



Stop Making Sense: Nonsense Books, Silly Texts, and Semantic Resistance from 1100-1800

May 26-27, 2022, Newberry Library
Speaker Biographies and Paper Abstracts

Katie Bank, University of Birmingham

“Making Musical Meaning: Nonsense Song and Performance Possibilities”

Abstract:

Music's lack of traditional semantic meaning makes it well suited for a variety of contexts: for questioning inherently paradoxical or ambiguous concepts such as love or sensing, for satire, or for stirring emotions often thought to be beyond words. Modern theorists such as Lawrence Kramer assert it is a folly to assume music is either nonsemantic or all semantic, leaving its precise quality open for debate. When combined with words, one might assume this gap between music and meaning is more closed, but perhaps this is not the case.

In early modern England, non-lexical vocable refrains such as 'fala' or 'heigh-nonny-no' were often used within popular song forms, but to changeable ends. Nonsense refrains in song allow for performers to sometimes alter the uptake of textual meaning drastically, bringing out different readings from performance to performance. It is admittedly challenging to understand and access such historically grounded expressions, particularly when they were so rooted in improvised performance.

This paper introduces relevant debates from the field of musicology concerning early modern nonsense song and what happens when it is sung and performed collaboratively. The semantically ambiguous performative space provided by nonsense refrains allowed for singers to further, diminish, or alter textual meaning in a process that occurred between print, performance, and uptake or meaning made. I argue why it is crucial for scholars to consider nonsense song in performance if any meaning is to be understood (or recreated) from such nonsense.

Bio:

Katie Bank (www.katiebankmusic.com) is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Birmingham researching musical-visual culture in early modern England. Recent publications include a monograph, *Knowledge Building in Early Modern English Music* (Routledge, 2021) as well as articles in *Early Music*, *Renaissance Studies*, and the *Journal of the Hakluyt Society*. She is currently co-editing *Byrd Studies in the Twenty First Century* with Katherine Butler and Samantha Bassler (Clemson University Press, 2023). Katie was a long-term National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the Newberry Library in 2018-19 researching nonsense and non-lexical vocables in English song. She is an avid choral singer and collaborates regularly with performers, curators, and galleries.

Rebecca L. Fall, Newberry Library

“White Nonsense in Seventeenth-Century England”

Abstract:

Nonsense offered a powerful tool for reinforcing community and consolidating power in early modern England, especially among literate men. From John Taylor the Water Poet, who published



populist nonsense pamphlets mocking elitist jargon, to university and urban fraternities who bonded over drunkenly improvising witty but senseless verses, Englishmen used semantic confusion to strengthen group identity and navigate tricky class hierarchies. But England's colonial ambitions were also growing substantially during the same period, and, accordingly, class and social identities were increasingly—and urgently—racialized as white. In this paper, I examine how Englishmen expressed whiteness through nonsense, especially via invented languages from the so-called “New World,” and how they leveraged social power through what I argue we should read as specifically *white* English nonsense writing.

Bio:

Rebecca L. Fall is a scholar of early modern literature and votress of the public humanities. After receiving her PhD from Northwestern, she completed a Mellon/ACLS Public Fellowship at The Public Theater in NYC. She now works as Program Manager in the Newberry Library's Center for Renaissance Studies, where, among other duties, she is currently co-curating a public exhibition on critical histories of race in the premodern world in collaboration with the RaceB4Race collective. Rebecca also serves as a public engagement speaker at Chicago Shakespeare Theater and continues to publish scholarly work. She is finishing a monograph that traces the surprising social functions of nonsense writing and silly jokes in Renaissance England against a longer history of culturally productive (and destructive) senselessness from eleventh-century France to the present-day US.

