

# CORDON OFF THE CONTEMPT IN A WORD COMPARTMENT

## (AND OTHER WHISPERING MOMENTS)

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A video-directed group exercise/meditation/conversation, "Cordon Off the Contempt in a Word Compartment (and Other Whispering Moments)" investigates the uses and values of contempt, hygiene, language, and importantly, of whispering as a means of containment, paradoxically, through the process of propagation



*Cordon Off the Contempt in a Word Compartment (and Other Whispering Moments), 2010, Joshua Kit Clayton. Video/Performance. Documentation of performance at Southern Exposure, San Francisco, USA. Copyright 2010 Joshua Kit Clayton.*

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### CONTEMPT

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Contempt. Contempt lives and breathes inside each of us. To deny it would be to deny something essential to the human condition, our relationship to the world around us, and ultimately, our survival. It's no accident our species is filled with such bounty. It spews forth in all directions, externally and internally: Upwards contempt to regain our agency in the face of authority; to fight oppression, injustice, or dominant systems. Downwards contempt to boost our self-image; to morally justify crimes against those we believe to be inferior. Lateral contempt to individuate, defend, and aggress in our struggle with our peers; to form communities around certain ideals. Self-contempt to combat the parts of ourselves we cannot accept; to maintain the fantasies that keep us alive.

Voice of morality; motivation for change; face of justice (and of justification); protective shell; vicious spear; it is all these things and more. It is anger, but anger combined with valuation. And how do we live without values? It is survival. And we would suffocate without its razor-edged embrace. Not only as individuals, but society as a whole. Contempt is an integral part of our emotional and social ecosystem. Obviously, contempt has its problems; its dangers. And you might think that we should only talk about how to eradicate it--contempt for contempt? But, let's put that aside for the time being and celebrate contempt's undeniable existence, its functions, and our reliance upon it.

You, yourself, might be swimming in it right now. Most likely you are. Perhaps it's the contempt for those around you. Perhaps for a situation you just left. Perhaps for your parents, your siblings, your children, yourself. Perhaps for the rambling of some egotistical pundit, whose arrogant words you can't shake. Perhaps for the politicians he was condemning. Perhaps for the bourgeois scum. Perhaps for your local drug dealer. Perhaps for global petroleum addiction. Perhaps for your endless indecision. Perhaps for that tragically catchy pop song that still circles in your head, or the brand markings that adorn your wardrobe, or the spam that ceaselessly pours into your email account, or those fucking obnoxious...

Perhaps it is the contempt you feel for this cursed artwork, or the whole of art in general, and the elitist cabal that operates the levers behind the machine. Perhaps that is art's gift: to present itself as an object worthy of contempt. To be generous in providing something around which people can commiserate as to its arrogance. In which people can assert their own identity in the face of this presumed authority. As they say, "The greatest gift you can give is something to complain about". Well complaint is but the pedestrian face of pure unadulterated contempt!

I digress. Regardless, it's not implausible to assume there's some contempt brewing inside of you. Maybe it's deeper than the surface, but if you take a minute to think, and dig, and poke your way through your inner muck, a golden kernel of contempt will reveal itself to you.

Take a minute to look inwards, and investigate. I can wait. Don't worry about getting your hands dirty. You'll have plenty of time to clean yourself later.

Hold on to that, but for a brief moment, put it aside. Scan the room. Surely you see someone who you don't know very well, but you think you can confide in. Walk to them. Don't be shy. Now that you've found them, and you have found them, haven't you? Hurry up. Okay. Now that you've found them. Sit if you like. Stand if you prefer. This is your shining moment. Where you can let it all out. In vitriolic indignation, or shameless sniveling, or breathless exasperation. Don't hesitate. Speak. Listen. Don't worry. There are no mistakes. Share it with your confidant.

Contempt. Raw and unfiltered contempt. Let it sweep you away.

*(five to ten minutes of people talking/reflecting)*

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## HYGIENE

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Now that wasn't so bad now, was it? Okay, well maybe it was. Consider it a gift. Now the thing about contempt, is that like I mentioned, you can get dirty. Horribly, terribly, dirty. Filth, infection, and contagion can take over. For all the important uses that contempt does serve, it is extremely dangerous. I apologize for not giving you much warning.

Yes, contempt can take over. Dripping from your mouth, across your face, and down across your entire body. Sliding under your skin, through your sinews, around your bones, back up your spine, inside your mind, and back out again. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Can you feel it the contempt squishing about? Can you smell it? Can you taste it? It's all over you. And not just yourself either, but those around you. It is an infection. An insidious, invasive, infection! And you are the one spreading it.

