Rebecca Jagoe: 'I beseech thee' Embroidering Textual Amulets Workshop Transcript

This is a written transcript to accompany the workshop created by the artist Rebecca Jagoe. The workshop was commissioned as part of *Hyper Functional, Ultra Healthy 2021* and can be underlined_link{viewed here}.

This text forms part of the second part of the workshop, a meandering train of thought on the power of words and language to create worlds and ourselves, covering the everyday magic of performative speech acts, the imperialized violence of standardized clock time and more.

1.

'Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities […] And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.'

– Sylvia Wynter, 'The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, the King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality and the Caribbean Rethinking of Modernity', in A. Ruprecht & C. Taiana (Eds.) *Reordering of Culture: Latin America*, the Caribbean and Canada in the 'Hood.

This is probably the most beautiful description of the human entanglement in language that you will ever come across. Sure you can try and find a better one, but you won't, so just, stop now. This quote from Sylvia Wynter appears in an essay she wrote about Aimé Césaire, the Martinique poet and polymath who founded the negritude movement. Césaire wrote widely on the importance of considering the limitations of scientific knowledge, and that poetry itself constitutes a knowledge practice in itself. He famously said:

2.

'Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge'
– Aimé Césaire, Poetry and Knowledge

Aimé Césaire is crucial reading if you are ever considering that poetry is a lesser form of knowledge-making, or that poetry is an idle or indulgent act which does not have material necessity. Go and read Césaire and have your mind changed.

But that's to explain the context of the Sylvia Wynter quote, and I want to come back to Sylvia Wynter herself.

3.

'Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities […] And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.'

So, what Sylvia Wynter here points out, is that language is not simply an act of description. There is not a teleology whereby a world exists, and humans come along and invent a language in order to describe it. Instead, these three things are interconnected and deeply enmeshed in a constant feedback loop: humans, worlds, language.

4.
Diagram of feedback loop
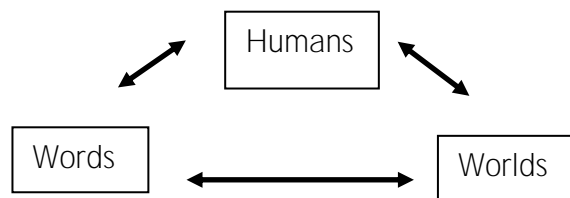
So here there is an image of a loop diagram. At the top of the page is the word 'Humans', below it to the left is 'Words' and to the right, 'Worlds'. There are black arrows connecting the three words in a circle.

And as Wynter is pointing out, we make ourselves through language. We are not fleshly lumps which language poorly describes, although it may do that too. But crucially, language also makes us.

5.
PERFORMATIVE

Ah yes, the word performative. Lately, the word has come to the fore in relation to acts performed on social media. In particular, things like performative activism or performative wokeness.

In this context, the word performative has a specific meaning, which is the opposite of authentic action. Performative activism is activism you do in order to be seen to do activism, rather than because you are rioting or campaigning or protesting or boycotting or speaking out in support of the cause itself. There was a lot of that around the time of the Black Lives Matter protests, as well as a lot of white people accusing other white people of performative action to not make their own actions seem performative, which is meta and misses the point of the protests, but anyway, this is what the word means overwhelmingly now; a performance which is disingenuous, a performance which is the opposite of authentic.

6.
Meme screengrabs: 'gender is a performance'

There are two cropped screen grabs from Twitter on a pink background. On the top one a user called Chaos tweets:
Judith Butler: "gender is a performance"

Everyone: "omg so wise"
Judith Butler: "don't be a cop"
Everyone: "haha what a kidder"

The second tweet from a user called Lars Goetia reads
'Gender is a performance and I plan on getting booed off stage'

As a sidebar I agree with the first tweet in principle, in that yes, we should listen to Butler's thoughts about defunding the police and finding new and radical nonviolent forms of living together. The only issue is the joke is structurally flawed by the fact that Judith Butler never said gender is a performance.

Judith Butler is often cited as saying gender is performative, and because of the general usage of "performative" now, to denote something that is relating to performance, this means that there is a misinterpretation of what Judith Butler actually said. So, people think they did say that it is a performance. Now some or many or all of you may already know how Judith Butler was using the word performative. But maybe you do not and that's also fine. I am not one of those people that will say 'Oh you probably know' or 'Oh you should know' or 'It is widely known', because, widely known by who? These phrases, are in themselves, normative.

7.
NORMATIVE

Normative is another word that is used a lot on the assumed knowledge that we all know what it means. To clarify:

8.
Dictionary screengrab of normative

A dictionary screengrab on a pink background. The text reads:

'*normative: adjective, formal, and then on the next line, establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard or norm, especially of behaviour.*
"Negative sanctions to enforce normative behaviour."""

So, in the context of humanities and philosophy discourse, the word normative is used to refer to a standard which is imposed, usually with the implication that it is for a moral good. Anything that is usually tied up with the word 'should', for example, heterosexual marriage is normative because of both social expectation and tax cuts, having children is normative.

So, for example, these phrases,

9.
Oh you probably know

Oh you should know

You are probably familiar with

As we all know

They reinforce the idea of a baseline of very specific knowledge, which then becomes canon. And this canon has historically been overwhelmingly white, middle class, educated European able-bodied cis gender males, who are of course able to speak for everyone. Now, Butler is a non-binary queer theorist, but the fundamental point is that not everyone has to read any one text, because all knowledge is highly specific. If you have studied art, and been told that you should be familiar with Deleuze or Derrida, you will know exactly what I am talking about. This idea becomes normative, with the notion you *should* have read something. I don't believe that knowledge is purely formed from citational academic practice, actually this can be a massive stumbling block to introducing radical thought, because it becomes harder to assert something within academic discourse if someone else has not already published the thing you are trying to say, and given the history of who, traditionally, is within academia, you can start to see the problem. I'm not going to assume that you've read anything because, you don't have to read, that doesn't mean you're not committed to your ongoing knowledge practice in some other way. But back to Butler. Judith Butler said

10.

