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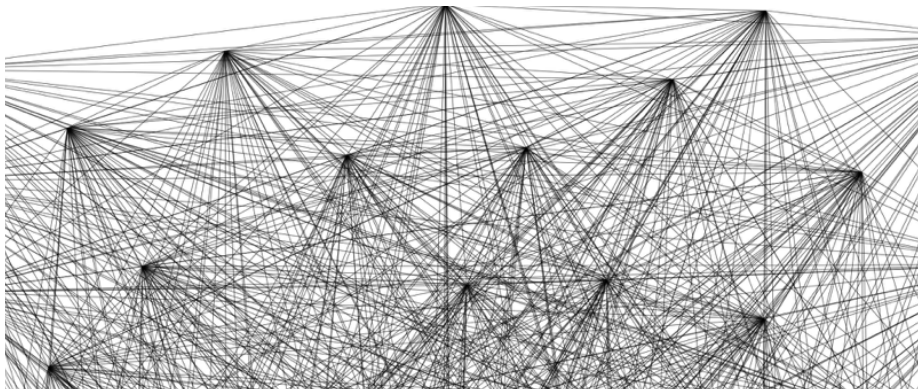
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# REFRACT

**An Open Access Visual Studies Journal**  
*Translation* | Volume 2 | Issue 1 | Fall 2019





## **Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal**

*Translation* | Volume 2 | Issue 1

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## Letter from the Editor

Kate Korroch

The idea for this issue began percolating in the very early stages of *Refract's* existence. I attended the Venice Biennale in 2017 with my partner, infant, and in-laws. I soon became aware of the several roles I inhabited: I was at once a contemporary visual culture thinker honing my critical eye, a new parent managing a balance of feedings and jet-lagged nap schedules, and an in-law guiding my family in a country that inspires many to bask in the visual. I juggled these roles while also trying to fulfill our collective desires for the quintessential family trip to Italy. This exercise invited a reflection on the practice of translation of experience and access (of age, of interest, of comfort, of cost), in addition to language and culture.

As we oriented ourselves in the contemporary art spectacle, we were drawn to the unofficial collateral pavilions, rather than the historical national pavilions, removed from the sanctioned grounds of the biennale. Just a few steps from our rental apartment, the Catalan pavilion presented *Catalonia in Venice\_La Venezia che non si vede*, which maps Venice through sound rather than sight via user collaboration. The project was a small piece of the BlindWiki mobile application designed by the contemporary Spanish artist Antoni Abad.<sup>1</sup> At one point, the pavilion facilitators invited biennale attendees to put on a disposable eye mask and join a person who is visually impaired on a gondola ride, experiencing the world through the guide's perspective. We piled in, pleased by the project's multifarious offerings: an art experience, a gondola ride in Venice (for free!), no crowds, and simply cooling our bodies in the Italian summer heat. As we sat bobbing, eyes covered, taking in the environment, we were invited into an intimate space of translation: the visual

bearings that we use to navigate space were transformed into aural markings through our guide's descriptions.

The title of the project is multilingual, intimating the most familiar form of translation: language. Translated to English, the second part of the title means "The Venice that cannot be seen," inviting the idea of something escaping our view or perception: something may be lost to us through a mistranslation of sorts. This sense is further compounded by how the viewer also experiences language translation in this context: the country where the biennale is held functions in Italian, but the language of tourism and the global contemporary art market is usually English. Furthermore, the project is situated in the Catalan pavilion, which reminds the audience of the language autonomously nestled within the Spanish nation-state. However, the project invites participants to think about translation beyond language and toward a sensorial experience. This going "beyond," this translation of senses, invites those accustomed to accessing the world via sight to crucially rethink their quotidian experiences of the world. Simultaneously, the project provides an additional sensorial experience in a biennale context, which heavily relies on access through sight. Finally, it provides a way for those who do not have sight a space, albeit limited, to engage in the mega art exhibition system.

Thus, I began to think about the relationship between translation and accessibility. The offerings of the Catalan Pavilion were more accessible economically within the confines of the biennale structure: guests did not need to pay, because it is not part of the formalized Biennale. However, it also questioned political access, as Catalonia refuses the nation-state format that dominates the organization and history of the Biennale. The project's message was inviting and inclusive, and it was straightforward but thought-provoking. Translation, I reflected, is much more than the processing of language. This is the crux of *Refract's* second issue.

In addition to our contributions that speak to the unfolding richness of translation, in this issue we formalize our ongoing series, "Voices of Visual Studies." In each issue, the editorial board strives to present perspectives on visual studies from a diverse array of thinkers. Most important, these pieces do not define *Refract's* political intervention in visual studies, but instead present a variety of ideas and approaches. In other words, we seek tension. To ignore tensions and to limit this space to a single disciplinary doctrine is detrimental to how *Refract* engages with visual cultures of diverse histories and geographies. In our first issue, "Refraction," James Elkins discusses and problematizes visual studies through a consideration of writing. In this issue, Sara Blaylock offers another narrative which is both introspective and critical. As we embark on this nascent intervention, we are

placing “Voices of Visual Studies” contributions at the end of each issue to provide a final piece for contemplation across the swath of issues over time.

