



Aesthetics of Legitimacy: Resisting the Effects of Power with "Grassroots" News & Queer Sasquatches

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ABSTRACT

If, as Michel Foucault argued, “truth” reflects relations of power, what legitimate cultural forms reflect resistance to those relations? In other words, how is it possible to protest “truth” without seeming foolish or simply wrong? One of the ways dissenting subjects overcome this discursive double-bind is through the use of aesthetics to undermine structures of discursive legitimacy. This paper argues that ‘structures of legitimacy’ maintain their discursive visibility through conditions of the *legibility* of power’s expectations, the *credibility* of the conditions which have given rise to these expectations, and their *appropriateness* in the circumstances. The tactical use of aesthetics to both challenge ‘structures of legitimacy’ and assert competing ‘structures of legitimacy’ can be observed in citizen-produced cultures of dissent such as *The Dominion* magazine, a Canadian-based national citizens journalism project, and *Ladies Sasquatch*, a sculpture installation by artist Allyson Mitchell. *The Dominion* champions the epistemic authority of those least served by hegemonic conditions in Western liberal democracies and capitalist forms of economic organization; and *Ladies Sasquatch* (re)appropriates public space for radical political lesbian identity. *The Dominion* and *Ladies Sasquatch*, like other manifestations of cultural resistance, must encounter the conditions of their own (il)legitimacy through the practices of knowledge production in which they engage, and they do this through the tactical use of aesthetic experience. An ‘aesthetics of legitimacy’ offers an approach to better understanding how these practices challenge and mobilize relations of power within the discursive settings of cultural imagination.

KEYWORDS:

Contact information

Introduction

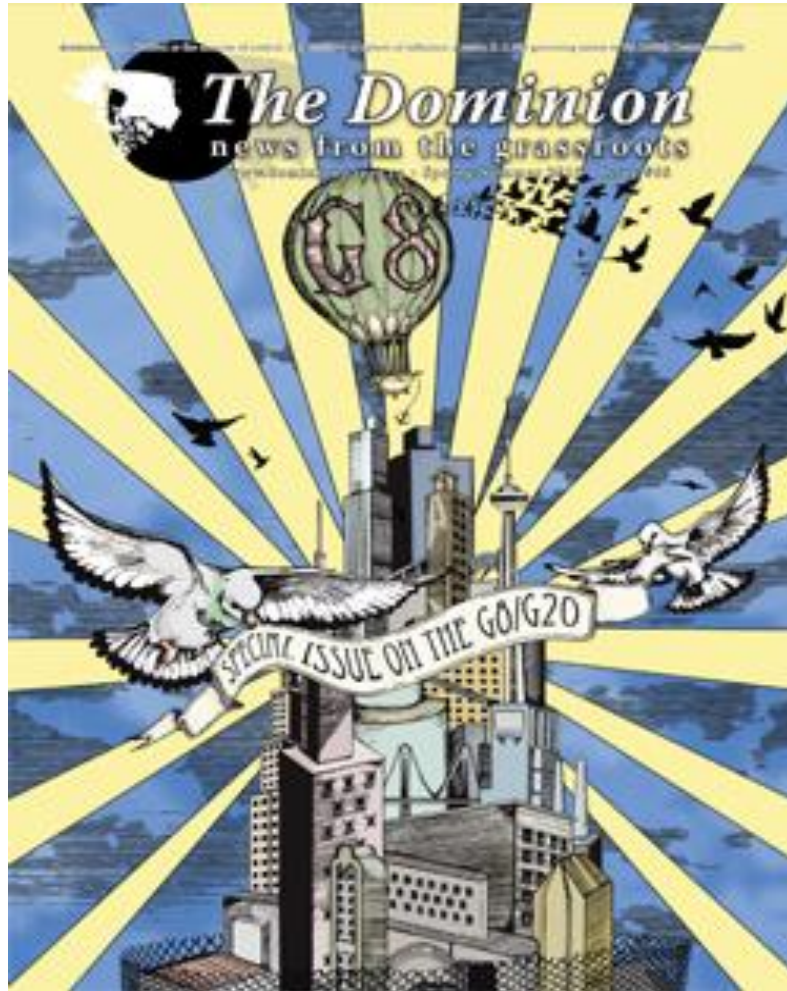
The genealogical union of knowledge and power presents a quandary. If “truth” reflects relations of power, what are the cultural forms that reflect resistance to those relations? Or in other words, if domination depends in part on regulating the experiences of resistance into categories of nonsense and irrelevance, how is it possible to protest “truth” without seeming the fool? “We are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function; we must speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth” (Foucault 1980, 93). To stray from this path is to dwell in error, to have beliefs rooted in falseness, and ultimately to act without legitimacy -- a grim prospect indeed for cultural activists who would challenge abuses of power.

In this paper I argue that one means for overcoming the discursive double-bind of “eventualization”¹ is through the use of aesthetics to undermine conditions of domination. Broadly speaking, aesthetic experience describes elements of cultural legitimacy that lie outside of the conditions of rational and empirical knowing. Aesthetics describes the physiological and ‘felt’ qualities of meaning and all the complexities that entails. The aesthetic dimensions of cultural expression provide a way for subjects to navigate competing structures of legitimacy – those that reflect relations of domination and those that reflect relations that resist the effects of power. My argument in essence is twofold: (i) that ‘structures of legitimacy’ for domination depend on conditions of the *legibility* of power’s expectations, the *credibility* of the conditions which have given rise to these expectations, and their *appropriateness* in the circumstances; and (ii) that in considering dissenting cultural responses to conditions of domination, we can observe the tactical use of aesthetics as a means through which cultural resistance to “truth” challenges conditions of both “truth” and power’s legitimacy.