In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantative effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.

– Judith Butler, Gender Trouble

So, this is quite complex and because Butler is writing within academia, their writing is quite dense. To break this down, throughout Gender Trouble, Butler was using JL Austin's lectures on language, in which he described performative utterances as:

11.

A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something.

– J.L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words

The examples that he gives are wedding vows, so 'I do', naming a ship so 'I name this ship...', declaring something in a will, and also betting. He says very cutely as an example 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow', I mean, sure John, I will take that sixpence bet. The point is that with all of these statements, in saying them, you change a reality. You are not describing something pre-existing. The statements, then, perform something, in that they carry something out, they can enact change. So, when Butler was saying gender is performative, what they meant, is not that gender is a performance, in which you are an authentic nub of interiority, which then meets the world with a facade, which is purely a lie. There are many incidences where this may the case, where you need to mask because it is not safe or you are not able to express your gender identity, or you're not yet ready to do so, or you don't know what that is. But Butler here means that all cases of binary gender are performative, in that the reproduction of gender norms and gender normativity – yes that word again, normativity – reinforces and itself produces gender. So, gender is the product of its constant reinforcement.

12.

Image gender reveal party

An image of a gender reveal party. There is a table with food on it and a background that is blue on one side and pink on the other. The banner across the top reads 'BOY OR GIRL and the words are separated by a cartoon moustache and a cartoon heart. Below the banner are balloons in the shape of the words BOY and GIRL. Predictably, BOY is pastel blue and GIRL is pink. It's a hideous image.
Every gender reveal party is in fact a gender creation party, not just for that unfortunate person-to-be, but for wider society. The only reason that binary gender persists in Western culture is because we keep buying into it, and keep reproducing it, and violently imposing it upon other cultures. For example,

13.

Screen grab Oyewumi work

Image of a book cover. It is red and in white letters reads '*The Invention of Women*' then below this in black letters '*Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*'. Dr Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí's work demonstrates that the category of 'woman' did not exist in Yorubaland until after European colonisation, and that age was the main organising principle. Maria Lugones is a decolonial theorist who says that:

14.

[….] gender is a colonial imposition, not just as it imposes itself on life as lived in tune with cosmologies incompatible with the modern logic of dichotomies, but also that inhabitations of worlds understood, constructed, and in accordance with such cosmologies animated the self-among-others in resistance from and at the extreme tension of the colonial difference.

– Maria Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System', Hypatia

What both these theorists and what many other decolonial theorists and feminists have written about is the fact that binary gender is highly culturally specific. There is nothing universal about it except for its violent imposition due to colonialism. What the colonial imposition of gender highlights is this that gender is just this accident we (who is this nebulous we?) all keep buying into. There are very real reasons why Western histories of gender imposition, colonialism and capitalism are all inextricably linked, and it's largely to do with the control and regulation of labour, production and reproduction. I mean I will also say that it is reductive to say gender arises and persists solely for one reason, it is multipronged and incredibly complex and deeply embedded, even if it is a fucking lie. So, in the essay '*Gender is a Workplace Technology*', Helen Hester argues that

15.

'Gender may be productively understood as a form of workplace technology—not only in the sense of being a tool put to use during wage labour, but also in the sense of operating as a domestic labour-saving device. As with all technologies, gender is not operated in the same way in all contexts or by all people, and work comes to attach itself differently to particular bodies at particular times. Gender both assists in the performance of certain labours (while hindering others) and demands to be seen—at least in part—as a response

to the historical development and current conceptions of cultures of work. Resistance to work must also be resistance to gender, and vice versa.'

– Helen Hester, 'Gender is a Workplace Technology', ON CARE

And Legacy Russell, too, says that

16.
'[...] gendered bodies are far from absolute but rather an imaginary, manufactured and commodified for capital.'

– Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism

You can see from these quotes that the history of colonialism is inextricably linked with the history of capitalism and shows why there would be an agenda tied to labour for the importation and violent imposition of the gender binary on other cultures. So, what the work of scholars such as these demonstrate is that not only is there nothing essential about gender, but also there is nothing inevitable about it, except that it is a tool for subjugation and power relations in order to produce capital. And a lot of the world we inherit, we end up reproducing, which isn't to say that if I wake up tomorrow and decide to stop this, I have the power to end white patriarchy, unfortunately as this 'we' I have lazily invoked is actually really nebulous. But I also don't want to think that we have absolutely no power, so, back to the word performative. In summary, there are two definitions of the word performative.

17.
1. Performative as something false
2. Performative as something which performs change, which creates something in the world

And it's really annoying that these two very different meanings share the space of the same word. There are other words that Austin used to describe this type of language, such as

18.
constative

illocutionary

but he says they're not really sufficient so he really just runs with 'performative', and a world of confusion and incorrect memes about Butler follow.

But I want to focus on this latter idea, to consider the idea of the power of words to enact change in the world.

This is a theme that permeates the works of Ursula le Guin.

