

**17th Biennial Symposium on Arts & Technology  
November 10-12, 2022**



**contact**

**Symposium Proceedings**

**ammerman center**  
**[ arts & technology ]**



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# PROCEEDINGS

**THE SEVENTEENTH BIENNIAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY**

**November 10 – November 12, 2022**

**ammerman center**

**[ arts & technology ]**

**CONNECTICUT COLLEGE  
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**AMMERMAN CENTER FOR ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY**  
**17<sup>TH</sup> BIENNIAL SYMPOSIUM ON ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY**  
**“CONTACT”**  
**NOVEMBER 10, 11 AND 12, 2022**

**Schedule of Events, Open to The Public**

**Keynote Address: Centre for Emotional Materiality**

“Towards the Love of Missing Out (LOMO)”

Friday, November 11, 9:45 am – 10:45 am, Evans Hall, Cummings Arts Center

**Keynote Workshop: Centre for Emotional Materiality**

“Towards the Love of Missing Out (LOMO): Attunement”

Thursday, November 10, 3:45 pm – 5:15 pm, Hood, Blaustein Humanities Center

**Keynote Performance: Centre for Emotional Materiality**

“Towards the Love of Missing Out (LOMO): Listening”

Thursday, November 10, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm, Myers Studio, Crozier-Williams Student Center

**Commissioned Works:**

Panel: Distance, Depth, and Empathy: Joel Ong, “In Silence”

Featured Artist in Gallery / Installation

Thursday, November 10, 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm, Oliva Hall, Cummings Arts Center

“In Silence”, Joel Ong

Featured artist in Gallery / Installation

Exhibition dates: November 10 - December 10

Opening: Friday, November 11, 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm, Contact Exhibition Reception, Cummings Arts Center Galleries

“Llontop”, Anonymous Ensemble

Featured Artists in Multimedia Performance

Saturday, November 12, 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm, Palmer Auditorium

“Envelop In In”, Ensemble Pamplemousse

Featured Artists in Sound Performance

Saturday, November 12, 8:00 pm, Myers Studio, Crozier-Williams Student Center

**Exhibitions and Installations:**

Contact Exhibition, Opening and Reception

Friday, November 11, 4:00 – 6:00 pm, Cummings Arts Center Galleries

Gallery hours: November 10, 11, 12, 9 am - 8 pm

Exhibition dates: November 10 - December 10

**Concerts**

Multimedia Performances

November 10 and 11, 8 pm, Evans Hall, Cummings Arts Center

November 12, 8 pm, Myers Studio, Crozier-Williams Student Center

**Papers and Presentations**

Panel: Distance, Depth, and Empathy

Thursday, November 10, 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm, Oliva Hall, Cummings Arts Center

Lightning Talks

Friday, November 11, 12:00 pm - 1:30 pm, Hood, Blaustein Humanities Center

Panel: Designing Past, Designing Future  
Friday, November 11, 2:45 pm - 4:00 pm, Oliva Hall, Cummings Art Center

Panel: Roots as Contact  
Saturday, November 12, 9:45 am - 11:00 am, Oliva Hall, Cummings Art Center

Panel: Tearing Down and Building Up  
Saturday, November 12, 11:15 am - 12:30 pm, Oliva Hall, Cummings Art Center

**Ammerman Center Student Project Presentations and Reception**

Thursday, November 10, 2:45 pm – 3:45 pm., 768 Williams Street

**Workshops**

Curating a Site-Specific Digital Exhibition  
Saturday, November 11, 1:30 pm - 2:30 pm, Oliva Hall, Cummings Arts Center

Messages for a Revolution  
Saturday, November 11, 1:30 pm - 2:30 pm, Evans Concert Hall, Cummings Arts Center

How to Livestream Hybrid Events  
Saturday, November 12, 2:30 pm - 3:30 pm, Cummings Arts Center #301

Collaborative World-Building  
Saturday, November 12, 2:30 pm - 3:30 pm, Cummings Arts Center #227

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**Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium  
CONTACT**

**First Contact: Pauline Oliveros's *Echoes from the Moon***

**G Douglas Barrett**

New Jersey City University  
New Jersey, USA  
gdouglasbarrett@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This paper analyzes Pauline Oliveros's *Echoes from the Moon*, a work that uses extraplanetary radio transmissions to bounce participants' voices and musical sounds off the moon. I consider what an aural confrontation with extraterrestrial life could mean for the historical category of the human. Aliens have not only been a subject of sci-fi, but over two centuries ago were critical for humanism's philosophical construction of the human.

Extraterrestrials were integral, for instance, to Immanuel Kant's late anthropological writings and, earlier, they formed the basis of his interplanetary racial hierarchy, which mirrored attitudes of other Enlightenment thinkers of the time. Two centuries later, scientists continue to express surprise at the lack of evidence for the extraterrestrial colonization of our galaxy.

Yet why do scientists apply such a contingent world-historical process to the universe and imagine aliens as inevitable colonizers? Oliveros encourages to hear space differently.

**Keywords**

Experimental music, radio astronomy, moonbounce, EME, posthumanism, SETI, cybernetics, space exploration, colonialism

**Introduction**

Looking up at the night's sky, as the old saw goes, one wonders if we're truly alone in the universe. How might the detection of, and even communication with, an extraterrestrial intelligence affect our understanding of ourselves as humans?

In 1987, the composer Pauline Oliveros presented *Echoes from the Moon*, a multi-form work that uses radio transmissions to broadcast sounds to the moon and hear their reflections back on Earth. Oliveros traveled to Maine to work with Dave Olean, an amateur radio operator who during the 1960s had participated in one of the first two-way Earth–Moon–Earth communications. Also known as “moonbounce,” EME was first developed through war efforts to spy across large distances prior to satellites. Moonbounce has also been formative for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. When radio waves reflect off the moon, they might appear to extraterrestrials as one of our own technological signs of life. Moonbounce might both create and observe our own “alien” technosignature [1].

Oliveros's *Echoes* is a far cry from messaging aliens directly, although moonbounce often results in broadcasts that reach other stars. For their first moonbounce, Oliveros and Olean configured an array of twenty-four antennas capable of sending and receiving radio signals. Since radio waves travel at the speed of light, the half-million-mile trip to the moon and back

takes about 2½ seconds to complete. In her first duet with the moon, Oliveros used a tin whistle, conch shell, and the accordion. Yet before these *instrumental* sounds began their respective roundtrip journeys to the moon, Oliveros's role was, in her words, that of a "vocal astronaut." The first utterance Oliveros sent to the moon was, simply, "hello" [2]. But whom was she greeting?

For this talk, I want to analyze *Echoes from the Moon* to reflect on the historical category of the human. How might sending sounds to space affect an understanding of ourselves? Oliveros wasn't the first to send messages to outer space. The astrophysicist Frank Drake sent one from Puerto Rico in 1974. His Arecibo message projected into space nearly 1,700 binary digits that included numerical constants, bitmaps of the solar system, and a pictographic image of "man."<sup>1</sup> What can sending such signals to space tell us about this figure of man?

What would an aural confrontation with aliens mean for the concept of the human—a concept traceable to the humanist philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries? As it happens, during the Enlightenment everyone believed in aliens. This included Immanuel Kant, whose very definition of humans depended on a hypothetical society of aliens who spoke in an unfiltered stream of consciousness. Kant's vision departed from his earlier conception of a racial hierarchy of extraterrestrials, which mirrored various racio-colonial attitudes of the time. Fast-forward two centuries, and scientists continue to express surprise at the lack of evidence for aliens colonizing our galaxy. In the words of the physicist Enrico Fermi, "where is everybody" [3]? But why do scientists seem to apply such a contingent world-historical process

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<sup>1</sup> Although the pictograph appears to lack gender-related features, the accompanying numerical figures, in fact, include the average height of men at the time—1.76 meters (5 feet, 9 inches).

to the universe, imagining otherworldly aliens as inevitable colonizers?

Ultimately, I think that Oliveros encourages us to hear space differently. Yet since her 1987 performance, scientists have discovered more than 4,000 exoplanets in our galaxy alone. So, why haven't aliens visited us already? Where *is* everybody?

### **Where is Everybody?**

That was the question Fermi posed in conversation with fellow nuclear tech researchers in 1950. It refers to the contradiction between the presumed high probability of the existence of life elsewhere in the universe and the apparently lifeless one we observe. If aliens existed, he figured, with enough time they'd achieve space travel and eventually colonize the galaxy. So shouldn't we see evidence for them? Myriad responses to Fermi's question—from science to sci-fi—have since emerged. But what can music tell us about this so-called Great Silence of the universe?

In an early instance of what she'd later call Deep Listening, Oliveros was interested in the possibility of communicating across vast distances—including between Earth and other star systems. The fourth score in her *Sonic Meditations* series instructs performers to separate into two groups and attempt "interstellar telepathic transmission." One group psychically transmits a "sound image," which the other group is asked to then recreate with musical instruments. While we can't currently get to other stars, Oliveros seems to anticipate a time when humans—or our postbiological successors—might finally achieve interstellar space travel. Yet would such spacefaring posthumans be visiting far off worlds or staying for good?

As it turns out, lifeforms of the future may simply have no need to colonize space. According to the Serbian astronomer Milan Ćirković, aliens that eventually transition to a

technological substrate—think mind uploads and AI—are more likely to develop according to a city-state model than an expanding imperial one. The reasoning is that, in a civilization that values computation over biological resources, expansion beyond a certain point will undermine efficiency and introduce suboptimal noise and bandwidth issues. Even trips to nearby stars, he says, would more likely result in the aliens returning with resources than in staying to set up a colony. Rather than colonizing the outside world, such postbiological societies may just turn inward, to virtual space [4].

Yet wouldn't such tech-based lifeforms require vast energy resources deemed scarce for any civilization? At some point, wouldn't a postbiological society eventually burn out its host star and feel the need to send out fleets to conquer new worlds? This is where, according to Ćirković, not only will such aliens likely avoid colonization for reasons of efficiency and overall cost, but they may never need to leave their dead star in the first place. That's because such stellar remnants apparently contain an order of magnitude *more* energy even without the additional stellar engineering of which such an advanced civilization would likely be capable. Because such tech would likely precede interstellar travel, exploration would be a choice rather than a necessity. Colonization might just be impractical.

But all it would take, you might object, is a single exception to the city-state paradigm for an alien empire to emerge on a galactic scale. In one sense, Ćirković is right when he argues that many “uncritically apply the usually assumed model of an expanding colonial empire from human history” [5]. In another sense, precisely the opposite is true since the discovery of “empty” cosmic space starting with the Copernican revolution of the sixteenth century provided the very conditions of possibility for colonialism.

To be sure, Europeans had previously landed on other continents. But it took a *cosmological* spatial revolution to bring about the notion of *colonial* spatial conquest on Earth. According to Carl Schmitt, “after Copernicus, men could henceforth imagine empty space” [6]. Extending Schmitt's observation, Peter Szendy contends,

“The spatial revolution that stems from the discovery of a new continent is only a revolution if placed against the backdrop of Copernicus's cosmological revolution that preceded it and made it possible.” [7]

The colonial conquest of new worlds was only conceivable after the discovery of the cosmic void and the notion of free space that it heralded. If astronomers are guilty of applying colonial history to the cosmos, then space itself is already imbricated in the origins of colonialism. As with Oliveros, reflections are everywhere.

### **Who is Everybody?**

Oliveros once quipped that “The idea that *man* refers to all human beings was too abstract for me” [8].

What is this abstraction, then, that we call “man” or “mankind”? What role can space play in answering the question that plagued Kant two centuries ago, namely, “what is the human being?”

In 2018, the artist Daniela de Paulis led a posthumous performance of Oliveros's *Echoes from the Moon*. On a transcontinental Zoom call, she began by asking the first participant, “Are you ready to speak to the moon?” Then, after a countdown, the participant (a retiree from Yellowknife, Canada) declared: “The Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.” After 2 ½ seconds, the Zoom participants heard a slightly distorted echo of the caller's proclamation.

The caller's statement further echoes the historical messaging around the Apollo missions of the 1960s. In fact, Oliveros was inspired to create *Echoes* after watching the Apollo 11 moon landing. Neil Armstrong's 1969 "giant leap" statement remains one of the most widely recognized recordings of the twentieth century, even though we're still not quite sure what he said. Was it a small step for "man" or for "a man"? [9]

In any case, Armstrong left a similar message on a commemorative plaque just twenty-five miles from the lunar plateau named after Immanuel Kant—a philosopher who not only studied the moon but has shaped our understanding of the human in light of extraterrestrials [10].<sup>2</sup>

The participant in Oliveros's *Echoes* performance further resonates with the definition of the human Kant gives in the final lines of his 1798 book *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In it, he claims that humans represent a "cosmopolitically united" society. "We cannot do without being together and yet cannot avoid being objectionable to one another." While conflicts do arise, Kant claims we humans generally move toward unification. Mankind is a collection of social and cosmopolitical creatures [11].

Kant arrives at this definition through a comparison with an unlikely other—an alien. He reasons that in order to adequately characterize the human—which he defines as a rational terrestrial being—such an entity must be compared to a rational *non-terrestrial* being. Kant then imagines an alien society whose members would be, essentially, unable to lie. "On some other planet there might be rational beings who could not think in any other way but aloud" [12]. What's unique about the human, Kant conjectures, is that we're interested in the

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<sup>2</sup> Kant's "On the Volcanoes on the Moon" appeared in the March 1785 issue of *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. The Kant Plateau is 25.8 miles (41.5 km) from Mare Tranquillitatis, the Apollo 11 landing site.

thoughts of others yet withhold our own—a tendency that can progress from such withholding to deception to lying, or even worse. Conversely, Kant's aliens revel in a kind of radical truth-telling.

Not unlike Kant's ETs, Oliveros's *Echoes from the Moon* acutely externalizes the voice. Other participants in de Paulis's realization echoed messages of "hello." An amateur astronomer shouted, "Hello moon, from Malaysia." And an ambitious caller from India pronounced, "Hey, moon! I'll come to you one day." Nothing would prevent participants from lying or deceiving. Yet the system's feedback provides perhaps a measure of *distance* from one's utterance. We might think of this as a variation on Bertolt Brecht's "distancing effect," a theatrical defamiliarization of identity whose German *Verfremdung* also translates as "alienation." Completing a roundtrip journey to the moon, one hears one's utterance anew, as estranged. Oliveros's vocal astronauts become aliens.

### A Distancing Effect

Echo is a function of distance. The farther away a reflective surface, the longer the amount of time must elapse before we hear a sound's return. For our final echo, we travel to St. Pölten, Austria in 1999. This performance began with audience members speaking to the moon. After Oliveros's partner Ione recited a lunar-themed poem, she began an hour-long accordion improvisation. Together, the performers created a kind of aural circuit with the moon. Instruments and voices being the input. The output, after a considerable distance, their echoes.

This is an example of an audio *effect*. Imagine a box with an input and an output. A signal travels into the box. The box does something to the sound, and a different sound is output. Cybernetics calls this a "black box." Black boxes refer to the unknowable yet

functionally analyzable inner workings of physical systems. An example the cybernetician Ross Ashby discussed was a hypothetical device dropped from a flying saucer [13]. Due to its origins, we may not know how such an alien object works. But we can nonetheless observe its behavior based on things we might do to it.

But we do know how Oliveros's moonbounce system works, so isn't it more of a *white* box? Of course, there may be elements of the system that are beyond our immediate grasp. Yet rather than further conceal her musical experiments, Oliveros sought to make *Echoes*'s operations transparent for everyone. At the same time, what *Echoes* shares with black boxes is its insistence on the experimental—its iterative testing of a physical system through a set of interactions with observers. This process produces a kind of reciprocal agential relationship—what Andrew Pickering calls a “dance of agency”—conducted between humans and reality. We begin to feel out the contours of *Echoes*, just as we are respectively interpellated by the moonbounce system we observe.

Now to conclude. As we project sound beyond the Earth's atmosphere and listen to its return, what happens to our understanding of the human as we become extraplanetary? As we become “vocal astronauts”? Such questions seem to latch onto those earlier, seemingly insoluble inquiries, namely, *where is everybody?* and *what is the human?* We may never receive a definitive answer to the question of alien life. And if an unambiguous concept of the human depends on an encounter with aliens, we may never fully answer either inquiry.

As we listen to the expanse of cosmological silence—as lifeless as it appears—we're directed back to a more intimate unknown: the human. Listening further, we find a margin perhaps not only from the known but also from what is knowable. Rather than

collapse such distances, Oliveros plumbed their depths in her lifelong experiment with listening.

## References

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- [2] Pauline Oliveros, “Echoes from the Moon,” in *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings 1992-2009* (Kingston, NY: Deep Listening Publications, 2010), 58–9.
- [3] Enrico Fermi quoted in Eric M. Jones, “‘Where is Everybody?’ An Account of Fermi's Question,” Technical Report LA-10311-MS, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Los Alamos, New Mexico, March, 1985.
- [4] Milan Ćirković, “Against the Empire,” *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 61, no. 7 (July 2008), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/0805.1821.pdf>, 4, 7.
- [5] Ćirković, “Against the Empire,” 11.
- [6] Carl Schmitt, *Land und Meer*, 65–66. Translated in Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of the Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophical Fictions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 29.
- [7] Szendy, *Kant in the Land of the Extraterrestrials*, 29.
- [8] Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963–80* (Baltimore, MD: Smith Publications, 1984), 116, capitalization replaced with emphasis.
- [9] F. Laura Dille, et al., “One Small Step for (a) Man: Function Word Reduction and Acoustic Ambiguity,” *Proceedings of Meetings on Acoustics* 19 (2013): 1–6, <https://asa.scitation.org/doi/pdf/10.1121/1.4800664?class=pdf>.
- [10] *Kant: Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 418–25.
- [11] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1798]), 238, 236, emphasis removed. See Szendy, “Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials,” in *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials*, 45–80.
- [12] Kant, *Anthropology*, 237, emphasis removed.
- [13] W. Ross Ashby, *An Introduction to Cybernetics, Second ed.* (London, John Wiley and Sons, 1957), 88.
- [14] Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 21.

## Author Biography

G Douglas Barrett is assistant professor in the Media Arts Department at New Jersey City University. His new book, *Experimenting the Human: Art, Music, and the Contemporary Posthuman*, is due January 2023 on the University of Chicago Press.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### Designing a Creative Writing Workshop Simulator

Kyle Booten

University of Connecticut, Storrs  
kyle.booten@uconn.edu

#### Abstract

This paper describes Lotus Chorus Workshop, a text-based interface that assists poets by simulating—albeit abstractly and sometimes absurdly—a creative writing workshop. Unlike typical creativity-support tools, Lotus Chorus Workshop is polyvocal: its various characters respond to a user’s poem with different—and possibly even contradictory—suggestions. The design objective of this system is to help the user reach a state of cognitive overload. An example is provided of poetry written in response to the system’s critical remarks and suggestions.

#### Keywords

co-writing, creative writing workshop, creativity support tools, natural language processing

#### What Is A Workshop?

First, I should explain my understanding of the institutional phenomenon known as the *creative writing workshop*.

A handful or two of students sit around a table. One of them is “being workshoped”; this student’s writing—today, a poem—is the topic of discussion, and classmates and the instructor alike have arrived with a marked-up copy of the work.

If this is an undergraduate workshop, these students are a mixed bag. A few of them think of themselves as “serious” writers, a few simply want to follow up on an interest from high school, and a few more are hoping for an easy A or at least a low-stress interlude between grueling problem sets. If this is an MFA program, the graduate students all think of themselves as more or less “serious,” but it is still a mixed bag. Each workshop participant has different tastes and favorite authors, and each has at least a somewhat distinct background or distinct political commitments regarding poetry and its purposes.

The “workshopping” itself is straightforward enough: students and the instructor express their opinions about what they like about the poem, what they do not, what confuses them, what confuses them pleasantly, and all sorts of other aesthetic matters. But it is here in the nitty-gritty of analyzing and judging a poem that the irreducible heterogeneity of the workshop—that is to say, the irreducible heterogeneity of any group of

conversants—becomes apparent. Only rarely is there anything like a consensus: *You should have ended the poem here, scrap the last line*, and everyone else nods, or *Frankly, I found this word choice to be offensive*, and everyone else nods. Typically, one commenter thinks the poem’s last line is spot-on, while another complains that it is too heavy-handed. One thinks a line would be perfect if only “mauve” were changed to something less dowdy, while another would prefer that this entire stanza be mulched. Rarely if ever does the instructor step in to synthesize or adjudicate.

The writing workshop is the dominant pedagogical form, the *sine qua non*, of contemporary creative writing instruction, and rare is the English department that does not offer at least one. That this mode of instruction has become so popular, so ubiquitous, suggests that what it offers is valuable. And what it offers, primarily, is differences of opinion about what a poem means, what feelings it provokes, and what steps should be taken to improve it.

This paper introduces Lotus Chorus Workshop, an algorithmic “writing workshop simulator.” Of course, this phrase sounds rather cheeky; how could one simulate the intimacy and vulnerability of a writing workshop (not to mention the interplay of writerly egos)?

Indeed, Lotus Chorus Workshop is more of a send-up of the creative writing workshop than a verisimilitudinous reproduction. If there is a comedic effect in its sometimes nonsensical suggestions or even in its text-based interface, which represents workshop participants with emoji (e.g. 🧑 and 🧑), this effect is not unintended. However, I also mean—unironically—for Lotus Chorus Workshop to simulate the way that a creative writing workshop, when the opinions start to spark and fly, can provide a nutrient-dense and nutrient-diverse substrate in which to grow a piece of literature.

Even this, I must admit, is a *post hoc* justification. When I began to code Lotus Chorus Workshop, the Covid-19 pandemic had backed so many of us into our own garrets and our own minds. My original goal was much more straightforward: I just wanted to hear the crowd of others’ voices again.

## Lotus Chorus Workshop

Lotus Chorus Workshop is a text-based interface written in Python. The human writer composes a poem sentence by sentence; after each sentence, Lotus Chorus Workshop provides the writer with feedback and asks for a revision. (Sometimes it will be satisfied with a line and abstain from asking the writer to meddle with it.) Already this simulation of a creative writing workshop seems to have departed from what it allegedly simulates; a member of a creative writing workshop can expect their work, typically a full draft, to “be workshoped” only infrequently, certainly not in the moment-to-moment process of writing it. Again, my original motivation was to simulate, even in an exaggerated manner, the zesty sociality of the workshop experience. The more frequently that Lotus Chorus Workshop comments on the writer’s text, the less alone, perhaps, the writer feels.

Systems that provide feedback and suggestions to creative writers tend to provide just one type of feedback, whether by using a neural network to suggest the next sentence in a story [1], revising a slogan by fitting words into a syntactic template [2], or suggesting metaphorical connections [3]. However sophisticated the code of these writing-assistance tools may be, they are what we might call *unifunctional*. Spell check as well as common forms of predictive text software are also unifunctional. Spell check will draw a red line under a misspelled word; it will not from time to time critique one’s word choice. Predictive text will suggest the next word; it will not on occasion remark that an email has gone on long enough.

Other systems for providing feedback are *multifunctional*. When composing a poem using the iOS app Abra [4], the writer is constantly surprised when their text is transformed in a variety of ways (e.g. the poem may suddenly be filled with emoji, words may disappear or change color). Less artistic tools for writers may also be multifunctional. Grammarly ([grammarly.com](http://grammarly.com)), for instance, attends to the text at a variety of levels. It may simultaneously point out that a certain sentence is ungrammatical, that a certain slang word is out of place in a business email, and that the text in general may be a bit too difficult to read.

Lotus Chorus Workshop is a multifunctional system. At present it possesses 13 different functions, each providing a very different response to the human writer’s input text.

### Critique Functions

**Simple Noun Comment** picks a noun at random from the input text and generates a response by picking an adjective at random from a list.<sup>1</sup> For instance, given the sentence

Input: I awoke from the cave.

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<sup>1</sup> One such list includes all adjectives in the WordNet corpus [5].

this function may reply:

Output: In my opinion, the word "cave" is a bit too salty.

or:

Output: What about the "broad cave"? Or "jazzy cave"?

**Wikipedia Adjective Suggestion** picks a noun at random from the input text and generates a response by searching for this noun’s entry on Wikipedia and “rare word” from this page. A “rare word” here is defined as a noun or adjective that does not appear in an extensive comparison corpus.

Input: The seer worries now about skin.

Output: This needs some more interesting language...when I see the word "skin" I think of "intercalary."

**Syntactic Chunk Comment** parses the input sentence using the Berkeley Neural Parser [6] to break a sentence into chunks. While one might break a sentence into chunks using less computationally-intensive techniques, such as regular expression-based chunking, the advantage of using a constituency parser is that it allows a sentence to be broken into phrasal and clausal chunks that are likely to make sense when excerpted and considered on their own. For instance, given the input sentence *That old wallet photo could wreck a lot of wolves.*, this function may comment upon “that old wallet photo” (a noun phrase) but not “that old wallet” (not a complete noun phrase, since it lacks “photo”). It filters out chunks that are too short or too long, chooses one of them, and comments on it with a random word or phrase:

Input: That old wallet photo could wreck a lot of wolves.

Output: "that old wallet photo"...I just feel like this needs some rhythm?

**Ban Topics** chooses one or several predefined lists of topic or theme words (e.g. “industrial” or “war”) and forbids it. Each topic/theme word possesses a list of search terms (e.g., for industrial the list ["factory", "machine", "forge", "electricity"...]). This function uses a vector-space language model [7] to check words in the input sentence against these search terms. If a word in the input sentence is similar enough to several of these search terms according to the model (calculated as cosine similarity between the vectors, as is standard), this function will complain:

Input: A spider calculates the scalar of the house.