Fall 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the visual studies doctoral program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. *Refract* is emerging from this setting, and, although it is an independent entity, a large part of our financial and intellectual support stems from the department. This issue is emblematic of the program’s important impact on the field in the past ten years: the journal was founded and is maintained by visual studies doctoral students; our second issue’s contributor to “Voices of Visual Studies,” Sara Blaylock, is a graduate of the program; and two other contributors, Ace Lehner and Alexandra C. Moore, are currently doctoral candidates in the program.

*Refract* has experienced exponential growth since our founding in 2016. Our editorial board continues to grow, we are collaborating with the Institute of the Arts and Science at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and we have a steady stream of readers and contributors. The publication of this issue, as well as our operational costs, would not be possible without the financial support of an independent donor, Anne Bass; the Arts Dean’s Fund for Excellence; the History of Art and Visual Culture department; Porter College’s Provost’s Office; the Institute of Arts and Sciences; and the UCSC Graduate Student Association. Lastly, we would like to thank Stacy Kamehiro, Elisabeth Cameron, Boreth Ly, Ruby Lipsenthal, Michael Conlee, Paula Dragosh, Tatiane Santa Rosa, Molly Korroch, all of the staff of the History of Art and Visual Culture department, and the support of our visual studies colleagues. Their enthusiasm, engagement, and inquisitive support are integral to *Refract*’s success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://blind.wiki/>.

## Introduction

At arm's length, we might define translation as a process by which a set of information is manipulated, altered, transferred, or rendered into another form. But translation also, and often, bears on us more personally, more intimately. It has the potential to bridge chasms of difference in our encounters between languages, interpretations, and experiences. Translation also carries with it the possibility of getting things wrong. How might we align the spirit of translation—of the things it does—with the undoings it can engender? How might this issue probe the scope of translation across and beyond modes and textures of expression such as the written, the spoken, the sensory, the visual, and the auditory?

Selected contributions to *Refract's* second issue interrogate the mechanisms of translation, its various outcomes, and its role in visual culture or other forms of creative, social, or political production and representation. This rich topic inspired a variety of thinkers and makers to experiment with different forms of inquiry, from video and interviews to audio recordings and photo-essays. In keeping with *Refract's* first issue, we have published a menagerie of explorations side by side, treating artistic production as no different from other forms of scholarship.

Such an intervention is critical to *Refract's* mission to offer new modes of thinking *with* and *alongside* conversations that are often siloed by disciplinary boundaries. This volume is no different, and, as we produced the issue, it became clear that we were participating in a long history of sociopolitical interventions in how “translation” is understood. In keeping with *Refract's* mission to avoid aligning ourselves with only a few select thinkers, we did not specifically refer to this history in our call for papers. And yet, the resulting volume contributes to the robust and amorphous field of translation studies by addressing how “translation” might have wide-reaching implications in the field of visual studies.



We are particularly invested in thinking about translation beyond the written word or spoken language, an emphasis that characterizes most of translation studies—from debates over the “autonomy” of a written text to the “function” of a translation and the “equivalence” between a translation and the “original.” Walter Benjamin famously writes that the “task” of the translator is to find “that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida similarly argues that a “relevant” translation is “the transfer of an intact signified.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, however, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts that “it is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation.”<sup>3</sup> Rather, the rhetorical nature of language leads to disruptions in the “logical systematicity” of grammar, revealing how language is itself the “production of agency.”<sup>4</sup> Derrida, too, acknowledges the messiness of translation, describing an “economy of in-betweenness” in which a translated text “stands between...absolute relevance, the most appropriate, adequate, univocal transparency, and the most aberrant and opaque irrelevance.”<sup>5</sup> This “in-betweenness” remains a crucial issue in translation studies, from Homi Bhabha’s theorization of the “third space” as a “translational space of [cross-cultural and unequal] negotiation” to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s call for a “thick translation” that “meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others.”<sup>6</sup>

This is by no means a comprehensive review of all that has been written or theorized about translation. Nor is this issue of *Refract* necessarily an effort to speak directly to this genealogy. Rather, we wanted our contributors to think of translation alongside and beyond text and language, asking questions such as: What could “thick translation” *look* or *sound* like if it were made manifest in artistic production? How can we think through the “translational third space” in today’s *digital* world? And rather than solely ask about equivalence, intention, and function, what could be gained by focusing more on *transformation*?

The resulting contributions take translation as both method and object of analysis, and often as both. As method, translation can be a powerful tool for creating new forms or opening up new avenues of inquiry. Scott Hunter’s “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal,” for example, explores issues of translation when a tarot deck is used to dictate the fate of each note for a saxophone quartet. Each translation of a tarot card, be it “the fool” or “the hermit,” manifests in a harmonic progression of “rehearsals” that culminate in an infinite play on what is lost, or preserved, in the act of translation. Accompanying “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal” is an interview between Hunter and *Refract* editorial board member Alexandra Macheski discussing how translation of tarot into musical composition creates unforeseen harmonies.

Ryan Page also considers sound and translation in his aural montage “Daisy Bell.” In this mash-up audio recording, Page re-creates the 1892 song “Daisy Bell,” which sits squarely within a history of digital interfacing with speech synthesis and artificial intelligence. Here Page references how the song is used in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* as part of the sentient onboard computer HAL’s (Heuristically Programmed Algorithmic Computer) database. The audio piece combines the voices of earlier singers and vintage modes of recording with new technologies for sound making as well as “voices that were never alive to begin with.” Through the compilation of various versions and recording instruments, the piece showcases how, symbolically, the translation and transmutation of voice and music across modes can produce the uncanny and force us to question what is essential, what is persistent, and what changes through different formats.

