
Spin, Spin, Spin: Responsorial

David M. Boje. *Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 2; pg. 97-99, 3 pgs

Abstract (Article Summary)

I will contrast one poet who adores Nike with a guitar poet who sees tragedy there. Acquenetta Taylor is a Nike fan and Randy Granger is the critic.

Full Text (2,164 words)

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Acquenetta's poems present a counter-point to our special theme issue of *Tamara* on corporate predators. She does not see Nike as a predator, but rather as a champion of sport, who keeps it real and has something deep to say to sports fans. She and I trade much email about her poems:

America has a heart and Nike has won it over through respect and creditability. There are always competitors, and there should be. That's what keeps a company like Nike going. You know; People in this day and time are into Truth. Gimmicks and instant gratification simply won't cut it. It's time to tell the people what they want to hear, and the truth of matter is "Keeping It Real" like Nike says; "Just Do It!" That's what it's gonna take to stay in the race.

With time being the precious commodity that it is, Right Now! As we speak "Poetry Is In Motion in TV/Commercials."

You know! The one's that leave you with something to think about. Something deep, with depth. Something that'll leave you somewhat spiritually inspired; that's what I'm talkin' about.

Thanks again,

Acquenetta!

Obviously, we do not see eye to eye; I am skeptical of Nike's advertising messages. I look at how Nike depicts women and minorities in sports while employing over 700,000 in sweatshops throughout the world.

Acquenetta says she hopes Nike will notice her poems, now published in *Tamara*, and Nike will make them part of their advertising legend. In the words of the movie, *Matrix*, she wants to plug into the spectacle, not deconstruct it. Acquenetta wrote to Mr. Harris, the Chief Information Officer of Nike saying:

I was very impressed with the commercial www.nike.com/mrsjones. In fact I had registered my vote with the survey, in hope there were more that shared my sentiments. In any event my writing you is contributed to my interest in possibly having two of my poems used as one of your commercials.

I am aware of Nike endorsing several athletes, and I am confident I have the perfect poem geared to inflate corporate profits...

Acquenetta!

It is interesting to me, that Acquenetta would sell her poems—her art—to Nike so that they might increase what I consider ‘predatory corporate’ profits. Acquenetta seems to believe the messages of popular culture, without awareness of the factory houses of terror beneath the spectacle.

Acquenetta’s relating of art to profit, reminds me of the life of another artist, Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980), a character in John Krizanc’s (1981/1989) play *Tamara*, after which this journal is named. I have a story to tell.

Beautiful and headstrong, Tamara de Lempicka enrolled in *Academie de la Grand Chaumiere* in 1918 and began her paintings of unnervingly erotic and (soft) cubist portraits. In the 1920s and 1930s, in an art industry dominated by men, she became the darling of the European aristocracy. Her abstract and modern style is widely recognized as the most important in all Art Deco. In a time of Hitler and Mussolini, Tamara de Lempicka sold her art to the wealthy patrons. In a time when global capitalism is addicted to sweatshops, Acquenetta, what are you doing?

Was Tamara at all answerable for her stories and characters rendered in Art Deco? This is the point that Krizanc is making in his play. Or does Tamara merely anticipate the postmodern consumer, who makes icon-purchases without awareness of their complicity in fetish distribution and sweaty production?

Are we answerable for our own consumptive and artistic choices? Acquenetta Taylor is also struggling in an industry dominated by men, not only male poets, by ad men, and Nike buyers for her poems. She is not yet the darling of Nike, but she needs a wealthy patron for her art to become known. We are not wealthy, but we do attract the gaze of the Nike war room.

What about Acquenetta’s two poems? One is inspired by Nike’s ads about Mrs. Marion Jones, a world-class sprinter. Jones is featured in ads Nike fashions to be controversial. Marion Jones was trying to win an unprecedented five gold medals in track and field, but now the media circles like vultures, as she announces her divorce from husband, coach, body-guard and trainer—C. J. Hunter.

The second poem is about Tiger Woods, and his winning of a Master’s golf tournament. Woods is positioned by Nike in countless ads to take over the iconic role of retiring

Michael Jordan. Last year, Tiger had to run the gauntlet after a tournament in Thailand, as 100-sacked employees, did mock him. One was dressed as a henchman, swinging an inverted Swoosh, like an ax. Organizer, Lek Junya Yumprasert, observed, "It would take the workers here 72,000 years of work for Nike on their wages to make that money." Tiger Woods just lowered his head, ignoring the signs that read "Tiger Woods putting around workers rights" and "Tiger Woods please help us."

The second theme, as I read Acquenetta's messages, is about Nike's Mrs. Jones ad series: "why do media and critics jump on high school basketball players who pass up college to play in the NBA when nobody seems to be concerned about hockey, baseball or soccer players who do the same thing in much greater numbers" (Nike, 2001)? Mrs. Jones according to Nike's Web site "asks her listeners why women earn less at the same game, even though they work just as hard and "their blood is just as red" (Nike, 2001). Nike says it produces these commercials in hopes they will raise awareness of issues facing athletes and sports. There is also a "Join The Debate" over these ads that Nike has run on Mrs. Jones at www.nike.com/mrsjones with two interactive questions:

Question One: "More Role Models" (Chose one response):

- Like it or not athletes, you are roles models. Set a positive example.
- Athletes, you get paid to play. What you do on your time is between you and the law.
- Parents, raise your children. Athletes, shape up so you can stay on the field

Question Two: "More For Women" (Choose one response)

- Women athletes work just as hard as men. Give them equal pay.
- It isn't a gender issue. Pay all athletes according to the money their sport brings in.
- Pay male athletes more than women.