To give practical substance to my proposition I will consider the aesthetic strategies evidenced in *The Dominion* magazine (“news from the grassroots”), Issue #68, and in the sculpture-installation *Ladies Sasquatch* by Canadian artist Allyson Mitchell. *The Dominion* is a national citizens journalism project based in Canada; the issue in question was published in the weeks leading up to the G8/G20 Summit gatherings in Toronto, Ontario in June 2010 — a gathering which precipitated the largest mass arrest of protesters in Canadian history. *The Dominion* in many ways exemplifies DIY (do-it-yourself) or citizens journalism as a form of cultural dissent in the realm of public knowledge. It is a not-for-profit, collectively run, critical news organization championing the epistemic authority of social movements and the experiences of those least served by prevailing economic and political conditions, and as such it offers a compelling case for demonstrating an aesthetic approach to the discursive conundrum of engaging “truth” to undermine domination. *Ladies Sasquatch*, a sculpture of six 12 foot high female sasquatches gathered around a campfire, asserts a radical lesbian political identity against the legitimacies of a patriarchal, heteronormative construction of female identity, sexuality and pornographic lesbian identities. The installation has exhibited in Canadian galleries (including the Winnipeg Art Gallery) and has provoked controversy. Mitchell positions her work artistically as what she calls “messy craft”, a genre of artistic practice that celebrates domestic arts often associated with housework and positioned within feminist discourses as a response to

¹ ‘Eventualization’ is Michel Foucault’s term for the continuity of power and knowledge reflected in knowledge outcomes and the effects of power generated by the contents of knowledge, see Foucault 1991; 2007a).

the undervaluing of women’s cultural contributions, and also as a form of DIY cultural expression, community building and resistance to the industrialization of the cultural industries (Minihan and Wolfram 2007; Pentney 2008).



Ladies Sasquatch and *The Dominion* are both exemplary of the times. The “convenient fiction”, as Keven Howley writes, of the categorical distinction between consumers and producers of culture has been diminishing in the wake of expanding digital, peer-to-peer and participatory networks of cultural engagement (Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Kozalanka et al. 2012; Hartley 2000; Howley 2005; Schudson 2009). Both of these cultural expressions, like other manifestations of citizen-organized resistance flourishing in DIY cultures and online contexts, must encounter the conditions of their own il/legitimacy through the practices of knowledge production that they engage in. An 'aesthetics of legitimacy' offers an approach to better understanding how these practices challenge and mobilize relations of power within the discursive settings of cultural imagination.



Allyson Mitchell's Ladies Sasquatch, photo courtesy of the artist

In this paper, I briefly consider literatures on ‘legitimacy’ to develop a framework for understanding ‘discursive legitimacy’, by which I mean the terms under which experience is rendered visible in discourse as “truth” (as opposed to being rendered invisible, silenced, discredited, etc. in the genealogical sense: Foucault ([1969] 2007; [1970] 1981; see also White 1973). I argue that discursive legitimacy is grounded in the subjectivities of legibility, credibility and appropriateness, and as such it is an approach to power that emphasizes the subject’s role in the production of power. In answer to the question ‘How is it possible to resist “truth” without seeming foolish or insane? Aesthetic experience is identified as one tactical approach to navigating the competing structures of legitimacy that emerge through the encounters of resistance with conditions of domination within settings of cultural production.

The Legitimacies of Power

My research question can be stated thus: How is discursive resistance possible under conditions where cultural legitimacy precludes that which resists the effects of power? In other words, how is it possible to resist the effects of power through the creation of a cultural text? There are three elements to consider: what is a ‘text’; what is power; and how is power challenged through the production of a text.

The first element, what is a ‘text’, is only of peripheral concern. As I use the term in this article, a ‘text’ is an artifact of words, images, sounds or video – anything that circulates in

public culture as a communicative unit. What ‘texts’ share are characteristics of cohesion, coherence, intertextuality, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, and situationality (Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Wodak 2008). In this sense, regardless of medium, ‘text’ can be understood as a confluence of sensibility and meaning, be it through language, visuality, sound, or performance that is created for a public.

More central to my inquiry is power and its effects. As I use the term, ‘power’ describes relationships “in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other” (Foucault 1997, 292). Power describes a desire to predetermine social outcomes – a “structure of actions” as Foucault put it, “brought to bear on possible actions [with the goal of] guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (Foucault 1982, 789). Power relations are part of the human condition, they are “mobile, they can be modified, they are not fixed” and reflect the varieties of relations we find ourselves living through age differences, love and intimacy, family, political life, professional experience, etc. It is important to remember that power reflects a capacity to refuse its effects, i.e. on a capacity for resistance, without which the assertion of control is simply an exercise of will (1997). What is of especial interest are relations of domination; that is, relations of power that are no longer flexible and mobile, but rather fixed asymmetrically to limit capacities for resistance (1997, 283):

When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means, one is faced with what one may call a state of domination.

Cultural resistance describes attempts to challenge domination through the production of cultural texts. What is being challenged, at least in terms of discourse, are the conditions of legitimacy for circulation as “truth” and subjectivity. When producing cultural texts, authors/creators encounter the discursive conditions for subjectivity and “truth” that power expects (and in this sense are the visible expectations of power). Authors/creators choose or reject these conditions through their own productions of meaning. In Foucault’s later works he described ‘care of the self’ as practices of self-review and self-constitution, i.e. the capacity of the experiencing subject to constitute a relation of power with self contrary to other relations of power (1997; 2007). Participating in discourse requires the constitution of subjectivities and meanings, and it is here, in the processes of producing discursive legitimacy, that I argue cultural resistance manifests through aesthetic means.

‘Discursive legitimacy’ as I intend the term describes how experiences become culturally sensible as “true”. More generally, the study of legitimacy and legitimation has tended to focus on structures of governance, i.e. whether or not and how modes of governance acquire legitimacy in the minds of those governed. In the work of Max Weber, for example, we find legitimacy described as the probability that action will be oriented towards the existing social order (Merquior 1980; Uphoff 1984; Weber 1978). Cotta (1986) identifies four possible sources for political legitimacy: consensus, inheritance, republican and constitutional all of which, he observes, “attribute the effective source of legitimacy to will ...” (p. 100). Political legitimacy, according to Hechter (2009), transforms force into right, and obedience into duty; what legitimacy describes in each is the alchemy of transforming subjection into agency. Coicaud

(2002) argues that the justification of power and obedience depends on three conditions: (i) consent, (ii) laws, and (iii) norms. For Coicard, the sensibility of consent is rooted in reciprocity, an obligation founded on an expectation of a reciprocal obligation. Reciprocal obligations stem from shared values, which in turn reflect social identities. Collective survival (or in less extreme terms, collective advantage), according to Coicard, is tied to values that protect and encourage reciprocity rather than conflict – a system of norms linked to group identity.