Translation as process or transformation is also a key focus for “Interpreting the Legal Archive of Visual Transformations,” by Asif Ali Akhtar. This contribution analyzes the way penal law was modified, subverted, and translated across different cases in the Nizāmat ‘Adālat, a criminal court operating in Bengal from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Focusing on the publication *Reports of the Cases*, Akhtar explores how law came to be articulated in unprecedented ways that reshaped Bengalese relationships with British colonial authority. What counted as evidence shifted to emphasize the visible traces of the crime, and certain Islamic voices were erased through a colonial articulation of jurisprudence. Akhtar’s detailed discussion of specific cases recorded in *Reports* shows how Islamic modes of seeing and knowing were restructured, or translated, to follow the logic of British modernity. Akhtar’s piece highlights the way translation is used in political, social, and colonial ideologies, a theme that runs throughout many of the submissions. A major tenet of this issue, therefore, is that translation can lead to structural inequalities but is also a means for resistance and subversion.

Marc Miller’s “Conceptual Transpositions: Considering the Grammars of Conceptual Art and Parametric Drawing” explores the ambiguity of language when communicating instructions, again using translation as method. Miller takes as a starting point Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing #118*, one of over a thousand such drawings LeWitt created between 1968 and 2007. The drawings are created according to instructions such as “place fifty points at random” and then “connect them with straight lines.” Miller transposes these instructions in Rhinoceros, a 3-D computer-aided design application using Grasshopper, a visual programming language, in order to emulate the outcomes of the original conceptual piece. Modifications are then made to the first set of instructions given to the program in order to change the grammar and syntax, and these modified instructions are

transposed back to text. The resulting differences remind us of the ambiguities inherent in acts of translation, and Miller's contribution further complicates the relationship between algorithmic input and its translation into structural output.

Another mode for thinking about data, digital interfaces, and translation is Adriene Jenik's *Blast Radius*. Jenik uses the term *data humanization* to describe her performance-based practice in which the artist intervenes in large-scale data set visualizations by using her body to physically explore a single data point. For *Blast Radius*, Jenik retraced the one-mile blast radius of a Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) the US government dropped on Afghanistan in 2017, by walking its circumference barefoot. Her work physically translates data so that it is readable, and therefore comprehensible. By imprinting the data onto her body, Jenik's work considers the corporeal ramifications of military violence that is purposefully kept outside the purview of US civilians.

Ansel Arnold is similarly interested in violence and data, using translation as a method for interrogating the role of digital media in normalizing violent acts. Arnold's video *Languages of Violence* translates the sound of gunfire in video games into an act that often seems benign: typing on a computer. The video shows what appears to be a text-document on which letters and symbols are typed in real time. Accompanying these keystrokes are the sounds of rapid-fire gunshots and the clicks of a gun being reloaded. By removing the visual evidence of violence that gamers normally see while playing video games, or what Arnold calls "blatant violence," the artist calls into question the role of media technologies in legitimizing "subtle violence." Translation, in this case, becomes an act of resistance and critique.

Rebekkah Dilts also investigates the capacity of translation to resist or subvert social norms by looking at two nineteenth-century female writers, Renée Vivien and Natalie Clifford Barney, and their translations of works by the classical Greek poet Sappho. Sappho's poetry was highly popular during a surge of Western European nationalism and neoclassical nostalgia in the late nineteenth century. Sappho's lesbian identity was mined at this time for alternately radical and reductive attention to female sexuality, depending on the translator and audience. Dilts uses Luce Irigaray's rewriting of classical Greek texts as a template for analyzing the two female authors' translation projects. Like Irigaray's interventions in the masculine canon of Greek literature and thought, Dilts argues that their "radical approach to translation [destabilized the more] canonical and phallogocentric" translation efforts of their male contemporaries. Vivien and Barney countered this with strategies that reclaimed "multiplicity" and "ambiguity" as applied to Sappho's identity and works.

Ace Lehner's essay and interview with Alok Vaid-Menon offers a different approach to issues of gender, ambiguity, and radical forms of translation. This contribution takes up the history of portraiture, its intersection with social media, and representations of trans individuals. Vaid-Menon is known for their performative poetry and is widely followed on social media platforms such as Instagram. Vaid-Menon's posts are often self-portraits featuring their boldly styled and brightly colored outfits. These portraits are often paired with captions that unveil raw emotion and the brutal and beautiful experiences of being a transfeminine performer, writer, and activist. This piece begins with an essay by Lehner, followed by an interview with Vaid-Menon in which Lehner inserts essay-style prose to further elaborate on the context and history of the conversation. Lehner's thoughtful writing and inquisitive questions reveal the critical intervention of Vaid-Menon's practice while writing that act into a history of self-visualization and presentation.

Many of the pieces in this issue engage with translation as *process*. Austin D. Hoffman's essay, "Lupine Sensibilities: Dynamically Embodied Intersubjectivity between Humans and Refugee Wolves," looks at the process of translation in mediating interspecies relationships. Hoffman's contribution is a somewhat autoethnographic study of what happens within interactions between the "more-than-human" and the human, considering these interactions as a form of translation. Through a phenomenological approach, Hoffman explores how interspecies communication dissolves the nature-culture divide and how theories of semiotics can help us better understand narratives of trans-species interactions to offer new perspectives and break down anthropocentric ways of constructing knowledge in the discipline of anthropology.

