

The Broadside of a Yarn:  
A Situationist Strategy for Spinning Sea Stories Ashore

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Presented at:  
“Environmental Utterance”  
University College Falmouth, UK  
1-2 September 2012

This paper endeavours to navigate between a proposed project and a work as it is in the process of becoming. The work in question, *The Broadside of a Yarn*, was commissioned by Electronic Literature as a Model for Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) for *Remediating the Social*, an exhibition to open at Inspace gallery in Edinburgh on 1 November 2012, two months from the time of this writing.

*The Broadside of a Yarn* is a multi-modal performative pervasive networked narrative attempt to chart fictional fragments of new and long-ago stories of near and far-away seas with nought but a QR code reader and a hand-made map of dubious accuracy. This project is, in a Situationist sense, a wilfully absurd endeavour. How can I, a displaced native of rural Nova Scotia (New Scotland), perform the navigation of a narrative route through urban Edinburgh (Old Scotland)? How can I, a one-time resident of Falmouth, Nova Scotia, fathom how it is we find ourselves here in Falmouth, Cornwall, today? My grandmother Carpenter lived in Cape Cod. There's a Falmouth there also. This seems a fabulous coincidence, until we consider that the element connecting these places is the sea. In *Cape Cod*, a book named after a cape named after a fish, Henry David Thoreau asserts: "All that is told of the sea has a fabulous sound to an inhabitant of the land, and all its products have a certain fabulous quality, as if they belonged to another planet, from sea-weed to a sailor's yarn." Indeed. How can any inhabitant of dry land possibly understand the constantly shifting perspective of stories of the high seas?

*The Broadside of a Yarn* may perhaps be best understood as an assemblage, a collection of stories, an unbound atlas of impossible maps, a combination of historical and hand-drawn sources, interspersed with engravings from nautical narratives, my own drawings, photographs, and fiction, computer-generated narratives, and quotations from sailors' yarns. This network of interrelated narrative elements is

being composed in segments, some of which have already been published. These elements are mediated across a continuum of forms.

Eponymously, *The Broadside of a Yarn* remediates the broadside, a form of networked narrative popular from 16th century onward. Broadside were written on a wide range of topical subjects, cheaply printed on single sheets of paper (often with images), widely distributed, and posted and performed in public. During the *Remediating the Social* exhibition in Edinburgh, *The Broadside of a Yarn* will be posted as a 5m x 3m printed map situated in a light-box in Inspace gallery. This map, and a series of freely distributed broadside-sized subsets of it, will propose imprecise and possibly impossible walking routes. The purpose of this map is not to guide, but rather to engage “readers” in, or perhaps merely suggest to them, the Situationist practice of *dérive*. In *Theory of the Dérive*, Guy-Ernest Debord suggests: “With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental *dérives*, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influences, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is no worse than that of the first navigational charts” (1958). Fantastically, for my watery purposes, McKenzie Wark ascribes a suggestion of “space and time of liquid movement” to the word *dérive*: “Its whole field of meaning is aquatic, conjuring up flows, channels, eddies, currents, and also drifting, sailing or tacking against the wind” (2011: 22).

Like the printed broadside ballads of old, the public posting of *The Broadside of a Yarn* signifies that it is intended to be performed. Embedded within the highly visual cartographic space of this printed map are QR codes which link to web pages. Some of these contain digital maps, which in turn link to images and/or narrative texts, which may influence the reader’s attention back toward the physical map in the gallery, or out into the street. Other QR codes lead to web pages containing computer-

generated narrative dialogues, performance scripts, replete with stage instructions suggesting how and where these texts are intended to be read. In both these cases, points on the physical map point to potential events, to utterances, to speech acts. For Walter J. Ong, “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (1982: 75). Even the written words here refuse repose. In the case of *There he was, gone.*, which has been published as a stand-alone piece in *Joyland Poetry* and performed at Performance Writing Weekend 2012 (Arnolfini, Bristol, May 2012) and &Now Paris (June 2012), the computer-generated text becomes an impetus for an oral performance in four voices which perpetually evokes, but can never quite enunciate the circumstances surrounding a recent traumatic event, a death, a body, a loss, at sea. Derrida articulates this chasm: “Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning” (Derrida 1978: 75).

The yarn is a performative form, perhaps not fully of the “primary oral culture” Ong evokes, a culture in which “the world has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visually perceptible text, and no awareness of even the possibility of such a text” (73), but certainly the yarn is of an oral tradition within which the “phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings’ feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word” (73).