Buchanan (2002) and Parkinson (2003) describe legitimacy as the moral justification for power. Buchanan is arguing that only a democratically authorized political power can inculcate the moral justification necessary for legitimate power – an argument at one remove from my own concern with subjective agencies. Authority, however, has resonance at the informal level in the way Cotta says it reflects a sense of social identity, a power that “preserves and increases the common good” and thus inculcates a common willingness to comply (1986, 103). Along these lines, Tyler (2001) makes a case for legitimacy rooted in the subjective self-esteem produced by group membership through inclusion and fair treatment. In essence, Tyler is arguing that self-worth is tied to varying degrees to subjective feelings of being valued, treated fairly, and included by persons and institutions of authority. This sense of belonging and self-worth provides the foundation for compliance with the expectations of power. From fairness, argues Tyler, flows pride; and from pride flows deference to the values of the group.

In their resource-based model of legitimacy, Hegtvedt and Johnson (2009) also endorse Tyler’s identity-based approach. They argue that Tyler’s model is most persuasive when group membership is central to individual identity, when those with authority and subordinates are in the same group, and when the group is perceived as having high status. In their approach, the affect of trust becomes the precursor to legitimacy through obligations that arise in response to the distribution of rewards and benefits. Self-interest motivates sanctions against transgressions that interrupt the trusted and legitimate flow of rewards (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2009). Connolly (1984) similarly recognizes the importance of social identity to the processes of legitimation. He argues that legitimacy emerges from an understanding of the range of possibilities for shared good and from social commitments – from a collective process with deep ties to “one’s ability to endorse the way of life one actually lives” (p. 225).

The link between social identity and subjective volition in the legitimation process is a key element in understanding legitimation beyond the formal structures of governing. There has been recent and growing interest in legitimation as a process through which *informal* social structures acquire stability. Both approaches – in the assessment of governance and in the assessment of informal social relations – are grounded in recognizing legitimation as the willing agreement with normative expectations, but whereas the study of governance focuses on formal structures of institutional domination and the degree to which their stability is maintained by public approval, the latter approaches legitimacy as an element at work within emergent and possibly ephemeral social arrangements. Morris Zelditch describes this less formal social legitimation as “the stability of informal status orders” where ‘status orders’ describe informal social hierarchies determined through social norms and conventions of deviance, allocation of status, feelings of obligation and expectation, and the expression of sentiment and emotion (2001A, 4). This is an understanding of legitimacy as a collective condition but without the necessity of consensus (near-consensus will suffice) and allowance for issue specificity, so that

near-consensus on one issue does not imply consensus on other issues (Zelditch 2001A). A key element of these informal and incomplete status orders are ‘performance expectations’ and ‘status characteristics’. Differentiated status positions emerge from expectations about (i) specific performance characteristics, i.e. the abilities, capabilities, attitudes ascribed to individuals; and (ii) diffuse status characteristics, i.e. characteristics ascribed to groups such as race, gender, etc. For example, the belief that ability merits authority at the individual level is widespread in the corporate world as is the accompanying justification for dominance behaviour. What legitimacy measures in these instances is the degree to which members of a society or group accept the status quo in relation to performance expectations and status characteristics as applied to themselves and to those with greater authority. Less acceptance suggests less legitimacy for the structure of domination and greater instability in the status order in question.

Status beliefs tend to manifest when different status groups interact to achieve shared goals and often ascribe lesser valued advantages to the subordinate members of the group, which increases their believability and provides a consolation incentive for subordinate members to accept the terms of their subordination (Ridgeway 2001). The perception of (near) consensus in such cases is what propels status expectations into behaviour: structural inequalities attain social validity through the appearance of being already consensually valued (Ridgeway 2001). Legitimacy in this less formal context expresses the social conditions of shared approval through feelings of obligation and responsibility to others that results in voluntary deferral and commitment to social relations (Tyler 2006). As Levi and Sacks write: “Legitimacy is a concept meant to capture the beliefs that bolster willing obedience” (2009, 355). *Obligation, commitment* and *expectation* are among the key conditions through which the legitimacy of social relations manifest: they are the elements of voluntary deference upon which the foundation of authority is based.

A (near) consensus about authority is expressed in part through the widespread intent to support and enforce social norms if they are transgressed (Zelditch 2001). Because transgressions jeopardize the stability of group cohesion, transgressions of norms must be accounted for within the group (Horne 2009). Scott and Lyman (1968) identify two kinds of ‘accounts’: (i) excuses, which admit the transgression and seek forgiveness; & (ii) justifications, which admit the transgression but argue for its necessity in the circumstances. Significantly, both kinds of account depend on acknowledging the expectations that have been transgressed: they both require foreknowledge of the expectations against which they have acted. The latter form of account (justification) engages “socially approved vocabularies” in order to “neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question” (Scott and Lyman 1968, 51). Political dissent and cultural resistance to the effects of power, I am suggesting, can be understood as a kind of transgression of expectations and obligations which dissenters argue is justified. Cultural dissent, as a bid to challenge the terms on which legitimacy is maintained, must derive from those terms just as justifications must acknowledge the conditions of their transgression before neutralizing the act or its consequences. The visibility of what is being transgressed is an essential component of accounting for and legitimating transgressive acts.

Recognition of authority necessarily reflects acquiescence to a particular arrangement of social relations. As mentioned earlier, and others have argued, relations of power exist only in terms of uncertainty and limitation in that they presuppose the capacity for refusal by those who

would be ruled (Hoy 2005; Foucault 1997a; Gordon 1999; Oakeshott 1975; O'Sullivan 2000). Under the ever-present conditions of resistance, power must communicate expectations, status characteristics, justifications to those who would be dominated in order to secure the legitimacy of its relations. Neve Gordon (2002) calls these expectations "fiats of power".