This issue is committed to engaging with the inequalities inherent in the mechanisms of translation. This comes to the fore when we think about accessibility, inclusion, and differently abled bodies. Marrok Sedgwick addresses this in their *Speech Poem* series, an experimentation with bilingualism and translation through performative American Sign Language poetry. By performing ASL poetry, *Untitled (Speech Poem #2) 2018* translates sound, poetry, and sign language to explore the gaps in meaning and meaning making that exist between spoken language, closed-captioning, ASL, and augmentative and alternative communication tools. For example, meaning is often lost in the translation of spoken dialogue into closed-captioning. Sedgwick's video complicates the phonocentric implications of this translation process by engaging the viewer in a brief ASL lesson, allowing viewers to watch as the sign for "speak" takes on greater meaning through ASL. *Speech Poem* is an ongoing series that continues to grow as Sedgwick explores different and new ways to communicate poetic meaning. At its core, *Untitled (Speech*

*Poem #2) 2018* makes clear to the viewer not only the varied ways translation can occur but the impact translation has on comprehension and meaning.

In each issue, the *Refract* team solicits contributions from scholars and artists whose work we feel exemplifies the theme, and we wanted to highlight issues of accessibility in one of those guest contributions. The artist and writer Joseph Grigely was generous enough to allow us to publish a selection of his social media posts, curated by *Refract's* managing editor, Kate Korroch. The posts consist of screenshots or photographs of Grigely's everyday experiences as a person who is deaf. He accompanies these images with captions explaining the frustration he faces when navigating a world designed for people with hearing. The photo-essay illustrates how translation is fundamentally about access and inclusion, and the posts we have published here are a small instance of how the world might be translated, or mistranslated, for differently abled bodies.

We also asked Alessandra Reango to reflect on her work with liquid blackness, a research group that interrogates blackness as an aesthetic, a way of being, and a methodology for investigating the material and discursive forces that condition how blackness operates today. Through an analysis of Kahlil Joseph's BLK-NWS and Arthur Jafa's *White Album*, Reango unpacks how liquid blackness does not "behave" in the way demanded of it by the rules of exchange, labor, and dispossession that so define black social life. Reango reflects on the way liquid blackness moves in multiple directions, evading characterization. In other words, it is *untranslatable*, "it cannot be held in place, but only, and precariously, *in sus-pension*."

And finally, Alexandra C. Moore contributed the photo-essay "All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi's Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme (DUDH)," which unpacks Hervé Youmbi's *Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme* in Camfranglais, presented as murals for Salon Urbain de Douala. In this project, Youmbi translates articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations) into Camfranglais, a pidgin language of English, French, and several Indigenous Cameroonian languages. In a similar format to Grigely's piece, Moore's contribution presents images of Youmbi's murals and translates the Camfranglais text into English. Extended captions explore the cultural nuances of Camfranglais, unpack the geopolitical contexts of the murals, and unveil the challenges of linguistic and visual translation.

In addition to the submissions and solicited contributions engaging with the theme, each issue of *Refract* features a short piece from a scholar working in, or around, the discipline of visual studies. This issue's featured "Voice of Visual Studies" is Sara Blaylock, assistant professor of art history at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Blaylock's astute observations about the lacunae

of visual studies stems from her pragmatic experiences as a professor, organizer, and cross-disciplinary thinker. Blaylock responds to James Elkins's contribution to *Refract's* inaugural issue and his concerns about presentism in visual studies.<sup>7</sup> Using the notion of the “lag,” Blaylock explores how visual studies was originally envisioned and how it manifests itself today. While *Refract* includes “Voices of Visual Studies” to offer windows into the multiple, and sometimes divergent, views on the discipline, we can all agree with Blaylock that artistic production acts on us, produces *something*, and “leave[s] the embers burning, hoping—though not expecting—someone to keep the fire going.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 195.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, 397.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 397, 405.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?,” 179.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Translation and Displacement” (presentation, Translation Theory Today conference, CUNY Graduate Center, May 6, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVQcdbSV6OI>; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Thick Translation,” *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993): 818, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2932211>.

<sup>7</sup> James Elkins, “What is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 15-22, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141455>.

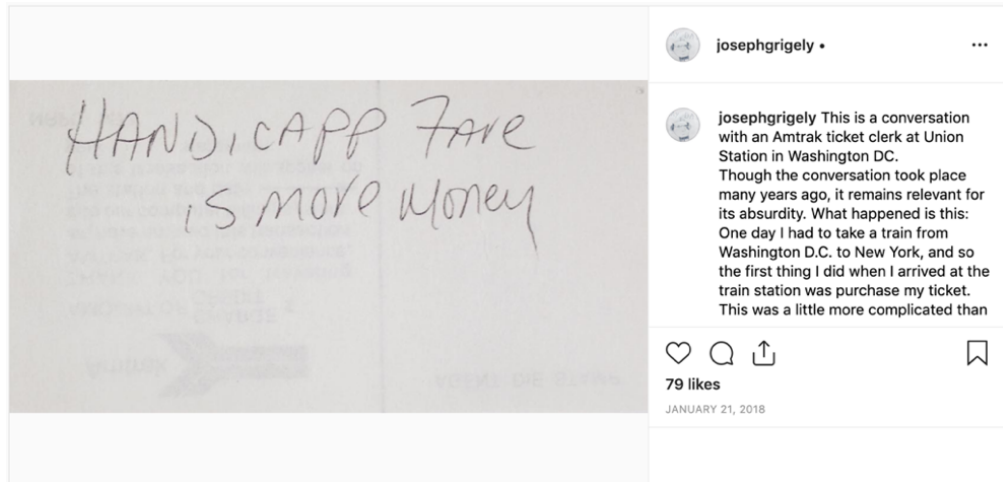
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## **Craptions: Instagram Notes from Joseph Grigely**