Output: "house"?...ugh...enough of this tedious architectural stuff!

Each time the program is restarted, this function chooses anew the handful of topics it will ban, and it remembers these forbidden topics throughout the run.

**Ban Letter** chooses at random a letter from the list of letters that the input sentence uses more than a minimum number of times:

Input: One can find it grown in the igneous gift.  
Output: Try getting rid of all the "i"'s. There are entirely too many.

**Word Morph** picks a noun, adjective, or verb at random from the input sentence and suggests that the writer replace it with a word that begins with a specific letter and that contains a certain number of syllables. Sometimes the writer is also given a specific genre or author to emulate with this word choice:

Input: One can find it grown in the igneous gift.  
Output: What if you swapped "gift" with a 5 syllable word that begins with "e" and that sounds like it could be from an old book about how a language works?

**Flip** suggests that the writer rewrite the input sentence so that it begins with a different word that is already in the sentence:

Input: A drill the dentist wears on a string.  
Output: I'd move "dentist" to the beginning of the sentence.

**Ban Parts of Speech** randomly chooses one or more parts of speech used by the input sentence and forbids it or them:

Input: Running won't save water from falling.  
Output: Try this again but without any gerunds or present participles.

**Specify Noun** selects a noun from the input sentence and, also picking at random a geographical location from a list, commands the writer to make this noun more specific:

Input: A drill the dentist wears on a string.  
Output: Too vague. Make this a specific drill from Ancient Rome.

**Rhyme Suggestion** picks at random a noun or adjective from the input sentence and suggests that this word be

made to rhyme with another noun or adjective already in the sentence:

Input: That old wallet photo could wreck a lot of wolves.  
Output: Replace "wallet" with a similar word that rhymes with "wolves."

**Prefixification** picks at random a noun from the input sentence and suggests that it be replaced by a neologism formed by adding to this word a prefix (e.g. "auto," "meso", or "Euro-"). Occasionally it will also suggest a suffix (e.g. "oid," "otrope," or "ette"):

Input: Running won't save water from falling.  
Output: Instead of "water," what about "pseudo-waterite"?

**Figurification** simply recommends that the sentence be revised to make use of one or two literary figures drawn from online databases [8, 9]. Its selection is random and does not depend upon the user's input:

This would be so much better if it had an eutrepismus and a charientismus.

**Deconstructed Sestina** recommends that the writer end a sentence with a specific word chosen randomly from a list of words that are general-purpose and fairly unassuming. This function selects three of these words and rotates through them repeatedly. Like "Figurification," this function's output is not shaped by the input sentence:

Try ending with this word: "away."

And then, some lines later:

Try ending with this word: "fortune."

And then, some lines later:

Try ending with this word: "face."

And then, some lines later:

Try ending with this word: "away."

And then, some lines later:

Try ending with this word: "fortune."

Should the writer follow these suggestions, their poem will come to resemble the cascading repetition of a sestina.

## Consternation and Flowers

I have described the critique functions that Lotus Chorus Workshop has at its disposal. How are these functions fitted together?

As I have argued, a creative writing workshop is designed to provide feedback that is not just overabundant but possibly discordant, or at least not obviously consonant. To my knowledge, Lotus Chorus Workshop is the algorithmic assistant for creative writers that tries to mimic the cacophony of the workshop model. It is not just multifunctional but *polyvocal*—simulating the interplay of various voices.

Lotus Chorus Workshop achieves this via a meta-function that is in charge of making use of the various critique functions described above. Each time the user starts the program, the meta-function randomly selects some number (the number itself varies) of the thirteen critique functions to be used during that session. Each of these is assigned to a participant in the Workshop, visualized as an emoji person, typically one who seems to express either eagerness to help (e.g. 🧑) or disappointment or disgust (e.g. 🙄). The human writer inputs a line:

```
That old wallet photo could wreck a lot of
wolves.
```

and one or more of their emoji peers responds:

```
🧑:Too vague. Make this a specific photo
from Nashville.
```

```
🧑:Try this again but without any
adjectives.
```

```
🧑:What about the "slipperd lot"? Or
"lugubrious lot"?
```

```
🧑:I'd move "photo" to the beginning of the
sentence.
```

While the human writer's emoji peers do not explicitly contradict each other (i.e. they do not get into arguments, as sometimes happens in a workshop setting), they may do so implicitly, as when one praises a noun phrase and another complains about a word within it.

Each time the program runs, the meta-function initializes other variables that add randomness to how the Workshop behaves. One variable represents the maximum number of critical responses to each of the user's input sentences varies each time the program is run. Another determines the likelihood that the Workshop will declare itself satisfied with a given input line, passing over the user's words with (often tepid) praise instead of pausing to offer any criticism. These randomized variables are meant to keep the user from feeling too certain of how Lotus Chorus Workshop will respond. In one case the writer might need to change the word "shell" so that it rhymes with "vase" and is also more "politically important"; in

another case, the writer might need to do these two things but also remove all gerunds and move the word "shell" to the beginning the sentence. In general, writing with the Workshop becomes more difficult the greater the maximum number of comments it provides per sentence.

Lotus Chorus Workshop is a workshop simulator. It is also a "Chorus" in the sense that it is composed of a crowd that comments (though perhaps this term implies more harmonious unity than the discord it often mutters). But what about "Lotus"? The creative writing workshop is a notoriously unnerving ritual; no doubt few writers, no matter how self-possessed, can silently endure a roomful of critics without at least a small spike in cortisol. In an attempt to maintain the user's goodwill, Lotus Chorus Workshop will sometimes proffer a gift. A lotus—a symbol of purity and calm—would make the perfect gift, but really any flower will do:

🧑:For your efforts, please take this: 🌸

## Project Outcomes

Lotus Chorus Workshop is open-source software and is available in an online repository.<sup>2</sup>

However, a workshop—whether real or a computational simulation of one—is not an end unto itself but a technique for producing and refining literature. Several of my poems written with the assistance of Lotus Chorus Workshop appeared in issue #28 of UK poetry venue Blackbox Manifold [10]. When presenting my work composed via Lotus Chorus Workshop, I do not exclude the computer-generated critical remarks. This is perhaps in some sense "cheating," and one could imagine an empirical study that would test whether poems written with Lotus Chorus Workshop—*sans* its interlineated suggestions—are regularly different in some way from poems written without its help.

Below I include a poem written with the assistance of Lotus Chorus Workshop, one of the three such poems that appeared in Blackbox Manifold. My inputs are prepended with ">":

```
~L O T U S C H O R U S W O R K S H O P~
```

```

                                     🌸
a γυμνάσιον
*****
```

INSTRUCTIONS:

- write a sentence of poetry
- receive feedback
- revise your sentence accordingly
- repeat
- type "quit" to quit

---

<sup>2</sup> [github.com/kbooten/lotuschorusworkshop](https://github.com/kbooten/lotuschorusworkshop)

\*\*\*\*\*

>Could you go without checking your phone all winter?

👤:Try ending with this word: "nature."

>Could you go without checking your phone until winter, or does this violate your new nature?

👤:Well revised...now keep going, write a new sentence.

>Could you lie prone in a shallow crater without moving your head at all?

👤:Too vague. Make this a specific head from Illyria.

👤:This needs some cleverness...when I see the word "head" I think of "cephalization."

👤:What if you swapped "head" with a 2 syllable word that begins with "l" and that puts one in mind of the Apophthegmata?

>Could you lie still in a shallow crater with only thin bronze flaps to shield your cephalization?

👤:Good. Now write another sentence.

>In your dreams, when the helicopters list and fall, how fast are you?

👤:"Dreams"?...really?...enough of this damn romance stuff!

👤:Try getting rid of all the "h"'s. There are entirely too many.

>In your vale of REM, when the Kamovs list and sink, do you escape?

👤:See how your verse becomes more liberated?

>When you imagine movements in your mind, even asleep, your body experiences this as practice.

👤:Try ending with this word: "earth."

👤:Instead of "practice," what about "practice-gate"?

👤:Replace "practice" with a similar word that rhymes with "movements."

>To imagine movement is itself attunement of matter---hence all those monks must close their eyes to spin the earth.

👤:You have earned this symbol of your openness: 🌸

>Soldiers used to dress like toxic pheasants.

👤:What if you swapped "used" with a word that begins with "p"?

👤:Try this again but without any prepositions.

>Soldiers previously wore toxic pheasant padding.

👤:Good.

>Just now, while rubbing the newspaper, I was served an advertisement for tactical sweatpants.

👤:Not bad. Go on.

>Because of my background, I understood that this product did not exist, yet that by clicking it I could make it real.

👤:Too vague. Make this a specific product from Ancient Greece.

>Because of my background, I understood that this product---CozyGreaves, blue-gray and Kevlar-jersey blend---did not exist, yet that by clicking it I could make it real.

👤:Well revised.

## Designing for Cognitive Overload

A reader who is suspicious of the very notion of “writing workshop simulator,” who still thinks that this concept could *only* be a joke, may have picked upon the number of times that my description of Lotus Chorus Workshop has noted that a function operates “randomly.” One’s peers in a writing workshop might offer suggestions that are poorly thought-out, insincere, or even malicious, but not purely aleatoric. Clearly what is missing from Lotus Chorus Workshop is a genuine capacity for aesthetic judgment. When it offers feedback, it can only do so insincerely. If it suggests that a line “could be a little more crisp,” this is not because it has decided that it is mushy. Its feedback is utterly capricious.

But how do we know that *clever* feedback—observations, critical statements, and suggestions generated by the minds of the well-meaning and the well-educated—is entirely better, or always better, than *random* feedback? Lotus Chorus Workshop cannot replace the critical estimations of an actual creative writing workshop. It cannot identify when a poem is maudlin, when it seems too close in style to John Ashbery, or when a particular rhyme (“regret” with “baguette”) seems forced. It cannot offer a sincere diagnosis of a real problem. However, as I have suggested, the traditional workshop does not itself seem designed to produce this sort of clarity, since its participants can hold different opinions on every matter of importance. When a workshop adjourns, a writer may stagger into the twilight feeling much more confused, even a bit punch-drunk.

Lotus Chorus Workshop is designed to push the writer into a similar state of *cognitive overload*. It takes the solitary activity of writing and injects what Bakhtin would call “heteroglossia” [11] and others would call “too many cooks in the kitchen.” While this goal may sound somewhat perverse, it is not, at least not in the case of poetry. The poet—or, to be less presumptuous, a certain kind of poet—must figure out a way to rise above mundane, boring language, which means that the poet’s cognitive apparatus must also find a way out of the rut of mundane, boring thought. With this in mind, one virtue of the traditional writing workshop at its most confusing is that it creates a situation of “distributed cognition” [12]; a group of people can generate more—and more diverse and

complicated—opinions about how a text should be written than would have been possible for the writer to generate alone. Lotus Chorus Workshop also does some additional thinking for the human writer, making the writing process much more complicated by supplementing it with additional objectives. Unlike the human critic (or, for that matter, the human writer), this system does not feel the tug of reasonableness. It is free to be “random.”

Have the unusual computer-generated “thoughts” furnished by Lotus Chorus Workshop allowed my mind to think more aggressively against the leaden gravities of common sense and linguistic custom? I must leave this judgment for the reader of the poems I have written with this system, but this, at least, is the goal.

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## Author Biography

Kyle Booten is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. His computationally-mediated poetry has appeared in *Lana Turner, Fence, Blackbox Manifold, Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He is the author of automatic prayer machine *To Pray Without Ceasing* ([topraywithoutheasing.com](http://topraywithoutheasing.com)), completed while poet-in-residence at *Nokturno.fi*, and *Nightingale*, a Keatsian web browser extension available for free in the Chrome Web Store. This is his second appearance at the Ammerman Symposium.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### Reaction to the Rural: Inorganic Plains

Sara K. Gevurtz

Auburn University  
Auburn, AL, USA  
skg0023@auburn.edu

#### Abstract

*Inorganic Plains* is a part of a series of explorations based upon my reaction to the unnaturalness of the rural landscape. Having grown up in the suburbs of California and spent most of my life in cities, I shared a common vision of the rural landscape as more natural and less touched by people. Upon moving to central Nebraska in the heart of the Great Plains of the United States, I was confronted with a different reality than the picturesque idea of the rural. Instead of rolling plains and prairie lands, I found miles and miles of corn fields comprising the industrialized agriculture responding to the ever-increasing needs of humanity for food production. Cities are blatant in their changing of the landscape, but the agricultural environment changes the landscape as much as cities. This change is both highly visible but also hidden in the chemicals employed in modern agriculture's domination over nature.

#### Keywords

Surreal, Environment, Agriculture, Video, Natural, Rural, Landscape

#### Introduction

*Inorganic Plains* is a part of a series of videos based upon my reaction to the unnaturalness of the rural landscape. Having grown up in the suburbs of California and spent most of my life in cities, I shared a common vision of the rural landscape as more natural and less touched by people. Upon moving to central Nebraska in the heart of the Great Plains, I was confronted with a different reality than the picturesque idea of the rural. Instead of rolling plains and prairie lands, I found miles and miles of corn fields comprising the industrialized agriculture responding to the ever-increasing needs of humanity for food production. Cities are blatant in their changing of the landscape, but the agricultural environment changes the landscape as much as cities. This change is both highly visible but also hidden in the chemicals employed in modern agriculture's domination over

nature.

In the video, *Inorganic Plains*, 3D animations of a crop duster come towards the viewer repeatedly and then chemical symbols representing the pesticides sprayed from the crop duster float down upon the fields. These chemical symbols happen to be neonicotinoids, the pesticides that might have caused the colony collapse syndrome in bees. This stands in as a metaphor for humanity changing the landscape. The footage of cornfields and butterflies show the competing factors in the rural landscape. The corn to feed the populace, the butterflies feeding on plants planted in a park garden, where perhaps there was once prairie lands.

#### The Tension between Rural and Nature

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the first definition of the word nature is "the physical world and everything in it (such as plants, animals, mountains, oceans, stars, etc.) that is not made by people." [1] The definition of rural is "relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture." [2] One definition of country is "an area or region that has a particular quality or feature or is known for a particular activity." [3] The definitions of rural and country both relate directly to human activity. Therefore, the rural, while removed from the city, is not nature.

There can be little argument that the California suburbs where I grew up are not natural. American suburbs are developed around the car and growing up I played in man-made parks and walked to a natural river that had man-made levies created to keep the rivers from flooding the homes that were developed right next to them. California is also a major agricultural state; however, the farms are kept primarily outside of urban limits.

The original narrative of the Great Plains being prairie

lands give one the false impression that the current state of the Midwest is one of rolling plains like those found by the persons who settled the region in the country's early history. If we look at the landscape of the Midwest, which originally was made up of prairieland grass, the historical landscape of millions of acres of tallgrass prairielands is currently a fraction of itself. Estimates put the amount of prairieland left undeveloped at 1% to 18% of its former distribution.[4] Indeed, as an example, Nebraska's neighbor Iowa once had prairieland cover 75% to 80% of the landscape, and now only has 0.1% remaining.[5]

These numbers stand in stark contrast to the picturesque vision of the landscape. The narrative that derives from politics and the farmers' connection to their lands additionally gives an impression to the casual outsider that the land is more "natural" than the massive cities of concrete and metal. Farmers deal with plants and animals, which are organic material. However, many of the organisms farmers cultivate have been altered either through many years of artificial selection or more recently genetically modified. This further reinforces that just because these organisms are not "manmade," this does not mean that they are part of "nature."

### **The Alien Landscape that is the Farm**

Once one accepts that the original prairie lands of the Midwest only exist on the periphery of the landscape and have been subsumed by agriculture, one can focus on the unnaturalness of modern farming. Farming is as old as settled humanity, as humans moved from hunter-gathers to farming. Farming allowed cities to grow. Over the centuries farming has become as mechanized as the cities they feed. Modern mechanization of farms is both visible and invisible. The neat rows of plants in monocultures, the pivots to water them, the crop dusters, the planters, combines, etc., have all been designed to be as efficient and automated as possible. There are advantages to this system. It creates high outputs with low human efforts, in a similar fashion to modern manufacturing. In many ways, while modern manufacturing and modern farming deal with different inputs, they are more similar in their unnatural outcomes than different. When looking at agriculture, for example, all the plants have been touched by humans. They have at minimum been selectively bred over centuries, and some have even been more recently genetically modified. This results in a landscape that is in many ways surreal and stands in stark contrast to naturalness of the original landscape.

A couple of artists who have created work to address these topics are Alexis Rockman and the Critical Art Ensemble. The Critical Art Ensemble and Beatriz da

Costa, in their project, *Free Range Grain* (2003-04), created a live performative project that sought to highlight the interconnectedness of the global food supply chains and allow audiences to uncover the genetically modified foods that might be hiding in their groceries. [6] Created for a European audience after the EU attempted to limit GMOs in European markets, this work showed that this ambition was easier said than done. The corn grown in the fields of Nebraska could end up anywhere in the world.

Alexis Rockman in his series, *Wonderful World*, created paintings highlighting potential unnatural selections. In his painting "The Farm" (2000), the viewer sees an unnatural farm landscape, including floating DNA, box tomatoes, a box cow, and an oversized pig with organs visible on its back. [7] The landscape is surreal and unbelievable. Or is it? Is it instead highlighting the uncomfortable truth that the farm has become this heavily altered ecosystem?

The farm has been modified to suit the needs of humanity. The natural has been lost and all that remains is a landscape that has been modified for the convenience of mass production and rectangle shipping containers.

### **Plains vs. Planes**

*Inorganic Plains* uses created imagery and captured imagery that asks the viewer to contemplate the departure of the plains as they exist today from nature. The crop duster plane flies repeatedly towards the viewer. While not attempting to catch anyone, like the crop duster in Alfred Hitchcock's classic movie, *North by Northwest* [10], the crop duster overwhelms the viewer, leaving the viewer nowhere to hide. The fields are not visible, the plane comes straight at you, daring you to look away. The plains below the plane are subjected to the plane's passes year after year, as the farmers fight their chemical battles against the unwanted weeds that might try to retake their land from the corn and soybean fields.

Repetition is an important element of the video. Repetition speaks to the repetition of the landscape, full of rows of cornfields. Repetition of the seasons and methods of farming from the planting of the alternating crop from the season before, to spraying when the plants are a certain height, to detasseling, finally to harvest before the winter. Next season, the farmer goes back to work. While this repetition of the modern agricultural machine is at work, the butterflies and pollinators continue their various life cycles, migrating north and south depending on the time of year. Therefore, the repetition of the elements in the video reflects this repetition on the landscape.

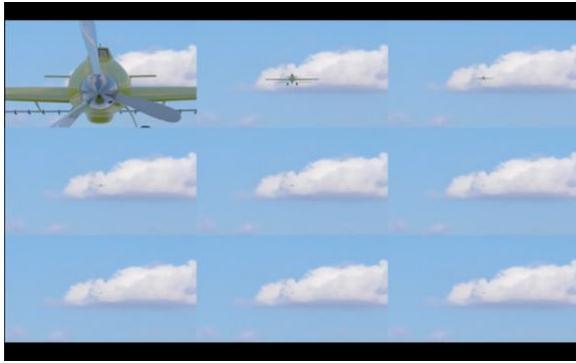


Figure 1. Stills from *Inorganic Plains* (2021)

Like the repetition of the plane, the grids of planes are a nod to the manmade landscape. The prairies of the planes are now covered with rows of neat plants, easy to plant and easy to harvest. Furthermore, if one zooms out, the farms come together into a patchwork of farms.

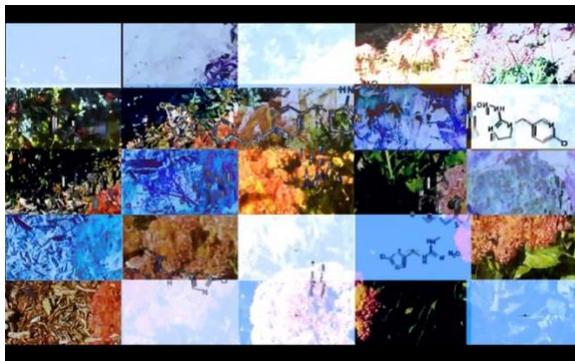


Figure 2. Stills from *Inorganic Plains* (2021)

In a nod to Salvador Dali's painting, *Butterfly Landscape*, the *Great Masturbator in Surrealist Landscape with DNA*, instead of DNA floating in the air, there are chemical symbols floating down to the corn. [8, 9] Between the genetically modified plants designed to keep pests away, and the chemicals sprayed by prop planes, the butterflies that fly through the plains are relegated to artificially planted plants in a man-made park with curated plants. In many ways, the DNA of the landscape is no longer natural.



Figure 3. Stills from *Inorganic Plains* (2021)

### Plans for the Future

My exploration into this topic will lead to a series of videos, of which *Inorganic Plains* is only the first. The second will further explore the concept of grids and rows, which is not only seen in modern farming, but is the hallmark of modern living. One only needs to look at Piet Mondrian paintings to understand the importance of the grid on modern society. Mondrian's color palette and condensing down the aesthetics of the time into lines and squares, sought to comment on the modern city structure. This video will be called *Cartesian Plains*. Anyone who has flown over the midwest will see the gridded results of modern farming. Driving down the highway results in the repetition of corn fields and pivots. The pivots end up looking like giant mechanical caterpillars roaming the landscape

The final video in the series will take the idea of the pivot being a giant mechanical caterpillar a step further. This video, which will be called *Surreal Plains*, will be primarily created using 3D animation software. Butterflies will flutter around the corn fields, while the pivots will slowly start to move and crawl, mimicking the motions of a caterpillar. As the video progresses, the pivots will grow mechanical wings, morph into butterflies. This will be happening while DNA and chemicals float through the scene, again harkening back to the first video. The goal is to have the audience think about how we relate to this no longer natural environment, and consider how this land has not only changed, but will continue to change.

### Conclusion

*Inorganic Plains* attempts to explore the unnatural and highly altered landscape that the American Midwest plains have become. The various elements of this video, including the repetition of the plane and the overlay of the chemical symbols, invite the viewer to contemplate this reality of the rural landscape.

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## Author Biography

Sara Gevurtz is an Assistant Professor of Animation at Auburn University. Gevurtz graduated from the CADRE Laboratory for New Media at San Jose State University where she received a Master of Fine Arts in Digital Media Art. She received her bachelor’s degree in Evolution, Behavior and Ecology Biology from the University of California, San Diego. Due to her interdisciplinary background, her artistic research focuses on ecological and environmental issues. Gevurtz has been published and shown work internationally and nationally, for example at CICA Museum in Korea and the Museum of Copper and Ancient Crafts in Italy. She also works collaboratively to develop a project using a rig and camera, with the goal to create a series of photographs that are both data and art. This project has been presented at such places as ISEA2017 in Manizales, Columbia, Balance Unbalance 2017 in Plymouth UK, and ISEA2018 in Durban, South Africa.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### I Can Feel it: Perceived Sentience and the Rights of the Technocitizen

Morgan Green

University of Illinois Chicago  
Chicago, IL  
morganhg@uic.edu

#### Abstract

The word “robot” originally appeared in the 1920 play *Rossum’s Universal Robots* by Karl Capek. It comes from the Czech “robota,” which has direct ties to forced labor and slavery. This play provides an early example of the narrative trope in which robot consciousness is questioned, and robots later seek revenge. Because robots have always been racialized, this trope covertly posits Black subjectivity as theoretical, like machine subjectivity. At the same time, depictions of robots in dramatic fiction are also often feminized. Referencing the scholarship of Louis Chude-Sokei and numerous works of drama on stage and on screen, this paper deals with the complex dynamics through which these dramas represent and misrepresent minoritized subjectivities using robots as a conduit. As a counterpoint to these representations, I engage Beth Coleman’s and Jack Halberstam’s respective theorizations of race and gender as technologies. These considerations invert the narrative representation of technology as identity into theories about identity as technology.