In the traditional sense, a 'fiat' was an authoritative decree - for example, a King's decree forbidding hunting in the King's woods nailed to a post in the village square. In the sense that Gordon is using it, it is the nailing of the decree to the post in the square that is of particular interest. Foucault's notion of discipline (metaphorically illustrated with Jeremy Bentham's panopticon model of the prison) depends on two kinds of visibility: the visibility of the subject, and more germane to my argument, on the visibility of power's intentions and expectations (Foucault 1977/1995, 202-3). The panopticon works through prisoner internalization of the desires of prison guards and management. In cultural terms, hegemony (in the sense of relations of power reflected by dominant forms of understanding (Gramsci 1971)) reflects in part 'fiats of power' internalized as social norms and which form the foundation for authority.

Gordon (2002) writes that the dependency of power on visibility raises the question of the conditions of possibility for visibility itself. Visibility (in the sense of a normative fiat tied to certain relations of power) is a sensibility and a perception of 'how things are' in terms of responsibilities, obligations, commitments and expectations within which we have a place. The relations of power accreted through discourse and texts are grounded in feelings of obligation and responsibility to others but can only be so to the extent that they are expected and approved. Unexpected and disapproved obligations don't exist (although obligations may be imposed after the fact) because the feeling of obligation itself cannot be imposed; obligations are a felt response in a particular circumstance. Resisting the effects of power can be understood as an exercise, at least in part, in challenging the legitimacies (of responsibilities and obligations, etc.) on which extant relations of domination depend for their sustenance.

I am suggesting a tripartite understanding of the conditions of possibility for legitimacy in the sense described: that of *legibility*, *credibility* and *appropriateness*. Legibility describes the condition of understandability: in order for a subjective condition of commitment, obligation or expectation to manifest, the normative expectations of power must be legible. For example, an expectation expressed ironically without its ironic mode being understood will likely have little value in conditioning future behaviour. Similarly, the social conditions giving rise to commitments, obligations and/or expectations of power must be considered credible. If I do not believe that the social conditions that call for certain obligations have arisen, then my levels of commitment will be less certain. And finally, even if what is expected is understood, and the conditions that have given rise to the expectations are believed, levels of commitment and obligation will be responsive to an assessment of appropriateness - what on a deeply personal level is the rightful thing to do.

Obviously, these conditions are rooted in the histories, memories and identities of the experiencing subject and will be influenced by linguistic abilities, vocabularies, cultures of experience and preference, access to information, personal integrities, etc. More explicitly, there is in the notion of 'appropriateness' an expression of the necessary capacity of refusal that is a condition of possibility for power. Legitimation describes the process by which experiencing

subjects embrace fiat of power. As Zelditch writes (2001, 40):

Because the dependent variable differs from process to process and from level to level, there appears to be no unique dependent variable associated with legitimation processes, except that legitimacy is always a matter of accepting that something is right and its consequence is always the stability of whatever structure emerges from the process.

Legitimacy is a question of subjective agreement with fiat of power through conditions of legibility, credibility and appropriateness. A brief example may help to clarify.

In 2012, during the student strike in Montreal, Quebec (which mobilized tens of thousands of protestors over a period of three months against tuition increases and regulatory restrictions against freedom of assembly), a controversial gesture was used by students at one rally. A small group used the German National Socialist ‘heil’ salute to mock police². Use of the gesture was immediately condemned by some, and a debate ensued about whether or not using the “heil” in the circumstances was a legitimate cultural choice. Applying the analytic framework for legitimacy described, an initial observation (supported by student testimony) is that the gesture was intended ironically — not in support of fascism, but rather to draw parallels between the fascist politics of National Socialism and the unilateral exercise of force by various levels of government and police during the protests. We can speculate that one of the goals of the protestors using this gesture was to encourage others to join their cause. If, however, members of the public failed to appreciate the irony of the gesture, i.e. its intended mode of apprehension, the gesture’s *legibility* as an anti-fascist gesture would likely suffer. The question of *credibility* comes into play in assessing the circumstances giving rise to the use of the gesture. The ironic salute was intended to draw attention to anti-democratic actions by government and in particular the police. But the credibility of its use will depend on whether or not the public agrees with the metaphor it suggests: that the Quebec government’s response and police actions during the student strike reflect fascist tendencies comparable to Germany in the Second World War. If the public does not believe that the situations are comparable, they may reject the gesture and its intended outcomes as illegitimate.

And even if there is public appreciation of the irony, and even if there is public agreement about fascist tendencies at work in Quebec politics during the student strike, there still remains the question of *appropriateness*. Cultural sensitivities about Holocaust memory caused many to reject the comparison as degrading to the memories of trauma and violence experienced during the Second World War by those persecuted under National Socialism. Independent of whether or not the irony of the gesture was understood and anti-democratic tendencies of government and police observed, the gesture was deemed disrespectful to collective memories of Holocaust experience and therefore inappropriate. In the circumstances, for many, the “heil” salute was not appropriate and was therefore not a legitimate challenge to existing relations of domination.

The larger point in all of this is that power’s control over compliance through discursive means (through the truths it requires us to discover) — the visibility of those expectations —

depends on their being understood, the conditions of their implication believed, and finally that they are approved of in the circumstances by those whose future behaviours power expects to influence.

Constituting the dissenting subject: *The Dominion* magazine & *Ladies Sasquatch*