And so, it makes perfect sense that we often don't voice our contempt. For fear of harming those around us. Those close to us. Those we hold dear. The thought of being responsible for their demise sickens us. Of turning them into loathing contemptuous monsters. But, what about ourselves?

Surely, we don't want to seem to be such monsters either. But, in refraining from sharing, we keep the vermin festering inside of us. And eventually, they will lash out, in unconscious actions, with unforeseen consequences. We must let the contempt out somehow, but what are the means to tame this beast, so that it doesn't demolish everything in its path?

In order to protect ourselves, and those around us, we must cordon off the contempt in a word compartment. Cordon off the contempt in a word compartment. They cannot just be any words, however. We must choose them wisely and meticulously to form a prophylactic barrier to the contempt they contain. But we must also choose them in such a way that the contempt demands. We do not wish to undermine either the contempt itself, or the release we are striving to accomplish.

It is a problem of managed risk. There is no such thing as total safety, only best efforts. And inaction is not an option. Now think back on the words you thought or spoke in the call for "unfiltered contempt". Did your words consider the following criteria? What the contempt itself requires. Your hygiene. The hygiene of those around you. Was it in fact unfiltered? Was it even contempt? Don't feel bad. It can be difficult to synthesize emotion on command. I understand, but I will demand it all the same.

If you are still here, try it again. This time with a consideration of hygiene, and a meticulous choice of words. You can speak with the same person as before, or someone new, or, if you absolutely cannot bring yourself to share this danger with those around you, simply imagine the words that you would say. Or speak aloud to yourself. I won't mind.

*(five to ten minutes of people talking/reflecting)*

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## WHISPER

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Good. I can already sense the difference. Can you? Reflect upon your consideration, connection, transmission. What happened to your words? What happened to your voice? What happened to your face? What happened to your body? Was it safe? Was it safe enough? Did it contain the contempt? Did it respect the contempt? Was it just the same infectious gripe-fest as before? Do you feel dirty?

Hmmm... I suppose it was not enough. To carefully choose words alone, is not enough. We must also be incredibly attentive to the voice, and the structure the voice forms as it passes between persons. Voice can be a minimal conduit, a vast amphitheater, or a winding maze for the message it contains. The volume, tone, and timbre all provide detailed context. And it too must be carefully chosen, as you work to build this container.

Upward, downward, and neutral inflection. Resonant in your skull, or in your body. Sharpness. Softness. Rhythm. Pauses: why and where. Not only the voices spoken aloud, but the ones inside your mind. The ones that only you can hear. They have their own forms of internal transmission and diffusion.

What can one do to even further contain the contempt, and at the same time respect it, in a supple, non-aggressive form? Like a light misty breeze rolling through you and out into the world.

Yes, a light misty breeze rolling through you and out into the world. The whisper: unpitched, neutralizer of tone; vehicle of confession; quiet, ephemeral, but so present! And again, I will ask you to speak about and/or reflect on these ideas. Contempt. Disease. Words as containers. Respect. The whisper. Voice as structure. Or whatever you like. But whatever you do, do so in a whisper. Even in your thoughts. A whisper.

*(five to ten minutes of people talking/reflecting)*

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## PROXIMITY

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We are still here. And with the whisper: What happened to your words? What happened to your voice? Where was the contempt? Is it now a secret? What is the function of a secret? Are you trying to keep a secret from me? What is it you are afraid I'll hear? What happened to your face? What happened to your body? Yes, your body. And those around you.

Proximity. The proximity of your body to the bodies of others. Maybe you were able to divert the painful glances of the eyes, as perhaps you whisper in another's ear, but the whisper demands a physical proximity. When was the last time you recall whispering in someone's ear? Who was it you whispered to? What was it you were whispering? Why don't you whisper more often? What are the dangers involved? What if you were to imagine your whispering words, but not say them? Would this be a secret? Would your body show it? And what happens when you touch another body? What happens?

The touch. Again, danger. Respect. Infection. Hygiene. Proximity. Managing risks at every turn. The biggest danger, your hands. What if you were touching someone near you? Perhaps you are already. How would you do so without involving your hands? Specifically, the grasp.

Consider your body against another body without any grasp. No open palm. No way to pull the person towards you. It is a crucial difference. Arm. Elbow. Knee. Calf. Feet. Shoulder. Spine. Head. Chest. Hip.

One last time before we part ways, look around the room, and find someone, or just find yourself. Stand, sit, lie. Contempt, hygiene, whisper, proximity, and touching without grasping. You'll know what to do.

*(five to ten minutes of people talking/reflecting/touching)*