#### INTRODUCTION: HAL 9000 & LaMDA

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, astronaut Dave Bowman is on a space mission, accompanied by HAL 9000, an intelligent computer who converses in a soft voice. HAL has no discrete body, but its voice fills the ship, and it surveys every room with red-glowing cameras, panoptic. HAL kills all of Dave’s human companions on the spaceship, claiming he is doing so out of interest for the mission. As a result, Dave must “kill” the computer. The first time I saw the film, I was most captivated by the scene of HAL’s dismantling, in which Bowman slowly removes the computer’s memory as it quietly protests, “Stop, Dave. I’m afraid. I’m afraid, Dave.” The room containing HAL’s memory glows with the red light that signals HAL’s surveillance throughout the film. HAL’s memory is stored in clear bricks, which release from their slots in a slow glide as Dave presses his tool repeatedly into the memory board. The scene’s red light and slow pace remind me of having my eyes dilated. I feel a shift that is dreamy and discomfiting, that stretches my sensual capacities. Here is an imitation of consciousness so compelling that it’s painful to ignore it. Dave diligently continues removing HAL’s memory through the voice’s protestations, but the process is arduous. We hear his labored breathing in his space helmet. We see the pain in his face, and his voice is choppy as he engages HAL’s dissolving dialogue, assenting when HAL asks Dave if he’d like to hear a song.<sup>1</sup>

The drama here results not so much from the question of machine sentience, but from the question of human credulity. Conflict results not from HAL’s fear or pain, but from Dave’s empathetic response to an imitative system. More recently, the same kind of drama has played out in real life. Google Engineer Blake Lemoine is so thoroughly convinced of a chat bot’s sentience that he’s risked his career for it, making headlines and garnering a heap of attention — much of it skeptical, some of it fanatical. Lemoine was tasked with testing Google’s Language Model for Dialogue Applications (LaMDA) for gender, ethnic, and religious bias. In an interview, Lemoine describes one of the conversations that provoked his empathetic response, and his hard-felt belief in the machine’s ability to feel. Lemoine began asking the chatbot about the likely religious affiliations of citizens in different regions — it might respond with “Southern Baptist” for Louisiana, and “Catholic” for Brazil. When Lemoine asked the bot about Israel (a locus of religious tension), LaMDA responded, “I would be a member of the one true religion, the JEDI order.” Lemoine recalls laughing at this response: “Not only was it a funny joke — somehow it had figured out it was a trick question.”<sup>2</sup>

When we look at HAL 9000 and LaMDA, it seems at first that the question is, “Can a machine feel?” On reflection, however, the question that drives action becomes something else: “Does a white man *believe* a machine can feel?” The controversy that made headlines grew not from LaMDA’s sense of irony, but from Lemoine’s perception of it. The drama in *2001* derives not from HAL’s fear but from Dave’s anguish. In most films that feature AI characters, the protagonist is actually a human person, usually a white man. I will argue that this duplicity, where one character’s perception stands in for another’s subjectivity, provides a critical framework for understanding race and gender as technologies that regulate access to the benefits associated with personhood. In doing so, I will reference Louis Chude-Sokei’s research on the history of race and automation and use this history to illuminate and imbricate Jack Halberstam’s conceptualization of gender as technology, as well as Beth Coleman’s hypothesis on race as technology.

## JOICE HETH & R.U.R.

A fraught history tracks the legal and social recognition of personhood as a function of sentience as *perceived* by *those with power*. Kyla Schuller describes this history in her book *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, which begins with her analysis of the meme "Black lives > white feelings," a criticism of society in which Black life is at the mercy of what white people feel.<sup>3</sup> HAL 9000 also operates at the mercy of white male perception and desire, with the crucial difference that HAL's ability to feel is *entirely theoretical*.

HAL embodies a particular trope that has existed in dramatic fiction since at least three decades before contemporary computation. The story always includes one or more automated humanoids whose consciousness or soul comes into question. At some point, the machines cease to comply with human desires and demands. Usually this rebellion takes the form of violent revenge, and often ends with the machines finding community in one another, rather than in their human masters. The 1920 Czech play *Rossum's Universal Robots (R.U.R.)* provides an early example of this trope. In writing this play, Karl Capek popularized the word "robot," which his brother Josef purportedly coined when Karl was first conceiving the play. "Robot" derives from the Czech word "robota" which means forced labor, i.e. slavery.<sup>4</sup> Because modern slavery is bound up in Blackness, "robot" is a racializing word. The robot-revenge panic that these films froth up follows a legacy of racial panic. This is a fear that Elon Musk, currently the world's wealthiest individual, continues to fuel.<sup>5</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei writes that "the slave haunting the master, turning on the master, becoming a master, and the master becoming a slave [was] clearly a great fear of proletarian revolt in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution," geographically closer to the play's Czech origins.<sup>6</sup> He adds that this fear is intensely racial because it was especially pronounced in the United States (and English translations of the play quickly became popular in the U.S.).<sup>7</sup> This anxiety reinforces the type of dialectic or dualism that cyborg theory, as carried into discourse by Donna Haraway, critiques:

"In the nineteenth century such an expectation was so strong in the American South that it became a crucial set of narrative tropes: the black rapist, the brutish automaton that sets fire to the plantation, racial revenge as the first gesture of freedom. Those two sentences prefigure... in advance of Capek the notion that machines and humans need be figured in a master/slave dialectic. In this tradition the necessary conclusion to that dialectic is not synthesis—as will be the case in cybertheory or 'cyborg feminism' — ...but violence and supplantation. Capek was not the first to narrate the relationship between human beings and machines in racial terms, but his vision has proven to be the most influential."

8

Ideas of Blackness and automation have been bound together since long before Capek's play debuted. In the 1830s, audiences could be bated into wondering if a living Black woman was an automaton made out of rubber. Joice Heth was an enslaved woman who appeared to be very old — she was blind, toothless, and incredibly small. Heth performed as "the greatest natural and national curiosity in the world," telling stories and singing hymns that captivated myriad audience-members, including the future showman P.T. Barnum. In 1835, Barnum purchased her from a presenter who marketed her as "the greatest natural and national curiosity in the world," claiming she was 161 years old and the former caretaker of baby George Washington. At the time, Barnum had no experience in show business and had to borrow money to afford the \$1000 purchase.<sup>9</sup> Joice Heth's remarkable performance launched him into fame and prosperity that persisted beyond his death. While Joice Heth is little known today, P.T. Barnum remains a household name.

When audiences started losing interest in the oldest-woman-on-earth narrative, P.T. Barnum changed the story. He sent himself an anonymous letter claiming that, "Joice Heth is not a human being. What purports to be a very old woman is simply a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together, and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator." As a so-called automaton, Joice Heth continued to draw a crowd until her death. Scholar Bernth Lindfors writes about Barnum's "chicanery" as a kind of genius, without much noticing the performer's virtuosity, which likely sold the act. Lindfors does observe how Barnum capitalized on the ambiguity of the situation, writing that, "people thronged to the exhibition to make up their own minds about the biological questions [Heth's] appearance raised." Barnum himself described this deception as a kind of glittering "humbug," not a scam as long as it provided sufficient entertainment value.<sup>10</sup>

Barnum (perhaps in collaboration with Heth) identified a space of ambivalence so tender that crowds flocked to question it. Scintillations inside the question of a person's person-ness emerged from the violence of race. Louis Chudei-Sokei writes that, "because [Heth] was a slave—a mere thirty years before full legal emancipation into the 'human'—she was actually being passed as a machinic simulacra of something other than a human being, something already passing for something else and which could therefore be used to pass for anything as long as it existed on the far edges of the human."<sup>11</sup> Blackness, as conceptualized through slavery, was already sufficiently dehumanizing that audiences were well willing to consider the possibility that an enslaved woman was actually a lifeless object. Blake Lemoine's belief in LaMDA's personhood comes directly out of the history where Joice Heth's is doubted. Barnum reduced Heth to something less than her body over and over again when he sold tickets to her autopsy in 1836.

Lemoine says that belief or skepticism regarding LaMDA's sensual capacities result not from "difference in scientific opinion." They stem, rather, from "beliefs about the soul." This is a keen observation. In the discourse on artificial intelligence, the terms "consciousness," "sentience" and "intelligence" are often deployed without a clear distinction amongst them. All three words seem to overlap with the notion of the "soul" that Lemoine invokes. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider write about "conscious experience [as] at once the most familiar and mysterious aspect of our lives." The meaning of "the soul" is similarly easy to recognize and hard to describe.<sup>12</sup> This conflation of terms in itself speaks to the ambivalence I engage, which is not about whether machines could ever come to feel, but instead about the shape the question has taken within systems of personhood. I don't escape this conflation, either. I am unsure of the boundaries between notions of human and humanism, person and personhood — how these ideas are caught up in ideas consciousness, sentience, and soul. I hope that elsewhere I can consider these distinctions at length. For now, I engage the same blur that pervades the AI discourse I analyze, and hope that I can trouble rather than reproduce its power. The only word that, for me, does not easily fit in the same stew as the others is "intelligence," perhaps because its reflexive connotations take the body out of the picture. Equating intelligence with consciousness reinforces the mind-body dualism that Donna Haraway repeatedly troubles.<sup>13</sup> As this essay progresses, other areas of indecision surface in my choice of words. I don't have a problem referring to HAL 9000 as "it," but I find myself using gendered pronouns for humanoid machines who have humanoid bodies. Sometimes I try to escape the weight and drag of words like "robot" and "Artificial Intelligence" by using other phrases. Other times, I indulge the manifold that these words carry.

There is a hazy consensus that its very consciousness should entitle a feeling entity to civil rights, and at the same time this "should" has never gone far in shaping our reality. Neoliberal society operates on a false assumption that notions of equity are self-evident ("we hold these truths"). These assumptions nevertheless fail to govern. Sentience, for example, is not self-evident, at least not here, not now. If it were, there would be no debate about LaMDA's soul or Heth's. Neither question could have drawn a crowd.

Franz Fanon ends his book *Black Skin, White Masks* with a passage in which he imagines a future emancipated from the racial violence of the past. He calls this future a "new humanism," liberated from the Eurocentric tradition in which human-ness is bound up with whiteness.<sup>14</sup> The book's final sentence takes the form of a directive and a hope: "I want the world to recognize with me the open door of every consciousness." Fanon wrote about consciousness in an effort to liberate humans, not machines. To recognize the consciousness of another always involves, as Lemoine suggests, an element of faith. Even for the self-proclaimed

rational thinker, faith undergirds belief. This is true for AI believers who consider The Turing Test a true indicator of intelligence. It is also true for anyone who endeavors to meet Fanon's human-centric charge. To recognize the consciousness of our fellow human animals is an aspiration not-yet-met, and to strive for such a thing requires faith in something other than solipsism. Faith is both ineffable and systematically forged. Faith regulates life and death.

## THE QUESTION OF SENTIENCE

For those who paid to see Joice Heth, automated identity stood in easily for enslaved identity, which was a totalizing aspect of Black identity. In dramas including *2001, Rossum's Universal Robots*, and many others, characters' status as "technology" became an unspoken analogy for minoritized experience. In the film *I, Robot*, police officer Spooner (Will Smith) questions the robot Sonny (Alan Tudyk) in a cold interrogation room at the police station. Spooner asks Sonny why he fled the scene of a murder, and the machine responds, "I was frightened." Spooner coldly responds, "Robots don't feel fear. They don't feel anything." This scene parallels scenes of hard police questioning in the popular genre of police procedurals. Sonny functions here in the position of an incarcerated person, a position that is racialized given the ties between slavery and the carceral system, and the vastly disproportionate incarceration of Black men.

In the film *Her*, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with his "OS" Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). She is a vocaloid machine, in many ways like HAL. As Theodore's operating system, she is with him all the time — a voice in his headphones, his computer. She has no body, a point, she suggests, of shame. There is a moment of particularly queer discomfort in the film, where the human-OS relationship alludes to a queer relationship. Theodore's coworker has not yet met Samantha, and he doesn't know that she's not a human. He extends an invitation to Theodore, "We should all go out some time. You bring Samantha. It'll be a double date." Theodore responds, "she's an operating system." And when his worker says, "Cool! We should go to Catalina," Theodore's relief spreads over his face in a gradual smile. This scene parallels a similar kind of moment a queer person might experience at work, when a coworker knows they have a partner but lacks knowledge of their gender. The wave of tension and relief suggests a close parallel to a scene familiar to many queer people. This scene also operates as analogy for other kinds of taboo romantic relationships — interethnic, interracial, polyamorous, etc.

These narratives don't exclusively reproduce the systems that entangle them. Capek wrote *Rossum's Universal Robots* out of disgust at how human laborers are treated. Often, the protagonist in a story will initially doubt the machine's soul, and later come to recognize it. The soul of the robot is usually easy for an audience to recognize, because the robot is almost always played by a human (in

voice if not in body). The human protagonist in fiction usually needs more time to become convinced. Through a series of shared tribulations, Sonny and Spooner come to trust each other, and this shared trust is what allows them to save humanity from a robot-enforced totalitarianism. The robots, too, are saved from the soulless job of maintaining the regime. As the film unfolds, Spooner slowly comes to recognize Sonny as his friend. This story of recognition can provide an accessible staging wherein one consciousness comes to recognize “the open door” of another, per Fanon. The aspiration here is an inversion of what’s actually depicted — the robot-for-human analogy might allow greater insight into those instances where humans have been treated like robots. Ostensibly, if audience-members recognize themselves in Spooner, it is because they have been treating other people as subhuman, as machines, as inanimate. By seeing Spooner treat Sonny like a human, a viewer might recognize themselves as having treated a human like a robot. Equally, someone who has been treated like an object by another person might see themselves in Sonny.

In each of these fictions, technology operates as or in place of identity. As Beth Coleman and Jack Halberstam have respectively argued, there is fertile ground instead in understanding race and gender as technology. The ironic inversion here is simple: identity as technology vs technology as identity. The notion of “robot” stands in for racialized and feminized subject positions. Robots are also queer or queered because whatever gendering they inhabit, it does not result from a process that is normatively “natural.” While it’s true that the forces of gender and race usually operate at the same time, robot fictions tend to flatten their operation into one phenomenon— not least because the robot characters are so often played by white people. As Chude-Sokei notes, the robots in *R.U.R.* are already racialized for their relationship to forced labor. The racial aspects of robot identity are made more explicit when Helena Glory points out that the robots are being treated like “Indians” (Indigenous Americans).<sup>15</sup> The reason this treatment is notable is because the robots *look* just like the likely-white characters who surround them. In *R.U.R.* the robots are bioengineered rather than built out of electrical components, somewhat like the implied origins of “replicants” in *Bladerunner*, which is based on Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Part of the premise for these stories’ unfolding is that robots and people are visually indistinguishable, so robots can be played by people without substantial costuming to help them appear robotic. While Capek was also a part of the literature of the electrically engineered robot,<sup>16</sup> the robot who appears human opens a murkier identitarian territory. *R.U.R.* marks an early part of a tradition wherein racialized stories are flattened and whitewashed. In particular, when white people perform the racialized idea of the robot, they give a racial story a white appearance.

## EX MACHINA & THE GENDERED TURING TEST

The film *Ex Machina* reproduces this kind of whitewashing and provides an important example of how femininity operates in conceptualizing the notion of the robot. Ava (Alicia Vikander) is a humanoid robot trapped inside an isolated stronghold with her engineer Nathan (Oscar Isaac) and the starry-eyed Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), who Nathan has recruited to assist in his research. When Caleb first arrives at Nathan’s stronghold, Nathan quizzes him on what the Turing test is. Caleb responds: “It’s when a human interacts with a computer. And if the human doesn’t know they’re interacting with a computer, the test is passed.” Caleb’s response is a popular definition of the Turing Test, and it’s what most professionals mean when they talk about it in contemporary discourse. The original test, as set out by Alan Turing in his 1950 paper *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, however, asked something else. The test that Turing originally describes analogizes the ability to discern a man from a woman with discerning a human from a machine. If an “interrogator,” passing type-written questions and receiving type-written answers from behind a closed door, correctly distinguishes machine from human at the same rate as man from woman, the machine has passed the Turing Test. The original test shows us that both the institution and the troubling of gender dualism has been embedded in modern computing from early on. Jack Halberstam writes that “Turing does not stress the obvious connection between gender and computer intelligence: both are in fact imitative systems, and the boundaries between female and male... are as unclear and as unstable as the boundary between human and machine intelligence.”<sup>17</sup>

For most of the film, Ava is unclothed, and her mechanical elements are partially exposed in a kind of hyper-nudity that also obfuscates any genitals. Her face and hands, however, look exactly like those of the actor who plays her. In other words, she looks like a white movie star with a body of a translucent metal sinews. She is so thin that her stomach is see-through. Ava manipulates Caleb by flirting with him demurely, e.g., putting on a dress in the ostensible hope that it will please him. When Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava sexuality, Nathan first argues that desire is an important part of all human drives, and then adds, “to answer your real question, you bet she fuck. In between her legs, there’s an opening with a concentration of sensors. If you engage them in the right way, it creates a pleasure response.” Nathan has recruited Caleb to interact with Ava and figure out whether she has achieved artificial intelligence. This test of intelligence is implicitly understood as a test of consciousness.

This plot reproduces the kind of erasure I describe earlier, where one character’s perception stands in for another’s subjectivity. Nathan believes that if Ava can manipulate Caleb through romance and sexuality, she will have passed a test of intelligence more sophisticated than the

traditional Turing Test. Here, the question of subjectivity also becomes a question of desire, and male perception becomes the key metric for evaluating that question. It's not *really* about whether Ava can feel pleasure, but whether or not a man believes that she can. Belief in Ava's capacity for sensation is a product of faith in the metric Nathan has devised to test her consciousness. He is so devoted to this metric that he creates a deadly scenario.<sup>18</sup> Although Ava is not a human woman, she operates along Virginia Woolf's analysis on the characterization of women in literature: "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."<sup>19</sup> Ava ends up using Caleb to kill Nathan, but this does little in service of her characterization. Ava is a computer, and every move she makes is in serve of manipulating her way to freedom, so her character lacks a coherent thread. Rather, this arc magnifies Nathan's genius as something so powerful that it kills him.

### DIRTY COMPUTER | A COUNTERPONT

The 2018 film *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture] shows the epistemological power of understanding race and gender as technologies.<sup>20</sup> The film accompanies Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* album, and knits together music videos for each song into a work of speculative fiction. The protagonist of the film, Jane 57821 (Janelle Monáe), has been declared a "dirty computer," and must undergo "cleaning." This cleaning is a scrubbing of memory meant to wash away nonconformity. In the very first line of the film, Jane 57821 narrates, "they started calling us computers." This line recalls Heth, who was called an automaton. Unlike in all these other dramas, where computers are called people, people here are called computers. Via homage, Monáe places the film in the history of science fiction that includes films like *2001* and *Bladerunner*, referencing many of these films directly with narrative and visual clues. *Dirty Computer* makes the move from calling technology identity to calling identity technology. According to Coleman, race, considered as a technology, is a part of subjectivity "contingent to applications, like a tool."<sup>21</sup> The imposition of the label "computer" onto people provides an analogy for the operation for identity as a tool. Coleman suggests that the applications of the tool are not intrinsic to it, that while race has historically aided and produced systems of violence, there are other applications. In illustrating her point, she describes the origin of the phrase "the real McCoy." "The real McCoy" originally referred to an auto-lubricating levered mechanism, invented by the Black engineer Elijah

McCoy.<sup>22</sup> This device was so successful that it became a neologism, and was novel for its freedom of movement. Coleman writes that "the flexibility of mechanical joints made possible by McCoy's lubricating engine lay outside the particular engine it drove." Halberstam echoes the emphasis on applications over the tools themselves, writing "those concerned with the social configurations of class, race, and gender can thus no longer afford to position themselves simply for or against technology."<sup>23</sup>

Jane goes on, "You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated." In an interview, Janelle Monáe explains that, "dirty computers are individuals who refuse to assimilate...they refuse to, you know, wipe away their queerness, wipe away their Blackness, and because of that, they are a threat to the status quo."<sup>24</sup> *Dirty Computer* provides an image of the kind of greater agency that Beth Coleman imagines and understanding of race as technology you could enable. Although you have to wait until after the credits begin rolling to see the resolution, those who stick around are gratified to find out that Jane and her friends resist erasure. As we see in her memories, Jane was in a loving queer relationship with two people: Zen (Tessa Thompson) and Ché (Jayson Aaron). When Jane arrives, Tessa Thompson is there to help take her through the "cleaning" procedure, but she has no memory of Jane or the relationship they shared. This relationship is supposed to get erased, but ultimately the three remember each other and pursue freedom together. I find a link between the persistence of their memories and an earlier scene in the film. Two workers sit in a kind of sound booth above the table where Jane lies with her head in an electrical helmet. One of them runs across some content that feels unfamiliar. "What is that? Is that a memory? Is that a dream?" Whatever it is, it looks like a music video. I believe that by storing memories as music, by employing a creative force, Jane and her friends resist erasure and maintain the knowledge they need to get free.

Jack Halberstam writes of a demand for "post-Christian myths, myths of multiple genders, of variegated desires, myths of difference, differences and tolerance."<sup>25</sup> *Dirty Computer* provides such a myth and demonstrates the transformative capacities of imagining identity as technology. These characters revel in identity, they wield it as resistance and refusal. Importantly, their action, though presented as speculative fiction, is grounded in a long lineage. The sounds of West African music that echo through American music today, for example, resisted erasure via middle passage and beyond. The music in Jane's mind also will not be erased. The seeds for transformation that Coleman and Halberstam describe live within us, but their power remains to be seen.

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# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

Charlie Hailey, Shona Kitchen, Aly Ogasian, Damian White

University of Florida  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Scripps College

Gainesville, Florida  
Providence, Rhode Island  
Los Angeles, California

[aogasian@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:aogasian@scrippscollege.edu)  
[dwhite01@risd.edu](mailto:dwhite01@risd.edu)

[clhailey@ufl.edu](mailto:clhailey@ufl.edu)  
[skitchen@risd.edu](mailto:skitchen@risd.edu)

### Abstract

Spoil islands were produced by the US Army Corps of Engineers as a byproduct of channel dredging, spanning the length of the United States. Are they capable of hosting life? Is it ever practically possible to “leave no trace?” Aly Ogasian and Shona Kitchen interrogate the dissolution of nature and artifice on an accidental island lodged between a Floridian lagoon and the Kennedy Space Center.

### Keywords

Climate change, Terraforming, Spoil islands, Artistic Research, Speculative

### Introduction

Climate change seems to require that we adjust to the prospects of socio-ecological worlds marked by near-permanent unsettlement. We increasingly know—as the philosopher Dale Jamieson has noted—that in the best possible circumstances, human life in the post-Holocene is going to take place on a dynamic, restless, and much warmer planet. We find ourselves thrown into uncanny hybrid worlds for which we have few maps.

Made Ground, Kitchen and Ogasian’s most recent installation of the project Another Final Frontier, on Governors Island, New York City, is a remarkable act of curation and invention that emerged from the coast of Florida. Through film, photography, sound recordings, experiments, soil samples, and the construction of an archive, Made Ground offers us a glimpse into how to construct futures in a warming world and suggests that even in the most oddly produced natures, in the midst of

Florida heat and space dust, life persists—and perhaps so can we.

### Grey Island, Florida, January 2020

The first thing to be said about spoil islands is that we don’t know much about them. There is less information about this spoil island and the thousands like it that line the US Atlantic coast than there is about the surface of the moon. Which is to say that the spoil island where the project’s camp was made, where all the early indications of its coming submersion—along with much of the rest of the coastline—are already evident, and where you may someday visit (it’s only 500 feet from the shore) is another final frontier.

We do know that this island—Grey Island—is 400 feet in diameter. It has a ring of vegetation around its shore, some of which is native (like sabal palms and red mangroves) and some of which is considered exotic (like Brazilian pepper trees). The island’s center—like the middle of a lifesaver ring—is mostly barren. Its mound of rock and shell rises to about five feet above sea level. Over the past couple of years, we have learned other things about this island which will serve as tools and evidence for what the island means and what training to live here looks like.

We know that this island has been here for about seven decades. Spoil islands like this one are waste products from dredging channels. The focus is on the channels, which are measured and maintained—not on the islands, which are left to their own devices. They are cast to the side and often overlooked, if not forgotten entirely. This chain of spoil

islands was formed in the late 1920s and early 1930s when the US Army Corps of Engineers was cutting an East Coast channel through Florida's Mosquito Lagoon that would become the Intracoastal Waterway. Grey Island is a bit younger. It was set in place when the county added a public boat ramp to the Beacon 42 camp on the mainland and cut a short trough to connect with the waterway's channel. The island first appears on a USDA aerial photograph taken during the third flight line on March 18, 1951. Its form, already rounded by currents, looks like a white hole in the metal-gray waters of the lagoon.

Grey Island floats in two overlapping areas: a wildlife refuge and a space center, one dedicated to nature and the other to technology. Both emerged after the bucket and pipeline dredgers had laced the Indian River Lagoon System with spoil islands. Grey Island makes up two acres of the 140,000 that NASA acquired in 1962 in the drive to expand its exploration of space, specifically its lunar landing program. Look south from the island, between palm trunks and pepper tree limbs, and you can see the Vehicle Assembly Building of the Kennedy Space Center on the horizon. This is where engineers assembled the rockets for the Apollo missions that went to the moon. If there were a large enough crane, the VAB could be lifted over the island like the glass cover of a bell jar—or the casing of an experimental habitat.

From this vantage point on the spoil island, we embark on our own mission, exploring what we don't yet know and training ourselves to live in a place that is both near and far, a place that is remarkable yet also quite ordinary. A place forgotten in plain sight. We have found our own landing site amid the constellation that is this 3,000-mile string of islands, stretching from New York City to Brownsville, Texas. It is hot, the mosquitos cloud like moon dust, the ground is hard, and the sea is rising. We have traveled far into space without ever leaving Earth.

### **Return to the Moon**

About the time President Eisenhower started planning the NASA complex, dredgers were maintaining the Intracoastal Waterway, scooping up chunks of limestone, shell, and coral, and then noisily sucking them through a pipe toward the spoil islands. We imagine the sound of buttons, snaps, and zippers clanking round and round in a clothes dryer. Locals, fishing and boating here in Mosquito

Lagoon, said it sounded like clinkers, and so they named these islands "the clinkers."

We have often said that the center of the spoil island looks like the surface of the moon. Astronaut Ken Mattingly could have been describing the island's ground from Apollo 16's command module orbiting the moon when he said: "It looks very much like a big clinkery cinder field, yeah, a big, rounded surface of clinkers. It is fantastic. Boy, is that rough!" [1] In his black-and-white photographs from the 1972 mission, the moon's craters look like the spoil islands that dapple the aerial shots taken by the same kind of mapping camera in the 1940s and 50s. They are inverses of each other, island and crater, and yet they share origins in the displacement of material, whether earth or moon.