As indicated above, *legibilities*, *credibilities* and *appropriatenesses* are conditions deeply rooted in the idiosyncratic matrices of the experiencing subject; they take account forms of public knowledge, but also present opportunities for creating meaning that transcends collective memory and expectations for shared understanding. I have in other places examined in detail how aesthetic experiences influence the production of truth-claims in popular cultures (Lithgow 2012). Our encounters with public meaning are bound in aspects of communicative experience that defy the overarching frameworks of epistemological legitimacy (in Western terms) grounded in empirical and rational justification. These “defiant” categories of cultural experience precede meaning, i.e. they are the precognitive and affective dimensions of understanding sometimes considered under the rubric of aesthetic experience. With reference to Immanuel Kant’s philosophical exposition of the grounds for critical judgment (in the *Critique of Judgment*, 2007), I have elsewhere suggested a reinterpretation of the four “moments” of beauty as categories of aesthetic experience that reflect both representational and relational dimensions of communicative events (Lithgow 2012). What is useful for the purposes of this discussion are the categories of aesthetic experience through which cultural dissent can challenge the legitimacies of power. The categories are: (1) the modes of apprehension in play in a communicative event that indicate metastructures of understanding that link meanings with contexts – akin to what Wittgenstein referred to as the “language games” that guide our linguistic strategies and expectations for meaning; (2) the regulation of ambiguity in the production of meaning also reflects an element of aesthetic experience. In some cultural forms, such as journalism, the goal is generally to eliminate ambiguity and radically limit polysemy in order to achieve legitimacies of “truth”; in others, such as art, often the goal is to exacerbate ambiguity in order to challenge particular conditions of “truths”. Aesthetic experience also manifests in (3) collective identity and our sense of belonging — how we locate ourselves within larger and shared social cultures (the *sensus communis*, in Kant’s language). Our sense of belonging will influence our experiences of public knowing through the performance expectations and status characteristics of the groups we belong to, the groups we aspire to belong to, and the groups from which we want to distinguish ourselves. And, finally, (4) a fourth category of aesthetic experience describes conditions of exemplary validity, by which I mean the future conditions on which understandings in the present depend (such as the expectations, commitments and obligations that inform social structures). Such future conditions reflect what John Searle calls “deontologies”, the special reasons for action that reflect the foundations of meaning in language expressed through the complexities of obligations, rights, authorizations, permissions, entitlements, etc. (Searle 2006; 2008; 2010). Exemplary validity describes an expectation of understandability rooted in ontological commitments; to believe in a certain state of future relationality – for example, in the form of an obligation or a commitment – is to instantiate its validity through the integrity of the belief itself.

As stated, there is not the space nor is there a necessity to rehearse my reinterpretation of Kant’s aesthetics for present purposes. What is relevant is that these four categories of

experience suggest forms of meaningfulness difficult to account for in empirical and rational terms and as such offer opportunities to challenge the conditions of power without categorically being rejected as erroneous, as folly, as madness. Applied to the conditions of legitimacy, the question is how might these kinds of experiences be put to use tactically to undermine the legitimacies of domination? that is, how might tactically stimulating the precognitive responses of feeling and affect within the categories of legibility, credibility and appropriateness influence the production of discursive legitimacies?

To answer this question, I turn to the two case studies described at the beginning of the article. *The Dominion* magazine was created in 2004, as a news cooperative. It produces a magazine-format (approx. 30 pages) print publication five times annually with an editorial focus on national and international news. In 2008, *The Dominion* created the first of what has grown into a network of five regional media cooperatives (in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Halifax) who provide online platforms for user-generated news including text, photo, audio and video. One of *The Dominion*'s primary goals is to encourage public participation in news-making. The regional media coops contribute two pages of content to each print issue of the *The Dominion*.

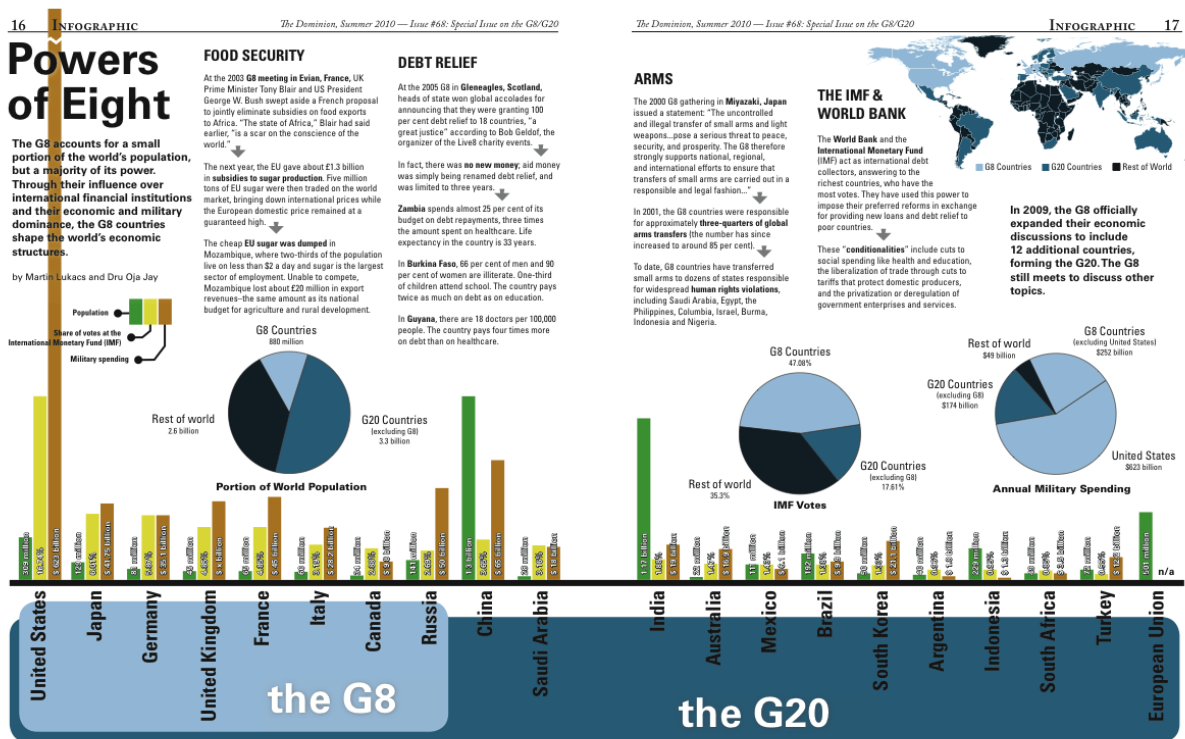
The Dominion supports itself financially through donations and subscription memberships (the magazine is sold for a cover price of \$5), with a small amount of revenues coming from advertising. Membership in the coop is obtained by contributing services, content or financing. The magazine's tagline is "news from the grassroots", and the masthead states that "The Dominion is a pan-Canadian media network that seeks to provide a counterpoint to the corporate media and direct attention to independent critics and the work of social movements." Generally speaking, *The Dominion* offers a venue for voices critical of the effects of Western liberal democratic forms of governance and capitalist modes of economic organization. For this article, I examined issue #68 — *Special Issue on the G8/G20* — which was published in the weeks leading up to the June 2010, G8/G20 Summit in Toronto, Canada. I interviewed Tim McSorely, a founding member of *The Dominion* and senior editor.

