

From Francis Gene-Rowe

Hi Jacob,

I think your project is worthwhile, and while countering hegemonic models of history is a key part of my practice and worldview, I may not be the person who can give you specific rather than general suggestions. I do think I can give you some decent general suggestions though.

Firstly, I think you can look to reading some critical theory around history. In addition to the 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism' essay I mentioned, here are some suggestions:

- From postcolonialism, *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, perhaps the first and last chapters) and *Black Marxism* (Robinson, can't remember which chapter but somewhere he basically offers an alternative theorisation of European and African history).
- From indigenous studies, *Beyond Settler Time* (Rifkin, perhaps again the first and last chapters).
- Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History' is a very interesting but also quite dense text, *Fire Alarm* (Löwy) is a helpful and not too long commentary which situates it in both its own historical context and subsequent ones, primarily Liberation Theology in Latin America.
- And lastly, investigating Foucault's concept of 'counter-memory' (introduced in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History') will also be helpful.

With the postcolonial and indigenous sources, obviously there needs to be some wariness of what claims you make, as your project is not inherently a postcolonial one, but it's good to draw in a wider range of perspectives and influences and let it shape your framing, if not necessarily the work itself.

I think self-immolation as a kind of self-extinction of the (abjected by/through modernity, because if you are not one of history's heroes then you are one of its victims) subject is an interesting angle. But I would also suggest -- and this is actually the advice I believe most strongly out of everything I am saying, it just also happens to be something I am less qualified to make concrete suggestions about -- that you should read up on activist history and specifically anything that can give you a deeper contextual sense of what surrounded various self-immolations. Not in an overarching way, but in a deep and specific manner around as many individual cases as possible. Because from that you will start to get a feeling for a weave of a different (set of) history(ies) to the hegemonic account.

Of course, you may well be doing this already! I hope none of this seems condescending, and that it's helpful.

Oh, and I'm assuming you know how to download free pdfs/epubs of books, and/or that you can use a library, I don't expect you to buy all this stuff!

best wishes,  
Francis

From me

Hello Francis.

Thank you so much for your email. I assure you it does not read condescending at all. Thank you for the suggestions, and indicating specific chapters. It is highly appreciated. I will certainly read them.

Could you elaborate on what you mean about me having to be a bit weary of the claims I make when drawing from postcolonial and indigenous sources? If my project is not an inherently postcolonial one (which I assume to mean that it is not consciously treating the global colonial project as one of its centerpoints) are those not the sources I should welcome? Or is it more about the risk of misrepresentation?

About the advice you most strongly believe; Thank you for expressing what you actually believe in regards to this project. It is the kind of thing that really helps me gain clarity. As it stands, I consider this project without end, exactly because it is so endlessly close to so many individuals. I imagine that as it progresses, it will become less and less interesting to stay in the zone of 'general' history, and become more and more interesting to peel back the layers of proximity to individual lives. It does feel like I have to do the first things first however, and gain a proper understanding of self-immolation as a phenomenon, what has been written about it, and the crucial ways in which it connects with fields like history and activism. Beyond that there is another thing that I'm not sure about in this moment. Maybe you have thoughts about it, maybe you don't; I am a bit afraid that there is a tension between this history being about all these individuals that performed this action, and it being about me / my personal fascination. A general sense of it being 'objective' and a general sense of it being 'subjective'. I write 'a general sense' because I know very well that it is not objective in any measure. But I am struggling a bit with this. Do you think it is idiotic of me to see some value in the air of legitimacy that is attached to that 'distance'? Or is there actually something there that -because in some ways its 'tone' is somewhat like the hegemonic model of history- manages to supplement it with a very sensitive and interesting world of information.

Given enough time and attention I don't think these two conceptions of the project are completely mutually exclusive, one can form the basic framework in which to position way more personal, close and hands on work.

I struggle a bit with finding the right words to express my last point. Maybe that is because I have not critically examined it enough. I wonder what you feel in regards to this.

Thank you so much again for engaging in this conversation, I really appreciate it.

Hugs

Jacob.

Hi Jacob,

I have for you a clarification and two suggestions:

Regarding my comment about 'the project is not inherently postcolonial, therefore be careful' -- what I mean by this in the first instance is that you are a white European creator, you are not directly partnering with or centering people of colour & the explicit topic of the project is not about them and their experiences, etc. At least, that is my assumption, and to be clear neither does it strike me that you are excluding those things. In fact, your project skews anti-hegemonic, and thus does occupy a wider space of opposition to/seeking alternatives to colonial historical thinking, so in a broad sense it's anti- or post-colonial, but as a sort of second order consequence of what it is. Secondly, what I was trying to say was more or less 'I encourage you to read sources from Black and Indigenous thinking about history, but I don't think you will be able to claim that your project is "doing" or a part of Black/Indigenous thinking in a direct sense, rather I think you can take inspiration and influence from these things and acknowledge that without claiming to be part of it -- after all, you are not Black or Indigenous'. I hope that clears things up!

In relation to your valid and thoughtful self-questioning around the project, I think you can firstly try to challenge your own position and fascination: who are you when you are fascinated, what position in history do you occupy? Are there points where you find disgust, boredom, alienation, disappointment (fascist self-immolation?), doubt? In a way, perhaps you need to really examine and overload/deplete/explore the personal in order to then put it to rest: or rather, to find its appropriate set of relations and tensions within the project. There is a marvellous essay by Donna Haraway called 'Situated Knowledges' that has been hugely influential for me -- in short, it makes the point that there is not objective position to take, which is a point made more widely through feminist science & technology studies (Haraway's broad field), postcolonial studies, and elsewhere. It's written in a slightly poetic and at times unclear way, but I think you may find it helpful.

I think on some level you are trying to grapple with the problem of scale, which is a problem for both art and almost all kinds of thinking. Capitalism insists on scalability, but Anna Tsing (who has written about non-scalability) observes how this enforces hegemonic thinking, and is also not truly possible/real. The grand notion of history operates at a certain conception of elevated scale, even as it may also spotlight heroic/villainous individuals. There's a whole game afoot there. Personally, I think a lot of art (especially poetry) is too concerned with the (creator-as-)individual -- a product of the neo-liberal mentality surrounding culture-as-industry -- but also I don't think it's honest or helpful to try to eradicate ourselves from what we make (much as I do think there is something to Keats' idea of negative capability). Two ways I think about this are: (a) via SF (science fiction/speculative fiction/whatever you want to call it), the idea of it as a kind of mythopoesis, and once you are in that space, then different scales can interrelate in less 'rational' ways, and the individual subject is part of (rather than above/outside) a landscape populated by objects, technologies, strange experiences and affects, etc. and (b) via the principle we find across many non-hegemonic epistemologies (Indigenous, Daoist, etc.) of the interconnectedness of all things -- in other words, that there is no 'individual', just many discrete and yet interrelated scales of life and non-life, that we are made of everything in us and before us and around us and after us. Now, how you implement these principles in your project is up to you, and may take time to discover, I think the best thing you can do is to be open and honest and critical: reflecting, questioning yourself, and being receptive to combining what might seem more and less 'logical' approaches and ways of thinking.

I hope and think that it will be a satisfying journey: challenging, exciting, at times obscure, at times revelatory.

best wishes,  
Francis