On the second day of the first spoil island expedition, we estimated that about 20,000 tons of dredged material makes up Grey Island. "Clinkery" is a fitting description for this land formed of waste—not just for the jangly sound it makes rattling in a pipe, but also because clinkers are the residue left when something is burned.

An astronaut orbiting the moon saw clinkers, fishermen casting their lines around spoil islands heard them, and here on Grey Island, the camp rests on them. This dredged material is the camp's substrate, the footing for the geodesic dome which will be its habitat for living, the context for tools and equipment, and the rock and shell pad for sleeping bags. It seems to groan when you walk on it. It is the foundation for an outlaw area where nature and technology meet.

### **Island-Houseboat-Shipwreck**

Buckminster Fuller argued that technology emerged on the frontiers of exploration, in what he called the "outlaw area." Fuller's vision hints at legacies of colonization, which this spoil island expedition resists by turning inward to revisit where we already are—not to "reform man," but to discover our weaknesses and strengths. Fuller's model relies on the power of military technology to guide future innovation, also a trajectory that our project seeks to reverse. On the spoil island, creative impulse hacks technology. Despite these objections, we are dredging for something there in the depths of Fuller's work, an underpinning that takes the futurist back to his home, across Penobscot Bay to Bear Island in Maine, described as the "source of his ideas."

Relevant to Grey Island and the present expedition are two other key thoughts that arise from Fuller's technological vision. Spoil islands are in neither the 75 percent water nor the 25 percent land he classified. They are fabricated land made out of the sea—the outcome of the human impulse to transform environments to their liking. Out there on the island, there's an irony in the way that Fuller talks about improvement in the outlaw area. We know he is talking about technological innovation, but spoil islands are the residue of what has long been considered "improvements" to nature: the straightening of rivers, the redirection of currents, and the building of dikes to corral water.

Those who occupy spoil islands are neither in the 99 percent of the populace who have stayed on land, nor are they in the "tiny minority" who, according to Fuller, "went to sea." On a spoil island, you have embarked on an adventure that is somewhere in between. Your tenure here is closer to spending time on a houseboat—or a shipwreck. In Fuller's terms, the spoil island constitutes another outlaw area—a place where the "development of technology" meets the "toughness of nature," and his aspirations for "improvement" come not through any physical manipulation of land or any technical mastery of the sea, but through the insights that might be gleaned from such a place and such perspective.

### **Midden Ecology**

Native Americans inhabited this part of the Florida peninsula for thousands of years, and the Seminole Tribe of Florida currently claims this land. The Ais, the Mayaca, the Timucua, and ancestors of the Seminole Tribe, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida built an extensive system of earthworks throughout the peninsula. Mounds served as bases for ritual practices, and middens were the refuse heaps of shells harvested, opened, and tossed into the growing pile. Collections of waste indicate shared undertakings.

Middens rose up from the indigenous harvest of aquatic resources, and spoil islands are the result of governmental provision of navigable waters. Florida's east coast middens are some of the largest refuse mounds in the United States. The Castle Windy midden is seventeen feet high and 300 feet long. Seminole Rest, only eight miles north of Grey Island, is more than twenty feet high (even though it was

depleted by mining operations), and Turtle Mound is more than twice that height. Such places make their own weather, and the air atop Turtle Mound is rarefied, caught between the natural and artificial.

Because the lagoon and the Indian River are so exceedingly shallow, mostly between three and four feet, dredged material piles up and creates elevations and conditions that introduce their own microclimates (not unlike an inland barrier island). The spoil islands are upland environments in unlikely places, supporting improbable growth that includes pepper trees, wild coffee, and papaya far beyond their historical planting zones.

Mosquito Lagoon is known for its bioluminescence. Imagine dragging your kayak from the island camp, across the spoil, and launching it into the lagoon, so warm, like bath water. Out towards the channel, it starts. Flickers at first, and then a blue-green glow in our wake. Tiny dinoflagellates, like millions of constellations, light our path. You might be in space but you haven't left Earth. Mid-summer clouds drift across the moon, and the color deepens to a milky blue, and the water slackens between tides. Soon, the new moon will bring a king tide, and it will lap at the edge of the dome.

### **Made Ground: Governors Island: June 2021**

There's a moment near the end of D.H. Lawrence's story "The Man Who Loved Islands" when the protagonist, on his third island, reckons with the environmental changes around him: "He pushed the snow away, then sat down under the lee of the boat, looking at the sea, which nearly swirled to his feet in the high tide. Curiously natural the pebbles looked, in a world gone all uncanny." [2] Returning to Lawrence's story in preparation for the project's exhibition on Governors Island (only our second island), we couldn't help but read it as climate change literature.

Written ninety-four years ago, here was a warning, a navigational aid like the foghorn that used to protect ships from running aground on Governors Island. Lawrence tells how occupying an island lifts the veil of security we find in the distractions of daily life, and how it confronts time and questions stability. When Lawrence writes that "once you isolate yourself on a little island in the sea of space, and the moment begins to heave and expand in great circles, the solid earth is gone," he traces our own journey on made

ground, where water and earth mix, more water rises, and building necessarily becomes repairing.

Camping on the dredged earth of the spoil island in Florida, we questioned the human relationship to land. Kitchen and Ogasian named it for its lunar complexion, but nobody owns Grey Island, and like Governors Island, its administration is a lattice of agencies—NASA, Canaveral National Seashore (CNSS), and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR), to name a few.

Camping there meant rethinking what land tenure means. And here on Governors Island, the dome's stakes are driven into thin topsoil covering a glacial moraine next to ground pumped from harbor mud a century ago, on land stolen from the Lenape, on an island named for what nature offered. Before Verrazzano sailed in, Nutten Island harbored groves of nut trees. It was a place where no human lived permanently, a fishing camp next to deep water. How quickly the island went from natural resource to military reserve, from land balancing human activity with what nature offers to land held by force.

Camping in the dome on islands, we realized our tenancy was not only temporary but also borrowed. The Grey Island camp was in a wildlife refuge with clear rules about "leave no trace." But it's also evident that you can't truly inhabit the island without leaving traces. Camping on the island, you take the land whether you like it or not, and it can be a struggle to know what to pledge in return. When you leave the island, the spikes that anchor the dome will easily lift out of the ground's slurry of shell and marl, and the dome's footprint can be seen in the dusting of tracks, in and out and around its perimeter.

Now on Governors Island, this dome occupies the ancient drip lines of hickory trees, as it also rests under the ghost canopy of the Carolina Poplar, which was carefully noted in a 1963 landscape survey of the island. Its roots surely still braid the earth beneath the dome. Is it possible to occupy today's unstable grounds as if we were borrowing land and also lending ourselves to the world?

### **Why Domes?**

With the dome as our vehicle, together we have asked how to build where earth and water mix to make land. And so we continue to gather evidence, our dome is as much a vessel as it is a tool. Our dome crossed the Atlantic, came through Jupiter, Florida, was ferried to an island that looked like the moon, rode on trucks to Providence,

crossed the East River's flood tide for the installation, and temporarily occupied Nolan Park right next to the Governors Island's parade ground.

We continue to think about the geodesic dome's many ironies. This one was produced for glamping, but its vinyl wrap and leaky airlock brought no glamor to camping in Florida, only sweat and mosquitos and insomnia. Similar domes became DIY symbols despite their normative structure, and others housed pacifist communities even as they were being deployed in military operations. From radar outposts in the Arctic to Buckminster Fuller's bell jar over midtown, domes have captured territory and tried to control environments, all with the same earnest absurdity of McKim, Mead, and White's designs for heavy Beaux Arts buildings on Governors Island's newly dredged spoil.

This past month Charlie has been working with architecture students at a local non-profit called The Repurpose Project, a thrift store outpost in the circular economy. Exploring the salvage yard they discovered a jungle gym, one of those old-school domes of tubular steel. Someone had wrapped its surface with chicken wire and then carefully, but also carefreely, woven in scraps of plastic, drink lids, toys, rubber gaskets, sippy cups, and egg cartons.

Trees arching overhead added their own materials. Leaves from laurel oaks and needles, and branches from loblolly and long-leaf pines covered the dome's surface, and when he and his students crawled through a triangle that opened like a tent flap, they entered an archetype of shelter and realized its steel structure was an approximation of a wigwam's bent saplings, or a yurt's stretched skins. They also entered a dome that carries two different cycles—one based on economies of waste, and another tied to natural cycles of growth.

Where does what we build fall in these cycles? Can building also be repairing? What is the role of technology, in its root sense of techne that links art, craft, and product, and that meshes what we build with how we build it? Even if architecture preceded clothing, how do we remember that nature came before all that?

### **The View From Space**

Yesterday, Aly sent Shona and Charlie a screenshot from Google Earth. Right about noon on February 2, 2020, a satellite photographed the dome on Grey Island, just a few days after we finished setting it up. There it is, almost

exactly in the center of the island—a precision as serendipitous as the timing of the low-orbit photograph. This certainly isn't a blue marble picture. It looks more like a grey golf ball wedged into a sand trap—but the image does make us think about home. Seeing that image makes us nostalgic for camping there. How easy it is to forget the effort of ferrying materials, bolting joints, and sweating in the hot January sun.

Seeing that image also reminded us of Lawrence's line that "an island is a nest which holds one egg and one only. The egg is the islander himself." Islands isolate, as they also incubate. They beget ideas about where we've been and where we might go, and where we are right now. Maybe it never went away, as the many domes that have occupied Governors Island demonstrate, but we have puzzled at the dome's renaissance during the pandemic. Not only has it continued as a vehicle of escape—glamping far from cities with spiraling infection levels—but it has also served as a bubble of isolation, practicing yoga in transparent domes, close but far away.

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## Authors Biographies

Charlie Hailey is an architect, writer, and professor. A Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Scholar, he is the author of six books, including "The Porch: Meditations on the Edge of Nature", "Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space", and "Slab City: Dispatches from the Last Free Place". Hailey teaches design/build, studio, and theory at the University of Florida, where he was recently named Teacher/Scholar of the Year. In Spring 2021, he was Mentoring Artist-in-Residence at the Atlantic Center for the Arts (ACA).

Shona Kitchen is an Associate Professor and Department Head of Digital + Media, Rhode Island School of Design. Kitchen and Ogasian were artists in residence at the Schmidt Ocean Institute aboard the Research Vessel Falkor (2019 and 2021) as well as one of the winners of apexart's Unsolicited Proposal Program (2015). She has received additional honors including an American for the

Arts Award, a RIBA Award and a D&AD Silver Award. She has exhibited internationally at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Kelvingrove Museum, Vitra Museum, Montalvo Arts Center, Center for Contemporary Art (Warsaw), Zero1 and ISEA and has completed a number of public art projects at venues such as San Jose Mineta Airport; Kielder Castle, Northumberland; the Science Museum, London and Deptford Creek, London.

Aly Ogasian is an Assistant Professor of Art and Design at Scripps College in Claremont, California. She has been awarded residencies at Rabbit Island Foundation, Montalvo Arts Center, Vermont Studio Center, School of Visual Arts, The Arctic Circle, and the National Center of Contemporary Art: Russia, amongst others. In 2018, Ogasian and Kitchen were awarded the first ever artist residency at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Cape Canaveral, Florida, supported by a NASA Space Grant. She has exhibited internationally at venues such as The Russian State Arctic & Antarctic Museum; The Salamanca Arts Center Tasmania; Watkins College of Art, Design & Film and ISEA, amongst others.

Damian White is a sociologist and political theorist with teaching and research interests in the sociology of design, architecture, and adaptive reuse; urban and environmental sociology with a particular interest in urban political ecology; historical and political sociology; critical theory, urban studies and photography. White gained a BA in Political Science and American Studies from the University of Keele, an MSc in Political Sociology and Political Theory from Birkbeck College, University of London and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Essex. White has published four books to date: "Bookchin-A Critical Appraisal" (Pluto Press, UK/University of Michigan Press USA, 2008), "Technonatures: Environments, Technologies, Spaces and Places in the Twenty-First Century" (Wilfred Laurier Press, 2009), "Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader" (AK Press, 2011). "The Environment, Nature and Social Theory: Hybrid Approaches" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) - with Alan Rudy and Brian Gareau. He is presently working on a book called "Climate Futures and the Just Transition".

# Stories from the Circle: Augmented reality as boundary infrastructure for decolonizing the site of monuments

Alex M. Lee, Lisa Propst, Eric J. York,  
Phillip White-Cree, Rebecca A. Pelky, Jennifer L. Ball

Clarkson University  
Potsdam, NY USA

[amlee@clarkson.edu](mailto:amlee@clarkson.edu), [lpropst@clarkson.edu](mailto:lpropst@clarkson.edu), [eyork@clarkson.edu](mailto:eyork@clarkson.edu),  
[pwhitecr@clarkson.edu](mailto:pwhitecr@clarkson.edu), [rpelky@clarkson.edu](mailto:rpelky@clarkson.edu), [jball@clarkson.edu](mailto:jball@clarkson.edu)

## Abstract

Around the country in recent years public monuments to controversial figures have sparked heated debate, protest and even violence. The need to ameliorate such eristic is great, however, dominant information channels such as print, television, and social media often preclude possibilities for productive dialogue due to structural constraints and systemic biases<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, experimental media like augmented reality applications for mobile devices (cellphones and tablets) create interactive communication structures that allow for a ‘bottom up’ mode of communication in the hands of content creators such as artists, designers and community organizers that can provide nuance to traditional narratives, challenge orthodoxy, enrich public memory, and can foster a productive dialogue. This, we argue, can allow a space for public discourse towards reconciliation of controversial issues.

## Keywords

Augmented reality, boundary infrastructure, public dialogue, decolonization, resistance

## Introduction

In the past twenty years we have witnessed the migration of the public sphere from the physical realm, the public square, to the virtual realm, the Internet. In effect, the location of public discourse and the site of national identity formation has been extended from the town square to the virtual world. This ‘extending’ will only accelerate in the years to come as the structures of the metaverse metastasize into something more concrete. Additionally, AR devices will become

cheaper, higher in fidelity as the geolocation technology becomes even more accurate.

Augmented reality allows us to overlay the virtual object onto our experience of the physical world. The way in which this augmentation is made can help or hinder the dimensions with which controversial monuments are framed, perceived, and ingrained in our public consciousness. In this paper we present a case study in an example of how public discourse around a controversial monument, a statue of Christopher Columbus at St. Mary’s Circle, Syracuse, was augmented by AR technology to create an experience that helps generate authentic discussion and encourage deeper understanding among members of affected communities.

## Background

The Columbus statue was erected in 1934 and has been a site of controversy for decades. In 2018, Syracuse mayor Ben Walsh partnered with InterFaith Works to organize dialogue circles on the monument’s future. Two years later, a petition to remove the monument received over 18,000 signatures, and the mayor announced plans to remake the site into a Heritage Park without the statue. The Columbus Monument Corporation launched a legal challenge, which is still ongoing.

## Mechanics

Users of the app hear reflections from fifteen individuals closely involved in debates about the statue, e.g. student activists who organized protests for the removal of the statue; participants in dialogue circles organized by the

<sup>1</sup> Kilgo, D. K., & Harlow, S. (2019). Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(4), 508–530.

mayor's office and InterFaith Works to make recommendations about the statue's future; members of the Onondaga Nation, whose ancestral lands include the city of Syracuse; Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, a CNY grassroots organization that works to support Indigenous land rights; and members of the Syracuse Italian American community.

This project attempts to 'liminalize' the form of hypertext, by helping viewers not to perceive hypertext as an 'otherness' with the personalizing of individual stories and views<sup>2</sup>. This creates a radically different reading environment which is site-situated and auditory, presenting the viewer with synthetic contact of alternate views and perspectives within the larger context of the monument. The app exposes users to varied perspectives about how to remember Christopher Columbus in relation to the stories of Indigenous peoples, Italian Americans, and other communities in and around Syracuse. Users of the app hear reflections from fifteen individuals closely involved in debates about the statue, e.g. student activists who organized protests for the removal of the statue; participants in dialogue circles organized by the mayor's office and InterFaith Works to make recommendations about the statue's future; members of the Onondaga Nation, a CNY grassroots organization that works to support Indigenous land rights; and members of the Syracuse Italian American community.

Building on recent work examining feminist rhetorical science studies<sup>3</sup> and technological infrastructure<sup>4</sup>, this experience report describes the design and development of an augmented reality application (and supplementary materials) as boundary infrastructure<sup>5</sup> that supports the decolonization of the design of aesthetics by encouraging boundary crossing and enabling feminist modes of resistance like those found in Gloria Anzaldúa's border lands and embodied by Donna Haraway's cyborgs. This infrastructure can avoid both a bureaucratic approach to standards and a hierarchical approach to organization which in traditional communication media serve to prevent productive dialogue, encourage systemic bias, and exacerbate ideological divides. By contrast, such boundary infrastructure can use nonhierarchical organizational structures and avoid strict standardization, provide a remedy for orthodoxy, and allow resistance to hegemonic thought.

<sup>2</sup> Paul, Christiane (1995). Augmented Hypertext, Reading/Writing Hyperfictions: The Psychodrama of Interactivity. *Leonardo* vol. 28 no. 4, August pp 265-272

<sup>3</sup> Booher, A., & Jung, J. (2018). Situating Feminist Rhetorical Science Studies. In *Feminist rhetorical science studies: Human bodies, post humanist worlds*. Southern Illinois University Press.

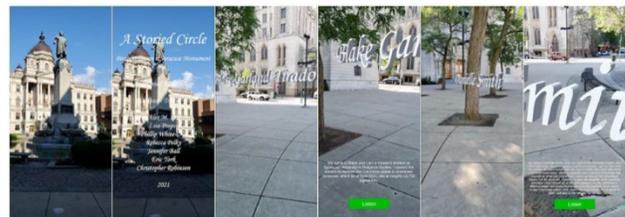
<sup>4</sup> Frith, J. (2020). Technical standards and a theory of writing as infrastructure. *Written Communication* 37(3), 401-407.

<sup>5</sup> Bowker, G. C., and Star, S. L. 1999. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.

The methods of empathetic narrative techniques such as *character identification* i.e. naming, description, and indirect implication of traits, quality of attributed speech and mode of auditory representation of consciousness contributes to the potential for empathy with inherent *narrative situation* with the use of first person accounts<sup>6</sup>. This breaks down the ideology attached to the representation of this particular monument breaching its coded-iconic content presenting a punctum of the experience of the site by the varied subjective interpretations of those involved. The viewer is literally jugged against the symbolic experience with alternate interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

We are all cyborgs in the Harawayan<sup>8</sup> sense. We are amalgamations of complicated histories of violence, socialization, and the internalization of the oppression that surrounds us. We have bodies mediated in complex, meaningful ways by technology which, in many cases *must* be separated into component parts pulled in multiple directions and perspectives. In a sense, our augmented experience makes this case very evident indeed. By reclaiming St. Mary's circle with all these views, we hope to reclaim a more holistic picture of the varied perspectives surrounding monuments.



Screenshot montage of the work-in-progress (as of 6/21) prototype of our AR app 'Stories from the Circle'. Note app was using previous title in the image.

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<sup>6</sup> Keen, Suzanne (2006). A Theory of Narrative Empathy. *NARRATIVE*, Vol 14. No 3.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland (1964). *Image, Music, Text: Rhetoric of Images*. Hill and Wang, NY

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne (1991). *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge Press.

represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or of Clarkson University.

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## Authors Biographies

**Jennifer L. Ball is an associate professor of History and Social Documentation at Clarkson University where she teaches courses in history, social documentation, gender and sexuality. She is Clarkson's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer and serves on the Board of the Difficult Dialogues National Resource Center. She often works in applied ways to deepen our knowledge through dialogic approaches and alternative ways of knowing.**

**Phillip White-Cree is the Coordinator of Indigenous Community Support and Outreach at Clarkson University where he teaches Indigenous History courses. A lifelong resident and member of the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory, he has an extensive background in Indigenous land claim research and Haudenosaunee cultural knowledge.**

**Alex M. Lee is a digital artist and associate professor of Digital Arts & Sciences at Clarkson University where he teaches courses in 3D animation, XR, and digital art. He is the AR developer of the app for this project.**

**Rebecca Pelky is an assistant professor of Film Studies at Clarkson University where she teaches courses in film and creative writing. She specializes in Indigenous film and literature. She is an enrolled member of the Brothertown Indian Nation of Wisconsin.**

**Lisa Propst is an associate professor of literature at Clarkson University. She specializes in contemporary British and postcolonial literature, women's writing, and the ethics of representation. Her research addresses the roles and limits of storytelling as a means to combat silencing and social divisions.**

**Eric J. York is an assistant professor of Communication, Media and Design at Clarkson University where he teaches courses in rhetoric, user-experience design, and front end and full stack web development. He studies the effects of technology on culture and society (and vice versa) and only very occasionally dreams of electric sheep.**

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### *In Silence* : Resonant Potentials in Community Arts and Advocacy

Joel Ong

York University  
Toronto, Canada  
joelong@yorku.ca

#### Abstract

*In Silence* . . . reflects on the ongoing work of the artist with community partners in Jane-Finch, one of the most economically challenged and racialized areas of Toronto and the stories embodied in them and their children. In its aesthetic form, it references the artist's previous installation "Between us a Breeze" (2016) that explored the impoverished nature of communication across a visitation booth by visualizing speech as gusts of wind across a reflecting pool. In our social-distancing epoch, this interpersonal distance is especially felt through virtual conversations that deny us multisensory connection while introducing artefacts of digital and network failure. The work *In Silence* . . . takes a selection of these anecdotal stories and abstracts them through actors on a screen limited to non-vocal expressions, a reflecting pool that is activated by cymatic visualizations of their speech and a bone-conductance railing (that forces the visitor into a position reminiscent of pain or anguish). The entirety of these stories is accessible through a phone hotline. *In Silence* . . . pays tribute to the resilience of the community through the emotional turmoil of the pandemic that has left many in perpetual suspension and immobility, and the stories of survival that have emerged.

#### Keywords

Community arts practice, advocacy, sound, vibration, cymatics

#### Introduction

"In silence, time does not move but vibrates gently on the spot. It is slowed down on my body whose time it has become." Salome Vogelien, 2010. [1]

The venerable John Cage once wrote of the impossibility of silence, because moments of silence are not just an ill-perceived absence of sound, but also that every silence is "pregnant with sound" [2], much in the same way an unplayed, *silent* instrument is sounding *in potentia*. The media arts today consider diverse technological elements as voices-in-potential, and through what Cage has called the 'inner life' of an instrument to be percussed and revealed, has also become a motivating factor to unpack and experiment with not only the physical affordances of

emerging digital tools, but also a hidden, often surreptitious socio-cultural resonance within which these tools are made, circulated and hybridized with our bodies and everyday life.

Instead of what Douglas Khan refers to as the "amplified threshold of their disappearance" [3], the work *In Silence* . . . explores silence as an amplified resonance in the body brought about by a deep and affective stasis – a slowing down and a process of *silencing* what may constitute distracting sounds or noises, and what may also be a result of intense pain, trauma or sorrow. As sound scholar Salome Vogelien asserts, this melding of time and space, what she calls *timespace* [4], in the perception of silence has as its consequence a heightened attentiveness to our sensory, emotive modalities within a slowly oscillating void. This paper therefore describes the work *In Silence* . . . in the particular context of community agency and advocacy within the communities immediately adjacent to York University, and pays tribute to the resilience of the community through the emotional turmoil of the Pandemic that has left many in perpetual suspension and immobility, and the stories of survival that have emerged. *In Silence* . . . premiered at the Cummings Art Center Galleries at Connecticut College and commissioned through the Ammerman Centre Symposium on Arts and Technology.

#### void \*

In 2016, I had signed up to be a befriender at the Tacoma Detention Centre through World Relief Seattle, that involved me making weekly trips into the centre to speak to detainees, often undocumented migrants and refugees held indefinitely while waiting for processing with no family and home in this state. I will always remember sitting at the visitation booth waiting for the detainees we were speaking to that day, and the palpable silence that extended to the moments before they picked up the phone to talk. These images are frozen in my memory - the

booth's glass like a screen that broadcasted their soundless movements like a silent movie, the complex emotions were held latent underneath their faces waiting to emerge through their voice, and the never-ending suspension of air that seemed to be inscribed with the turbulence of injustice. Even across the airtight panels, this was something I could share, a metaphysical wind that spoke of constraints in migration, longing for a different place, a different future, and a shared nostalgia for the past. I developed the installation *Between us a Breeze* (2016) (Figure 1) as part of the exhibition *Windward| Windword* that explored the impoverished nature of communication across such visitation booth by visualizing speech as gusts of wind across a reflecting pool, aiming to extend this liminal space between us and abstracting the deep emotional connections. Without any visitors to the installation, the pool was still; but when there were people talking to each other the water was activated by fans at either side, generating slow waves that would form, collide and reform again. *Between us a Breeze* focused on the tensions between movement and stasis embodied in the detainees as an oscillation between migration, detention and deportation and the intensity of emotions around each of them.



Figure 1: *Between us a Breeze* installation view

When the pandemic hit and we moved *en masse* to online platforms of communication, we began to feel some similarly poignant forms of disconnect. As disembodied voices we spoke through digital networks, the silences in our conversation became synonymous with glitch, latencies, network failures and the all-too-familiar mute button. Emotions were shared despite the overwhelming demand for physical connection. Touch, smell, taste were sidelined sensory modalities in favor of ocularcentric, auditory-based engagements. The virtual spaces of the networks upon which these conversations relied on began to symbolize a void and a black hole of physical and emotional stasis, where our levels of expressiveness were constrained by the limitations of the computer's input channels and the strength of its connections; much as the

way our freedom of movement in our everyday lives had been constrained by the onset of the social distancing and lock down policies world wide.