The Dominion was created with the express intent to both mimic and challenge traditional forms of journalism. As with its mainstream² counterparts, "truth" for *The Dominion* is largely a question of method and verification: verification of sources, research, interviews and "being able to see where the numbers come from" (McSorely 38). It is a "truth" whose legitimacy is rooted in an empirical and rational justifactory framework reflected in many Western mainstream discourses including news, but also including science, law, history, philosophy, sociology, etc. These tactics reflect how *The Dominion* acknowledges the legibilities and credibilities of dominant cultural structures of legitimacy of at work in popular cultures of news.

The risk, of course, is that in using the criteria of legitimacy manifest in mainstream newspapers and hegemonic culture, *The Dominion* will and arguably must according to Foucault

2 By "mainstream", I am referring to for-profit news organizations whose primary source of revenue is the sale of advertising to other for-profit organizations; whose institutional identities eschew labels such as alternative, independent, activist, citizen-based, community, participatory; and whose journalists expressly adopt the traditional professional standards of journalism rooted in objective reportage and empirical verification.

adopt the relationships of power through which dominant forms of knowledge achieve their legitimacies, the very same relations of power that manifest Western liberal democracies and their attendant capitalist structures of wealth production. To overstate it somewhat, it is as if genealogically speaking they are trying to use math to protest against logic; the question remains: how can *The Dominion* avoid either replicating the conditions it wants to dissent against or being dismissed as illegitimate and absurd. They do this, I suggest, through the tactical engagement of aesthetic experience.



Excerpt from *The Dominion*, Issue #68

Key to *The Dominion's* tactical aesthetics is how sensibilities of expectation are redistributed and in doing so a form of integrity is established that undermines the conditions of appropriateness at work in the legitimacies of domination manifest in dominant social forms. *The Dominion's* editors not only expect their audiences to reject certain kinds of experience as unacceptable, but there is an expectation that some of their audience will act to ensure that future social conditions prevent these experiences from recurring. In the article "Uprooting the G8 and G20", they write:

The articles in this issue, we hope, offer reasons to become angry and inspired. Join us in the assemblies and meeting halls and teaching spaces of the Toronto counter-summits, and join us in the streets. (*Dominion* 2010, 3).

In the same issue, in an article on human migration, the author writes:

The G20 protests this Spring are attracting a wide variety of community members ... “We have been and are continuing to host community forums in 15 migrant neighbourhoods in the months leading up to the G20 ... People want to talk about status, and about labour standards, about the world that they want to live in” (Maynard 2010).

In an article about protest movements learning from past experiences, the author quotes a representative of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP):

In Scott's experience, “The most powerful relationships are built right on the streets. Many of these groups have been to each other's demos, but have never called one another.” What comes of those relationships can only be told, fought over and evaluated and the days, weeks and months following what promises to be a memorable week in June. (Woolnough and Heinrichs 2010).

The expectations are that some of their readers are or will be politically involved, that they are seeking information relevant to tactical intervention, that they want to build “powerful relations” with others, and that they will be in the street acting out embodied forms of protest, or at least open to the prospect. These kinds of expectations render other kinds of experiences — like the effects of power that create havoc in the lives of those who benefit least from existing forms of social organization — in problematic and perhaps most importantly impermanent terms and thus destabilize at least to some extent the relations that give rise to their legitimacy. One's view of events changes, for example, if they are understood as subject to one's influence, just as they do if there is an understanding of responsibility for their eventual outcome.

More importantly, in addition to their use of objective modes of apprehension in their reporting (i.e. tying states of factual legitimacy to the techniques of objective observation and empirical verification as is the case in mainstream forms of journalistic practice), *The Dominion* is actively and simultaneously engaged in a mode of apprehension that structurally conflates the categories of subject/object by involving audiences at all levels of organizational production. *The Dominion* is a worker cooperative that actively produces alternatives to traditional forms of news media hierarchy and decision-making. Audiences are producers and managers; the objects of stories are the subjects themselves. In addition, the Media Coops each contribute two pages to the national magazine ensuring yet further decentralization of editorial authority (over meaning) into the agencies of contributing publics. It is *inappropriate* to exclude subjects from the procedures of representation within the organization, an altogether different structure of legitimacy from that of more mainstream commercial media organizations whose forms of public participation are largely limited to online comments and carefully scrutinized and selected letters to editors (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). The structure of *The Dominion* encourages news production by precisely the communities who benefit least, for example, from policies of advanced capitalism (i.e. aboriginal communities, the poor, migrant labour, LGBT communities, etc.).

Another important tactical engagement with aesthetic experience in *The Dominion's* cultural work can be found in the ways collective identity influences the production of meaning.

The “counterpoint to corporate media” that *The Dominion* wants to be is derived in the “work of social movements”, as the masthead says, and in being part of social movements driven forward by a sense of what is supposed to be, and what is in fact possible. These are exemplary states and they are tied to kinds of commitment and obligation (for example, to prevent the destruction of indigenous culture and territory) less likely found in more mainstream news organizations. It is not, for example, that *The Globe and Mail*³ doesn’t rely on exemplary states of obligation and commitment to produce its meanings (i.e. on future states that elude empirical verification). A commitment to expand opportunities for capital investment may stand at odds with a commitment to respect indigenous interests in traditional territories, but both equally inform the production of meaning just as both elude empirical verification. To understand what is appropriate (and therefore legitimate) in *The Dominion*, I suggest—to make sense of *The Dominion* -- is to subsume your identity into this authorized 'agreement of the people'. There is in this an expectation that audiences will become angered, inspired and that they will act politically, together. *The Dominion* is constituting new relations of “community resistance” (McSorely, 14).

Contrary to a more general and perhaps popular perception of the world's poor and disaffected, the editors of *The Dominion* instantiate them within relations of power where the seat of authority over decision-making rests with those served least by current political and economic arrangements. It is to this “authority” in a sense that *The Dominion* directs its rendering of “truths” about the world, and in this way also constitutes an identity, a shared identity, among readers as those with the agency and authority to determine political outcomes. And in this way, through the production of communities of resistance and descriptions of inappropriate social outcomes within recognizable frameworks of objectivity and verification, *The Dominion* is resisting the effects of power by undermining its conditions of legitimacy through aesthetic means.