Mira 'Assaf Kafantaris, Butler University
“Unsilencing the African Queens of Mocambo”

Abstract:

In “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman asks: “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?” (3). I grappled with this lacuna while working on Catherine of Braganza's royal marriage to Charles II of 1662. Despite all my feminist desire to recover this poorly-celebrated royal woman's agency, I came face to face with dynastic marriage's imbrication in racial capitalism and settler colonization. Heeding Christina Sharpe's call in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* “to become undisciplined and to imagine otherwise,” to look elsewhere, to let go of the research methods, the tools that built the master's house like Audre Lorde taught us, I will suspend discipline, history, and linear temporalities. In this talk, I will abandon Catherine of Braganza's queenship and will tell the story of the Black queens—some enslaved and others free—of the Mocambo quarter in Lisbon. Caring for the spiritual and material well-being of the large Black diaspora in this Lisbon quarter, these queens formed ties of kinship that warrant our attention, our retelling.

Bio:

Mira 'Assaf Kafantaris is Assistant Professor of English at Butler University. She specializes in Premodern Critical Race Studies, Shakespeare, and Early Modern Culture. She is completing her first manuscript, titled *Royal Marriage, Foreign Queens, and Racial Formations in the Early Modern Period*. Her book chapters have appeared in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (with Richard Dutton); *The Palgrave Handbook of Shakespeare's Queens*; and *Race and/as Affect*. Her public humanities essays have appeared in several online publications, including [The Sundial](#), [The Millions](#), [Overland Journal](#), [The Rambling](#), [The Conversation](#), [Medium-Equity](#), and [The](#)



Platform. She co-edited, with Sonja Drimmer and Treva B. Lindsey, a special issue of the Barnard Center for Research on Women's journal, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, titled "Race-ing Queens." Her current work includes an edited collection (with Urvashi Chakravarty) on early modern queenship, premodern critical race studies, and queer theory for Palgrave's Early Modern Cultural Studies Series. She is also writing the introduction to Antony and Cleopatra for the *Oxford World Series*.

Suzanne Karr Schmidt, Newberry Library

"Monumental Morsels: Erecting Premodern German Food Jokes on a Grand Scale"

Abstract:

From ironic edible monuments to erotic sausage valentines, German visual culture has long equated bawdy humor with the nonsensical display of oversized comestibles. This talk will examine the imagery of overindulgence via banquet and tavern culture and grapple with the meaning of its omnipresence in printed ephemera and book illustrations, jocular alba amicorum, and culinary travel narratives. Albrecht Dürer's infamously ambiguous monument to the Peasant Rebellion of 1525 in his *Underweissung der Messung* artist manual provides a starting point, while Georg Phillip Harsdörffer's 1665 *Trincir-Buch* banquet manual pushes the performative boundaries of sculpted meat and folded napkins to newer heights.

Bio:

Suzanne Karr Schmidt (PhD Yale) is Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Newberry Library. An historian of early modern art, books, prints, and science, her monograph, *Interactive and Sculptural Printmaking in the Renaissance*, appeared in 2018. Her playfully interactive Newberry exhibition, *Movable Mayhem! The Art of the Pop-Up Book* is scheduled for February-June 2023 and examines this overlooked artform from the medieval to the modern era. Her previous prizewinning exhibitions include her co-curated 2020 Newberry exhibition *Renaissance Invention: Stradanus's Nova Reperta*, and her 2011 Art Institute of Chicago exhibition *Altered and Adorned: Using Renaissance Prints in Daily Life*.

Jordan Kirk, Pomona College

"Quasi Apicula: Nonsense in the *Garden of Delights*"

Abstract:

The *Hortus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delights) is a lavishly illustrated and elaborately conceived encyclopedia compiled by the abbess Herrad of Landsberg over several decades in the twelfth century. Herrad wrote a preface to the work that, like the work itself, is a kind of collage of citations. In the light of my longstanding inquiry into the correspondences among medieval and modernist nonsense, I will examine a constellation of overlapping 'metaphors' in the preface to the *Hortus*: those of the flower, bee, honey, and hive. My claim is that the repetitiveness, imprecision, unoriginality, and ultimate incomprehensibility of Herrad's prose should be understood not as errors of style but as the elements of a poetics of nonsense. The question is how such a poetics might serve Herrad's ultimate aims—and what those aims might be.