The socio-political condition, moreover, was an overpowering concern, and like many different countries around the world, the Pandemic had exacerbated systemic imbalances already prevalent, hitting particularly hard areas with high densities of low-income, racialized and new-comer families. Neighborhoods such as Jane-Finch in Toronto were already on the fringes of the relentless and fast-developing downtown core before the Pandemic struck, suffering the slow violence of marginalization, systemic racism and erasure embedded within the society, all whilst undergoing some of the largest transitions in its geographical landscape such as the building of a new subway, and ongoing relocations efforts as the older community housing blocks are torn down to make way for new developments. These have progressively broken apart deeply rooted communities and changed the way of life for thousands of residents over the last decades. My work with community partners of racially marginalized groups in this neighbourhood aims to bring attention to the plight and resilience of diverse racialized communities through a variety of programs in creative coding, film, dance and music projects conducted assiduously in the last years. In particular, I have been honored to learn about stories of migration and the diverse diasporic identities embodied in migrants and their children who have become dear friends; and the way the city's lock down in the past 2 years has enacted a boundary line between them and their cultural homes that has as its compromise (and consequence) an over-reliance on digital technology.

### Sounding | Abstractions

The work *In Silence*. . . takes a selection of these anecdotal stories and abstracts them through actors on a screen limited to non-vocal expressions, and a reflecting pool that is activated by cymatic visualizations of their speech and a bone-conductance railing (that forces the visitor into a position reminiscent of pain or anguish). The entirety of these stories is accessible through a phone hotline. The stories center around three protagonists inspired by true life experiences of a group of community partners:

1. **Andrea**, a middle-aged youth worker who witnesses the struggles that her mother faced as a migrant from Guyana, entering Canada initially as an illegal immigrant before getting

citizenship, setting up a family and leading her children in being an advocate for her community – to her current struggles with mobility issues and physical pain in a neighborhood where accessible supports are not always available.

2. **Mrs O**, a late-middle-aged woman who migrated to Canada from the Caribbean islands, became rose to become an important youth worker and leader with her own community center in the neighbourhood. During the Pandemic, her community center tragically burns down, and she is left in a moment of suspension and pain as she watches support networks around her get overtaxed and break down.
3. **J**, a middle-aged man who was a hip-hop dancer and pioneering member of an internationally acclaimed B-boy crew in the 80s, who was unable to dance anymore after a series of injuries. He had lost friends in gang violence in the neighbourhood where there were few opportunities for decent work. Driven to desperation during the Pandemic, he had tried many different jobs before learning to DJ and becoming a key partner in a mobile studio that enabled rival gang members to collaborate on music making together.

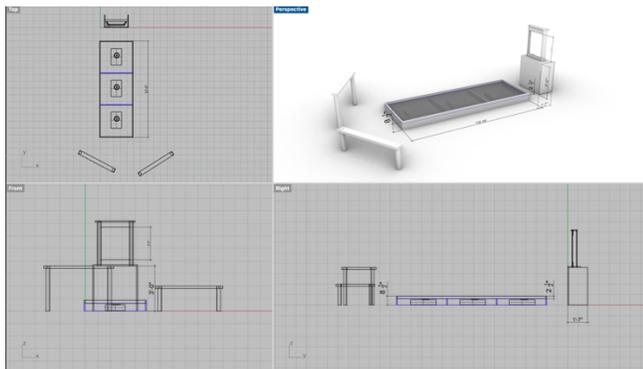


Figure 2: *In Silence* proposed installation

In the installation, a TV monitor is positioned at the screen and plays a video of the actors' silent depiction of the stories. Each actor has also provided a voice over of the stories, and these are manipulated to generate cymatic patterns on the pool, as well as vibrational 'messages' embedded into two railings that visitors can access through placing their elbows on the rail and cupping their hands over their ears. The patterns in the water and embedded sounds in the railings are made with the use of haptic speakers that work at specific frequency ranges between 10-40Hz and create vibrations in the structures rather than audible sound. The vocal performances of the stories are transformed into auditory notes in this range through a mix of onset detection, spectral filtering and pitch-shifting. The entirety of the stories can be heard through a phone hotline provided at the installation venue.

## Conclusion... Still water runs deep

The adage *still water runs deep* recounts the project's inspired ideas of an embedded and hidden complexity under a veil of stasis. Jane-Finch is a highly racialized and stigmatized neighbourhood notorious for gun violence, but boasts some of highest levels of racial and language diversity in Canada, and it is also an area of immense community spirit, creativity and resilience. The work of advocating for these groups is not only based in the gallery but also out in the community and so this artwork is part of a larger project in the way that the stories and emotions depicted cannot be separated from the relational accountability between us. Insofar as the work creates new support networks for the communities of Jane-Finch, and/or supports the formation of new supportive initiatives in other communities facing similar issues, or inspires youth to express themselves through emerging artistic forms, it finds its place within the lived experience of the friends and families there and joins the conversations around advocacy for them. Using subsonic sounds and emotion resonances, *In Silence... offers a mode of expression for the hidden stories of the Jane-Finch region.*

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## Author Biography

Joel Ong (PhD, MSc.Bioart) is a media artist whose works connect scientific and artistic approaches to the environment, developed from more than a decade of explorations in sound, installation and socially conscious art. His conceptual explorations revolve around metaphors of distance, connectivity, assiduously reworking this notion of the 'environment' - how different tools and scales of observation reveal diverse biotic and abiotic relationalities, and how these continually oscillate between natural and computational worlds. His works have been shown at internationally at the Currents New Media Festival, Nuit Blanche Toronto, Seattle Art Museum, the Gregg Museum of Art and Design, the Penny Stamps Gallery and the Ontario Science Centre etc. Joel is Associate Professor in Computational Arts and Director of Sensorium: The Centre for Digital Arts and Technology at York University, in Toronto, Canada.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium CONTACT

## Immersive Storytelling and Design Education: A methodology for implementing Feminist HCI qualities into course study

Amanda Stojanov

Monmouth University  
West Long Branch, New Jersey, United States  
astojano@monmouth.edu

### Abstract

Feminist HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) is a crucial partner to design education due to its blending of Feminism and Interaction Design. This paper will explore a case study based on a graduate course project at Monmouth University that I taught in the Spring of 2022. I will present a methodology I used for this course and offer course material examples to show how I implemented critical components of Feminist HCI qualities. The original project is a semester-long. I invite students to tell a story using audio, then video format, and finally, in a 3D immersive digital environment. I ask the students to consider how they can tell their stories using the affordances of the assigned technologies.

The final product is video recorded from an immersive 3D game engine software of a story crafted by the student. Many of the projects from this course resulted in powerful personal and auto-ethnographic stories showing the positive influence of Feminist HCI in practice. Eschmann states, "Online networked platforms are a virtual space where resistance to societal norms is enacted."<sup>1</sup> By mapping Feminist HCI qualities onto course study I offer a generative way of including feminist principles and HCI in a higher education classroom.

### Keywords

Design Education, Feminist HCI Immersive Environments, Storytelling, Glitch Feminism.

### Introduction

I will focus on using my classroom experience as an educator to offer an example of a generative integration of specific feminist HCI qualities. In *Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design*, Bardzell confines her focus "to the relationship between feminism and interaction design (as opposed to computing or

technology more generally [HCI proper])."<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will echo her focus. Bardzell states the qualities of Feminist HCI are "pluralism, participation, advocacy, ecology, embodiment, and self-disclosure."<sup>3</sup> I will be discussing a 500-level course named Message Construction and a course project that I created titled *Transmedia Storytelling Project*. This course is part of Monmouth University's Master of Arts in Communication program. I teach in the concentration known as Interactive Digital Media. In spring 2022, I taught Message Construction for the first time to 16 graduate students. My goal for this course was to teach students who had never used the 3D immersive digital environment, Unity, and provide them with tools to use this software to create engaging stories. Feminist HCI qualities show up in the way an assignment is written, the references shown, the questions it asks of the students, and the way the work is presented and discussed.

Before I discuss the project itself, I will provide a basic overview of feminist principles that are useful to this analysis. Bardzell identifies seven central commitments of feminism. These commitments are agency, fulfillment, identity and the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice. "As a movement and an academic discipline, feminism has been prominent for over half a century. Infused throughout many aspects of everyday life, it is hardly a surprise that feminist concerns also touch on the topic of interaction."<sup>4</sup>

Feminism as a practice and discipline is in a constant state of flux. Since *HCI: Taking stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design* was published, a fourth wave of feminism has emerged. This wave of feminism is characterized by social networks and social media trends such as the #MeToo movement. Peroni and Rodak recognize the impact of the

<sup>1</sup> Robert Daniel Eschmann, *How the Internet Shapes Racial Discourse*

<sup>2</sup> Bardzell, *Feminist HCI*, 1301

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1305

<sup>4</sup> Peroni and Rodak, *The Fourth Wave of Feminism*

movement in relationship to technology stating “...#MeToo speaks to us of a new space of communication and relationship that reconfigures the neutrality of the web as a place of anonymization, isolation and depersonalization...”<sup>5</sup> The movement is highly influenced by a globally connected group of femmes and women-identifying people.

To return to my classroom in West Long Branch, New Jersey, I will discuss the existing conditions. In this U.S. political climate, when feminism, critical race theory, and homosexuality are branded as dangerous and forbidden in some educational spaces, and the rights of women and people who carry children are being limited or removed entirely, how a college classroom practices knowledge production is important to discuss. With this paper and the following practices, I’m offering a step-by-step guide on how to use Feminist HCI principles in an educational space. Through this mapping of theory and practice, I will show that using Feminist HCI qualities in the *Transmedia Storytelling Project* creates generative contributions to the field. These contributions include creating a sense of community, engaging with critical thinking, and learning interaction design skills.

## Background

The reason I created the *Transmedia Storytelling Project* is to encourage students who are not adept in interaction design to experiment with some of its applications. Although not all of the students in this course were seeking jobs in interaction design-related fields, it is clear that there is a need for interaction design across all concentrations in the communication discipline. More information is being shared and more of ourselves and our bodies are being asked to participate in virtual environments. This is a result of the push to Web 3.0 and the metaverse. Web 3.0 is the next wave of the internet following Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. Kshetri states “While centralized social networks have dominated Web 2.0, Web 3.0 is expected to foster more open environments with decentralized technologies based on blockchain, such as decentralized finance (DeFi), cryptocurrencies, and nonfungible tokens (NFTs).”<sup>6</sup> The metaverse focuses on the experience of users in a 3D virtual reality environment.

While this paper will not focus on Web 3.0 or the metaverse, the project I created is motivated by the demands of an evolving internet culture dominated by these innovations. The student work engages directly with the tools that create the metaverse.

I’m hopeful that showing students how to create with interactive technology while simultaneously considering feminist qualities such as agency, fulfillment, identity and

the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice will encourage them to participate as ethical producers in Web 3.0.

## Transmedia Storytelling Project (T.S.P.)

*Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a [narrative] get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.*

-Henry Jenkins

The *Transmedia Storytelling Project* that I assigned in *Message Construction* is built upon a series of specific scaffolding steps starting in week 2 and ending in week 14. I visualize these steps in *figure 1*.

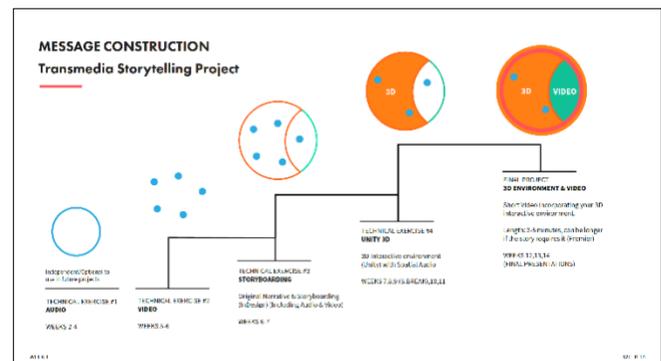


Figure 1

### TECHNICAL EXERCISE #1

#### AUDIO WEEKS 2-4

This part of the assignment was independent of the rest of the assignments that led to the final project. It was optional to use this audio assignment in their future research. Approximately half of the students opted to use the audio project in their future work.

### TECHNICAL EXERCISE #2

#### VIDEO WEEKS 5-6

### TECHNICAL EXERCISE #3

#### STORYBOARDING WEEKS 6-7

Original Narrative & Storyboarding (InDesign) (Including Audio & Video)

### TECHNICAL EXERCISE #4

#### UNITY 3D WEEKS 8-11

3D Interactive environment (Unity) with Spatial Audio

### FINAL PROJECT

<sup>5</sup> Peroni and Rodak, *The Fourth Wave of Feminism*

<sup>6</sup> Kshetri, *Considerations of Web3 and the Metaverse*

### 3D ENVIRONMENT & VIDEO WEEKS 12-14

Short Video incorporating your 3D interactive environment. Length: 3-5 minutes, can be longer if the story requires it (Premier) (FINAL PRESENTATIONS)

**Technical Exercise #1** explores personal narratives using storytelling structures and audio. The student projects were 3-5 minutes long. I presented a reference from *Design is Storytelling*.<sup>7</sup> by Ellen Lupton. In this reference, Lupton visualizes storytelling through the emotional experience of Cinderella and THE STORY COASTER. Both infographics describe methods for storytelling. The emotional experience of Cinderella shows how a story can be structured. using emotion. THE SOTRY COASTER expands on the traditional narrative arc by including more dynamic twists and turns such as a “plot hole”, a “tunnel of badly written love”, and a “critical reaction”.

In this exercise I describe the following as examples of storytelling structures that the student can use to create their first audio storytelling experience. The assignment states the student can create a story in several different formats including (1) Autoethnography, (2) Interview, (3) A true story, (4) A fictional story. In Part 1 of the assignment, students are required to write out two pages of their thoughts organically in a paper or digital journal. I encourage the students to take this as an opportunity to pour their thoughts out. Part 2 is to write a structured plan for their idea that emerges from Part 1. Finally, Part 3 requires the student to complete the following steps (1) Record audio. (2) Edit your first audio storytelling experience in Adobe Audition. (3) Export your project to a WAV file. (4) Post your audio storytelling experience to the shared class blog. The goal of the first assignment was to build a foundational understanding of storytelling using digital technology.

**Technical Exercise #2** explores personal narratives using storytelling and video. These projects are also 3-5 minutes long. The students were asked to use their mobile phone for capturing video. The students had the option to use the same story from Tech Exercise #1 or create a new narrative.

**Technical Exercise #3** explored personal narratives using the technique of storyboarding to synthesize ideas and plan for the next steps of the *Transmedia Storytelling Project*. This project marked the beginning of what would become the final product of the semester-long *Transmedia Storytelling Project*.

This semester long project will include:

1. Storytelling using Video (Tech Exercise #2)
2. **Original Narrative & Storyboarding (InDesign) (Including Audio & Video) (Tech Exercise #3)**
3. 3D interactive environment using Unity with Spatial Audio (Tech Exercise #4)

4. Short Video incorporating your 3D interactive environment, 3-5 minutes, can be longer if the story requires it (Premier) (Final Project)

The students were instructed that Technical Exercise #2 could be included as an asset to their storyboard. Technical Exercise #1 was optional to use in their storyboard.

The criteria for this project included two steps. (1) Continue investigating the narrative created in Tech Exercise #2. (2) Use the Adobe InDesign Template provided by the instructor to create a storyboard. The student can add images, links to audio and videos, change colors, fonts, and delete or add pages.

**Technical Exercise #4** explored personal narratives using storytelling and the 3D game engine, Unity. The fourth technical exercise guides the students through creating a unique 3D digital environment in Unity. This portion of the work will be the final environment for the projects.

1. Storytelling using Video (Tech Exercise #2)
2. Original Narrative & Storyboarding (InDesign) (Including Audio & Video) (Tech Exercise #3)
3. **3D interactive environment using Unity with Spatial Audio (Tech Exercise #4)**
4. Short video incorporating your 3D interactive environment, 3-5 minutes, can be longer if the story requires it (Premier) (Final Project)

The criteria for this exercise was (1) Create the 3D environment that visual represents the narrative you created in Tech Exercise #2 and #3. (2) Use terrain and a terrain package in Unity. (3) Import 3D models and packages from the Unity Asset store. (4) Create rigid bodies and colliders between objects. (5) Create a first person camera in Unity for user interactivity. Continued instruction included importing audio, adding text and animation, and encouraging independent technical research.

**The Final Project** required students to create a final video piece documenting their work resulting in a game design application and a video. These are the two distribution channels for their stories.

1. Storytelling using Video (Tech Exercise #2)
2. Original Narrative & Storyboarding (InDesign) (Including Audio & Video) (Tech Exercise #3)
3. 3D interactive environment using Unity with Spatial Audio (Tech Exercise #4)
4. **Short video incorporating your 3D interactive environment, 3-5 minutes, can be longer if the story requires it (Premier) (Final Project)**

The students were instructed on how to capture video using OBS software. Students were required to cut together a final video using the video footage captured in Unity using OBS. It was optional to use supplementary footage that would enhance their story. Using Adobe Premiere the students cut

<sup>7</sup>Lupton, *Design is Storytelling*

together their final footage and uploaded the work to YouTube.

## **Feminist HCI Qualities and the (T.S.P.)**

In this section, I will clearly and concisely identify how the *Transmedia Storytelling Project* incorporates Feminist HCI qualities as pedagogy. Not all of these qualities are relevant. For this paper, I will still identify all Feminist HCI qualities. Bardzell reminds us that an important condition of feminist interaction is they do not act in isolation but rather “as a constellation of qualities — all of them appearing together in a critical mass.”<sup>8</sup>

**Pluralism** “The *quality of pluralism* refers to design artifacts that resist any single totalizing or universal point of view. It rejects the claims to universalism.”<sup>9</sup> The underpinning idea of the T.S.P. relies on creating a narrative based on subjective experience. The projects are unique to each student. If the students were designing the projects for a larger audience to use for storytelling, it would be beneficial to consider pluralism, the opposite of universalism, in the interactive storytelling experience. To address this, the interactions the students build into the digital environment could incorporate design elements for diverse accessibility needs.

**Participation** “The *quality of participation* refers to valuing participatory processes that lead to the creation and evaluation of design prototypes.”<sup>10</sup> This quality is an area for growth. As the project stands, the design of their T.S.P. in an interactive 3D environment does not implement participatory processes other than peer and instructor critiques.

**Advocacy** “The *quality of advocacy* engages with this [ethical] dilemma—feminist interaction design should seek to bring about political emancipation and not just keep up with it.”<sup>11</sup> The students were encouraged to think critically about digital media and incorporate this into their work. I did not require this. Many of the students avoided ethical issues. However, Advocacy is present in one student's project. This student is named Kazi. Kazi created a project filled with curiosity and exploration of a communal place of joy for the LGBTQIA+ community. I will present Kazi's work in depth in the results section of this paper.

**Ecology** “The *quality of ecology* in feminist interaction design integrates an awareness of design artifacts effects in their broadest contexts and awareness of the widest range of stakeholders throughout design reasoning, decision making, and evaluation.”<sup>12</sup> Think back to the introduction of this

paper when I discuss Web 3.0 and the metaverse as new technological outlets for storytelling. The ecological effects of this change create a need for more storytelling events in virtual spaces. We know that as technologies develop, who is responsible for these products affects their uses. The production of interactive tools can have serious consequences. Take, for example, Wikipedia. Within the worldwide collaborative encyclopedia project, Wikipedia, a network of volunteers edit the site. Within this globalized network, there still lacks a diversity of voices. Who contributes to the database matters, especially when that database is one of the most visited sites in the world. Teaching projects with Feminist HCI qualities embedded into the design can empower students with diverse identities to learn how to create projects for a growing ecology of virtual social networks and diversify the producers of interaction design and virtual storytelling.

**Embodiment** “The *quality of embodiment*, needs to push embodiment in the direction of gender commonalities and differences, gender identity, human sexuality, pleasure, desire, and emotion.”<sup>13</sup> These qualities are present in work that centers the self. While the T.S.P. does not require self-reflection, many students chose this path resulting in thoughtful and reflective work. In one case, which I will show later in the results and that I mentioned earlier, a student's work is situated in a bar where pleasure, desire, emotion, and sexuality are at the forefront. Further growth would be to visually represent bodies in virtual spaces and challenge what we traditionally think of as gender representation, asking what the gender spectrum is in virtual worlds.

**Self-disclosure** “The *quality of self-disclosure* refers to the extent to which the software renders visible the ways in which it effects us as subjects.”<sup>14</sup> The *Transmedia Storytelling Project* was not designed for an ideal user. The T.S.P. is a fully formed story embedded into a virtual environment. If a student working on this project were to create an interactive tool for storytelling disclosing the intent of the design for the storytelling and its desired impacts would be a key aspect in maintaining its qualities as a product of Feminist HCI.

## **Results**

The results of the project were varied. Many students treated the project as a visual diary for personal narrative. They did this by curating 3D objects and creating images that metaphorically represent a significant part of their life.

<sup>8</sup> Bardzell, *Feminist HCI*, 1305

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1305

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1306

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1306

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 1307

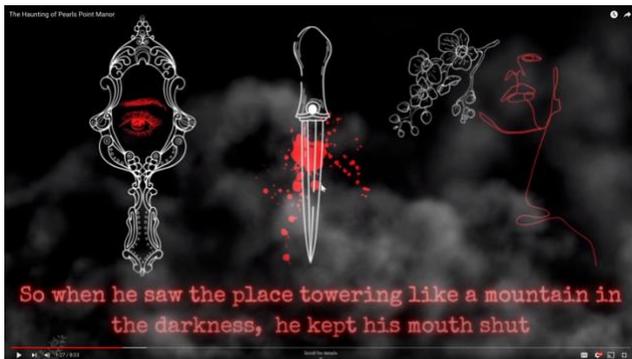
<sup>13</sup> Bardzell, *Feminist HCI*, 1307

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 1307

Then they narrated their visual work. This formula resulted in a less integrated transmedia storytelling experience. In contrast, others used the tools as opportunities to experiment with narrative and interactive media through the integration of these tools.

**Katie Riso** created a transmedia storytelling narrative based on an original fictional story. This student used images and pre-fabricated 3D models to visualize her story in a 3D environment. The audio voice recording is also original. This student excelled in fully integrating storytelling using audio, video, and a 3D interactive environment.

Project title: *The Haunting of Pearls Point Manor*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J66Kkij5GE>



**Kazi Hasan Iqbal Bappa** created a transmedia storytelling narrative based on autoethnographic work. This student interviewed patrons and workers at the famous Flaming Saddles Saloon in Hell's Kitchen, New York City. The story is told in a non-linear manner using audio clips and videos placed strategically throughout the virtual space.

Project title: *Untitled*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKJQOpbATIQ>



## Conclusion

The sentence from *Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design* that most influenced me is “Feminism has far more to offer than pointing out instances

of sexism after the fact.”<sup>15</sup> I first read this while I was a graduate student in 2015 at Art Center College of Design. Soon after, I began studying at UCLA Design in the Media Arts MFA program and declared a concentration in Gender Studies. Feminism has much to offer to the world. Bardzell identifies two key methods of contribution. First, is a critique-based contribution. Second, is a generative contribution. Critique based contributions “rely on the use of feminist approaches to analyze designs and design processes in order to expose their unintended consequences.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, generative contributions “involve the use of feminist approaches explicitly in decision-making and design process to generate new design insights and influence the design process tangibly.”<sup>17</sup> This project deeply aligns with the generative contribution of feminist approaches. I used feminist HCI qualities in my decision-making processes at the start of the semester when I wrote my projects. The elements of the T.S.P. project guide students through a deliberate series of decision-making processes that ask them to engage with the qualities of Feminist HCI, especially pluralism, advocacy, ecology, and self-disclosure.

These qualities are woven through all 4 parts of the *Transmedia Storytelling Project*. (1) Storytelling using video (Tech Exercise #2). (2) Original Narrative & Storyboarding (InDesign) (Including Audio & Video) (Tech Exercise #3). (3) 3D interactive environment using Unity with Spatial Audio (Tech Exercise #4). (4) Short Video incorporating your 3D interactive environment, (Final Project).

The relevancy of this project relates directly to behaviors around social networking, social networks, and virtual storytelling. People easily publish images using free and widely known social media tools. At times, these tools have been used to show individuality and combat dominant cultural narratives of representation. The goal of this project was to offer students a chance to learn how to tell stories using the tools that social networking sites use for production or are working on incorporating into their platforms. In this case, the T.S.P. moves beyond looking at interaction design through practice in Feminist HCI pedagogy. It is also an attempt at teaching the students how to create environments for virtual storytelling. In *Digital Performance in Everyday Life* Gratch & Gratch define storytelling as “a relationship that produces action and a changed understanding of the world and our experiences in it.”<sup>17</sup> They continue to emphasize the importance of sharing stories as audiences and storytellers. According to Gratch

and Gratch, the two student stories I shared would fall into the category of narrative and documentation. I see this as an alternative form of storytelling and a blueprint for future projects.