19.
Earthsea Quartet book cover

A book cover in shades of orange and red. It is divided into four images: the top left image shows a person in front of a glowing red dragon. The top right has two figures entering a dark cave, one is holding a glowing staff. The bottom left shows a person standing among the bones of a dragon, and the bottom right shows a person standing on a cliff edge against a glowing red sunset, with a dragon flying in the background. In the middle, on a black background, it reads 'The Earthsea Quartet'. The whole thing has a very late 80s graphic design feel to it.

The Earthsea Quartet was one of my favourite books growing up, and I read it again in my early twenties, and I read it again a few years ago, and then again a few months ago, and each time I find something new and rich in it. The premise of the world of Earthsea is that everything has a true name, and then it has a use name. Dragons speak this language of true names as their dialect, but humans don't, and most humans don't know the true names of objects, or each other. But wizards (who are educated through centralised educational system) and witches, who are lay practitioners –and by the way, this book series is a very intentional critique of that as a highly gendered structure – use the true names in order to control matter. Most people don't reveal their true name to anyone, because if they did so they would leave themselves incredibly vulnerable to being controlled.

20.

'[...] To weave the magic of a thing, you see, one must find its true name out. In my lands we keep our true names hidden all our lives long, from all but those whom we trust utterly: for there is great power, and great peril, in a name. Once, at the beginning of time, when Segoy raised all the isles of Earthsea from the ocean deeps, all things bore their own true names. And all doing of magic, all wizardry, hangs still upon the knowledge – the relearning, the remembering – of that true and ancient language of the Making. [...]'

– Ursula Le Guin, The Earthsea Quartet

So, we can question the idea of an essentialist language, I think we can do that, it implies a sort of true nature which is fixed, I don't know, I mean, to come to back to Sylvia Wynter,

21.

'Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities'

And sure, the human world is entirely enmeshed with language, as we are ourselves, but I don't want to go all anthropocentric and assume that cats or peacocks or slowworms or mud or sofas give a shit about words. However, I will argue that to some degree touch is an interspecies language BUT, that's a sidebar that I will not be tempted down, oh no. To come back to what Ursula was saying, what Judith Butler and Sylvia Wynter and John L Austin were saying, speech has power to enact change.

22.

Mabinogion image

A black and cream book cover. It looks like a woodcut. In the middle it reads 'The Mabinogion translated by Lady Charlotte Guest' and the words are in a frame of patterned scrolling leaves. It is a very Victorian-does-medieval style.

The Mabinogion is a collection of 11 Welsh medieval stories which were gathered in the White Book of Rydderch (c1350) and the Red Book of Hergest (c 1400) and were actually never meant to be collated into one text, but were all lumped together in the nineteenth century under this title. In *The Fourth Branch* of *The Mabinogion*, Aranrhod repeatedly curses her own son by stating "I will swear a destiny [...]" and for each curse, the boy and his father have to find an ingenious way to work around it.

23.

'I will swear a destiny that he shall not get a name until he gets one from me.'

So they trick her into naming him

'I will swear a destiny on this boy that he shall never get weapons until I arm myself.'

So. They trick her into arming him

'And I will swear a destiny on him,' she said, 'that he will never have a wife from the race that is on this earth at present.'

And for this latter curse they charm a wife for him out of flowers

The point is that there is no question throughout *The Mabinogion* that to speak something is to bring it into being. The power of language is taken as a given.

24.

ABRACADABRA

An initial search for the etymology of this word will tell you that it comes from the Aramaic phrase which means 'I will create as I speak', or the Hebrew words for the trinity. However, a very small amount of digging will tell you that this is in fact not true, but an ongoing misinterpretation that began in the 19th century. Listen, generally, the 19th century is a terrible time for false historicism based on their, at the time, presentist values. For example, see the Victorian skewing of medieval culture as barbaric and brutal to make themselves seem less brutal. See also the skewing of embroidery and sewing as allegedly always historically gendered, the use of Darwinism to uphold racist brutality and oppression of disabled people. These are the ones that occur to me off the top of my head but listen. Victorian Western society was in many ways far more racist and sexist than pre-Enlightenment Western culture, which isn't to say the medieval era was halcyonic, it definitely wasn't. Indentured labour was definitely *a thing*. Instead, consider that perhaps the Victorians are essentially the endgame of centuries of colonialism, industrial capitalism and the desire to distort and fabricate so-called 'science' to justify the oppression of vast swathes of the population in order to uphold their hoarding of resources, all the while trying to paint themselves as the pinnacle of evolution when in fact they likely represent a regression in terms of justice and human rights. That's also simplistic, there are plenty of humans in that mix who did not ascribe to the dominant thought of the time, and my Christ I hope no one looks back in 200 years time and thinks everyone who lives in this country was happy with Brexit, the Tories, the rollback on disability support, ongoing white supremacist society and the continued existence of the monarchy. But, back to 'abracadabra'.

25.

Image of Abracadabra pendant

A gold pendant on a black background. The pendant is a triangle pointing downwards, and inside the pendant it reads ABRACADABRA / ABRACADABR / ABRACADAB and it continues going down the pendant, losing a letter each time. At the top of the pendant are two stylised birds, and the two sides of the pendant are each flanked by a scarab beetle with its wings open. Next to this are the words 'Victorian-era talsimanic pendant with abracadabra inscription'

Now, the first written record of it appears in a Latin medical poem, *De medicina praecepta*, by the Roman physician Quintus Serenus Sammonicus in the second century AD. Serenus Sammonicus said that to get well a sick person should wear an amulet around the neck, a piece of parchment inscribed with a triangular formula derived from the word, which acts like a funnel to drive the sickness out of the body:

26.

