

TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]:  
Locating Narrative Resonance in  
Transatlantic Communications Networks

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This paper locates narrative resonance in transatlantic communications networks through a discussion of one web-based work. *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is a computer-generated narrative dialogue which propagates across, beyond, and through transatlantic communications networks (Carpenter 2011). These networks serve as narrative structures for stories of place and displacement that resonate between sites, confusing and confounding boundaries between physical and digital, code and narrative, past and future, home and away.

Critical to this discussion is the notion that communication networks are what they do. Communications may impart narrative, and, at the same time, may constitute the network through which that narrative communicates. Documents, letters, packets, ships, telegraphs, telephones, radios, televisions and digital networks both communicate and are communications. In *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]*, transatlantic communications networks serve as narrative structures for an ongoing narrative dialogue resonating between the United Kingdom and Atlantic Canada. This dialogue resonates in a space between places separated by time, distance and ocean, yet inextricably linked by generations of immigration. Narrative resonance may be understood here as the prolongation, amplification and distribution of narrative, produced by a place vibrating in sympathy with a neighbouring source of narrative resulting in a sympathetic vibration between two coastal locations.

One coastline implies another, implores a far shore. The question inherent in this entreaty intrigues me. What we write is always a question. A question desires a reply. When the first official test of the electromagnetic telegraph line was performed by Samuel Morse before the U.S. Supreme Court on May 24, 1844, the first transmission was that of question: "What hath God wrought?" A colleague waiting in Baltimore received this message and returned, not an answer, but rather, the same question

repeated back in confirmation. Repetition is one of the hallmarks of Freud's notion of the uncanny. The sender and receiver become *doppelganger*, doubles of one another. Freud writes: "This relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other – what we would call telepathy – so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience" (2003, 141-142). Early telecommunication technologies twined notions of question and answer, here and there, living and dead. A perception of electromagnetic communication as a disembodied communion with otherworldly presences persisted, even as telegraph and telephone networks girdled the globe with cables, signals, switches and stations.

December 14, 1901, three short sharp clicks skipped this physical grid. The Morse letter S travelled from Poldu, Cornwall, to Saint John's, Newfoundland, where it was received by a telephonic headset held to the highly sensitive receiver of Guglielmo Marconi's waiting ear. Or so we hear. Hoax rumours abound. Some suggest that what Marconi heard was actually a harmonic – a connection resulting from resonance rather than transmission. Resonance is produced by reflection, reverberation, coupling, echoing, re-sounding. The Morse S was no doubt chosen for its ease of intelligibility. But three dots are, after all, an ellipsis, a grammatical indication of an intentional omission. Transatlantic communications bridge vast distances. But distance distorts, distance distends. We hear what we need to.

Wireless technology revealed a vast, unfathomable ocean of static to the world. Deep listening into that void has returned many an uncanny result. *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is one such, the result of a combination of scholarly, archival, sited, and practice-led research into transatlantic communications networks, and a narrative act of imagining the dialogues these networks have engendered.

TRANS. A prefix meaning: across, beyond, through. A prefix used in combination with an element of origin: transatlantic. A prefix implying a state of change: transmit, transfer, transport. A prefix implying poetry: transverse. From the Latin *versus*: literally, a turning. Every verse has a re-verse. In Greek verse, *Strophe* sets out from east to west across the stage. *Antistrophe* replies from west to east. Neither voice is in either place. Both are calling: across, beyond, through.

MISSION. A group or committee of persons sent to a foreign country to provide assistance, conduct negotiations, establish relations, initiate communications, build fortifications or in any other way forge something familiar somewhere strange. An operational task, designed to carry out the goals of a specific program. A computer program, for instance. From the Latin *missiō*: a sending off. On a mission. A transmission, a sending across.

DIALOGUE. A conversation between two or more persons. A literary work in the form of a conversation: a dialogue of Plato, for example. From the Greek *dialogos*: *dia-*, meaning: across + *logos*, meaning: a word, saying, speech, discourse, thought, or reckoning. Akin to *légein*: to choose, gather, recount, tell over, or speak.

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is a computer-generated dialogue, a literary narrative of generations of transatlantic migration performed in the form of a conversation, an encoded discourse propagating across, beyond, and through long-distance communications networks. One JavaScript file sits in one directory on one server attached to a vast network of hubs, routers, switches, and submarine cables

through which this one file may be accessed many times from many places by many devices. The mission of this JavaScript is to generate another sort of script. The call “function produce\_stories()” produces a response in the browser. The browser produces a dialogue to be read aloud in three voices. These may be identified variously as: Call, Response, and Interference; or: *Strophe*, *Antistrophe*, and *Chorus*; or Here, There, and Somewhere in Between.