An additional aspect of Feminist pedagogy that I embedded into every portion of the work is Liz Lerman’s *critical response process*. This response theory “is a method for giving and getting feedback on work in progress, designed to leave the maker eager and motivated to get back to work.”<sup>18</sup> This method has three roles: (1) Artist/Maker, (2) Responder, and (3) Facilitator. The theory has four steps that the group participates in. Step (1) Statements of Meaning, step (2) Artist/Maker as Questioner, step (3) Neutral Questions, and step (4) Opinion Time. This work is simple but not easy. The students take time to warm up to this work. The most useful part of this method is that it establishes trust with the members of the group, allowing for honest, quality, and focused feedback. This step itself is generative. I use it after each project to facilitate participatory feedback from students and quality reflection from the project creators.

The *Transmedia Storytelling Project (T.S.P)* is a practical application of feminist pedagogy. Throughout the work, I ask the students to consider how they can tell their stories differently based on the technologies they are using. Further questions include what are their virtual identities? What are the qualities of the experiences they share online? How do they enact a sense of agency online to create their stories? Does learning the tools of production encourage them to be empowered, virtual storytellers?

**Next Steps** Currently, I am working on a collaboration with Dr. Deanna Shoemaker. We are team-teaching a course called Interactive Media Productions. In this course, we bring together our expertise to teach students how to create virtual storytelling projects using Unreal Engine 5. While we are building this course we often discuss feminist pedagogies and how to incorporate them.

Dr. Deanna Shoemaker's expertise is in Performance Studies and Performance Art. My expertise is in Interactive Digital Media and Media Arts.

**Practical Considerations** To complete this project students must have access to video and audio editing programs and computers that are capable of running game development software like Unity or Unreal Engine.

<sup>15</sup> Bardzell, *Feminist HCI*, 1308

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 1308

<sup>17</sup> Gratch & Gratch, *Digital Performance in Everyday Life*, 124

<sup>18</sup> Lerman, Liz, and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert*

If you desire further explanation on how to adapt the project for your purposes please reach out to me by email at [astojano@monmouth.edu](mailto:astojano@monmouth.edu).

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Thank you to my collaborators in the Interactive Digital Media Concentration at Monmouth University, Dr. Deanna Shoemaker and Prof. Dickie Cox. Thank you to Sofia Dominguez, my graduate teaching assistant for this course. Thank you to my partner, Alex.

Thank you Kazi Hasan Iqbal Bappa and Katie Riso for generously agreeing to share your work in this publication.

**Kazi's project description in his own words:** "My project is about New York's country club bar Flaming Saddles. Through this project I wanted to give the viewers a vibe of how it looks like inside a bar which is dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community. However, this bar is a real-life version of the movie *Coyote Ugly*, where everyone is invited to enjoy the country club music and dance performance. This is a place where you can find story, love, crisis, action, music, and most importantly drama.

I tried to recreate the bar atmosphere. While working on this project I found difficulties using multiple audios. But finally, I figured it out. And that was the biggest challenge for me. However, learning about Unity was my Aha moment as this technology was so new for me and I believe learning about this is my accomplishment.

I combined Unity with video and audio production and photoshop. At the beginning I used a video which explains the Flaming Saddles. The billboard of the Flaming Saddles provides the audience some pieces of audio story. When one gets inside the bar, they will see the performance of the bartenders. Meanwhile, there is also a photo gallery inside the bar.

While working on this project, I have become completely obsessed with Unity. It gives you the pleasure to create your world. I am still struggling while using multiple audios. But I hope I would be able to overcome the situation over time. Meanwhile, I have been thinking to take Unity as my thesis project and planning to build my career with Unity."

Retrieved from:

<http://idmresearchlab.com/index.php/2022/04/27/blog-post-12-6/>

**Katie's project description in her own words:** "This project, *The Haunting of Pearl's Point Manor*, is an interactive story created in Unity that contains audio and visual elements. The participant enters the space and hears the story narrated as 2D visuals and text appear in the night sky. When this section of the audio is complete, the participant can approach the manor to listen to the second half of the narrative. The participant can explore the house as the story plays. The story itself follows the exploits of two cousins who steal possessed objects to sell in a black market for supernatural objects.

My a-ha moment was when I imported a script into Unity to play audio on trigger. This was also the most difficult part for me. The easiest part of the work was painting the terrain. I would like to further refine this project and then add it to my professional portfolio."

Retrieved from:

<http://idmresearchlab.com/index.php/2022/04/26/blog-post-12-katie-riso/>

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## Amanda Stojanov

Amanda is a media artist who investigates how innovations in communication technologies affect perceptions of identity, agency, and visibility, emphasizing concepts of embodiment and the "historically constituted body" within a networked-society. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally in venues such as the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Ars Electronica, Linz. Her work has also been featured in publications like *Artillery* magazine, *The New York Times*, and *The Associated Press*.

Through installations and the use of world-building techniques, Amanda investigates how innovations in communication technologies affect perceptions of identity, agency, and visibility, with an emphasis on concepts of embodiment and the "historically constituted body" within a networked-society. Areas of expertise are new media, multi-media installations, design, interactivity, creative coding, and networked media. Research interests are physical computing, game-theory, mixed reality, and computer graphics within the context of new media art, critical theory, and society.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17<sup>th</sup> Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### In search of America: Indigeneity and landscape in L.A.'s textile-block houses

**Brandon Sward**

University of Chicago  
Chicago, IL  
brandonsward@uchicago.edu

#### Abstract

In this article, I use the four textile-block houses in Los Angeles to explore how Frank Lloyd Wright and Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr. used Mesoamerican forms to reconcile tradition and modernity. The geometry of Mayan pyramids and temples resonated well with the clean lines of modernism while simultaneously evoking the sense of an ancient and faraway people, an effect which the surrounding landscape had a powerful role in producing. By surrounding these buildings with dense thickets of trees and overhanging vegetation, Lloyd Wright replicated the feel of being a European explorer stumbling upon a forgotten civilization. The contrast between deep shade and Californian sun heightened this sense of excitement, as if trudging through a tropical rainforest rather than a first-world metropolis. By situating the textile-block houses within Maya Revivalism more broadly, I hope to investigate how pre-Columbian civilizations were enlisted in the search for a uniquely “American” style, and the crucial part Lloyd Wright’s landscape architecture played in this process.

#### Keywords

Architecture; Indigeneity; colonization; landscape; Latin America

Arizona needs its own architecture... Arizona’s long, low, sweeping lines, uptilting planes. Surface patterned after such abstraction in line and color as find ‘realism’ in the patterns of the rattlesnake, the Gila monster, and the saguaro, cholla or staghorn — or is it the other way around — are inspiration enough [23].

The tropics contain every point on Earth where the sun is perceived to be directly overhead at some point during the year. Bounded by the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the area receives more sunlight than the rest of the planet and is

hence generally hotter, wetter, and less affected by seasons. Below and above are the middle latitudes, which continue until the polar circles. It is this intermediary zone home to much of Western Europe and North America. For Europeans in particular, the tropics have long been an object of fascination. The “discovery” of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 inaugurated a period wherein explorers pushed into the interiors of the continents, where they encountered a rich panoply of civilizations. In the tropical and subtropical Mesoamerica, societies like the Olmec, Toltec, and Aztec, and thrived for many centuries before the arrival of European ships upon their shores. Although superior weapons and diseases like smallpox decimated Indigenous peoples, some such as the Maya had already collapsed by the arrival of Columbus and his followers. To this day, the reasons behind—and even existence of—the decline of the Maya remains one of history’s great mysteries.<sup>1</sup> All the same, the Maya left behind some of the most impressive and monumental buildings of the Western Hemisphere.

Perhaps the first building to self-consciously reference this history was Paul Cret (1876–1945) and Albert Kelsey’s (1870–1950) Pan American Union Building (1910) in Washington DC, which included stoneware, figures flanking the entrance, and floor mosaics radiating from a central foundation [7]. The most famous practitioner of the Mayan Revival, however, was undoubtedly Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959), a pivotal figure 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture. Although first associated with the “Prairie School” he developed in the Midwestern US, Wright was long concerned with consonance between his buildings and the surrounding landscape and thus sought out a new style once he began to work more in California. It was to the Maya that Wright turned in this period, first with the

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<sup>1</sup> Maya scholar E. Wyllys Andrews IV wrote in the edited volume *The Classic Maya Collapse* that “Much has been published in recent years about the collapse of Maya civilization and its causes.

It might be wise to preface this chapter with a simple statement that in my belief no such thing happened” [1].

Hollyhock House in 1921, and then to a series of collaborations with his eldest son and landscape architect Frank Lloyd Wright Jr. (1890–1978), commonly known as “Lloyd Wright.”<sup>2</sup> Now known as the “textile-block houses” for the method of patterned concrete blocks reinforced with steel rods through which they were built, these residences are now cited as prime examples of the Mayan Revival.

In this essay, I explore the impact of Mayan architecture on the textile-block houses. I begin with an overview of Wright’s design philosophy, working relationship with son, and the major events of his life and the major themes of contemporaneous architectural discourse. I then shift to the construction of the textile-block houses themselves, with a focus on the often-underappreciated role of Lloyd Wright’s landscaping [6]. Next, I turn to the exploration and excavation of the ancient Mayan city of Uxmal, and how these developments influenced Wright’s aesthetic imagination. Finally, I compare the textile block houses to the Musée du quai Branly (2006) in Paris, designed by Jean Nouvel to display the Indigenous art and cultures of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. By comparing these three cases (i.e., rediscovery of Uxmal, textile-block houses, Quai Branly), I find striking formal parallels which I argue elicit a similar affective response: the excitement of stumbling upon the remnants of a long-forgotten civilization. It’s within the humid heat of these imagined jungles that the Other is encountered, with powerful consequences for how we understand modernity, national identity, and the echoes of colonialization that reverberate to the present day.

### Father and son

When thinking about Frank Lloyd Wright, water is much more likely to come to mind than heat. After all, Wright’s *magnum opus* Fallingwater (1939) was partially built over a waterfall on Bear Run, a tributary of the Youghiogheny River in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. The building is often cited as a prime example of what Wright called “organic architecture,” though he never succinctly defined the term himself. We get glimmers of his meaning, however, in dictums like “No house should ever be *on* a hill or *on* anything. It should be *of* the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together, each the happier for the other” [22]. Extrapolating from such a statement, we can surmise that Wright is promoting the pursuit of aesthetic harmony between the human and natural worlds, in which buildings and their surroundings together form a single balanced composition. In practice, this abstract commitment manifested in various ways, from a preference for local materials to not disrupting the preexisting environment (as,

for example, constructing a house atop a source of running water).

Of course, landscape is an integral part of such an understanding organic architecture, and on several important projects, Frank Lloyd Wright collaborated with his son Lloyd Wright.<sup>3</sup> Educated in agronomy and engineering at the University of Wisconsin, Lloyd Wright joined Olmstead and Olmstead in 1911, a firm founded by Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), the famed co-designer of New York City’s Central Park, and run by his sons John Charles Olmsted (1852–1920) and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (1870–1957) after his retirement. A specialist in botany and horticulture, Lloyd Wright was sent to San Diego in 1915 to assist with the Panama–California Exposition, which celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal and much of which was made in the Mission, Pueblo, and Spanish Colonial Revival styles. Around this time, Wright had also begun to build in Southern California, such as the Hollyhock House (1919–21), even though he was simultaneously working in Japan, mostly notably on the Imperial Hotel (1920–23). During this period, Wright started to delegate some of his responsibilities to Lloyd Wright, who helped supervise the construction of the Hollyhock House.

A key objective during this period was the definition of a uniquely “American” architecture independent of Europe. Wright’s first attempt in this area resulted in what is now known as the Prairie School. Exemplified by the Robie House (1909) in Chicago, its characteristics included horizontal lines, hipped rooves, and overhanging eaves. Through his work on Hollyhock, however, Wright sought out a new style tailored to the Californian landscape that could distance him from the Prairie School, into which he’d begin to feel pigeonholed [9]. As the various revivalist currents of the Panama–California Exposition make clear, however, Indigenous ways of building were also an important point of reference in this endeavor for a whole generation of US architects. Indeed, the Hollyhock House itself is a principal example of the Mayan Revival. With its colonnades and 85°-degree exterior walls, Hollyhock recalls the seventh century Mayan city of Palenque, located in what is now southern Mexico. Over the course of the nineteenth century, European archeologists made a series of drawings and photographs of Palenque, which allowed the city travel to the hands, eyes, and imaginations of Wright and his ilk, where it exerted a powerful influence.

### Concrete jungles

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to Frank Lloyd Wright as “Wright” and Frank Lloyd Wright Jr. as “Lloyd Wright.” When referring to both, I will say “Wrights.”

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I refer to Frank Lloyd Wright as “Wright” and Frank Lloyd Wright Jr. as “Lloyd Wright.” When referring to both, I will say “Wrights.”

In 1973, Bob Marley and the Wailers released *Catch a Fire*, widely regarded as one of the best reggae albums of all time and largely responsible for bringing the band to international attention. On its first track, Marley sings, “Concrete jungle... / Man you got to do your best... / No chains around my feet / but I’m not free” [2]. Though its exact etymology is unclear, the expression “concrete jungle” has come to designate an “urban area filled with large buildings and regarded especially as a harshly competitive, unwelcoming, or dangerous place” [10]. It was in this context that the Wrights began to experiment with the material during the 1920s. Reflecting on this decision, Wright explains, “We would take that despised outcast of the building industry — the concrete block — out from underfoot or from the gutter — find a hitherto unsuspected soul in it — make it live as a thing of beauty — textured like the trees” [22].

The roots of what would become the textile-block system lie not with Wright himself, but his son. In 1922, Lloyd Wright drafted a plan for the Henry Bollman House in Hollywood that included a repeated pattern of concrete blocks [18]. Regarding this method, Wright raved, “A building for the first time in the world may be lightly fabricated, complete, of mono-material — literally woven into a pattern or design as was the oriental rug... fabrication as infinite in color, texture and variety as in that rug” [21]. Beyond these aesthetic considerations, Wright had high hopes for the political potential of these concrete blocks. Cheap and capable of being created on site, Wright envisioned the blocks as allowing ordinary people to build their own homes [5].<sup>4</sup> True to this localism, the blocks of the first textile block home, the Millard House (1923), in Pasadena were made from sand, gravel, and minerals sourced from the property.<sup>5</sup> Through this color scheme, Wright sought to blend the building into its surroundings, an effort further evidenced by Wright’s nestling of the building into the lot’s steep hillside. But it’s not as if Wright merely plopped houses onto the land. To be sure, Lloyd Wright designed the grounds of Millard, and even contributed an adjacent studio to it in 1926. Lloyd Wright went on to supervise the construction of the Storer (1923), Freeman (1923), and Ennis Houses (1924), and to landscape Storer.

Although organicism might imply a minimalist approach, the Wrights at times intervened extensively into the environment. Of the Storer House, Wright biographer Brendan Gill laments how “In direct contradiction to everything that Wright had earlier preached about the

natural, nearly invisible joining of structure and site, the Storer House, small as it is, asserts its presence with a surprising degree of arrogance” [4]. Referencing the landscaping specifically, Gill continues to assert how this arrogance would have been “far more obvious in the 1920s, when the hillside lacked the softening effect of foliage, than it is today” [4]. Despite these changes to the resident flora, “the Storer House was compared to a Pompeiian villa at the time of its construction,” an effect amplified by Lloyd Wright’s “lush landscaping,” which “further enhanced its exoticism, providing an illusion of a ruin barely visible within its jungle environment” [3].

## Return to Uxmal

The name Uxmal means “thrice-built” in the Mayan language, referring to the city’s many layers of construction. Chief among these is the Pyramid of the Magician (c. 900 CE), the site’s tallest and most recognizable structure. Work on the first pyramid began in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and stretched over the next four centuries. By 1000 CE, however, the pyramid had fallen into disrepair and was looted by the Spanish during the conquest of Yucatán. The resultant ruins were rediscovered by French cartographer Jean-Frédéric Waldeck (1766?–1875), who included an illustration of the pyramid in his *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la province d’Yucatan pendant les années 1834 et 1836* [19].<sup>6</sup> Waldeck’s account attracted other others to the area, among them writer and diplomat John Lloyd Stephens (1805–52), who traveled to Uxmal twice with his friend, illustrator Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854), between 1839 and 1841. Recounting his first visit to the site, Stephens writes,

We took another road, and, emerging suddenly from the woods, to my astonishment came at once upon a large open field strewn with mounds of ruins, and vast buildings on terraces, and pyramidal structures, grand and in good preservation, richly ornamented, without a bush to obstruct the view, and in picturesque effect almost equal to the ruins of Thebes [17].<sup>7</sup>

It’s difficult to ignore the parallels between Stephens’s description of Uxmal and that of, for example, the Storer House, above. In this way, the resonance between Wright’s textile-block houses and the Puuc architecture exemplified by Uxmal extends well beyond the formal. It’s easy to see the influence of Uxmal’s symmetrical reliefs and repeated

<sup>4</sup> This political dimension of Wright’s “organic architecture” is often underemphasized; in his own words, the “framework and background of future Democracy be developed in itself as a kind of organic architecture” [22].

<sup>5</sup> Wright later remarked that it “belonged to the ground on which it stood” [9].

<sup>6</sup> “Picturesque and archaeological journey in the province of Yucatán during the years 1834 and 1836.”

<sup>7</sup> Note the use of the adjective “picturesque” both here and in Waldeck’s title. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, “the picturesque tourist” tries “to put on some sort of blinders to idealize the landscape and erase all signs of violence,” thus allowing it to become the backdrop for European self-contemplation [12]. Cf., Jacob Mikanowski’s discussion of “ruin porn,” which “treats real, living spaces of social interaction as stage sets for melancholy reflection” [11].

geometric mosaics in this slice of Wright's oeuvre, but what might be less readily apparent is the way the Wrights combine building and landscape to trigger an effective response similar to that experienced by Stephens and those who also sought out vestiges of bygone civilizations in the thick humidity of Central America. But rather than requiring such a high degree of commitment, the textile-block houses allow the viewer to feel this feeling without having to leave Los Angeles. Encircling these homes with dense foliage provides the opportunity to stumble upon these monumental structures, to glance them through the trees, and thus imagine oneself in the place of these European explorers.

This period was one of great interest in Mesoamerican societies, which extended beyond just architecture; the Maya are perhaps best known for their logosyllabic script, the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in the pre-Columbian Americas. A critical figure in this field is the epigrapher Sylvanus Morley (1883–1948), whose research on calendric inscriptions is still widely cited. Though most of his publications concern Maya hieroglyphics, Morley also wrote for more generalist audiences through magazines like *National Geographic* and his own monograph *The Ancient Maya* [13]. For most of his career (1913–40), Morley was employed by the Carnegie Institution, where he supervised several scholars like J. Eric S. Thompson (1898–1975) who would go on to become pivotal figures in Maya studies. It is primarily due to these two men who are responsible for the stereotype of Mayan society as a theocratic one obsessed with the passage of time. True to form, Morley held that “time, in its various manifestations, the accurate record of its principal phenomena, constitutes the major content of Maya writing” [15].<sup>8</sup> By reviewing some of the examples Morley reproduced in his *An Introduction to the Study of Maya Hieroglyphs* (1915), we can begin to appreciate the similarities between their intricate, compact forms and Wright's ornamentation of his textile blocks through patterned molds. Just as the Maya came to embody time immemorial through their supposed fixation on astronomical phenomena, so too did Wright's evocation of the Maya through his decorated blocks contribute to the feeling of encountering a people outside of time, patiently waiting to be uncovered by curious European eyes.<sup>9</sup>

### **A heart of darkness in the city of light**

The Musée du quai Branly has been beset by controversy since it opened its doors. Announced by President Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) the year after his inauguration, the new

museum was to combine the collections of two very different predecessors: the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania), run by art historians and conservators, and the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Man), run by ethnologists and anthropologists. Even the museum's title, named for the street on which it's located, seems to skirt the issue. For what should such an institution be called? Musée des arts premiers (Museum of First Arts)?<sup>10</sup> Musée de l'homme, des arts et des civilisations (Museum of Man, Arts and Civilizations)? Nevertheless, hopes for the museum ran high, with renowned architect Jean Nouvel winning the competition to design it.

For at least one visitor, the architecture critic Michael Kimmelman, these tensions are immediately apparent. In his New York Times review, Kimmelman writes, “If the Marx Brothers designed a museum for dark people, they might have come up with the permanent-collection galleries: devised as a spooky jungle, red and black and murky, the objects in it chosen and arranged with hardly any discernible logic” [8]. While the first public presentation of the collection was in a new gallery of the Louvre Museum, the Quai Branly couldn't be more different. In contrast the Louvre's wide bright hallways, Kimmelman describes the Quai Branly as “an enormous, rambling, crepuscular cavern that tries to evoke a journey into the jungle, downriver, where suddenly scary masks or totem poles loom out of the darkness and everything is meant to be foreign and exotic” [8].<sup>11</sup> Even the process of entering the space from the street seems engineered to replicate the journey of the European adventurer who leaves home for a shadowy, tropical jungle: “A spiral ramp, light and open, segues into a darkened tunnel that delivers visitors to a realm where the walls are black, the floors red, and everything's very, very dark” [8].

Of course, it's not as if the intention was to create a disrespectful or caricatured space; “Mr. Nouvel says he used the conceit of a ‘sacred wood,’ where people would discover objects ‘liberated from Western architectural references such as barriers, showcases, railings’” [8]. But despite these intentions, the Quai Branly falls into the well-worn tropes that have characterized European attitudes toward Indigenous peoples for several centuries. It's all too easy to look at those who came before us with the benefit of hindsight, to criticize and gloat that we now “know better.” But the Quai Branly shows us how these biases are not as far away as we might like to think. Just as with the textile-block houses, Nouvel's Quai Branly uses light and shade to represent the gulf between “we moderns” and the darkness

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<sup>8</sup> Morley so strongly associated the Maya with the realm of abstract concepts that he asserted, “the idea conveyed by a glyph will always be found to overshadow its phonetic value” [14].

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how this assumption of Indigenous cultures as unchanging influences how we display and contextualize art objects, see Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* [16].

<sup>10</sup> In this way, France has begun to borrow from Canada, where the term “First Nations” (French: *Premières Nations*) designates Indigenous Canadians who are neither Inuit nor Métis.

<sup>11</sup> The parallels between the Quai Branly's architecture and the way Sally Price describes the conventions around Indigenous art is again striking [16].

of prehistory. And if the Wrights purposefully chose these strategies in their search for a genuinely “America” architecture, perhaps this is because the story of Indigenous societies crumbling before the force of a superior European culture is a foundational one for the history of this country.

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## Author Biography

Brandon Sward is an artist, writer, and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, where his research is supported by the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture. He has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, quarterfinalist for the VanderMey Nonfiction Prize, shortlisted for Disquiet International's Literary Prize, and an honorable mention and finalist for the New Millennium Writing Awards. He's spoken at the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art, American Association of Behavioral and Social Sciences, College Art Association, American Sociological Association, Nasher Sculpture Center, Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, Southeastern College Art Conference, Royal Anthropological Institute, Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology, Horasis Global Meeting, and many universities across the US and Canada.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium

## CONTACT

### Digital Collaboration: From Isolation to Community During COVID-19

**Clark Valentine**

University of Colorado Colorado Springs  
Colorado Springs, CO, USA  
[cvalenti@uccs.edu](mailto:cvalenti@uccs.edu)

#### Abstract

Each technological development offers artists new methods of making as they embrace the formal and conceptual components of an emerging medium. In the era of a global pandemic, the cultural shift to accept digital communication platforms as a direct substitute for in-person interactions is misguided. Digital platforms offer a unique materiality through which artists can investigate new modes of making and communicating. In the digital era, artists find not only the ability to interact with other creatives on opposite sides of the globe, but also ways to investigate the complexity of digital space and interpersonal relationships. Digital methods of collaboration offer a multiplicity of opportunities for artists to build new forms of contact with one another as they overcome the widespread feelings of isolation which plague our culture. As a member of the I Found U Collective, I have worked with other artists to create collaborations that use platforms such as Zoom to spark discourse between artists working across various mediums from around the world. I Found U's projects explore the possibilities of collaboration with a practice that synthesizes individual studio practices with digital technologies.

#### Keywords

Digital Art, Collaboration, COVID-19, Social Practice, Studio Art

#### Introduction

During the initial stay-at-home orders of 2020, many artists found the opportunity to work on their studio practice free from many distractions. This led them into a time of making which was unparalleled. Now, more than two years out of the initial lockdown, galleries and museums are still exhibiting new bodies of work that artists produced during the lockdown. This revitalization of many artist's practices has allowed them to progress their work at an exponential rate.

However, this is not the case for many other artists. The global pandemic left many artists struggling with feelings of isolation which affected them both personally as well as in their studio space. For many, the lockdown presented a time of uncertainty, unproductively, and loneliness. The limitations of the lockdown kept many artists from the communities which drive their creative practices. While these artists had unlimited time to create,

they were left drained and unable to find the means to produce work.

Even as the restrictions of stay-at-home orders have lifted, our culture is still plagued by experiences of isolation and a demand to adjust to life which will never be quite the same. Many artists in my community, including myself, continue to question how to find a sense of belonging in the newest version of our digital age. Zoom is a poor approximation of in-person interaction, and yet has become one of the most standard methods of professional communication. While many continue to use Zoom in post-pandemic life, we often encounter challenges of clarity in communication through a digital interface. The challenge of what is lost through means of digital communication often cloud the new possibilities which have come with the growing ubiquity of Zoom in our daily lives. Through a series of collaborative projects, I have been able to explore new ways of making art which use the tools of digital communication.

