead largely advance a feminist critique of the built/person-in-place, I engage this form of writing with a desire to meld the strictures of scholarly composition with the wildness and personalised nature of freeform creation. The results emphasise my

own self-set requirement of individualising research and unleashing an entertaining story.

I feel the constraints of the academic industry often muffle and stifle the potentially lush voices of storytelling inherent in our chosen research projects. I definitely advise scholars, especially those starting out, to take risks and allow themselves to become unshackled from their own disciplinary constraints, while simultaneously using and honouring the fundamental tools these very disciplines have provided. The products might not necessarily lead to employment-friendly outcomes, but they will hopefully be welcome additions to the expanding thought archives of adventurous scholars.

Please elaborate on how emotion figures into your method. You refer to Paul Stoller’s “sensuous scholarship”— could you explain how this helps you to think about the history of the cameleers?

I have conducted a lot of linguistic, ethnographic, and environmental fieldwork in Australia, the Pacific, and India. Fieldwork within these disciplines means interacting with real people in real places and real time. And interacting with people means emotional involvement. Any written production, which comes out of the emotional involvement of fieldwork, is by definition *sensuous scholarship*. Emotion means contact. Contact is sensuous.

My work is emotional in the way that I document other people’s and my own nexuses and bonds of emotional attachment and connection formed around, by, and within language, place, time, history, nostalgia, and stories. For me and from where I stood in outback South Australia in July 2014, the story of the cameleers in which I partook was one of linguistic and architectural silence, absence, and passive violence, where I generally use *violence* as a metaphor of *time is the remover*, imbued with charged meaning. When I looked out over the sparse, desert setting, I felt the emotion of the narrative working through me, wanting to come out. I wrote what I felt.

I wish more emotion were put into *sensualising our scholarship*. The line “never let the truth get in the way of a good story” is key in unpacking and writing about the relevant and driving emotions of theoretical crafting. While A->B type writing, of course, has its place in scientific and even creative formulation, the oftentimes muddiness and loose clauses afforded by employing feeling and describing atmosphere in a spatialization of words is an exciting venture.

Parentheticals seem to be a productive way to work through the limits of language in capturing the complexities and nuances of the topic at hand. We are curious to know more about this. For instance, why do you say “spatial(ly violent) behaviour” rather than “spatially violent behaviour?” What *work* are the parentheses doing in this and other instances?

When we talk to others we use hand gestures and body language. Written language can be both more or less restricted. My use of parentheticals seeks to unmoor the written from the impediment of disallowing plural meanings. “Spatial behaviour,” with my implied meaning set on alluding to built architecture rather than human presence, is significantly different in its position than the meaning of “spatially violent behaviour,” which I intend as an allusion to time-space-movement as being brutal by nature.

I use parentheticals, purposeful bracketing, and punctuation as a way to unpack the experience of the duality of reading-writing. Through reading my work, I invite the reader into a dialogue, into the often-jumbled edge-edgy spaces and cracks between the components of the writing. This method is a crucial element in my emotional take on spatial writing; it further spatialises the physical page or screen on which the writing exists.

Please elaborate on your use of the relationship between grammar and architecture. That is, this piece suggests there is a link between the components of language (articles, modifiers, etc) and the components of architecture. What is the cultural significance between language and the built environment?

Linking language and grammar with architecture is nothing new. My position is that few linguists, if any, have looked to architecture for disciplinary assistance (several architectural theorists have drawn directly on linguistics for aid, e.g. Jencks and Preziosi). I feel that the *architecture is grammar* metaphor is commonly employed in a weak way because those who use it are not aware of what the tools of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology within the study of grammar and linguistics can actually do. That is, scholars have used the *architecture is language* and *architecture is grammar* metaphors primarily in nominal ways rather than in ways effective to the actual analysis of architecture through the possibilities linguistics offers and vice versa.

Indeed, articles (a, an, the), modifiers (most commonly adjectives), and the syntax of sentences can and have been likened to the order required when building and for creating stable buildings. Structure is necessary for anything to be built,

and linguistics assumes that it can measure or quantify what it deems are structural aspects of spoken and written language(s). It is important to remember that the idea of the existence of separate languages, which can be spoken of in terms of (a) distinct grammar(s) is problematic. The built is there, sure. Or maybe it is made absent due to its passively violent removal through time. And the spoken, written, and signed are there, too. Time eventually gets the better of these no matter what.

Using the technical tools I have inherited, and which sit fast in my methodological and theoretical tool belt, I strive in this piece and several of my other works to investigate creatively the linked cultural significance between built and spoken-signed instead of insisting on establishing empirical, literal, and scientific facts. Again, *I simply look around, take in the view.*

We wonder if you think about the article (as a linguistic device) and an article (a piece of writing) in similar ways? They both make things concrete and material, they “language” the world. Do you view your own work as a similar way of making things concrete?

These are excellent questions and exciting ways to speculate about melding language with linguistics and architecture. The definite article—the—can make the nominal—nouns: people, places, and things—definite, distinct, and less ambiguous. An article of writing can achieve the same with the wording of abstract thoughts into the concrete currency of the page.

I enjoy making world-concrete the fringe ideas, which might otherwise be lost in the packaging of scientific articular, that is, the oftentimes uncreative pursuit of formulating writing for peer review. It has been a luxury that I have been fortunate in being able to share with my readership in substantial form many of my peripheral academic escapades.

You call yourself a “generalist” rather than a linguist, anthropologist, historian, etc. Part of *Refract*’s mission is to break down disciplinary boundaries. Please speak more about that and how it matters in your research and writing.

The clarion call of the day is multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity. There are even sections in grant applications I have completed, which query whether the research for which I am seeking funding is interdisciplinary or not. I have never sought to be purposefully interdisciplinary, to bounce between disciplines, or to create my own fields and research gaps and then to fill them myself. This is just what

happened during times of thinking, feeling, and immersion in the adventure of research, travel, and exploration.

I am definitely a generalist, and have published in many fields including anthropology, island studies, language ecology, Pacific history, and placenaming. Claiming to be a generalist is a double-edged sword; it can be a way of embracing many specialties of study. It can simultaneously be a way to avoid sticking to my own discipline of origin, linguistics, and really going deep and making a vast contribution there rather than spreading myself around and doing as *Refract* has made as its mission: to break down disciplinary boundaries.

Demarcations exist for a reason; they help us make sense of where we stand and where we are going academically and personally. I suspect I may have in the past thrown out the deep-rooted and philosophically strong disciplinary baby with the bathwater of striving to be different, non-conformist, and even quirky. I believe there needs to be a balance between being staunchly interdisciplinary and remaining steadfastly loyal to our roots. I wish the editors and authors of *Refract* all the best wishes and luck with their journal and writings, respectively. I have no doubt their search will arrive at, at least, a work in progress position of this middle ground, a dynamic space, which lies between being a generalist disciple and a disciplinary devotee.

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Notes

¹ The interested reader is referred to several volumes that document the extant empirical history of the cameleers: Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland, 1860s-1930s*, rev. ed. (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2010); Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia*, rev. ed., (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002); Peter Scriver, "Mosques, Ghantowns and Cameleers in the Settlement History of Colonial Australia," *Fabrications* 13, no.1 (May 2004): 19-41.