Bio:



Jordan Kirk is Associate Professor of English at Pomona College, where he teaches medieval literature. He studied comparative literature at NYU and Princeton. The results of his research into non-signification in medieval poetry, linguistics, mystical contemplation, and sacramental theology have recently appeared as a book called *Medieval Nonsense: Non-Signification in Fourteenth-Century England* (Fordham, 2021) and as a chapter in the *Edinburgh Companion to Nonsense* (Edinburgh, 2021). His current research is in the history and theory of interpretation; psychotropics in the Middle Ages; and premodern contact across Afro-Eurasia.

Matt Negrin, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*

Keynote Conversation: Media Nonsensification, Then and Now

Bio:

Matt Negrin is a senior producer at *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and a former journalist who covered politics until the 2016 campaign drove him crazy. In his time as a newsperson he was a writer for TV journalists like Diane Sawyer, Jorge Ramos, and [Name Withheld Because Of Sexual Harassment Story That Came Out After Matt Stopped Working For This Person]. Matt has also written for *The New Yorker* and *Sports Illustrated*, and he can technically put "The New York Times" on his resume because he was an intern on the copy desk there after graduating college and years later wrote one (1) story for them about a soccer fan club in Finland. Currently Matt spends most of his time burning bridges to his former industry by tagging journalists on Twitter who quote Republicans at their word without mentioning that they supported the January 6 insurrection and lied about the election being "stolen." It's a tough job, and no one has to do it, but he does.

Dominique E. Polanco, Virginia Tech

"Making Sense of Spanish Colonialism: Sixteenth-Century Nahua Manuscripts and their Portrayal of the Indigenous Experience of Colonial New Spain"

Abstract:

Following the long tradition of recording orality in Mesoamerica, Indigenous people continued to use an illustrative writing system after the Spanish Invasion of Mexico in 1519. In this presentation, I consider how Nahua tlacuiloque (artist-scribes) in Central Mexico portrayed their experiences during and after the violent imposition of European power, and navigated new methods of writing and recording. I use examples of representation and materiality to demonstrate how Indigenous modes of thinking and understanding persisted to portray their changing cultural landscape. In the end, the "nonsense" in these manuscripts was in fact mistaken agency that Europeans and European-descended people misinterpreted.

Bio:

Dominique E. Polanco is assistant professor of colonial Latin American art history in the department of Religion and Culture at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Her research focuses on the creation, collection, and reproduction of sixteenth-century manuscripts created by Indigenous tlacuiloque (artist scribes) in Mexico. Dr. Polanco is currently at work on her first book titled *Copying the Colony: the Pintura del gobernador, alcaldes y regidores de México's Many Editions*, along with co-editing *The Routledge Companion to Race in Early Modern Artistic, Material, and Visual Production* with Nicholas R. Jones



and Christina H. Lee. In her work, Dr. Polanco uses decolonial and indigenizing methodologies to elucidate the agency of Indigenous people in colonial Mexico and their descendants today.

Masha Raskolnikov, Cornell University

“Chaucerian Nonsense or How Does Sir Thopas Read *The Tale of Melibee*?”

Abstract:

When bullied into telling his own tale on the voyage to Canterbury, Chaucer’s narrator proceeds to doggerel-rhyme up a narrative so truly terrible that the Host begs him to stop wasting everybody’s time. The nonsensical “Tale of Sir Thopas” behaves as a joke about Chaucer’s own poetic abilities: the “father of English poetry” personifies himself in his own story as a terrible poet. The poem parodies romance tropes by making its protagonist, Thopas, vain, unmanly, childish, cute, and simply silly. There is no “sense” to be made of Sir Thopas, he incarnates a queer aesthetic that defies categories and reasons. The “Tale” is an extravaganza of romance playfulness and it is roundly rejected by the Canterbury pilgrims; Chaucer’s narrator is interrupted and ordered to tell a different tale. Alone among the pilgrims to tell two tales, Chaucer proceeds to tell a tale in prose, and here, too, the poet laureate performs as a terrible writer. The ensuing “Tale of Melibee” is among the most stultifyingly boring pieces of writing that Chaucer, or the Middle Ages, ever produced and, as such, it just begs to be read in an interesting way. My argument in this paper is that the only way to understand the sententious ponderousness of “Melibee” is by using the “Tale of Sir Thopas” as a key to decoding it – nonsense as a way to work with a tale that offers nothing but “good sense” “common sense” and “being sensible” to its readers. I believe that the outcome of this analysis, while still not entirely clear, has something to do with how both of Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s Tales struggle with the nature of femininity as a different sort of strength rather than a form of weakness.