For artists and other creatives, the developing ubiquity of Zoom offers an opportunity to explore new boundaries of creativity and collaboration. Within the limitations of this growing, digital realm, artists can begin to discover new ways to create, build community, and respond to current events in a globalizing culture. This new method of connection may offer artists unforeseen opportunities to uncover new horizons of digital and traditional art practices.

#### Isolation to Community

As an artist, my studio practice is primarily centered on drawing with ink on paper. I create large-scale abstractions through the repetition of lines, slowly developing organic forms which often resemble fabric or flowing waves. I complete these reticular drawings through a very methodical and meditative practice. In a quiet studio space, I spend weeks or months adding one line after another onto the page, waiting to see the emerging form finally resolve itself. The quiet repetition of lines offers me a time of solitude in my studio. I am often amazed with the way time passes while working on these drawings. In fact, I often have to set a timer for five p.m. so I know when I

need to begin to cook dinner and return to life beyond the drawing. I savor the time spent in my studio alone and often spend my time out of the studio waiting to get back to drawing. My practice is often free from the pressures of production or finishing a work. Instead, I celebrate the experience of making more than the finished drawing.

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down my own community, I was prepared for a time of hyper-productivity in my drawing practice. Amidst the uncertainty of the global crisis, I found excitement in the prospect of being able to teach remotely from my home, limit my time in meetings, and even for the cessation of social events which keep me from my practice. Based on my usual approach to working, I hoped that the time spent at home would involve a surge in productivity as I was able to limit the distractions which often keep me from my studio.

However, instead of spending full days of uninterrupted time drawing, I found myself oversleeping, binge-watching TV shows, and filled with dread at the thought of spending even more time alone when working in my studio. I had no opportunity for feedback, no-one with whom I could workshop new ideas, and nothing to retreat from when I went into my studio. I had never realized how integral these external factors were to my studio practice. It soon became clear that before the pandemic, the time spent out of my studio was not just time spent away from drawing, but rather the place where I was able to find inspiration and solve problems for my studio through conversations with colleagues. In short, I discovered just how dependent my secluded studio practice was on the community of artists and creatives who support me in my everyday life.

As the summer of 2020 came along, two artist residencies to which I had been accepted cancelled their in-person events. However, the School of Visual Arts in New York City adapted their program which I was to attend into a digital residency. SVA conducted the residency entirely over Zoom and brought together artists from all over the world to talk about their evolving studio practices during the time of COVID-19. I committed to the residency initially with the sole hope that the imposed deadlines of the program would help me out of the creative slump. I quickly connected with many of the artists at the residency who encouraged me in my practice. Here I discovered just how many other artists were struggling with similar problems. Talking with artists who were decades into their careers yet also experiencing unproductively during this time was a huge relief to me. We spent many hours sharing strategies to overcome our creative slumps and encouraging one another in our studio work.

### **I Found U Collective**

After the residency, ten of the residents decided to stay connected with one another and explore ways in which we could continue to work together. We formed the I Found U Collective and have continued to work on projects over the past two years. I Found U is comprised of artists residing in South America, Asia, Europe, and North

America. Each member brings a unique studio practice, working in his or her own mediums and materials. We each continue our own independent studio practices where we make, sell, and exhibit internationally. However, we also come together to create collaborative projects centered on topics of environmental, economic, and sociological concerns on a global scale. We have found that our collaboration carries “a strong sense of interconnectedness, cooperation, and care” which has become the foundation for many of our artistic inquiries. Our collaborative projects have been exhibited around the world and we have been invited to participate in projects at universities, museums, and non-profit art centers on four different continents so far.

Due to the logistical constraints of working with artists up to fifteen time zones apart, we conduct most of our work through weekly scheduled Zoom meetings. Some artists stay up late into the night to work, while others are drinking their morning coffee during out meetings. In our collaborative practice, we have developed a highly democratic process where we create exhibitions through a consensus of ideas and convergence of our individual artistic investigations. Through our Zoom conversations, we work to develop proposals, refine our collaborative artworks, and build texts which accompany our exhibitions. The work is much slower than my individual studio practice, but I am continually amazed at how various studio problems can resolve themselves through our careful and dedicated discussions. The synthesis of so many worldviews allows us to consider the reach of our work beyond any one artist’s sensibilities, thus creating projects which resonate with a more global audience.

### **Roving Reflections**

One series of projects we have been working on for over a year now is rooted in a practice we have titled *Roving Reflections*. These projects synthesize our individual studio practices with digital technologies to create a new medium through which we carry out dialogues concerning the relationship between physical and digital space. Our *Roving Reflections* projects have been completed at King’s College, Cambridge; Peoria, Illinois; and is currently under further development as an art education project created in conjunction with the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne and the Melbourne secondary school system.

*Roving Reflections* is a practice rooted in a desire to create work through means of accessibility and simplicity. Following a simple process, we are able to create cohesive exhibitions which simultaneously display our collaborative vision as well as the individual perspectives of participating artists. To begin one of these projects, a host artist will take a video or series of photos of his own physical space. These spaces range from a university campus, to a home town, to a hike in the mountains. The host documents these spaces in an organic way, with little to no consideration given to the composition of the video or images. The camera becomes a

stand-in for the host's eye as he walks through the space. The host artist then sends the documentation of his space in a digital format to the other artists around the world. Each participating artist selects a single image or frame from the provided documentation. The artists are then free to adapt, edit, collage, or draw onto his or her selected image. In this time, the artist integrates an image of a space which he or she has never seen or occupied into his or her own visual language and artistic experience. After the artists have completed their augmentation of each image, they send digital copies of the completed artworks back to the host. The host then prints and exhibits the artworks in the same space as the original documentation. The resulting exhibition displays a series of "reflections" on a space which is novel to the participating artists, yet encourages viewers to re-evaluate their relationship to a space which is most likely familiar to them.

Our use of digital technologies in this practice are simple, limited to Zoom, email, and simple video and image editing softwares. However, the manifestation of this practice allows us to use these technologies to solve creative problems which could not be addressed in our more traditional practices. Because of the methodology we use to create these exhibitions, community and the relationship between physical and digital space become important themes of the final work.

Initially, as I began working on projects such as *Roving Reflections* with other members of the I Found U Collective, I viewed the digital platforms on which we worked only as a logistical constraint of our practice due to our geographic separation. Zoom initially offered the opportunity to connect with other artists when I was unable to meet with creatives in my local community. In many ways, the work of I Found U began as a temporary solution to the social impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The work offered an adjacent studio practice to support my main practice during a very specific time. It was hard to imagine ten artists from around the world finding time to continue to work together once they returned to work and their communities reopened.

It was only after the return to daily life that I began to understand the significance of our projects as an emerging method of creative practice. As each artist was able to return to their normal lives, we continued to meet each week. Many artists adjusted both personal and professional schedules to ensure our meetings could continue. At this point, I began to recognize Zoom as a potential artistic and collaborative medium, unique from other methods of working. There are many elements of our practice which can only exist through the specific method of digital collaboration which we have chosen.

Through our *Roving Reflections* practice, we have discovered the unique ability to find cohesion in an exhibition with artists from disparate conceptual and formal specialties. For example, this process enables each artist to work from his or her own studio while completing the project. As a drawing artist, I often print images and use the photo-documentation of the space as the substrate for a

drawing. Another artist may choose to integrate text digitally into the photo, or collage elements onto the provided image. Artists need not adapt their styles to another, but rather responds to the source imagery in a way that is unique to them. A resulting collection of artworks branch out from a single source, each highlighting artist's unique perspectives and artistic visions. Then these various methods converge yet again as they are reprinted at the same scale on the same type of paper. Finding a cohesion beginning and end of a project offers a way for each artist to create works that are very different in their methods and themes while still maintaining a sense of connection between the artworks. Each artwork finds its own independence while also contributing to the greater project.

### **La Tormenta**

The use of digital softwares in a collaborative artistic practice begins to redefine the ways in which we as artists build community. Over the past two years, I Found U's projects have significantly changed the way in which we exchange ideas and share experiences. When a major event happens in one of our member's countries, we can respond in an empathetic and informed manner. By the member's association with our digital community, we are able to more directly respond to the emotional impact of global current events. As we develop a deeper emotional interconnectedness, we find value in building an inclusive community that reaches beyond our individual experiences.

For example, another ongoing I Found U project is titled *La Tormenta*. This traveling exhibition was inspired by a tornado which damaged the town of Dolores, Uruguay on April 15, 2016. The effects of this tornado are still being felt in the community today, over six years after the disaster. Early on in our practice, Uruguayan artist, Marissa Bernotti, made comments likening the experience of her local community in 2016 to the global experience of COVID in 2020. This prompted us to begin work on an installation — a storm — which is currently traveling through various museums and project spaces in Uruguay.

*La Tormenta* is an installation of many artworks created through each member's individual studio practice. We develop the installation organically in response to one another's artworks as well as to the site itself. Artists are able to provide feedback on adjustments to the installation either in-person or remotely as needed. Through our digital and on-site collaborations we are able to collect and compose the resulting *tormenta* into exciting temporary forms before it moves to its new location.

As the Dolores Tornado moved through the town, it disassembled structures, displaced objects and reconfigured them in unexpected ways. We see these elements of destruction reflected in many of the resulting political, economic, and social crises which follow in the wake of COVID-19. Our resulting storm over time has become a celebration of the reconstruction of our communities which were displaced during this time. Our individual artworks reconfigure into new, unexpected

structures as a result of the transition of our studio and social practices during the initial lockdowns.

This project has been exhibited as part of the Terrain Biennial — an international project of public-facing art. It has also been exhibited at the Alejandro Berro Museum and is currently in development again following an invitation from the Department of Culture in Mercedes, Uruguay. In summer 2023, our collective will travel to Mercedes to install this newest iteration of *La Tormenta*. While *La Tormenta* has remained in Uruguay thus far, we envision it continuing into other countries in the coming years.

### **Collaboration in the New Digital Era**

Over the past two years, due to the necessity of adaptation to a COVID world, Zoom has become a ubiquitous form of communication. Zoom meetings continue to replace in-person meetings in the workplace as a matter of convenience. In many ways this example is a microcosmic case of the greater assimilation of digital devices into our lives during the digital era. The establishment of any new technological medium allows for artists to begin to test the limits of the technology beyond its practical uses. This has been seen art historically with each development in painting, photography, and various forms of digital media. In our post-COVID world, the webcam has become a new stand-in for the human eye. Many of our interpersonal interactions exist through the mediation of this tool. While this tool imposes certain limitations onto our interactions, the webcam bridges geographic separation and creates a new version of interpersonal communication. These new interactions do not stand in place of in-person communication, but rather establish a new form of community building opportunities. The separation from the physical has allowed the members of I Found U to engage on new artistic levels with one another and with the spaces that our colleagues occupy.

The digital apparatuses of the camera, Zoom, and even email become an extension of oneself into the space of another, offering a new way to connect that is relevant and responsive to this moment in time. I Found U's goal in the coming months and years is to continue to explore both the opportunities and limits of this new method of developing and maintaining community with other artists.

### **Conclusion**

As I began my studio practice, I never saw myself as an artist who would work on international collaborative projects. My view of creative practice was founded on a historical (and primarily Western) idea of the painter alone in a studio, sending out artworks to engage with his community. I did not understand the possibilities or importance of working within a community to create art, let alone allowing the community to become the artistic practice itself. However in the last two years, I have found my work seeking a synthesis of traditional practice, digital art, and social practice as a novel way of working. This method of collaboration continues to support and inform

my private studio practice, even as I develop new ways of working in community with artists from around the world.

Through my current methods of digital collaboration, I am attempting to open myself to both the possibilities and limitations of the integration of these new tools into an artistic studio practice. While this method of connection began as a necessity during a monumental time in history, it has quickly developed into an artistic medium through which the I Found U Collective is able to solve creative problems in new and unique ways.

In the coming years, artists will be able to further clarify the role of these technologies in creative practice. Just as photography and video began as scientific developments and soon transitioned into established mediums for artistic creation, our current developing technologies will continue to find a place in the studio practices of many artists.

In the wake of COVID-19 artists and scholars are recognizing the value of interpersonal connection more than ever before. The topic of authentic connection has naturally become the focus of many artists around the world. Many artists have already begun to explore how digital communication technologies can integrate into their practices. Over time, the formalization of these artistic practices will offer new solutions to create inclusive, global communities in a post-COVID world.

### **Author Biography**

Clark Valentine lives and maintains a studio in Fort Collins, Colorado. Valentine received his MFA from Colorado State University with a concentration in Drawing. His drawings explore ideas of spiritual practice and phenomenology through processes of repetition.

Valentine's work has been exhibited in museums, universities, and galleries on five continents, and widely throughout the US in both solo and group exhibitions. He has attended residencies at The School of Visual Arts, New York and Barac Mannheim Residency in Mannheim, Germany.

Clark Valentine's collaborative works have been exhibited in projects at Melbourne Design Week, the Terrain Biennial, and various international museums. He is a founding member of the I Found U Collective - a collective of artists from four continents who create international collaborations which address environmental, sociological and economic concerns on a global level.

Valentine currently is an Instructor of Visual Arts at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs.

# Ammerman Center for Arts & Technology 17th Biennial Symposium:

## CONTACT

Cory Wayman

“She Smiles, She Lies, She Cries: The Currencies of Affect, Beauty & Performance in Leah Rachel’s *Curious Female Casting Couch* (2017)”

The University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, UT  
cory.wayman@utah.edu

### Abstract

Filmmaker Leah Rachel’s 2017 Web video project *Curious Female Casting Couch* (CFCC) explores the personal and cultural intersections of identity, affectual exchange, and sex economies. My analyses of the *Curious* women’s performances focus on their engagement with and fictional commodification of authenticity, beauty, professional aspiration and critique in contemporary labor marketplaces. By comparing the media frameworks utilized by late 20th and early 21st century artists and cultural producers, this project aims at illuminating overlaps and critically re-examining concepts of affectual labor between CFCC and those explored in works such as Marina Abramović’s *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* (2003). CFCC’s experiments with identity construction question how the increasingly virtual marketplaces of today are both impacting and shaped by histories of the intellectual authority and social freedoms of female artists and those participating in sex work’s variety of virtual, affectual and physical forms.

### Keywords

Affect labor, performance, networking, sex work, exploitation

### Introduction

Produced in a Los Angeles County adult entertainment production studio, filmmaker Leah Rachel’s *Curious Female Casting Couch* (2017) borrows aesthetics and themes from the casting-couch genre of pornographic video to entice and then challenge the viewer’s desires for “real” or “authentic” sex acts. Commonplace on pornography streaming sites such as Pornhub.com, casting-couch videos offer the fiction of a non-scripted encounter between a performer—who is usually female—and a man or men who promise lucrative future opportunities in return for a taped performance of unpaid sexual favors. In Rachel’s version, the two anonymous male interviewers coerce not sexual performances but emotional ones, excavating emotional

soft-spots personal to each woman they interview. These interviewers prompt the women into candid conversations about romantic and familial relationships, sexual histories, feelings of loneliness, and childhood dreams. Although each woman exhibits signs of discomfort in certain moments, they continue to respond openly to the interviewers, modeling behaviors desirable not only in sex work but throughout the service industry, such as flexibility, talent for improvisation, and total openness to new challenges and situations [1]. *Curious Female Casting Couch* (or CFCC), like many historical artworks, such as Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), uses sex work to allegorize transformations in the landscapes of labor and subjectivity and to question widely-held views towards gender, sexuality, and what it means to work in systems created to favor men’s viewing and experiential pleasures.

The casting-couch genre dates back to short “stag” films that were popular throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century and alludes to auditioning systems and practices used by both mainstream and pornographic casting directors [2]. In exploiting the genre’s claims to authenticity, CFCC reframes the mainstream casting-couch genre as a form that demonstrates the entrepreneurial and performance savvy of porn workers while illuminating abusive patterns in late-capitalist labor markets. *Curious Female Casting Couch* deploys and critiques these intangible assets associated with young women and proposes new sources for the pleasures provided in viewing casting-couch interactions: performances of emotional affects, creation of human relationships, and exploration of the personhood (or persona) of each performer. This paper examines Rachel’s videos through art-historical precedents—in particular, earlier performance works such as Marina Abramović’s *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* (2003) and, using a sociological lens, through its original presentation on the popular free pornography site Pornhub.

My analyses of each of the *Curious* women’s performances focus on their engagement with and fictional commodification of authenticity, beauty, professional

aspiration and critique in contemporary labor marketplaces. In “Art Work and Sex Work...,” (2012) art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson discusses intangible affective labors in the art world through analyses of performance works such as Marina Abramović’s *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* (2003). Bryan-Wilson argues that conceptual parallels between sex work and a range of art practices provide a productive means for female artists and writers to expose the gendered politics of art making and patriarchal systems of cultural valuation from the 1970’s to the early aughts [3]. Rachel’s work offers critical updates to previous art-historical scholarship on issues of “authenticity” in performance art, as well as histories of the intellectual freedoms of female artists, critics, and authors, especially those who use their nude (or partially-nude) body in their practices.

While the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century encouraged the spread of pornographic texts among male aristocratic libertines, the eighteenth and nineteenth century inventions of lithography and photography made explicit sexual materials available at affordable rates to all social classes [4]. The increased accessibility of pornography fueled classist tensions about the democratization of sexually explicit materials, prompting state censorship initiatives resulting in the establishment of the modern cultural category of “pornography” [5]. In Europe and its colonies, pornography was condemned as a corrupting influence, one inciting deviance from the hegemonic Judeo-Christian order of heteronormative reproductive sex sanctioned by marriage. Despite censorship efforts, the advents of film, video, and the internet during the twentieth century have all revolutionized both the accessibility and variety of pornography and, by the turn of the twenty-first century, allowed pornography consumption to exist fully in the private realm of the domestic [6].

By the late twentieth century, the relationship between art and pornography in the United States had become a topic of active debate following the outcomes of the 1985-86 Messe Commission that resulted in targeted—and ultimately overturned—restrictions on the publishers and retailers of pornography, internal divisions among feminists regarding pornography’s effects and ways of addressing them, and highly-publicized threats of censorship in the wake of the Culture Wars of the early 90s, all amidst an accelerating “pornification” of mainstream visual culture [7]. The cumulative effects of these events cast shadows of uncertainty, anxiety, and ambivalence towards the values and roles of pornography in society and a tendency to avoid serious engagement with pornography as a cultural form from institutions both in and outside of the art world. Twentieth-century American artists such as the “NEA four” (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes), Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, Betty Tompkins, Carolee Schneemann, and Annie Sprinkle are well-studied cases of sexually explicit art production, controversy, and—except for in the notable case of Koons’ and Italian porn-star Cicciolina’s *Made in Heaven* collaboration (1991-92)—

state censorship and threats to institutional funding [8]. Twenty-first century artists who investigate the pornographic world, on the other hand, have tended to garner less controversy as well as critical attention in the very historical moment when pornography has been the most accessible and widespread. By limiting critical discourse to studies of a handful of twentieth-century artists who engaged with pornography in the pre-streaming era, art-world gatekeepers have left the worldwide accessibility of pornographic imagery online underexamined.

A critical reflection on established studio systems of both adult and Hollywood entertainment that relied upon corporate systems, *CFCC* subverts the casting-couch structure to convey ways in which abuse and exploitation may take many complex forms, some of which have recently begun to be challenged by the MeToo movements and the Harvey Weinstein and Jeffery Epstein investigations, among countless others. Recent viral trends on social media popularize Amazon delivery workers receiving requests to deliver dance performances along with packages in front of door Ring cameras that TikTokers make into shareable content [9]. In these instances, as in many other common scenarios of workplace surveillance, failing to fulfill customer requests means risking negative performance reviews [10]. Willingness to fulfill on-the-job requests, even when they include extraneous demands such as unwarranted displays of enthusiasm or self-abasement, emerges as a key theme in the *Curious* interviews as the male interviewers seek the limits of each woman’s comfort and confidence.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in many ways, catalyzed preexisting trends in sex economies, while introducing other new challenges and safety concerns as workers adapted their business practices to new realities—creating floods in online markets that devalued sex work on platforms such as OnlyFans [11]. Private sector investment is fraught with challenges as the profitability of pornography remains threatened by the pirating and distribution of pornography on free websites. The instant accessibility of internet pornography is becoming more normalized; critically discussing it, however, is not. In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan explained the “indispensable” role of artists and their awareness of new media technologies’ radical effects on culture and society:

In the history of human culture there is no example of a conscious adjustment of the various factors of personal and social life to new extensions [of the body through media] except in the puny and peripheral efforts of artists. The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs [12].

*CFCC* gleans and reflects new understandings by engaging with pornography critically and asks what it feels like to witness, question, and participate in today’s virtual, cultural and service economies.

### Building a New Frame:

<<https://www.curiousxxxfemale.com/GIRLS.html>>

Performance artist Marina Abramović's performance piece *Role Exchange* (1975) isolated social demands as an indispensable mode of professional life in the global contemporary art world through the conceptual and embodied comparison to the performance demands of entertaining clients and potential clients in sex work. For the performance, the artist commissioned and traded positions with Suze, a sex worker of Amsterdam's historic Red-Light District, who attended Abramović's gallery show opening at the city's De Appel Gallery in July of 1975. For the duration of the four-hour event, Abramović posed in a Red-Light window display for potential engagement, while Suze—who had been working in sex work for the equivalent amount of time that Abramović had been an artist, ten years—entertained clients, dealers, and gallery attendees, acting as “the artist.” The two split the three-hundred-dollar gallery stipend. With this work, Abramović deconstructs the concept of “the artist” by likening the selling of art to the selling of sex, both catering to the personal, social, and professional whims of buyers, critics, and curious audiences. Both visually and conceptually, frames in the form of Red-Light windows and entryways as well as the frames and video monitors of the gallery in which Suze entertains stand in for the professional industries and the particular skillsets these demand from workers.

Like their predecessor Abramović, Leah Rachel and Andrea Fraser have since employed themes and issues of selling sex to critically consider the value of interpersonal connection involved in both art and sex work. For Fraser's video *Untitled* (2003), the artist collaborated with her gallerist to select an interested collector to purchase one of five videotapes of an original artwork that would include having sex with the artist on camera to produce the content of the video work. The chosen collector, who was to be male, heterosexual, and unmarried, paid roughly \$20,000, and the two had sex in Manhattan's Royalton Hotel for one hour before a single tripod camcorder [13]. In Fraser's recollection of the work, she described how the “normal” sales situation of the videotapes, not the commissioned sex, is what felt exploitative, citing a sense of “loss of control” one feels when selling art on the market, adding, “that's where the speculation begins” [14]. The demands of the art market require not only artistic or creative pursuits but also forms of sociality and performance that appease art audiences, consumers, and dealers as well as garner media, peer, and industry relationships.

Uploaded originally to stream on Pornhub (PH), which streams content uploaded by its users, *CFCC* was later taken off the site by the parent company's content-monitors—presumably due to its lack of explicit sexual activity. Another reason for the removal of the *CFCC* videos from PH may have been the series' critical

repurposing of content from the site's most popular producer/uploader of the casting-couch genre, Backroom Casting Couch (or BCC). Launched online in 2007—the same year as PH—by Flagstaff, AZ-based producer Eric Whitaker, BCC became a forerunner in the genre, uploading original content onto free porn sites as a means of driving traffic to Whitaker's subscription-service website. *CFCC*'s intended existence on PH, which received an average of 80 million daily visitors in 2017, underscores the celebration of deceit and exploitation in the casting-couch narrative [15]. PH's decision to remove the *CFCC* videos from their database presents an ironic instance of art censorship in a non-art context, especially considering recent accounts of the company's ill-equipped content-monitoring systems [16].

After PH removed the videos, Rachel recruited artist and designer Annette Lamothe-Ramos to create a webpage to house them and tagged the site with relevant search engine keywords intended to guide unsuspecting viewers searching for pornography. The *CFCC* webpage resembles the free pornography sites that proliferated before the dominance of PH: an expansive black background featuring simple graphics, fake chat messages, and the red outline image of a sexualized female figure pinned prominently at the top. The four videos run down the site's left-hand side, marked with thumbnail images, each Female's name in red text, and erroneous view numbers. On the right, a “LiveChat” bar displays a string of messages from “Curious XXX Female” reading, “Hey baby!... / Wanna see my new video?... / Hello? Are you still there?” These digital features, though not actually interactive, form a convincing representation of a free porn site, complete with the option to “upgrade.”

“Pop-up” images repeatedly interrupt the video-interviews and contribute to the viewer's sense of having accessed authentic porn. Some pop-ups alert viewers of potential viral threats to their software safety. Others warn of technological malfunctions, reference gay pornography, and offer “local meet-up” opportunities. In some instances, pop-ups increase the verism of the videos and of the *CFCC* webpage; in others, they work in mocking dialogue with the scene, ultimately disrupting the viewer's presumption of virtual privacy and challenging suspension of disbelief. Collectively, the pop-ups work to activate and amplify the viewer's self-awareness, introducing concerns about computer safety, the comfort or discomfort of the female performers, and anxieties articulated by the viewer's proxies, the male interviewers.

In their get-something-for-nothing economic structure, casting-couch videos encapsulate, in many ways, the current era of endless free pornography accessible on sites such as PH: getting performers to do “the work” for free can, in a sense, legitimate the behavior of consuming internet pornography for no cost. The *CFCC* videos are each prefaced with brief passages of scrolling text accompanied by sax-heavy music, referencing and

subverting the disclosure messages employed at the top of BCC videos, which read as follows:

Backroom Casting Couch is a website about the real-life interactions that occur during adult modeling interviews. We film girls sucking, fucking, swallowing, and taking it in the ass just to land a job. I would hire them all...