A B R A C A D A B R A

A B R A C A D A B R

A B R A C A D A B

A B R A C A D A

A B R A C A D

A B R A C A

A B R A C

A B R A

A B R

A B

A

Now, it is generally thought it is older than this, and that it derives from Semitic languages, but according to Steve Caruso, an Aramaic scholar I found online, the attribution to the Aramaic did not occur until 1891.

But the point is not the origin of the word. That's not to say it's not important, but for the purposes of today, the reason why I am citing 'abracadabra' is not because of what it may or may not mean, but instead, what it may do. At the time that it appears in this Latin medical poem, according to Serenus Sammonicus, the word '*drives sickness out of the body*'. In this case, words are material, and as capable of enacting a cure as any plant or other medicine that you might use. The words are material, the words are objects, the words have power.

And this brings us onto the topic of medieval textual amulets.

27.
Image of textual amulet

Two images of the front and back of a textual amulet. This one is in rolled lead. It looks a lot like a flattened stone, and the engraved marks of letters are just visible, but it's not possible to read them.

So I will tell you how this textual amulet obsession began. I was doing research into a Bosch painting called *The Cure of Folly*

28.
Image of The Cure of Folly

The Bosch painting is portrait. In the center of the painting are four figures, and the scene seems to be depicting a sort of surgery. On the left is a person with a funnel on their head, who is standing over a person sitting in a chair. The person on the chair has a wound on their head and the person with the funnel seems to be removing a bulb-like object from the cut. To the right of the person in the chair is an older person holding a tankard, and on the far right, a person wearing a book on their head leans their elbows on a table, while watching the operation. Above and below the image are gothic letters which are not really legible, and are in Dutch, which translate into English as 'Master, quickly cut away the stone / my name is Lubbert Das'

So I was researching this painting on the very brief Wikipedia page, which let's be honest, is how we all begin our research.

29.
Wikipedia page

Here is a screengrab of the Wikipedia page for the painting. It reads '*The woman balancing a book on her head is thought by Skemer to be a satire of the Flemish custom of wearing amulets made out of books and scripture, a pictogram for the word phylactery. Otherwise, she is thought to depict folly.* '

So I went to the footnote, which led me to a book called *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages,* by Don Skemer, and I thought wow, this book sounds incredible, and it sparked an idea for this workshop so I thought, I will buy the book, which I then did, and friends, it is so dry, honestly, do not buy it, it is like trying to read a slug lecturing in slow motion.

Now, before I get onto the topic of textual amulets proper, a note on this Wikipedia quote. Phylactery is an ongoing Jewish practice with deep historic roots of wearing scripture, and I do not intend to appropriate contemporary Jewish practices. The history of the wearing of scripture is not paradigmatically different from the more widespread use of textual amulets, though, in fact they share a history. The pagan-Christian practice of doing so was heavily influenced by the Jewish practice of phylactery, and so they exist in the same cosmology. It's also important to note that when anyone talks about medieval Europe, they are not talking about a monolithically white Christian culture. People of different religions, cultures, ethnicities, nationalities and races. And yes, race did exist as a concept in the medieval West, albeit in a different conception, and if you want to learn more about this, I strongly recommend the work of the scholar Geraldine Heng who says:

30.

Does the word race have to occur before there are racial practices and racial actions or racial phenomena? I think not. I think that sometimes the phenomena, the institutions, the actions happen before there is an adequate vocabulary to identify them, to name them, and to discuss them.

– Geraldine Heng

In the Medieval era people of different nationalities, races, ethnicities lived alongside each other, sometimes easily, sometimes uneasily. There were tensions and there was sometimes violence, which is the crux of Heng's argument: that we don't have to have the specific word for it for it to be identifiable as a structure, particularly in the case of violence and segregation. But, Europe was not monolithically white.

31.
Image: textual amulet

This is another image of a textual amulet. There is a page of finely printed black letters on a cream page. In the middle of the page is a rectangle containing collection of tiny charms, which seem to be arranged into some kind of pattern: there is an engraved cross, a branch of coral, some coins. Resting on top of this is another sheet of paper with a black and white image of Madonna and Child.

So in terms of textual amulets it's not really accurate, or useful, to tie this practice to one specific religion, because it is more a practice which is reflective of a much broader cultural understanding of language and its place and power within the world, and while different communities adjacent to each other might have different religious belief systems, these did inevitably influence one another, and in the case of textual amulets, and as I said before, Don Skemer does write that the Jewish practice of phylactery directly influenced people who practised Christianity, because they were actually jealous of this practice.

While I am not saying it is possible to completely ignore a person or a community's canonical religion, it's not so intrinsic here because I am specifically interested in textual amulets, which have a more horizontal relationship with change. That is to say, they do not invoke a creator to ask for the creator to intervene: rather, the texts themselves are interventions. So it is the words themselves that make the change in the world. Such as, for example, 'Abracadabra', which can drive sickness from the body. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. We need to define what a textual amulet is.

32.
Another textual amulet

An older textual amulet. It is a square piece of paper or parchment, which has an illustrated image in the centre and then handwritten lettering around the outside. There are dark marks in a grid pattern across the page which suggest it was folded.

