Burn after Reading: Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies + Vol. 2, The Future We Want: A Collaboration

Eileen A.Joy, Myra Seaman, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

Published by Punctum Books

A. Joy, Eileen, et al.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76466
Voice Change/
Language Change

Jonathan Hsy and Chris Piuma

Please note: This is a translation of a talk. It was originally intended to be performed aloud as a conference paper. It has been translated for the page. In this version, there will be twenty sections (not counting the figures and their captions). Each section will consist of one hundred words, making a total of two thousand words. Every hundred words, there will be a switch between writers: now Chris, but soon Jonathan. Each section will serve as a container, separated by a boundary marker and a change between italics and roman type. This will separate my voice from Jonathan’s.

Languages are slippery, and they don’t like being contained.

We have already broken the rules. That was not one hundred words. That was far, far less than one hundred words.
Each section, we agreed, should consist of one hundred words. That section could have easily been rewritten to consist of one hundred words. We have already broken the rules. But. But now I am reminding you all of the rules. And now, in this section, we are being mindful of the rules, the rules that we have created and that we are breaking. We are being mindful of how we are creating them and how we are breaking them.


In his *Etymologies*, Isidore initially suggests each language [*lingua*] can be traced to one nation [*natio*], but he soon gives up on this idea, re-distributing all languages across different groups of people by stereotyped mode of utterance (IX.1). Oriental peoples [*Omnes ... Orientis gentis*], for instance, gurgle in the throat [*in gutture*], Mediterranean people [*Omnes mediterraneae gentes*] crush the palate [*in palato*], Westerners [*Omnes Occidentis gentes*] gnash the teeth [*in dentibus*] (IX.8). These body parts seem to be evenly dispersed across space: Eastern throats, Mediterranean palates, Western teeth. But this trifold division overruns the three continental containers on the T-O map.
(Figs. 1-2). Europe and Asia get throats and teeth, but where’s the Mediterranean? And Africa?

But there I go again. So often, I think about form, and rules, and broken rules. So often, I break the rules, by thinking about form instead of content. So often, I talk about form, and let others talk about content. And I imagine that talking about form and talking about content are, somehow, in some sense, equivalent. I was trained as a poet, a particular sort of poet—as a maker and breaker of the rules of language—and I am still translating myself from a poet-container to a scholar-container. I am translating myself from one reliquary to another.

And here I go back to language-containers. Dante’s languages are a dysfunctional family. Three romance languages spoken by the Franci (“French”), Ypsani (“Spanish”), and Latini (“Italians”) share common descent from Latin (De vulgari eloquentia, I.viii.6). Lands of oil, oc, and si would seem to map onto France, Spain, and Italy, but these language families overrun modern borders: oil occupies northern France; oc traverses the borders of northern Spain and southern France, and si is uttered across Iberia and Italy. [The domain of io, meanwhile, extends
from the mouth of the Danube to Britain, encompassing modern-day England, Germany, Hungary, and Slavic areas ([I.viii.4]) (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Dante Aligheri, *De vulgaria eloquentia*: trifold model mapping onto modern nation-states (above), and the messier medieval reality Dante outlines (below). Full Latin text available online at The Latin Library: http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/dante.html.

*We make rules to make containers. The rule that each section consists of one hundred words, that each section is separated by a boundary marker, that each section switches*
between roman and italic type—these rules create the container that holds this moment of communication. This moment creates an ad hoc, temporally estranged community. When this was performed, the audience all heard the same words at more or less the same time, but soon after scattered. Now, you tenuous community of readers, you are all scattered from the outset. And your thin community of readers reading this section ends . . . here.

Medieval writers theorize language-communities in an ad hoc fashion. Froissart, Flemish-born chronicler writing in French about travels in England, encounters an English knight who thinks him a Frenchman since he speaks langue d’oil (Fig. 4). Froissart records a case of mistaken “contree ou nation”—an acknowledgment that neither lingua nor contree can be fully contained by any geographically grounded nation.

**Froissart’s Chronicles:**

**Inter(mis)perceptions**

Le chevalier [anglais]...Messire Guillaume de l’Ile, me vit estranger et des marches de France -- car toutes gens de la langue d’oil, de quelque contrée ou nation qu’ils soient, ils les tiennent Franchois...

**Froissart’s Chronicles:**

**Inter(mis)perceptions**

The English knight Sir William de Lisle saw that I was [saw me as] a foreigner from the marches of France -- for all who speak the langue d’oil are by the English considered as French, whatever country or nation [contrée ou nation] they may come from ...

“A celuy que pluys eyme en mounde,
Of alle tho that I have founde
Carissima,
Saluz od treyé amour,
With grace and joye and alle honoure,
Dulcissima.”

We make rules to make containers, but we also make containers to make rules. You can’t rhyme across English, French, and Latin, as in this anonymous fifteenth-century poem, without first having containers for English, French, and Latin. You can’t switch between the voices of two people, such as in the twenty-first century para-academic essay that you are reading, without first having a container for each voice, such as a Chris-container and a Jonathan-container.

Figure 5. Geographical range of student “nations” across various medieval universities. Information collated from Pearl Kibre, The Nations in Medieval Universities (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1948), 179–180.