Joseph Grigely

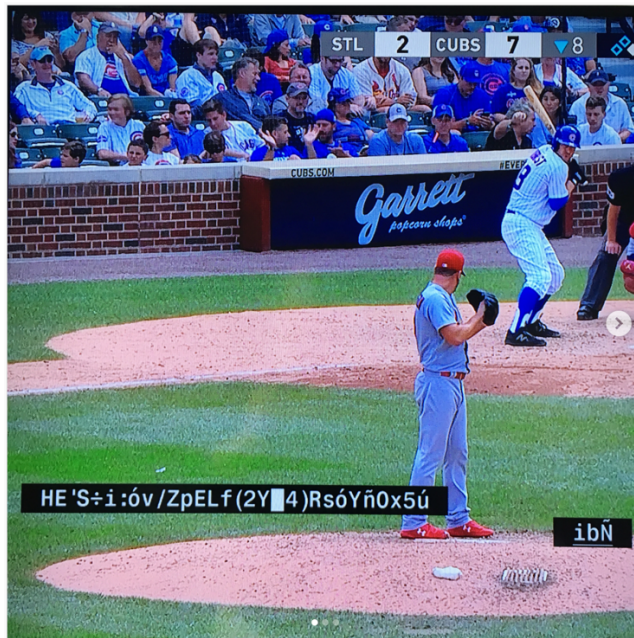
Joseph Grigely is, among many things, an artist, a writer, and a person who is deaf. On his public Instagram page, he occasionally posts documentation of his experiences navigating a world designed for people who can hear. Grigely has generously allowed *Refract* to publish a selection of his Instagram posts, curated below by managing editor Kate Korroch. These posts expand the notion of translation beyond that of language to think instead of the aural, the visual, and issues of access and inclusion. Grigely's playful documentation reveals a deeply problematic and systemic failing to account for differently abled bodies. His posts offer a perspective that is invisible in a society made for people with hearing. In this instance, *mistranslation* becomes a form of erasure. The photo-essay below offers a selection of Grigely's original Instagram posts, with minor edits to his narrative voice-over.





*January 21, 2018*

*This is a conversation with an Amtrak ticket clerk at Union Station in Washington, DC. Though the conversation took place many years ago, it remains relevant for its absurdity. What happened is this: one day I had to take a train from Washington, DC, to New York, and so the first thing I did when I arrived at the train station was purchase my ticket. This was a little more complicated than it seems, though. In America there is a federal law that stipulates that disabled people are entitled to reduced fares to compensate for the hassles and added expenses that disabled people typically incur when traveling. Normally this isn't something I'd ask for, but I thought—why not?—if only to see how much cheaper it would be. So I went up to the service counter and asked the clerk for a round-trip ticket to New York at the disabled person's rate. I showed her my transit ID card, which identified me as "a person with a disability." She smiled and wrote out my ticket, and then she said something to me that didn't quite make sense. So I asked her to write it down and this is what she wrote: "handicapp fare is more money." As she further wrote, the handicap fare was \$102 round trip, but the regular excursion fare was \$92 round trip. It didn't make sense then and it doesn't make sense now. A lot of things related to disability laws don't make sense*



josephgrigely •

josephgrigely More craptions. We are approaching the 50th anniversary of putting a man on the moon and still can't get right the technology for captioning. No one ever said speech-to-text processing would be easy as language is like water--always slipping through our fingers. But still....the legal requirement for captions does not solve the problem that many captions simply fail to do what they are designed to do.  
#craptions #captioncrap #disabilitytheory

51w

zamboni.duet Bad captions, accidental poetry

67 likes  
AUGUST 5, 2018

*August 5, 2018*

*More captions. We are approaching the fiftieth anniversary of putting a man on the moon and still can't get right the technology for captioning. No one ever said speech-to-text processing would be easy, as language is like water—always slipping through our fingers. But still . . . the legal requirement for captions does not solve the problem that many captions simply fail to do what they are designed to do.*



[Music]

josephgrigely • ...

josephgrigely More crappy captions. This is from a YouTube video of Andrea Bocelli singing Puccini's "E lucean la Stelle". As if the caption "music" conveys anything meaningful about what Bocelli is singing. The assumption that deaf people don't know, understand, or care about auditory nuances is a manifestation of intellectual and cultural prejudice. YouTube has the resources to do better than this. #craptions#captioncrap #andreabocelli #youtubecaption