Don Skemer describes them as the following:

33.
'Textual amulets in general contain apotropaic magic, ie protective magic. Textual amulets were portable devices filled with apotropaic text and images. They were believed to give the bearer magical protection against the demonic forces that were blamed for

everything from plague and sudden death to toothache and bad luck. We now regard the once-common ritual practice of wearing textual amulets as magic, but in the far more uncertain world of the Middle Ages, they promised protection and healing to their users. Most often worn or carried on the body, textual amulets were one of the most widespread manifestations of the written word in the medieval world, and were used at all levels of society because of an almost universal belief in the magical power of particular words, symbols, and images to ward off evil. A concatenation of scriptural quotations, divine names, common prayers, liturgical formulas, Christian apocrypha, narrative charms or historiolae, magic seals, word and number squares, characteres (non-standard or magical script), devotional images, crosses and other religious symbols in amulets offered divine or supernatural protection to their bearers. Traditional Christian elements were supplemented over the centuries with elements borrowed from pseudo-Solomonic magic and Kabbalah. Medieval sources often referred to the textual amulet as brevis or scriptura in Latin and equivalent terms in the vernacular. For that reason, one can think of the textual amulet as a "magic writ"; that is, a piece of writing that looked like a brief official letter (writ in English), folded or rolled so that it could be worn on a person's body.'

- Don Skemer

So, this is what I was saying about the texts, which have a horizontal relationship to change. In the medieval West, religious belief was not oppositional to science, or folk medicine, or folklore, or myth, or superstition. Often these things would exist alongside one another. If you read any transcribed Irish mythology, which is much older and from an oral tradition but was not written down until the mid to late medieval period, St. Patrick randomly gets inserted into stories about the Tuatha Dé Danann, who are a supernatural group of deities. Everyday belief systems might not necessarily fit into canonical Christianity but that also doesn't mean they were oppositional.

34.
Bosch painting

Back to the Bosch painting titled *The Cure of Folly.* I came to this Bosch painting because I have for the last year or so been doing research on medieval lapidary medicine. Now what I love about the lapidary texts of this time is that stones have an unquestioning animism. They can affect the weather, your fate, the seasons, they can divine truths about people (usually moralistic and misogynistic, usually relating to fidelity), they can cure sickness, or they can produce it. To give two examples in The Peterborough Lapidary:

35.
[Beryl]

[…] beryl is best against strife, and ensures that a man may not be overcome. Also he allows a man to bear suffering. Also he gives good understanding, and he is good against the sickness of the liver […]

[…]

[Balas Ruby]

The book tells us that whoever bears very many balas rubies, and shows them to his enemies, he may return again whole and safe; and whoever touches the four corners of his chamber or of his hall or of his garden, neither worms nor tempest will do harm to that house.

Animism and materiality coarse through all medieval conceptions of the world, and objects such as stones hold an arguably secular power. So in the same vein, words, specifically written words, are objects, and they are objects which, worn on the body, can affect change, and this is magic, which isn't to say it isn't real, rather the opposite: it's that magic is actually fairly mundane because it exists everywhere, and to highlight this point I would like to insert a scene from the film *Practical Magic*

36.
Practical Magic scene

Sandra Bullock's character Sally says: Magic isn't just spells and potions. Your badge? [referring to a police badge] It's just a star, just another symbol, your talisman. You can't stop criminals in their track. Get it? It has power because you believe it does.

Ok this scene is gross in the unquestioning upholding of the idea of law enforcement, but the point is that the separation of magic from the everyday was a project of early capitalism in the West, one which is charted wonderfully by Silvia Federici in her book *Caliban and The Witch* .

37.
Cover Caliban and the Witch

A purple book cover. To the right is the image of a person wearing a dress, with long hair trailing down their back. Their head is leaning back, possibly in pain, and they are holding open the front of their dress to bare their chest. On the left, reads the title and author: 'Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation / Silvia Federici'

In this book she too outlines the relationship between gender and the creation of capitalism:

38.
This process of primitive accumulation] required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work-force. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the "witches."
- Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch

Now, I haven't really explained this properly. I've touched on the relationship between gender and labour, capitalism and colonialism. Federici is one of the key scholars in this work of gender as a form of labour regulation, and this is very complex, I hope that I can do this justice. Federici's argument is that the idea of branding certain women as witches was a means to an end. It was a tool to create the structures necessary for capitalism. Capitalism as a brutal structure is obviously hierarchical, and still, to this day, can only exist through unpaid labour, indenture, and slavery. A part of this project was the simultaneous need to both control and devalue women's unpaid labour, and women's knowledge, both reproductive and otherwise. This

was in the medieval West, where gender existed in a binary. A part of this devaluation was a shift in medical knowledge and birthing, where medical practitioners sought to discredit the knowledge of midwives and control the birthing room, which was all part of a process of discrediting the knowledge of women, and a wider moral project of upholding their subordinate societal role. In all of this, witchcraft became a really convenient vehicle for mass social control and a massive societal shift in perception of specific behaviours. So, these forms of secular transformation in the world, such as herbalism, folk remedy, or these kind of quasi-pagan practices of for example textual amulets, rather than existing in a complex, sometimes ambivalent, and not necessarily explicable relationship with Christianity, suddenly become very clearly not Christian. They are witchcraft and therefore the Devil's work. This became such a movement because it was a convenient way to control and create a very specific gender paradigm. So, now to follow Federici's argument, there was good reason why you would want to stigmatise this knowledge, but the stigmatisation of certain forms of everyday magic was almost a form of collateral damage in order to create this violent new world order which we are still living in.

And it means that in the West we are now living in this world where magic is seen to be not real, which is obviously not true. This is what we are making: a textual amulet

39.
Image textual amulet

Image of textual amulets and the pouch they were kept in, on a white background. There is a small blue fabric pouch in the bottom right. Scattered around it are folded pieces of printed paper.