How did medieval institutions contain a polyglot world? University “nations” did not fix origins by geography but formed ad hoc linguistic containers, gathering students by their own “zero point of orientation.”¹ In France, this

¹ Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Oth-
meant drawing fine distinctions between Picardy, Normans, other northern groups; in England, groupings took shape along a North/South divide; in Iberia, a modified Dantean scheme was in operation; and in Italy, an Alpine barrier segregated collectivities of peoples (Fig. 5). Such containers create nations and shape lived reality (housing, social life, governance).

Most medievalists will be quite familiar with the fourfold interpretation of scripture, whereby scripture could be read in its literal, allegorical, moral, or anagogical senses (see Fig. 6 for an allegorical reading of it). I want to propose a not quite similar fourfold interpretation of containers, which I will discuss over the next four sections. The fourfold interpretations are as follows: First, containers can be assembled ad hoc, but, second, they can also be naturalized and historicized; third, containers can keep things separate in order to allow comparison, but, fourth, they can also destabilize any attempt at comparison by overflowing.

The fourfold interpretation of scripture

Figure 6. The fourfold interpretation of scripture.

Thank you for being a friend. When medieval Europe imagined itself as a whole it confected provisional nations, quirky gatherings of friends and neighbors. See in Fig. 7 the papal bull of Benedict XII (1366), and also the consolidated voting blocs of the Council of Constance (1418).

Figure 7. Above, fourfold division of “nations” (French, German, Spanish, Italian) in the Vas Electionis of Benedict XII (1336); below, a new “English” nation-container emerges in the Council of Constance (1414-1418).

First: Ad hoc. Let us propose that a container can be assembled by proposing the rules of its containment. Simply by recognizing or proposing distinctions, differentiations, or
family resemblances, we can separate this from that. We can make English English and French French. Let us similarly define the Chris-container as the person who wrote this italicized text about containers, and the Jonathan-container as the person who wrote the following non-italicized text that will disagree with this section. Let us, for the moment (without worrying about whether it will be possible to unthink this), think of these two persons as separate.

Or let’s not. We’re all groups too. What does our voice mean for collective containers? The Modern Language Association of America (MLA), the largest professional organization in the United States for scholars of language and literature, continues to enact its own form of divisio linguarum. It establishes nation- and language-based membership divisions (including historical periods within “American Literature,” “English Literature,” “French Literature,” and the like), and these categories in turn guide institutional practice. Where does the scholar of Flemish literature find a home? Or Occitan? Or multilingual poetry?

Or, second: The now suddenly always already. We can insist that a container has some sort of naturalized justification. There are several tools we can use to achieve this: “nature,” “common sense,” “the obvious”—but we can also use “history.” English is English because we can connect it, thanks to history, to the language spoken in England 1400 years ago—an England that is itself recognized as a container, defined as where English was spoken 1400 years ago. Chris is Chris because he has never stopped being the Chris that was created 38 years ago, and good luck arguing otherwise.

Yes, Chris is Chris, a living past into the present. But we’re not supposed to be talking history but the future. So the future I want … is more medieval. If medieval language-categories were overlapping and messy, why can’t we embrace this mess?

---

2 For a complete list of the current MLA divisions, see http://mla.org/divisions.
Which leads me to third: Connections. The container is a system that fosters comparisons and connections with other containers, and these connections proliferate beyond those initials distinctions that created these containers. Once we have the habit of thinking of English and French as contained, we can draw an infinite amount of lines to connect, contrast, or coordinate them. English tastes bitter, whereas French tastes sweet. English sounds grey, whereas French sounds cerulean. Chris and Jonathan can write an essay, or an infinite amount of essays, on any number of topics, with any number of dynamics, together—because they are apart.

Comparisons, connections, together: Eurominority (www.eurominority.org) advocates for minority language rights beyond co/official languages and bounded nation-states. This is truly neomedieval thinking: any shared lingua is affective natio (Fig. 8).

Finally, fourth: Overflow. Containers overflow. They slosh. They pour forth. Even if they have to overflow with emptiness, they will overflow. Containers erode or break down or get repurposed as new types of shelter. Things fall apart; the container cannot hold. You can read Chaucer and be confused, at times, whether you’re reading English or French. What are you reading? You are reading slosh. This is the rule that breaks the rule, or rather, the rule whose implications break the rule. This is the hope that when Chris and Jonathan alternate their voices, a third spectral voice might also speak.

Let’s make spectral polyvocality thrive within containers. If MLA divisions contain us, let’s fill these temporal confines with NOISE: in Old English let’s do Celtic, Norse, Latin; in Middle English let’s do all varieties, Anglo-Norman, Dutch, Latin (Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Augmented screenshot of online listing of MLA divisions (May 2013): http://www.mla.org/divisions.
This overflow—and this noise—of course it appeals to my poet-container, who creates rules to see how they can be broken, who creates rules that ensure that they will be broken. But I want to suggest that all containers, however they were constructed, can be read and reread in any of these four ways. I want the future of containers—the future of scholars dealing with containers, the future of scholars dealing with themselves as contained within their scholar-containers—to be one that is limber at moving between them, but quick to ensure that these four containers also overflow.

I want a future where containers overflow, where medieval English divisions aren’t consolidated, and divisions expand to endless new configurations. Let’s overpopulate our containers! Let’s make MLA more than the MLA of Anglophone North America.