71w

spider\_inna\_hole 🐞 @youtube

71W Reply

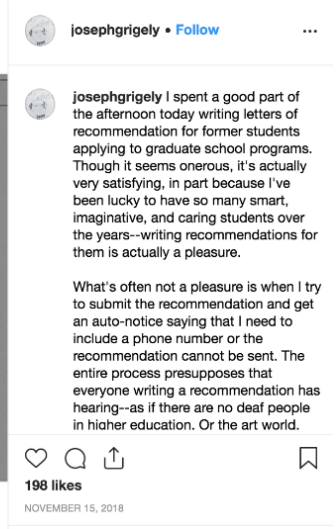
71 likes

MARCH 19, 2018

*March 19, 2019*

*More crappy captions. This is from a YouTube video of Andrea Bocelli singing Puccini's "E lucevan le stelle." As if the caption "music" conveys anything meaningful about what Bocelli is singing.*

*The assumption that deaf people don't know, understand, or care about auditory nuances is a manifestation of intellectual and cultural prejudice. YouTube has the resources to do better than this.*



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Email\*

Recommendation

TO THE RECOMMENDER: We would appreciate your opinion of this cand (and support from) UCLA. The University is particularly interested in an evaluat achievement. Explicit descriptions of academic strengths and weaknesse character, integrity or motivation are also appreciated, if pertinent. The ex Rankings should be related to other students in the same class or acader share the contents of this form with the candidate.

Intellectual Ability\*

*November 15, 2018*

*I spent a good part of the afternoon today writing letters of recommendation for former students applying to graduate school programs. Though it seems onerous, it's actually very satisfying, in part because I've been lucky to have so many smart, imaginative, and caring students over the years—writing recommendations for them is actually a pleasure.*

*What's often not a pleasure is when I try to submit the recommendation and get an auto-notice saying that I need to include a phone number or the recommendation cannot be sent. The entire process presupposes that everyone writing a recommendation has hearing—as if there are no deaf people in higher education. Or the art world.*

*But it doesn't stop here: I can't buy a plane ticket without a phone number. I can't schedule a doctor's appointment without a phone number. Some years ago, I had a request for a bank account denied to me because I did not have "a verifiable telephone number." This isn't a lot different than traditions of institutional racism: it's about how institutions presume homogeneous bodies are the only bodies that write student recommendations or buy plane tickets or have bank accounts. It's fucked.*


*I really don't understand how any of this is legal.*

*Once, when I was trying to buy a book through Powell's Used Books, but needed a phone number to do this, I emailed them and asked them why. I received a polite response saying that it was just a formality, I should just lie and make up a number. After that, I started using the number for Dial-a-Prayer whenever I was asked for my phone number.*

*What bothers me most in the end is the constant reminder that I am deaf and my deafness does not fit into paradigms of normalcy. "Diversity" is really a mythology.*



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<p>SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD-OF-HEARING</p> <p>When possible we provide sign language interpretation, open captioning, and assistive listening devices for performances and activities in our theater. If you are interested in these programs or would like to arrange for these services for talks, tours or educational programs, please call If you are interested in these services, please call the Box Office at <a href="tel:312-397-4010">312-397-4010</a> during museum hours for more information or to make arrangements before your visit (advance notice will help us plan your visit).</p>	<p> <b>josephgrigely</b> • <span>⋮</span></p> <p> <b>josephgrigely</b> This is a screenshot from the "Accessibility" webpage of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. <a href="https://mcatchicago.org/Visit/Accessibility">https://mcatchicago.org/Visit/Accessibility</a> •</p> <p>Being deaf, I usually require a sign language interpreters to attend or participate in talks at museums. It takes a little effort to ferret out the contact information to make a request for interpreters, but many museums now</p> <p>   </p> <p><b>95 likes</b></p> <p>FEBRUARY 16</p>
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February 16, 2019

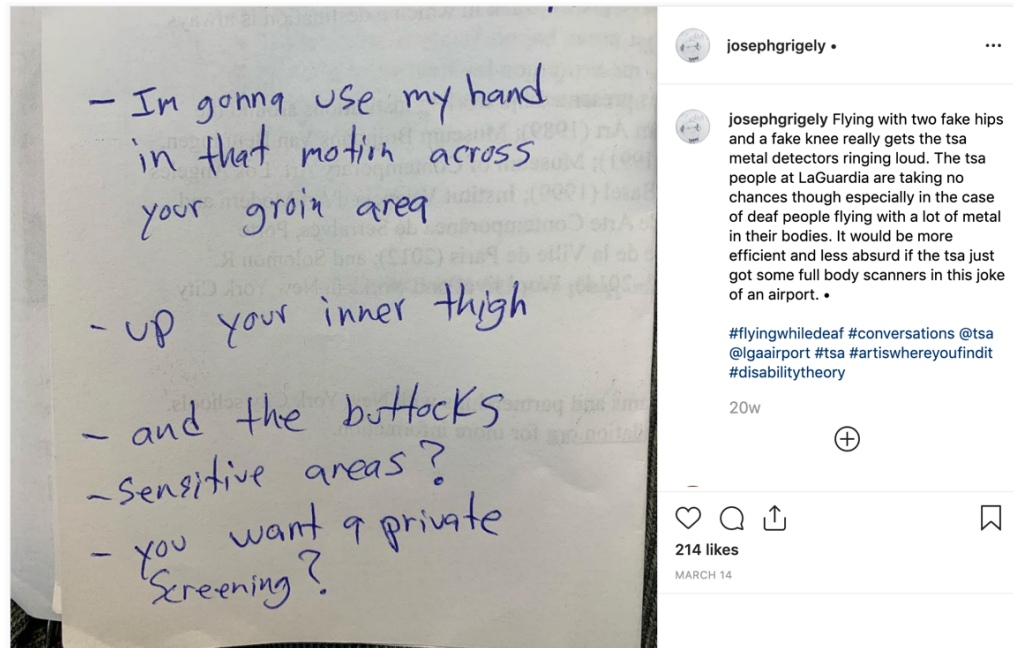
*This is a screenshot from the “Accessibility” webpage of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. <https://mcachicago.org/Visit/Accessibility>. Being deaf, I usually require a sign language interpreter to attend or participate in talks at museums. It takes a little effort to ferret out the contact information to make a request for interpreters, but many museums now have a webpage on accessibility, and this is good. But I had to read three times the MCA’s statement on services for people who are deaf before I could even begin to make sense of it. To request an interpreter, it says: “If you are interested in these programs or would like to arrange for these services for talks, tours or educational programs, please call If you are interested in these services, please call the Box Office at 312-397-4010 during museum hours . . .”*