The textual amulet can invoke change in the world and in yourself, and in your place in the world, because, words are material, words are powerful, words are magic. It's important that it's something that you can wear somewhere on your body. Historically, a lot of textual amulets were worn around the neck so that ideally it would hang over your heart and cover it like a shield. To quote Don Skemer again,

40.
'They could be positioned on the body like bandages to cover wounds and afflictions; read devotionally like prayer books; gazed upon like portable icons; carried ceremonially into battle like shields; affixed to walls, like a broadside or poster; placed on valuable livestock, vineyards, or cultivated land to protect agricultural bounty; molded into ingestible substances such as bread or cheese and ingested as a form of sacred medicine; and rinsed in water so that some of the iron-gall ink would wash off to produce a potable word therapy. In addition to protective use, textual amulets could be used aggressively, in the manner of black magic or necromancy, by placing them in physical contact with other people in order to bind and control their actions.'

So I wanted us to make something that is easily wearable. Now a lot of these textual amulets would have been written in ink, as the images show, but I dunno, I think there is something very powerful about sewing, because maybe the amount of energy it will carry is probably correlated to how much time you focus on charging it with a certain power, so if you are spending a decent amount of time sewing this thing while I ramble on, then it carries a lot more intention than something you might quickly scrawl on a piece of paper.

Which brings us now to what to write, and why I specifically chose the word 'No'.

Let's come back to Sylvia Wynter, for the fourth time is it?

41.

'Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities [...] And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.'

- Sylvia Wynter

The point is not a fatalism that we are doomed and prisoned by words, but, as per Butler and Austin, words are performative and constitute the world, which is an incredible moment of reckoning because it means we can literally recreate the world through language. So, as we focused on the first part before, now let's look at the second section, 'the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.' So, let's do this, let's redraw some fucking maps.

Now, I am autistic and dyspraxic. Part of this double whammy, which I dunno, it's not really a double whammy the two neurodiversities are actually massively comorbid and coexist together. A part of both of these is I really struggle with executive function. Executive function is defined on understood.org as follows:

42.

'Some people describe executive function as "the management system of the brain."
That's because the skills involved let us set goals, plan, and get things done. When people struggle with executive function, it impacts them at home, in school, and in life.

There are three main areas of executive function. They are:

Working memory
Cognitive flexibility (also called flexible thinking)
Inhibitory control (which includes self-control)

Executive function is responsible for many skills, including:

Paying attention
Organizing, planning, and prioritizing
Starting tasks and staying focused on them to completion
Understanding different points of view
Regulating emotions
Self-monitoring (keeping track of what you're doing)'

Now, I really struggle with this, and a lot of neurodiverse people do, and a lot of neurotypical people do. I find it really difficult to deal with life admin, with inboxes, with replying to messages, with keeping up with housework. This quote says something about juggling multiple tasks and I have no idea what that even means, how people do that.

Why am I telling you this? Well, I made a note recently to myself about this, because I am really struggling the last couple of months, a lot more than I was when the pandemic first hit, and I think it has a lot to do with executive function. Here is what I wrote to myself on the 6th Feb:

43.

'People finding things hard in the pandemic because suddenly the easy everyday things became difficult, and something they needed to think through.

When the pandemic first hit I seemed to cope a lot better than a lot of other people I knew, because as an autistic person with executive dysfunction, and an OCD person with agoraphobia, I already had adaptive strategies for working around executive dysfunction and difficulties with my everyday. This did not make them any easier, rather it felt like suddenly the world was operating at my speed.

Now that things have become more normalised, and strategies have been found, it feels like the world has sped up again. So, I am finding this stage of the pandemic infinitely more difficult than earlier, because of the expectation of managing, speed, etc. I do not wish for global trauma but I do wish the world would slow down again.

I think the issue is that the standardised time of late capitalism is built on an idea of linearity and progressive time, rather than a cyclical and seasonal notion of change, which loops whilst shifting. In fact, one thing that is really important to think about is time zones, the standardisation of time as a form of imperialism. Sure it came about because basically everywhere had local times, so different towns would run on different times, which became a massive safety problem when it came to railroads because what time are the trains scheduled on, their departure or their destination, so you can see the problem with regard to crashes, but quite why the railroads needed to therefore dictate the lives of literally everyone else is never questioned. And don't forget, the idea of every single human having immediate access to a timepiece is really recent. Chinese and Arabic scientists were well ahead of Europe on well, most technologies, and timekeeping was no exception. In the European West, mechanical clocks were invented in the 14th century, and these were still not widespread. There were other forms of clocks, such as candles and water clocks, and there is no real certainty as to the originary creator, but there are examples from 16th century BC in Egypt and in China in the 6th century BC, but we have to think of the evolution of timekeeping as something which is not just an objective development of ever-increasing accuracy. In fact, the specific differing ideologies of cultures lead to specific ideas about how time should be measured, and who should be doing it: for example, the desire for more accurate timekeeping in the West is bound up in the desire to exert ever greater control over the workforce. Back to Silvia Federici, who says:

44.

Capitalism also attempts to overcome our "natural state," by breaking the barriers of nature and by lengthening the working day beyond the limits set by the sun, the seasonal cycles, and the body itself, as constituted in pre-industrial society.
- Sivia Federici, Caliban and the Witch

So time, as it is understood today, this is an invention of sorts.

45.