Besides answering these multiple-choice questions, fans can sound off with an email. Nike attempts to stay right in the middle of a spotlighted issue it has constructed by its advertising. "Nike is no stranger to airing controversial ads that foster debate about key issues" (Nike, 2001). The ad about the ax murder chasing the woman in the woods, comes to mind.

What about Nike's adds? Cheryl Cole (1996, 1997; Cole & Hribar, 1995) has deconstructed Nike's advertising, and we have an article **Darin J. Arsenault & Tamer Fawzy in this issue that does likewise**. Through its ads, "Nike secures its patriotic, charitable, and socially responsible public profile" (Cole, 1997). Nike re-territorializes its identity through the somatic ads about its role in the life of youth, women's access to power, and with heroic figures, such as Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Marion Jones. Cole's work deconstructs such image constructions as the work of corporate power and hegemony. Hegemony here refers to authorial-power which is taken for granted and plots are scripted in ways unseen.

Consumers or investors do not know the locations of Third World factories, nor does one

ever hear stories directly authored and voiced by workers. The Athletic Apparel Industry stands as gatekeeper, authoring ventriloquist stories on behalf of workers who remain voiceless. Fans are captivated by the position Nike holds in popular culture. Cole questions the commodification of black popular culture.

Nike intensely invested in its image as a "socially responsible corporation." Nike exemplifies a new generation of corporations who, at least apparently, willingly inaugurate, participate in, and sustain programs designed to address what are simultaneously articulated as America's problems. Nike is seen as a charitable organization concerned with "giving something back" to American communities. Indeed, Nike is America's quintessential postmodern corporation: a technologically hip and innovative corporation that prioritizes public issues and cares about public well-being (Cole, 1997).

And we could say the same about Reebok and their annual "Human Rights Awards." For Cole, Nike is a postmodern corporation because it is so virtual: Nike outsources its production to mostly third world factories whose employees are 85% female between the ages of 16 and 23; after 23, they are typically fired, to be replaced by younger and cheaper, more docile substitutes. At the same time, Nike morphs itself in virtual image, changing its faciality to be heroic savior of sports-equity and an end to violence in inner city playgrounds. Please!

Nike invites consumers to become activists in its causes for fairness in sports, and positioning itself as the rebel, the non-conforming corporation in an age of conformity. Beneath its spectacularity, Nike does not address, as Cole (1997) describes how "America's urban areas are plagued by problems ranging from malnutrition, AIDS, drug use, gangs, murders, to teenage pregnancy, inadequate health care, unemployment, homelessness, and police brutality?"

How are we to understand the positioning of Nike, Tiger Woods, and Mrs. Jones in the poems that Acquenetta presents? Put another way, how does the position of Nike and its icons by Acquenetta help us understand Nike's position in popular postmodern culture? The poems position icons in the collective fantasy of popular culture, in ideals of competing to win—against all odds—and the hero's journey completed with the trophy held high and the adoration of the masses. Nike is codified in these poems as the quest, the hero's journey. Acquenetta wants to become a key artist in fabricating the national mythic that is Nike, transcendence through sports. Acquenetta be advised that Phil only paid \$35 for the Swoosh logo, he negotiates deals with subcontractors so only pennies a day remain for 700,000 workers, but he did pay Global Alliance for Workers and Communities \$7.8 million for some focus group studies.

To me the poems mask a more violent and predatory hypercompetition, one that oppresses mostly women in sweaty factory conditions, to compete for the lowest possible wage rates, to stretch the working day, while presenting a public image of justice and equity in sports.

To get some sense of this, I turn to the work of another poet.

Nike Poem by Guitar Poet Randy Granger

I asked guitar poet Randy Granger if he would let *Tamara* publish part of a song he wrote, called "Flying Home." He told me it reminded him of Nike's global business practices.

FLYING HOME by Randy Granger

What are we gonna do/
They've got our children there/
In a factory where/
The Sun will never ever shine/
They've got brittle bones/
And the brightest smiles/
Brighter than the sun/
They sing, fly, fly, fly/
Brother fly on/
Sister fly on/Children fly/
We all fly home

Words and Music by: Randy Granger Copyright 2000 granger, r.j.

We know that since the *Life Magazine* expose of soccer ball stitching in Pakistan (Schanberg, 1996), Nike has moved away from the pre-teen child labor market. To keep the record straight, the mean age of a Nike worker is now 16 to 23, with a few who are 13 to 15 trying to pass for older. After age 23, the mostly female workforce is fired, to make way for younger and cheaper labor. The stanzas about brittle bones, and where the Sun will never ever shine, recalls what Marx (1867, Ch 10) observed:

But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment of the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential (The Working-Day).

Randy Granger and Acquenetta Taylor, are two poets who tune into Nike quite differently.

Is Nike answerable for its advertising fantasy, its addiction to sweatshops, and its role in the Society of the Spectacle (Debord, 1967)? Are artists answerable for prostituting art to increase corporate wealth? Am I answerable for deconstructing poems that glorify and vilify Nike competitiveness? Ninety-three Nike staffers report to V.P.'s Maria Eitel and Dusty Kidd, doing the bidding of billionaire Phil Knight, and they are ready to deconstruct anything I say. Nike please publish Acquetta's poems, and to court the activists, make some ironic use of Randy's work, and so it goes...spin, spin, spin....

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Subjects:

People: Boje, David M.

Author(s): David M. Boje

Publication title: Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 2; pg. 97-99, 3 pgs

Source Type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 15325555

Text Word Count 2,164