Bio:

Masha Raskolnikov is Associate Professor of Literatures in English at Cornell University and author of *Body Against Soul: Gender and Sowlebele in Middle English Allegory* (2009) as well as co-editor, with Greta La Fleur and Anna Klosowska, of *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Cornell University Press, 2021). She is primarily interested in the project of unmaking “common sense” wherever such a thing is found, and in working with medieval literature as a means of doing so; she is also interested in feminist, lesbian, gay and transgender/transsexual studies. Her current project is about the rhetoric of apology, the annoying work done by overapologizing and the mystery of forgiveness.

Hugh Roberts, University of Exeter

“Nonsense and Reform in Early Sixteenth-Century France”

Abstract:

In the first half of the sixteenth century, authors including Clément Marot and François Rabelais ran the risk of persecution, exile, or worse, to express their views on religious reform. Both also turned to nonsense, including in the former’s *coq-à-l’âne*, a genre of apparently incoherent verse he instigated, and in the latter’s ‘Antedated Fanfreluches’ in *Gargantua* (1534). My presentation will revisit this well-known but still mysterious material: why did these engaged writers turn to nonsense on such deadly serious matters? Beyond formal features and satire, I shall investigate how their



nonsense can ape the spread of (mis)information and how, conversely, it can help reinforce social bonds of friendship and common cause.

Bio:

Hugh Roberts is Professor of French Renaissance Literature at the University of Exeter (UK). In collaboration with Dr Emily Butterworth (King's College London), he ran a research project on 'Gossip and Nonsense: Excessive Language in Renaissance France', which gave rise to *Gossip and Nonsense in Renaissance France and England*, a special issue of *Renaissance Studies* (2016). He was co-editor, with Dr Annette Tomarken, of the complete works of Bruscombille (2012), an early seventeenth-century French comedian who specialized in nonsense speeches.

Adam Zucker, University of Massachusetts Amherst

“Hoody doody, All too moody”: Early Modern Lyrical Nonsense”

Abstract:

Tudor and Stuart song lyrics are famously filled with the sound of nonsense. Hey Nonny Nonnies, Fara Diddle Diddles, and Derry Derry Downs abound. This paper gestures towards the meaningful resonance of these meaningless noises, turning in particular to the archive of lyrics that appear in printed playbooks and songbooks of the period. A diverse, multivocal, cross-class cacophony appears in this collection of texts: sense-breaking sounds link the musical voices of Roman Consuls, witches, laborers, and even Caliban. With an ear for songs that frame colonial and postcolonial contexts, special attention will be paid to transhistorical nonsense in *The Tempest*, and in lyrics related to it.

Bio:

Adam Zucker is Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he teaches courses on 16th– and 17th-Century English literature. He is the author of *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge University Press), and the co-editor of two books: *Historical Affects and the Early Modern Theater* (Routledge), with Ronda Arab and Michelle Dowd; and *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage, 1625-1642* (Palgrave Macmillan), with Alan B. Farmer. Recent book chapters and journal articles include work on “Pedantic Ben Jonson”, and the afterword for a special issue of *The London Journal* on performance outside of theatrical spaces in early modern London. In addition to co-editing the journal *English Literary Renaissance*, he is hard at work finishing a monograph tentatively titled *Shakespeare Unlearned: Nonsense, Pedantry, and the Philology of Stupidity in Early Modern English Drama*, and a new edition of *Love's Labour's Lost* for the Arden Shakespeare 4th Series.