On Time by Ken Mondschein

Image of the cover of the book. On a white background is a red circle, a yellow circle and a grey circle, overlapping each other. Inside another black circle and white circle reads the title: 'On Time / A History of Western Timekeeping'

This book is an interesting look at the history of time specific to the West, although he does reference Chinese, Persian and Arabic technologies, especially as these had a massive influence on the West. And he does say 'I want to offer a word of caution about imagining "progress" as inevitable or the Western way of doing things as superior.' Despite this caveat, the story of how the world came to be governed by European ideas of time is informative, because it is the story of imperialism, which is an important point to consider, given that the world now runs on a standardised time. And to think about the big question, i.e. WHAT IS TIME? Can I say as a sidebar that I am so happy that I am making a thing where I ask the question WHAT IS TIME, where is time, who is time, are you time, am I time, is time me, et cetera. Anyway, ok, Mondschein didn't ask these questions, but one thing he did say in answer to all of them is that:

46.

'The idea of time progressing at a constant rate is no more than a convention—a convention contrary to most human experience, but nonetheless convenient for regulating activities such as work, factory production, and trade.'
-Ken Mondschein, On Time

Now another thing that Mondschein points out in this book, which actually made my head explode because I had never thought about it before,

47.

Christine and the Sybil pointing to a ladder from the heavens, from the Book of the Queen, France (Paris), c. 1410-1414

An image from a medieval illuminated manuscript. Two figures stand inside a deep blue circle, which is outlined in gold stars, with a large gold sun in the top right and a moon in the top left. One of the figures appears to be pointing to the moon and the other to the sun.

What Mondschein highlights is that contemporary ideas of timekeeping originated in observation of celestial bodies, as these are the most predictable moving objects to observe. Timekeeping was by and large almost universally intended initially as a way of keeping track of the movement of the sun, the moon and the planets. It was only as timekeeping technologies became ever more fixated on precision that it became a question of, not using observable phenomena to mark time, but instead this conception of time as something mathematical which exists discretely and abstractly, against which to measure observable phenomena. But we do not need to quote Einstein to acknowledge that time is relative, because everyone knows it.

Ok, so, in terms of relativity of time, hello first lockdown if you were not a key worker. Now actually, Eli Grober wrote a text about the way time acted during the pandemic, which, is only true if you are not a key worker, it is important to note. I have to say, I kind of loathe this kind of gentle jocular humour, usually, but I find I can look past it in this piece because it's also just really true. So it is a short text, so I will read it to you in full.

48.

Here's How Time Works Now

Here at Time, we've made a few changes you may already be experiencing that we think you should know about. Please see below.

A Minute

A minute used to be sixty seconds long. We thought this could be spiced up. A minute can now either be one hour, or it can take 3.5 seconds. We hope you enjoy this new feature.

A Day
You may remember that a day used to take place over the course of 24 hours. We felt this was too much. A day is now over the moment you first ask yourself, "What time is it?"

It does not matter what time it actually is when you do this. As soon as you ask or think, "What time is it" for the first time that day, even if it is still ten in the morning, it will suddenly be eight at night. Does that make sense?

A Week
A week was once measured over the course of seven days. Our testing showed that this has been way too short, for way too long. So we made a big adjustment: a workweek now takes an entire year. From Monday to Friday, you will feel like it's been (and you will actually age) an entire year. This is non-negotiable. This brings us to…

A Weekend
A weekend doesn't exist anymore. You will go to sleep on Friday and you will wake up on Monday with a vague memory that you may have watched an entire TV show (every episode, every season) sometime in the last 48 hours.

A Month
Let's talk about months. Months used to be pretty inconsistent. Some months were 30 days, some were 31, and one was 28 or 29. This seemed too confusing, so now they are all four days long.

That's right, every month takes four days. You'll get to the end of a month and think, "Wow, that felt like it was only four days, which used to be one day shy of a week, but is now just 1/90th of a week, because a week is a year and a month is four days." And you'll be right.

A Year
Now, I bet you're wondering what a year is. Well, I hate to say it, but we're all wondering what a year is. The guy who was in charge of re-adjusting a year just quit, and he won't talk to any of us, so your guess is as good as mine. But I think it's gonna be a pretty long time.

As I said before, the time that I operate on is objectively slower than the time that I feel pressured to keep up with. Perhaps this is because my processing speed is measurably described as really slow, which I actually think is a good thing, because what is so wrong with slowness? Why do we always privilege action and speed and movement? My processing speed is only a problem if you take measurable clock time, and your schedule, as a default and not an imperially produced highly specific means of controlling workers and implementing means of neo-colonial forms of trade and communication through outsourcing.

Elizabeth Freeman writes:

49.

Chromonormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Evitar Zerubavel calls "hidden rhythms," forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege. Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organise the value and meaning of time. The advent of wage work, for example, entailed a violent retemporalisation of bodies once tuned to the seasonal rhythms of agricultural labor.
- Elizabeth Freeman, Time Binds

So turning back to Federici again, who says:

50.

'from the point of view of the abstraction process that the individual underwent in the transition to capitalism, we can see that the development of the 'human machine' was the main technological leap, the main step in the development of the productive forces that took place in the period of primitive accumulation. We can see, in other words, that the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism.'
- Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch

The mechanisation of human labour, which is to say the creation of the 'human machine', is really interesting if you look at historical shifts in Western understanding of anatomy, and the likening of joints to pistons, this shift into thinking of the body as mechanistic. But this demands that you have a normative and able-bodied body, an actually impossible body, a body which does not tire, which can switch off and on, which has no aches or pains.