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* begins with a call: *Begin!* Followed by a response: *How?* With a question. What emerges from a question? *Distant shores, to lure us.* Location, location, location. Location is both a physical place and the act of locating that place. Thus, a location exists before it is located. Derrida observes, “Site, this land, calling to us from beyond memory, is always elsewhere. The site is not the empirical and national Here of a territory. It is immemorial, and thus also a future” (1978, 66). The act of locating a distant shore provides a context for the fact of our present position, which is always already in the past, already behind us. In her long poem, *The Fall of Rome: A Traveller’s Guide*, Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson writes: “A journey .../ begins with a voice / calling you name out / behind you. / This seems a convenient arrangement. / How else would you know it’s time to go?”(1995, 75).

And so *Strophe* sets out from east to west on a treacherous mission, across high seas and frozen wastes, in search of a Northwest Passage, in hopes of trade routes, and fountains of eternal youth. And *Antistrophe* returns from west to east with scurvy, captive natives, and furs. Neither ever arrives. Both only just barely finish leaving. Likewise a reader can never quite reach the end of this transmission. Mid-way through a new version is generated. The sentence structures stay the same, but all their variables change. In a very long sentence in *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes

the classical sentence as a signification engine; a mechanical construction which performs the task of linking otherwise disassociated elements together. He writes, “in a single continuous sentence it is possible to indicate relations of time, of consequence, of possession, and of localization” (1994, 100). In *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]*, these relations shift as time passes, so that we have immigrants now, where once we had explorers; a persistent tap eclipses a strange whir; a message instead of a passage; Nova Scotia in place of Scotland; a submarine cable replaces a shipping network. How different is the narrative of one journey from the next?

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is a mechanical construction, a sentence engine performing the programmatic function of associating suspended variables with syntactic signification that they might travel through networks and emerge intact as narrative units. The dialogue generated by this engine is both technically and topically inflected with the syntax and grammar of code language. Some variable strings contain nothing but codes. “var receiving,” for example, reproduces shorthand gleaned from logs kept at the Glace Bay Marconi Station, Nova Scotia, circa 1911 (now held at the Marconi Archives at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University):

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var receiving=[40 words local paper',30 words local paper',100 words special
news',a few scraps of a private message',distinguishable dots',dots only',heavy
traffic',something again',atmospherics',last message from ship',repeated \
are you there\',"repeated \
where are you\',"request to repeat',several distinct
dashes',something from another station',a weak signal',no answers to our
enquiries',no answer',weak readable signals',no signals',no signals received,
probably not sending',strong readable signals, sending fast',medium strength
readable signals',some static',lightening all around']
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Of text generators in general Roberto Simanowski argues, “the internal problem of this genre of digital literature is its poetics of technology, which replaces a language juggler with a crafter of code” (2011, 91). *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* thwarts this argument on two fronts.

Firstly, the source code was not entirely crafted by me. Technically, less a craft than a crude life raft, my code is a hack of a narrative generator called *The Two*, created by Nick Montfort in 2008. The decision to hack rather than craft code anew was a deliberate one. In *A Hacker Manifesto*, McKenzie Wark argues, “[t]o hack is always to produce the odd difference in the production of information... by transforming in some way the very process of production” (2004, 222). Something of the uncanny twinning of characters at work in Montfort’s narrative underpinned my process production; my hack transforms Montfort’s source code into a code medium, sending and receiving dialogue on and through media haunted by generations of past usage.

Secondly, topically, *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* externalises a poetics of technology. Codes, their creators, the modes through which they operate, propagate, and communicate, and the confusion they instigate are one of the main topics of the dialogue *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* generates. Simanowski suggests that, “because absurdity, weirdness, and illogicality are the default modes of text generators, mastery is only proven by overcoming such characteristics” (91). This generator aims not to overcome but rather to embrace such characteristics. Absurdity, weirdness, and illogicality are the default modes of long-distance communication, migration, displacement and difference.

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* generates cacophony, liminality, atemporality and asynchronous exchanges of mixed messages pertaining to miscommunications and network failures. *Strophe* and *Antistrophe* call and respond between here and there with *Chorus* running interference, confusing and confounding boundaries between physical and digital, code and narrative, past and future, home and away.





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