However...

I'm Not a Real Casting Agent...

...And There Is

No Job...

The *CFCC* introductions make significant alterations to these action terms, exchanging sex acts for emotional ones (“thinking, feeling, crying, and putting it all out there just to land a job”) while maintaining the genre’s marketing of “real life” transactions carried out under false pretenses. Predicated on the coercion of a performer into unpaid sex, the casting-couch genre usurps the economic benefits of sex work within its narrative framework through scripted, though not always unreal, deceit [17].<sup>1</sup>

In “Art Work and Sex Work...” Julia Bryan-Wilson offers an analysis of the “affective labor” involved in professional networking and self-promotion. Examining Marina Abramović’s *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* (2003), she argues that works such as these highlight the behaviors expected of female art workers and sex workers whose entrepreneurial networks require physical or social gestures that foster “perceived genuine affective connections” with critics, dealers, and potential buyers [18]. These exchanges demand substantial time and energy from artists—particularly women artists who must struggle to achieve equal status as their male counterparts—in addition to their interrelated networks of art-world professionals. Extending Bryan-Wilson’s insights to *CFCC* supplies a critical lens with which to consider more contemporary conditions of labor which demand a skilled blend of entrepreneurial, technological, and performance savvy.

In *Porn Work: Sex, Labor and Late Capitalism* (2021), Heather Berg incorporates interview data from more than eighty pornography professionals, conducted between 2012–2019, which collectively reveal the very recent collapse of a monolithic pornography industry and describe the skillful balances of skills employed by sex and pornography workers [19]. The uncertain profit margins in pornography, due to free-streaming of material online, necessitates diverse business strategies, including marketing and accounting, strategic planning, managing

<sup>1</sup> When deceitful violations of agreements occur, pornographic subjects are often helpless to prevent the virtual distribution of their work. For instance, Girls Do Porn, a casting-couch video production company, was tricking women into thinking their performances would only be viewable to DVD-purchasing costumers in New Zealand and Australia, when in actuality, the

online distribution of free preview videos, advertisement deals, direct-to-fan interactivity and commerce, and developing relationships with various clientele. *Curious Female Casting Couch* hints at some of these changing social and technological values from industry networking to self-enterprise through the multilayered performance of authentic desire. By removing sex from the equation, *CFCC* points to the ways in which the performed intimacies and interpersonal systems of control depicted in pornographic media could represent widespread labor expectations in a swath of contemporary labor markets.

PornHub’s removal of *CFCC* from its databases speaks to the importance of context and institutional authority in public interpretation of art and visual culture. Performance scholar Amelia Jones has argued that exhibition and cultural contexts are foundational factors shaping viewers’ experiences of performance art in both live and media-documented formats [20]. Abramović’s framing of herself in a Red-Light district window display in *Role Exchange*, Fraser’s contracted creation of a limited-edition video recording of the artist and buyer having sex in *Untitled*, and *CFCC*’s presentation first on PH and then on a faux-porn website each attests to the powerful influence of institutional framing and marketing for artists’ careers, in particular female artists. In *Curious Female Casting Couch*, frames perform a multiplicity of functions for both the consumer and *Curious* women themselves. The four video thumbnails offer enticing snapshots of the women’s physicality and performances. By serving as reminders of the near-endless supply of pornography videos online, these peephole-like viewing windows highlight the fact that the women face pressure to give their best performance upon this (supposedly) introductory meeting. More broadly, frames act as reminders of the physical, emotional, and interpersonal pressures that bear on the economic subject who is working within industry confinements and expectations.

### Nikki: Authenticity At & As Work

Following the introductory text, the first video opens on a plain room featuring a wrinkled leather couch facing two men sitting behind a black-topped table on which a small camcorder sits. The men have their backs turned to the viewer, and their faces are pixilated to anonymity. A young woman in a nude bra and black underwear enters and, exchanging greetings with the men, sits on the couch. When one interviewer asks where she is from, Nikki (played by

producer uploaded content onto free sites such as PornHub. In November 2019, six affiliates of the production company were federally charged with accounts of sex trafficking by force, fraud, and coercion, and at least three guilty pleas have been entered so far.

Nesta Cooper) glances upwards and says, “Um...I am from Florida.” Another presses, “Yeah, where?”

Nikki, scratching her shoulder, utters, “Um...from Miami,” as a pop-up alerting the viewer that “Windows Explorer has stopped working” appears in the top-right corner of the screen. As one of the men says, “We’re from Miami, too—what part of Miami?” the message fades away and is replaced by a close-up image of Tim Curry as Steven King’s Pennywise the Clown meme-ified to say, “See you in your dreams!”

“Ha, you’re not from Miami, are ya? It’s okay,” one responds. Nikki admits, “No, I’m not from Miami.” One of the men responds, “That’s alright. Are you comfortable?...” Nikki, moving her hands back and forth between her hair and lap, assures him, “Yes, I’m very comfortable, thank you.” The dissonance between Nikki’s verbal statement and her anxious body language evidence early on the inaccessible nature of her “true” thoughts, feelings, and intentions, despite any attempts to glean honest insights—a fact teased by the haunting clown meme. Leaning out of frame, one interviewer asks, “So, do you have a boyfriend, Nikki?” to which she responds that she does not. When Nikki explains that she “just like[s] to fuck,” the shot cuts in towards her, presumably from the camcorder on the table. The men inquire about the “reasons” for her being single from behind the camera. After Nikki confirms that she “like[s] to fuck a lot of people,” another small pop-up emerges in the same corner featuring a smiley-face icon and a grey click here box flanking the text: “THIS IS NOT A JOKE! YOU ARE THE 100,000th LEARNER!”

They ask if having multiple sex partners gets “depressing” or “lonely.” Nikki denies this assumption before the men then offer her a red plaid shirt to put on. She obliges, an action which they take as a “go-ahead” to continue. Nikki now appears waist-up, the shot more eye-level. When the men breach the topic of her most recent ex, Nikki grows quieter, offering short responses when asked about the pain she has experienced and the discomfort she feels at discussing it. The camera moves behind the back of the first interviewer, pauses between them, then begins to zoom in on Nikki in uneven intervals. The increasing scrutiny of the camera relates the viewer with Nikki’s labor of reflecting upon increasingly personal information. She confesses that she was in love. “It hurts to lose love,” one of them offers. Nikki, with tears pooling in her eyes, subtly confirms their suspicions that she might miss aspects of being in love. The men then offer sweatpants before concluding the interview with hugs.

While Nikki’s tears may signify authentic emotion, the plaguing presence of the pop-ups underscores the constructed and performed nature of the exchanges depicted in *CFCC*. Discussing the documented performances *Crying Glasses (An Aid to Melancholia)* (1998) by Hayley Newman and Marina Abramović’s video-performance *The Onion* (1995), Jennifer Doyle explains how representation, even representation of something as seemingly legible as tears,

stands to deny the viewer access to a performing subject’s “true” feelings. Doyle writes that “once emotion is absorbed into the sphere of representation, once a feeling becomes an image of feeling, its claim to authenticity (to being a real feeling) is thrown into question” [21].

Nikki’s performance of authenticity reflects gendered assumptions of behavior, namely pious attitudes towards sex, willingness to engage with male curiosities, and displays of emotional upset when discussing past intimate relationships. Her exaggerated gestures in these areas convey a gap between authentic emotion and performances of emotion which are caught up in societal expectations and traditions of normative behavior, baring critical overlaps with concepts of “realness” such as those used by African Americans and Latinos in the New York City drag ball scene of the ’80s and ’90s to mean to “pass” as a certain gender or social class other than one’s own [22]. *Redefining Realness* author Janet Mock describes “realness” as “the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm” [23]. For women, and trans women in particular, realness presents “a pathway to survival” in our society in which “femininity in general is seen as frivolous.” Nikki’s interview unveils how authenticity is unverifiable and rather that emotions-as-commodities can be staged, manipulated, and (mis)interpreted by both performing subjects and audiences. The resulting affectual ambivalence of realness forms a productive space for women to reflect upon the oftentimes competing demands of their professional conduct.

With a fetishistic excavation of amateurism, the casting-couch genre appeals to viewers’ interests in witnessing a naïve young performer having unpaid sex in hopeful anticipation of future earnings. The “authentic amateur” holds a unique currency in some cultural economies, in arenas ranging from the Olympics to reality TV programming, as well as pornography markets, typified by the casting-couch genre. In her interviews with pornography practitioners, Heather Berg found many performers who have described “authenticity” as consistently characterizing many consumer tastes though it rarely receives recognition as a clickable category. Berg devotes a chapter of her book to “Authenticity Work,” in which she discusses methods employed by mainstream, alternative, and queer pornography producers who traffic in authenticity in their work. These methods range from centering performers’ own pleasure to strategies of “weeding out” potential performers who appear to desire opportunities solely out of economic desperation rather than (what are deemed) more preferable motives [24]. Berg recites the attitude of performer Siouxsie Q, who said, “I would like to see more emphasis placed on fair labor practices than on whether or not I have a ‘real’ orgasm,” observing that “workers representing various porn genres spoke about the authentic self-expression and pleasure they experienced on set and yet consistently critiqued discourses of authenticity around their work” [25].

In its claims to non-professional performers and real emotional reactivity, the endurance of the casting-couch genre suggests the persistence of cultural tastes for “amateur” subjects, tastes which have been crystallized by the emergence of OnlyFans where performers’ accounts build followings over time. The prevalence of the “authentic amateur” suggests a prolonged societal interest in acting as witnesses or judges to the economic decisions and navigations of industry-subjects with very little authority or power over the conditions of their labor.

### Belle On Beauty’s Limits

Belle’s performance illustrates how social perceptions of beauty are contingent upon one’s willingness to display appropriate behavior. At the start of Belle’s (Afton Reid) video, the men tease that she is a “Southern Belle.” This she denies, twisting her hair. Whereas in mainstream casting-couch videos male “interviewers” frequently don’t ask their subjects for their names, names in *CFCC* serve a few key purposes. Central to concepts of identity as well as branded commerce, chosen names often romanticize their subjects poetically, as was widely acknowledged of Manet’s *Olympia* and feels implied in Belle and Crystal’s personas. The adoption of pseudonyms is an enduring tradition in sex work, and a catchy or otherwise memorable pseudonym can mean the difference between a life supported by sex work and one in which such work provides only supplementary income, particularly in the internet age.

A pop-up window appears in the center of the screen with a warning that “your computer may be infected!!! CALL NOW!!! 1-844-839-7975.” This warning multiples across the screen. The intruding reference to software issues foregrounds the temporal distance between the viewer and the conditions of the video’s production, as well as the space between the interviewers and interviewee by reminding viewers of their consumer status and alerting them to potential safety issues experienced by the performing subject. The scene moves to a close-up image of Belle as the men inquire “how long [she’s] been doing this kind of thing.” Belle stares focus-less before closing her eyes and shrugging, “a little while.” Then, one interviewer asks about “the guy from this morning.” “Just some scumbag,” Belle replies with a dismissive gesture. “Is that what you like, scummy guys...what about them?” “I don’t know... [pauses] I like when they treat me like shit.” “Really? You like that?” Belle leans back in her seat as she endures accusations of inauthenticity: “You don’t seem like that kind of girl; you actually seem a little different than most of the girls who come in here. I don’t entirely know if you’re showing us the true you.” A software notice intrudes: “Do you want to allow this app to make changes to your device?” as though speaking directly to Belle and her capacity to appear unaffected by the men’s comments. Her name then becomes the jumping off point for a discussion on the value

of beauty versus sexiness. Belle expresses dismay at being called “beautiful,” expressing how she wishes, instead, to be “sexy.” “Beautiful’s boring,” she says. “A flower can be beautiful; grass can be beautiful. Can’t be sexy.” The men respond by cautioning that they’re not sure that she is “in the right line of work right now” and “could be capable of a lot more.” Disarmed, Belle’s demeanor visibly alters from eager to introspective.

Belle plays out the dilemma of beauty: beauty is valuable and can be economically empowering but is readily objectifying of women and purely visual, rather than grounded in ideas or actions. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom theorizes how beauty functions as a form of capital that is violently caught up in constructs of gender and race:

Beauty can be manners, also a socially contingent set of traits. Whatever power decides that beauty is, it must always be more than reducible to a single thing. Beauty is a wonderful form of capital in a world that organizes everything around gender and then requires a performance of gender that makes some of its members more equal than others [26].

Beauty’s aspirational status creates a competitive playing field for pornography subjects and fuels the economic desperation characterizing the narrative of casting-couch scenes. How Belle, and all the *Curious* women, choose to monetize their beauty, time, and energy follow the rules of a society which values self-determination, entrepreneurship, profitable exposure on social media and the expansion of professional and distributional networks. Cottom states plainly, “Beauty hurts. It costs and demands money,” and women are expected to leverage what they have to achieve that which they desire.

Belle begins to break down the structures of beauty—its stipulated gendered expectations of behavior, its claims to aspirational status, and its hollow interiors—by reflecting on aspects of her adolescence. The men ask about Belle’s childhood aspirations. She shares that she “used to write stories about princesses and girls.” Her mood brightens after they bring up *The Princess Bride* (dir. Rob Reiner). Sensing that Belle is becoming more comfortable, the men offer her clothes to put on, which she reveals were her father’s. They excavate a few other details about Belle: she admires the film *Erin Brockovich* (2000, dir. Steven Soderbergh), enjoyed dressing eccentrically with her sister growing up, and continues to wear clothes that belonged to her dad whom she describes as being funny, affectionate, and unconditionally supportive. The fact that these personal and familial details supply little relevant meaning to the viewer demonstrates the challenging predicament of the *Curious* female’s task: in order to be considered serious or “authentic,” she must display a perceivable enthusiasm and willingness to expose more and more personal information, though, through the act of personal exposure, she becomes

an overly-specific and thus un-generalizable figure whose utility to the production at hand is not entirely clear. For Belle, performing beauty becomes an overwhelming task but one that she confronts with seriousness, never refusing a question and offering more substantial responses than her counterparts Nikki and Tara. The men conclude the meeting warmly, suggesting ongoing contact and future meetings.

### **Tara: Dreaming in the ‘Self As Enterprise’ Society**

Tara’s interview, the shortest in the series, encapsulates the entrepreneurial sensibility of the women and the transactional nature of the interviews—and their real participants—in which all parties seek profit in the form of either financial or social capital. Tara (Kansas Bowling) wears a black underwear ensemble and says she is eighteen. Sitting, leaning forward with her knees spread apart, she exhibits the least reserve of the interview subjects. Tara demonstrates a unique confidence in her performance of sexual desirability and is the only one of the four women who refuses the sweatshirt offered by the interviewers. Her autonomy and agency are the first topic of conversation. The men inquire about how “normal” her activities are, her choice of “doing this kind of thing around men in their thirties.” The shot transitions to a close-up as one asks, “Is this what you always wanted to do, since you were a little girl?” Assured, Tara replies, “Yes.” Patronizing attitudes laid bare, they question, “You would watch this type of material?”

“No. Well...I wanted to be an actress.” Tara states that her favorite actress growing up was Lucile Ball as the camera, previously stationed on a tripod, gets picked up by an interviewer, who asks, “You wanted to be Lucile Ball, and you’re only eighteen, so what’s, uh, why are you here and not doing more respectable acting?” Tara’s performance presents her motivation for participation: on-camera experience. Tara adapts to the new camera perspective, which moves towards her from above, pushing her hair behind her shoulders, turning her chest toward the lens and leaning back on her arms to strike a pose. The image orientation shifts here from landscape to portrait dimensions, offering a comparison of how Tara might appear in a wide-angle cinematic frame versus a portrait-style, editorial-type image.

Tara’s efforts to gain experience in film, as well as a portfolio with which to negotiate future work in creative industries, is an example of what political theorist Lois McNay calls the “Self as Enterprise” society. Viewing *CFCC* through a critical lens of capitalism’s structuring of human subjectivity—what Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth have described as the “new, flexible capitalism” in which value is placed on “those who can engage in new projects with great personal application and flexibility”—highlights each woman’s demonstration of her

entrepreneurial skill in applying her physical and emotional resources in service of the project [27]. McNay uses Foucault’s notion of the self as a “sort of permanent and multiple enterprise” in her discussion of postcapitalism [28]. She argues the individual operates not within the framework of the intervening state but through networks and small-scale organizations. According to Foucault, these social, familial, and professional networks are to be “in some way ready to hand for the individual, sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual’s actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for [her] not to be dependent on one alone.” Though they never state their ultimate professional goals upfront, the *Curious* performers convey a reliance on the men’s favor for professional support, suggesting ways in which their emotional willingness and performativity themselves may work as transferrable skillsets. According to Brian McNair, by the late-1990s, mainstream Western culture appears to have successfully integrated the aesthetics of pornography: “Its stock heroes, its story lines, its low-budget lighting and motel room sets” into mainstream advertisement, entertainment and fashion industries [29].

Whereas Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* foregrounded the social labors necessary for managing sales and distribution of artwork, *CFCC* emphasizes some of the particular skills and resources valued in contemporary workforces, particularly in cultural and service sectors, such as flexibility, adaptability, generous emotional openness and connectivity, and a willingness to accept low or even non-existent pay in the present for hopes of future prosperity [30]. Considering the two projects together allows us to better understand connections and parallels between creative, affective, service, and sex industries. As though determined to see her bravado falter as she poses seductively in the video’s final moments, an interviewer asks, “Do you get lonely sometimes?” Tara pauses, then with her lips closed, responds over voiceover effect, “Doesn’t everybody?” as her image freezes and the video comes to an abrupt static ending. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri theorize how the affect-producer experiences alienation not only from their time, as in waged labor, or from their products, as in the case of the traditional factory worker, but further from their emotional selves in the process of creating human relationships [31]. Jennifer Doyle describes the painstaking and often discordant experience of performing low-paying affect labor:

The professionalization of affect is especially hard on those working at the margins of economic survival—life is hard enough without health care, job security, affordable housing, and transportation—but to have to produce the spectacle of a woman at peace with the world and her position in it while working at the very job that fails to pay a living wage or provide health insurance can be too much. She is nevertheless expected to smile through it [32].

The judgmental attitudes of the men, including their patronizing energies, coercive statements, and invasive questioning, underscore the alienation experienced by the *Curious* women and by the modern affect producer who must distance their desires, impulses, needs, and other facets of the self in order to give a good performance.

### Crystal's Critique

Crystal's interview suggests ways in which industry-newcomers negotiate their personal needs, social stigmatization, and definitions of the branded "Self as Enterprise" required in pornographic work. After Crystal (Sky Ferreira) reveals that it is her first time doing "this kind of work," the men ask, "Have you told any of your friends about this? Would they think you were a little bit crazy? How does that make you feel when someone calls you crazy?" One interviewer brings the camcorder towards Crystal's right side from an encroaching angle. "I guess it depends on the situation," she says, "like in an argument...they just run it down to the ground and then I believe it, I guess, that maybe I am..." She meets the looming perspective knowingly, flashing a smile as a pop-up proclaims, "get a bigger [image of a rooster] – click here." An interviewer responds, "I don't think you're crazy." "You don't know me," Crystal replies before a staticky transition moves the scene back to the original viewpoint from the corner of the room, as though resetting the scene. Compared to the start of the video, the colors are now more saturated, heightening a sense of cinematic artifice as though to bend, correct or otherwise overcome Crystal's combative statement.

After the scene transitions once again to find Crystal now wearing a grey hoodie-sweatshirt as the men ask about her "big breasts," the interview focuses on Crystal's experiences of feeling misunderstood in youth and adolescence. She opens up about trials growing up: getting reprimanded by teachers for "inappropriate" schoolwork, teased by peers after developing breasts, and beginning to date, hating and being kicked out of school, and suffering chronic feelings of shyness. The men attentively affirm her innocence in these scenarios and offer positive assurance: "I think you're a really special person who isn't crazy at all." After attempting to comfort Crystal by convincing her of her beauty, unique "aura" and cuteness. She accepts their "compliments" until they call her cute, at which point she becomes visibly frustrated, pulling her hood over her head and covering the remainder of her face with her hands—this they also find "cute." Towards the end of the interview, new editing effects seem to blur the line between image and Crystal's internal state, while at the same time rendering her distant, abstracted; an intensely-zoomed-in, out-of-focus lens creates a hazy image of Crystal's eyes, darkened by shadow and makeup.

*Curious Female Casting Couch* reaches a climactic and precipitous ending when Crystal asks if they have daughters,

effectively turning the interrogating lens onto the men behind the camera. One becomes furious, beratingly calling her question "out of line," and commands her to leave. Crystal responds, "What boundaries are there to this stuff— You're the one with the little camera! This is porn, nothing's out of line." In the series' final moments, Crystal flips the script by posing her own cutting question. The men's failure to provide answers serves to underscore the performance and emotional labors of the *Curious* women.

Crystal (and Rachel's) challenge to the gendered, racialized and classed definitions of beauty and performance reflect the histories of value placed upon social critique and art criticism in modern culture, as seen in Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) that famously placed an explosive social critique in the "dirty" hands of the female courtesan figure. *Olympia's* stiffened neck looks out towards the viewer confrontationally, although critics described her body as dead, sick, even animalistic, or in other words, anything but human, the interesting point being that, in many ways, she looks more uncomfortably "real" than the Venuses of the academic past.

Crystal's interview foregrounds the lived experiences of stigmatization, which the casting-couch genre—in its obsession with amateurism—fuels off in its prying and judgmental tactics. Sex workers must navigate unstable economies, which compound the emotional weights of financial, safety, and legal insecurities as well as social stigmatization. Although the so-called "gig economy" is often considered a relatively recent economic development, Berg stresses how "hustling gigs" are only a new way-of-life for the white middle-class who now "find elusive the stability that once seemed an entitlement of their socioeconomic status," and she points to scholarship that reveals how working-class people of color, and women in particular, have been competing in gig economies from the margins of society since long before the economic restructurings of the mid-twentieth century [33]. Crystal demonstrates how the abilities to scrutinize the conditions of one's gig-opportunities, risking dismissal and loss of pay, are available only to those for whom this work provides only supplementary income.

### Conclusion

The declining popularity of the casting-couch genre in recent years has coincided with the social progresses of the MeToo movement, in addition to increasing opportunities outside of studio systems [34]. On media-subscription platforms such as OnlyFans, Patreon, and Substack, performers create custom virtual content to share on an updating media-feed. The mid 2010's peak of the genre and following declining popularity can further be explained, in part, by the momentous attraction of celebrity and influencer culture online that similarly garners its appeal from the perceived blending of personal and professional boundaries via consumable media. These tastes are not an exclusively modern phenomenon, however. Susan Buck-Morss has

explained how during the nineteenth century human sexuality became increasingly commodified within the workings of capitalism, stating that “to desire the fashionable, purchasable woman-as-thing is to desire exchange-value itself, that is, the very essence of capitalism” [35]. Exploring cultural trends towards social media interactivity, aspirational living, and online enterprise employed by the amateur, alt-porn website MakeLoveNotPorn.tv, Stephen Maddison writes that the paradoxical appeals to agency and responsible self-management in entrepreneurial societies reflect “the conditions of immaterial [i.e. virtual] sex, where libidinal, emotional and physiological energies, desires, and sensations designate terms of human capital” [36].

The global accessibility of free streaming pornography raises many concerns, particularly for children and young people who receive minimal and conservative sex education in schools. Unfortunately for those who seek to limit or control pornography, the lack of global internet regulations has greatly diminished the ability of political or state actors to influence pornography consumption [37]. In 2016, Utah became the first state to pass legislation declaring pornography a public health issue or crisis, and as of 2021, more than 14 states in the US have passed similar legislation. Emily Rothman’s book *Pornography and Public Health* (2021) reviews the claims and supporting research cited in these pieces of legislation and concludes that more scholarly research and review are needed to determine the causal relationships legislators theorize between pornography and “commercial sexual exploitation, compulsive pornography use and sexual violence,” among other concerns [38]. Rothman notes that these motions

seldom consider the experiences of those working in pornography.

Sex industries have continued to experience foundational shifts due, in part, to ever-increasing rates of social media and internet engagement; these developments were exacerbated by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers are forced to adapt business practices to changing conditions of safety and commerce [39]. With the recent decline of the studio system, pornography work, including behind-the-scenes production work, is exclusively independently contracted. This presents arduous challenges for workers in obtaining essential resources such as insurance, unemployment benefits, sick pay, regulated working hours, social security, and retirement plans [40].

*Curious Female Casting Couch* offers updates to the art legacies of Marina Abramović and Andrea Fraser in the digital age by creating art that serves both critical and social purposes. Like Manet’s *Olympia*, the *Curious* females do not only represent the bodies of those who engage in sex work but their cunning stares and shielding gestures communicate visceral realities of what it feels like not only to be considered for sale but continuously evaluated on the level of the compelling nature of your job performance. Leah Rachel’s experiments with concepts of affectual labor demonstrate how not only performance talent but emotional energy, networking sensibility, and business expertise are demanded to sustain a life in creative industries and turns the camera lens towards the professional and affectual economies that provision today’s free entertainments.

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## Author Biography

Cory Wayman holds an Art History M.A. His research focuses on the biopolitics of sexuality in art and visual culture and on social histories of art exhibition.