So perhaps where workplace normativity arises is in the nexus of the clock and the human machine, both of which are disciplining tools. And if you are disabled, and you operate on crip time, the world doesn't make space for that. This isn't an ideological waffly sentence. Think about how difficult it is for a lot of workplaces to just make space for medical appointments, or also childcare, which is a highly gendered labour. Or consider that maybe I will find it overwhelming to have to get the tube and then do a full days work, but if I was allowed to work from home I would get more done. But then also I don't like this language that I am using because why should it be that productivity and speed are the most important thing? It's all just quantity over quality, isn't it.

In the art world, the overall structure is that the timetable honours the existing art spaces, not the people whose work it's supposed to facilitate. Elizabeth Ann Moore says:

51.

'A few years ago I accrued several debilitating diseases in a process some call "falling out of time." I now function on crip time, which, to crips, means we operate on a different schedule. We require more time to perform certain tasks than is usually allotted under the regimented, efficient system of standard time. The phrase is also used disparagingly.'

- Elizabeth Ann Moore, Body Horror

So it wasn't until really recently that I wrote my own access rider. We really have to credit the incredible ongoing work of Johanna Hedva, who wrote the Sick Woman Theory,

52.
Johanna Hedva sick woman theory screenshot
Screenshot of the top of a web article. There is a large image at the top of a person in a red dress with black lipstick, lying on a bed surrounded by pill bottles. In the bottom left of the screen grab reads the title 'sick woman theory'

Hedva has been very outspoken about accessibility in the art world, and it was after reading their access rider that I finally wrote my own. But you know what, full honesty, I still feel really embarrassed sending it, which I shouldn't, and please don't take this as an encouragement for you take on this shame. But, I think it can be really difficult, because I am a people pleaser, and I am also worried about spaces not wanting to work with me, and the reason for this is the complete and total lack of job security in the art world. It's a wider structural problem which means it's harder to assert yourself and your needs, because you don't know how that will be received and whether people will say 'well... actually, no'. I am incredibly blessed, I would like to say, because the people I have worked with have all, every single one, been really lovely and supportive people. That sounds insincere but it's entirely true, but the issue isn't the people, the issue is the structure which engenders a total insecurity and a power structure that makes it difficult to push back or to assert your needs. And more than that, it means that it becomes impossible to turn anything down, so maybe you end up saying yes to loads of simultaneous things then completely burning out, and working in these cycles of intense production then burnout. The more of us that do so, the more that it becomes normalised, and eventually, I dunno, does it become normative?

So ok, what does this have to do with anything? I was talking about the Wynter quote, about the need to draw some maps, and to come back again to the idea of

53.
PERFORMATIVITY

The things that we do in the world create an ongoing world – this is a form of everyday magic. What do I create when I say yes to multiple things with short deadlines, when I am already at capacity? What do I do when I apologise for replying to a non-urgent email a week later, because my executive function is shot to shit, but I still think that I need to reinforce that I am an adult professional. What happens when I work well in excess of the amount of labour that the fee covers? I'll tell you what happens. I reinforce the idea that this ableist pattern of working is ok. This is not just about taking care of myself. This is also about creating a world which is safe for fellow disabled, and neurodiverse people, as well as people who are not middle class and do not have the luxury of expanding into their free time in order to make work. Their time is otherwise taken up with low wage work which then means that, comparatively, I set myself as somehow being better or having a richer practice, when in fact it's just that my other side hustle pays a much better rate per hour. So, it is time, for neurodiverse atemporal world order, it is time for us to do this by setting some boundaries on the expectations placed on your labour, whether you are an artist or an actuary.

54.

'The idea of the "body" carries this weapon: gender circumscribes the body; "protects" it from being limitless, from claiming the infinite vast, from realizing its true potential.'
- Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism

The sad thing about Silvia Federici is that while her writing could be used as a really strong argument for gender abolition, she actually ends up stopping short of this and basically coming down as a bit of a TERF. I'm not going to air those frustrating views, but she basically says 'yes historically gender has done literally no good thing, but that doesn't mean it's beyond redemption!' and so I much prefer to turn to Legacy Russell, and her recent incredible book *Glitch Feminism*. To be honest, when I was planning this workshop I did not think I would be talking about gender so much, but the thing is that to talk about labour and disability and chronormativity, and the regulation and machination of bodies, gender is inextricably bound up with this. Which is not to say that gender is a limit point. In fact, this is exactly why Legacy Russell's writing is so important. So, let's say I reach a limit point and I literally cannot work anymore, which has happened in a lot of jobs I have had. I can see this as my failing to live up to expectation, or I can see this as the failure of a world to make space for disability and other modes of relating. The more that you say yes to unmanageable workloads, the more that you, and I and everyone create a world where unmanageable workload are the default. Obviously, there is a massive financial privilege in the ability to say no, which is all the truer given the increasing difficulties in gaining disability support since 2010. So, I am not trying to suggest that people turn down work which makes it untenable to survive. If you have to work, you have to work, but you can still resist the work and you can still refuse the work through your no, even if no one else sees or hears it.

55.

'What does it mean to find life—and to find ourselves—through the framework of failure? To build models that stand with strength on their own, not to be held up against those that have failed us, as reactionary tools of resistance?'
- Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism

So this is what the amulet is is. It is a talisman, and a reminder, and a protection. It will collectively work some everyday magic with a desire to overturn world orders of hyperproduction and capitalist time. Or maybe for you there is something more important that it performs, maybe it is a refusal to be codified within a gender binary, or any form of recognisability. As Legacy Russell says,

56.

'the body is a text: every time we define ourselves, we choose definitions—names—that reduce the ways our bodies can be read.'
- Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism

I'm not going to tell you what this thing should do, because that is up to you.

We need to make like Grange Hill. Just say no.