The phrase “to spin a yarn” emerged in the early 1800s as a sailors’ expression denoting the telling of long stories of incredible happenings while engaged in such sedentary work as yarn or rope twisting, net or sail mending, or simply waiting - for orders or wind or tide. The whole of Joseph Conrad’s novella *The Heart of Darkness* is in effect a sailor’s yarn, in which the affect Thoreau termed “a fabulous quality” is furthered through a series of nested parenthesis which create a telescopic experience

of distance via a series of oppositions. The quotidian narration of an epic journey to and up the Congo is recounted in one evening, in one sitting, whilst sitting utterly still, moored on the Thames. The oral yarn spun by the character Marlow is related to the reader through the filter of a narrator, written and printed in a book. Of Marlow and his yarn, the narrator has this to say:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical... to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale... in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (Conrad 1950: 68).

Indeed, Marlow begins his yarn far from its dark heart, as it were. He begins with begins with a map.

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.' (70-71)

The high order of abstraction in Marlow's narration separates him from his fellow seamen and their oral tradition. His cartographic conception of narration, marks him as a modern, literate being.

Alberto Manguel argues: "Cartography is a literary invention. The world we live in is not concerned with borders and limitations... It is made of movement, not of static spaces; it is a world in which rivers run and come to a halt... islands emerge and sink back into the sea..." Similarly, Ong asserts:

Only after... the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the... 'world', think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas, a vast surface or assemblage of surfaces ... ready to be 'explored'. The ancient oral world knew few 'explorers', though it did know many itinerants, travellers, voyagers, adventurers, and pilgrims (73).

Susan Barton, the traveller come castaway first-person narrator of Coetzee's novel *Foe*, warns against abstraction in narration.

[S]een from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity. All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway... The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches... When you made your needle... by what means did you pierce the eye? When you sewed your hat, what did you use for thread? (Coetzee 1986: 18)

The *Broadside of a Yarn* turns broadside to these tensions between detail and abstraction, aims for a soft spot in between them, a spot which is neither and both. Details from many sea stories have been netted by this net-worked work. This too is a Situationist strategy. Wark argues, "for past works to become resources for the present requires their ... appropriation as a collective inheritance, not as private property" (37). The plundering of *The Owl and the Pussycat* for the computer-generated text *Notes on the Voyage of Owl and Girl*, which has also been published as a stand-alone web piece, makes it my story and mine alone (Carpenter 2012). In my version the pussycat is a girl most serious, most adventurous, most determined. The cartographic collage she and her lazy friend the owl voyage through collects the particularities of a number of fluid floating places and reassembles them in an obviously awkward assemblage of discontinuous surfaces pitted with points of departure, escape routes, lines of flight. The computer-generated narrative takes Coetzee's Barton's "thousand touches" for what they are - a string of variables, from which a thousand partial truths may be output selectively. To quote Wark again, "Détournement is the opposite of quotation. [...] Key to any practice of détournement is identifying the fragments upon which it might work" (40). The computer-generated script *Trading Lip for Ear* is composed entirely of lines of dialogue from Conrad's

novela *The Secret Sharer*, spoken words from a printed story, set on a far-away long-ago sea, put into mouths and then shifted.

My stated intention in creating *The Broadside of a Yarn* was to use the oral story-telling tradition of the yarn, the printed broadside and map, the digital network, and the walk-able city in concert to construct a temporary digital community connected through a performative pervasive networked narrative. I wrote that sentence over a year and a half ago. Through the process of composition my focus has shifted away from the temptation to lure people on walks through a city tagged with links to stories of the sea, toward a desire to compel people to collectively speak shifting sea stories ashore. Perhaps this shift is an ontological one. On land, the body moves through stillness. At sea, everything moves. No wonder then, that sailors' yarns resist the fixity of print. They are sound. They move. Through the act of listening, the still body centres them.

For Ong, the spoken word is an event. For Deleuze and Guattari, "the ontological mixture of event and sense, or of lines traced on the plane of immanence, distributing points of singularity," constitutes a form of materialism which Jean-Jacques Lecreclle describes as "tak[ing] as the elementary units of the reconstruction of language not individual utterances nor individual speakers but collective assemblages of enunciation" (Lecreclle 2002 156).

I would close then by asking you to join me in performing a collective assemblage of enunciation. *Trading Lip for Ear:*

[<http://luckysoap.com/broadside/lipforear.html>]

Note: an extended, amended, and much revised version of this paper will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Performance Research Journal*.

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