In the case of Allyson Mitchell’s *Ladies Sasquatch*, the hegemonic legitimacies being a challenged are more narrowly construed. Mitchell is engaging with dominant perceptions of patriarchal and heteronormative relations of power to create space in public culture for lesbian identity. *Ladies Sasquatch* is comprised of six giant female humanoid figures, covered in fur, gathered around a camp fire. Their bodies, the platform that holds them, the fire, the small animals scurrying around the figures, are made of a mishmash of sewn together fabrics and “fun furs” reclaimed from textile objects gathered in second-hand stores — materials such as chenille bedspreads, shag rugs, hand-knit blankets, etc. Their faces are animalistic with mouths made from real animal teeth and tongues recessed into fabric cavities. The figures are distinctly female and naked -- breasts, nipples, vulvas, and asses are on display, and they strike a strange and playful mix of beastly and sexually-charged Sapphic intimations. *Ladies Sasquatch* is part of Mitchell’s *Deep Lez* project, a series of art works (re)appropriating public space for radical lesbian experience, an identity in Mitchell’s view that is largely absent from mainstream and popular cultures because of how it challenges popular norms (of race, body size, ability, sexuality, strength, autonomy, etc.) of female identity. In Mitchell’s work, these competing “truths” collide (Mitchell, 11-12):

... a truth about hetero-normativity in relation to hetero-sexuality in relation to hetero-

3 The Globe and Mail is Canada’s largest mainstream national newspaper.



Detail from Allyson Mitchell's Ladies Sasquatch, photo courtesy of the artist

normative hetero-sexuality in relation to whiteness, small able bodies thinness -- the Sasquatches undo that big capital T truth about those being the only kinds of bodies that exist, which you see on television, right, and shows different kinds of bodies that are racialized, that are not even fully human but are animal-human hybrids, that are fat, that have big butts and are sexualized, but not within the traditional way where you're used to seeing sexualized, feminized bodies through a patriarchal lens.

A hetero-normative, male-dominated hegemony encounters lesbian culture in the size and shape of female "beauty", in the challenge to traditional family structures implicit in a sexualized female collective, in the challenge to science implicit in the crypto-zoology of Sasquatches, in the challenge to colonial legacies implicit in the valorization of aboriginal mythology. (In Winnipeg, MB where the installation was exhibited in 2009, Mitchell was invited to participate in a panel discussion about the cultural importance of Sasquatch to aboriginal communities, aboriginal knowledge and colonialism by an organization called APES, Aboriginal People Excited about Sasquatches; and while the sculpture was at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, a group of young aboriginal mothers-to-be started using the room where *Ladies Sasquatch* was exhibited as a gathering place for regular meetings to share experiences and discuss their lives).

Mitchell expects *Ladies Sasquatch* to appeal to a wide and diverse audience – like journalism – and she must render her work legibly and credibly in terms of hegemonic "truths" or risk having it condemned as folly or madness. She says herself that she wants her sculpture to appeal to young radical lesbians, to "super-conservative homophobes", to rural folk, to feminists

and to an art community. This last category of audience and attendant structure of legitimacy is one of the first appeals made - *Ladies Sasquatch* finds its audiences primarily through institutional art galleries. Mitchell is well aware of the legitimacies that accrue with institutional acceptance and how these legitimacies play in audiences of the general public, as she says: “there’s something that happens with the work moving through museums and galleries that [is] teaching people that this is legitimate” [Mitchell 16]. The gallery setting asserts a kind of credibility for the challenges to dominant forms knowing (i.e. heteronormative relations of power) being asserted by the sculpture.⁴

Ladies Sasquatch blurs boundaries of legibility with ambiguities of playfulness, humour and most importantly through the use of textiles to evoke senses of nostalgia, comfort and familiarity rooted in memories of home and childhood:

I feel as though the materials and the way that people connect to the materials and get down with it, that they are seduced by the familiarity, the comfort, the tactility, the softness of the materials that. I feel like that indicates the truth of the work. (Mitchell, 6)

Playfulness, nostalgia, sensuality, comfort all work to draw the spectator in – physically, as viewers are encouraged to experience the sculptures up close, to step up onto the platform, touch the giants and join the circle around the fire. But what they are drawn into, if rendered through different aesthetic tactics (say, those of journalism), might otherwise have been threatening or condemnable. “People walk in here, and they become part of this circle ... implicated in the lesbian feminism separatist politics, regardless of gender” (Mitchell, 8). The spectator is encouraged to belong in this group rather than to feel “othered” and alienated; the old blankets and bed spreads and hand-knit afghans of which the giants are made recall childhood comforts for many, and in this way subtly, nostalgically, comfortingly, the subjugated knowledges become their own. It is like a conceptual optical illusion: look at the sculpture one way, and there are six playful “stuffed-animal” monsters that invoke childhood fantasies; look at it another way, and there is a collective of sexually-charged she-beasts with strength, independence and fierceness living a world without men.

Through these tactical uses of ambiguity, nostalgia and playfulness, *Ladies Sasquatch* generates the possibility of belonging: audiences must decide what is appropriate and whose identity is being offered. The physical strength and fierceness of the sculptures, and their mythological powers suggest a gathering of strange demi-gods of a kind and to be among them

⁴ But not without its own attendant controversies. At the Winnipeg Art Gallery, for example, Mitchell’s work was met with a certain level of institutional hesitation and, according to the artist, hostility. Mitchell describes how *Ladies Sasquatch* was originally curated for the central foyer at the main entrance to the WAG, a highly visible and prestigious location. The director of the gallery changed, and the new director was reluctant to proceed with the exhibition in the planned location. Despite reassurances that the installation was being moved for administrative reasons, Mitchell had the distinct impression that the sculptures were perceived as too sensational. In their new location -- a much smaller room deep in the gallery and shared with another exhibit -- the WAG’s concerns were narrowed to the angle of one the lady sasquatch’s naked butt and vulva: the curator didn’t want it facing the entrance to the room and threatened to cancel the show. Mitchell reluctantly agreed to make the change, but even after the installation was moved to the less prominent room and changes made, Mitchell felt the curator was “disgusted” by the sculptures. Art galleries are not immune from the hegemonic norms whose legitimacies are being challenged by Mitchell’s work.