*Both in grammar and content, the statement is convoluted. “If you are interested . . . please call . . . If you are interested . . . please call . . .” OK—understood—you don’t have to say it twice. But by saying it twice, the insult comes across twice. While some deaf people are happy to make a phone call using the video interpreting relay, it strikes me as being limiting to require deaf people to call the box office, of all places, during box office hours alone. Does the MCA have a coordinator for visitors with disabilities?*

*And an email or web contact, so one also has a written record of making accommodations requests and noting details related to those requests?*

*To its credit, the MCA website acknowledges: “We still have a lot to learn from our visitors with disabilities and from others who are thinking about accessible practices, but we aspire to be leaders in the community in embracing tenets of universal design.” That’s good. Please fix this very inefficient and unsatisfying process of making access requests.<sup>1</sup>*

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- Im gonna use my hand in that motion across your groin area
- up your inner thigh
- and the buttocks
- sensitive areas?
- you want a private screening?

josephgrigely •

josephgrigely Flying with two fake hips and a fake knee really gets the tsa metal detectors ringing loud. The tsa people at LaGuardia are taking no chances though especially in the case of deaf people flying with a lot of metal in their bodies. It would be more efficient and less absurd if the tsa just got some full body scanners in this joke of an airport. •

#flyingwhiledeaf #conversations @tsa @lgaairport #tsa #artiswhereyoufindit #disabilitytheory

20w

214 likes

MARCH 14

*March 14, 2019*

*Both of my hips and my right knee are made of cobalt-chromium and titanium, and whenever I pass through airport security, they make the metal detectors ring loud. The TSA agents at LaGuardia are especially vigilant. Once when I was pulled aside after setting off the metal detectors, the agent said to me some things I couldn't lip-read, so I had him write them down for me.*



josephgrigely • Follow ...

josephgrigely How does someone see deafness? How can one make visible what is, by biological design, invisible? Not just in and among the people who surround us on a daily basis, but also, by extension, culturally? •

Since 1999, I have been saving, when I can find and record them, images of street signs indicating that a deaf person lives in the vicinity. Sometimes they say "Deaf Person" but usually they say "Deaf Child Area"--a cautionary warning that the child on the verge or in the street might not hear your horn when you are driving by. The signs are present in all kinds of places: in the city, in quiet suburbs, along country lanes, and even on the dirt roads of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. •

213 likes

MAY 22



May 22, 2019

*How does someone see deafness? How can one make visible what is, by biological design, invisible? Not just in and among the people who surround us on a daily basis, but also, by extension, culturally?*

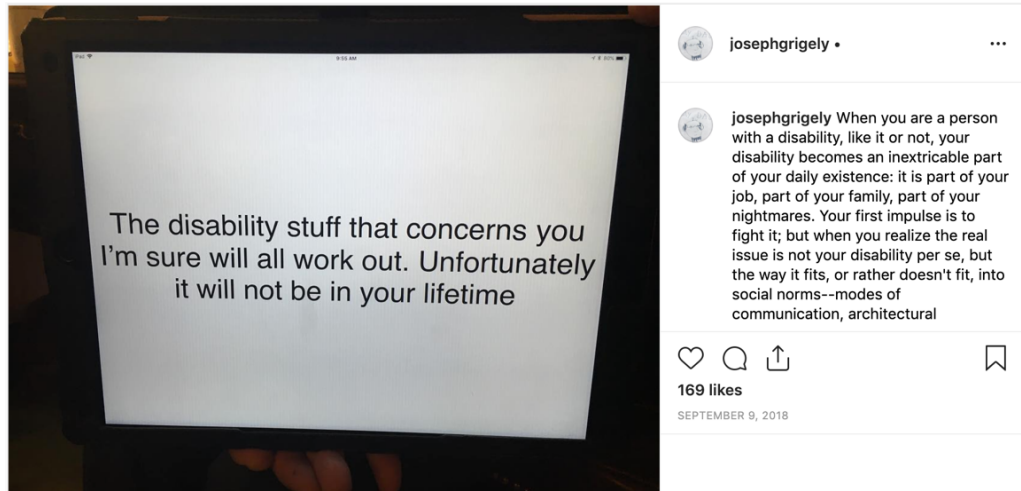
*Since 1999, I have been saving, when I can find and record them, images of street signs indicating that a deaf person lives in the vicinity. Sometimes they say “Deaf Person” but usually they say “Deaf Child Area”—a cautionary warning that the child on the verge or in the street might not hear your horn when you are driving by. The signs are present in all kinds of places: in the city, in quiet suburbs, along country lanes, and even on the dirt roads of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.*