Detail from Allyson Mitchell's Ladies Sasquatch, photo courtesy of the artist

may be intimidating, but it is also flattering. The expectation is that audiences must decide in the

encounter with feelings of nostalgia, wonder and even fear, if they belong in the gathering. The fierce qualities of the sculpture are inseparable from materials that evoke comfort, familiarity and childhood reminiscence. The invitation to play seems hard to resist. But to accept this invitation, is to accept on some level the appropriateness of the ways *Ladies Sasquatch* rejects dominant, patriarchal forms of understanding — about women, about the sexualization of women, about the visibility of radical lesbian identities, about race, about body size, about indigenous cultures.

Mitchell's production of her own identity and sense of belonging as audience renders visible what in dominant patriarchal terms is the illegitimate experience and knowledge of radical, separatist lesbian cultures. They are rendered legible, at least to the extent that they manifest on terms other than error and folly, and appropriate, at least to the extent that the invitation to play is accepted. By encouraging close inspection, touching and in fact *joining the giants on their platform*, *Ladies Sasquatch* implicates audiences into resistant knowledges willingly and within territories of pleasure.

Conclusion

The Dominion and *Ladies Sasquatch* are clearly two very different kinds of cultural engagement, one recognizably journalistic, the other more recognizable as art. But each in its own way helps to demonstrate the complexities of engaging in discursive challenges to the effects of power through the tactical use of aesthetic experience. Part of my argument in this paper is that, at least on an aesthetic level, the tactical sophistication with which these cultural endeavours are challenging the legitimacies of dominant “truths” are not only comparable, but that both are aesthetically engaged in commenting on social reality through challenging or producing discursive truth.

As has been widely described, there is undoubtedly a crisis in journalism in Western popular cultures (Barnett and Gaber 2002; Fuller 2010; McChesney and Nichols 2011), but the nature of the crisis is too often construed as only an economic upheaval. Another facet of the crisis is a crisis in meaning. Public expectations about and perceptions of “truth” are changing and it isn't clear that traditional forms of journalism are keeping up. There are for certain technological factors helping to explain why publics are turning to blogging, animation, graphic novels, video art, comedic talk shows, dramatic fiction, theatre and other forms of non-traditional commentary on social reality. The “accidental topologies” (Sampson 2007) of digital networks have among other things increased the possibilities for rhizomatic cultural links between peers directly and with greater independence from the homogenizing influences of large, centralized cultural institutions (Benkler 2006; Burgess 2006; Critical Art Ensemble 2001; Jenkins 2006; Sampson 2007; Pierce 2010). And with these changes are emerging changing tastes for “truth” in popular cultures (Baym 2007; Bird 2009; Cramerotti 2009; Dahlgren 2009; Hartley 2004; Jones 2009; Lanham 2006; Schudson 2000; Shields 2010). This article is arguing, at least in part, that what is at stake in these changes are ways of understanding and perceiving the nature of discursive legitimacy.

The Dominion magazine explicitly adopts the legitimacies of traditional journalism while undermining notions of what are appropriate expectations, obligations and commitments in the

current economic and political structures of capitalism and Western liberal democracy. Ambiguities of appropriateness emerge in relation to who is understood to have authority for governance and the kinds of ontological integrities instantiated through exemplary validities that assert, for example, that labour is more than an industrial input and that Canadian sovereignty is legally suspect. These are not empirically or strictly rationally defensible or condemnable orientations, any more than is a feeling of patriotism or a feeling of entrepreneurial contempt in response to concerns irrelevant to traditional practices of accounting. These tensions unfold in territories immune from the strict legitimacies that underwrite reason and because of it have been overlooked as elements of what makes up our experiences of “truth” in cultural terms.

Ladies Sasquatch encounters patriarchal understandings of women, of female bodies and sexuality, of the pornographies of lesbian sexuality, of heteronormativity, of thinness, of whiteness, with radical separatist lesbian politics through strong female bodies, large female bodies, and eroticization and sexualities that reject the ways the male gaze constructs female subjectivities. These females are humanoid, not human — they are Sasquatches, which is an encounter with aboriginal cultural mythologies. Their legibilities are uncertain. But the gallery setting provides a structure of credibility (even if through its own forms of controversy, see footnote 3) for whatever uncertain legibilities are in play. Audiences are confronted with an invitation to join an identity of radical lesbian experience rendered through affect of nostalgia, comfort and childhood fantasy. Patrons must choose.

If we are to agree with the terms that hegemonic power (in whatever form) would set, its fiats of subscription must be visible, which in turn requires their legibility, credibility and appropriateness, although in what proportions is unclear, and it is here in these fluid spaces that resistance can assert alternative relations, which must also reflect alternative terms of legitimacy. These are conceptually underdetermined territories of meaning and can be understood as elements of aesthetic experience, the extra-rational and preconceptual affects of cultural encounter. And in their tactical engagement, they reveal ways that dissenting voices can overcome the genealogical conundrum of rejecting hegemonic terms of legitimacy without succumbing to illegitimate status. Or in other words, an aesthetics of legitimacy helps to explain the cultural terms through which the “eventualization” of power and truth can be interrupted, reordered and reassembled.

As suggested by my inclusion of *Ladies Sasquatch*, the notion of a tactical aesthetics of dissent applies well beyond recognizable forms of journalism such as *The Dominion*. As Cramerotti (2009) has convincingly argued in *Aesthetic Journalism*, artists are increasingly confident exploring their potential for commenting on social reality. These aesthetically charged encounters with structures of “truth” and power assert new legitimacies in popular discourses of meaning. Artists as journalists may be a surprising idea, but it also an intriguing one, and perhaps one whose time has come.

An 'aesthetics of legitimacy' allows analytic access to some of the strategies power uses to mobilize “truth” on its own behalf, and — of more interest to those interested in the ways hegemonic influence can be disrupted — to the tactics engaged by artists and cultural activists to transcend the conditions of possibility for subjectivity and knowledge without succumbing to epistemic charges of stupidity and error.

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