*What I like about the signs is how they make deafness both visible and present, in a practical and meaningful way. It’s hard to do this when you are walking around, or when you are in airports or museums or other places where people congregate, and where rules regulate behavior. Once, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while sitting on the floor as I spent time with David’s Marat, a museum guard struck me on the shoulder and berated me for not getting up on my feet the first time he warned me. He had approached me from behind, and I had no idea he was yelling at me to get up. Another time, at Union Station in Washington, DC, four police officers dragged me outside because I did not follow their directions to get on my feet. A “deaf person” sign on the street where you live is an affirmation that your deafness is real, and so are you.*

*I never had a sign on my street when I was growing up. A couple of years ago, as the traffic on my block in Chicago became increasingly busy, I asked my alderman’s office if they could arrange to have a deaf pedestrian sign installed. It was a slow process and took a couple of reminders—but today I noticed the sign had finally been installed. I guess, at age sixty-two, I’m a little old for a “Deaf Child Area” sign.*



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The disability stuff that concerns you  
I'm sure will all work out. Unfortunately  
it will not be in your lifetime



josephgrigely •



josephgrigely When you are a person with a disability, like it or not, your disability becomes an inextricable part of your daily existence: it is part of your job, part of your family, part of your nightmares. Your first impulse is to fight it; but when you realize the real issue is not your disability per se, but the way it fits, or rather doesn't fit, into social norms--modes of communication, architectural



169 likes

SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

*September 9, 2018*

*When you are a person with a disability, like it or not, your disability becomes an inextricable part of your daily existence: it is part of your job, part of your family, part of your nightmares. Your first impulse is to fight it; but when you realize the real issue is not your disability per se, but the way it fits, or rather doesn't fit, into social norms—modes of communication, architectural environments, and so on—it becomes more a matter of avoiding intractable situations. Over time, though, you are put in a position of requesting, if not begging, for what is called by the Americans With Disabilities Act a “reasonable accommodation”—one of the most inherently demeaning phrases in constitutional law—as if my very presence as a person with a disability is a problem that needs to be “accommodated” by others. After fifty years of being the problem, you tend to reflect on what has happened, what is happening, and what still needs to happen to change all of this.*

*I try to be optimistic about the future. My therapist, a real pragmatist, is also optimistic. Within reason.*

\* \* \*

Joseph Grigely is an artist and writer. He has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the MCA, Chicago; the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris; and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin; and he has participated in the Whitney, Venice, Berlin, Istanbul, Liverpool, and Sydney Biennials. His books include *Textuality Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (1995), *Conversation Pieces* (1998), *Exhibition Prosthetics* (2010), *MacLean 705* (2015), and *Oceans of Love: The Uncontainable Gregory Battcock* (2016). He has a D.Phil. from Oxford University and is professor of visual and critical studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The current language on the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's website has been updated and now says, "When possible, the MCA provides sign language interpretation, open captioning, and assistive listening devices for performances and activities in our theater as well as talks, tours, or educational programs. These preplanned services are often denoted in the event's page," and they continue, "If you are in need of a particular service during your visit to the museum, our Visitor Services staff will do their best to accommodate. If you would like more information, or have any questions, you can email Box Office staff at [BoxOffice@mcatchicago.org](mailto:BoxOffice@mcatchicago.org)."

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## The Heat is On

Alessandra Raengo

At one point in Kahlil Joseph's two-screen installation BLKNWS (2018–ongoing), African American poet June Jordan recites her “Song of the Law Abiding Citizen.”<sup>1</sup> Strategically understated and delivered with deadpan irony, the poem begins by quickly accumulating momentum:

*so hot so hot so hot so hot  
so hot so what so hot so hot*

*They made a mistake  
I got more than I usually take  
I got food stamps food stamps I got  
so many stamps in the mail  
I thought maybe I should put them on sale  
How lucky I am  
I got food stamps: Hot damn!  
I made up my mind  
to be decent and kind  
to let my upright character shine*

*I sent 10,000 food stamps  
back to the President (and his beautiful wife)  
and I can't pay the rent  
but I sent 10,000 food stamps*

*back to the President (and his beautiful wife)*  
*how lucky I am*  
*hot damn*

Introduced by accumulating heat, as the poem progresses, we learn that the protagonist decides to follow her “upright character” and mail the ten thousand food stamps received by mistake back to the president even though she does not have enough money to pay her rent. The food stamps appear three times in the same stanza, flooding her small East Village abode, and then, through her law-abiding redirection, we want to imagine encumbering with their embarrassing presence, as tokens of magnanimity (a fictional “gentility” here ironically remarked by the repeated aside regarding the First Lady), the incomparably more spacious presidential residence.

That this heat is not merely metaphorical, however, or a clever sonic ruse to set up the understated dismissal—that is, the rhyme with “so what,” or the anticipation for the “hot damn” proffered shortly after—quickly becomes clear when the next stanza shifts to the image of trucks barreling down a New York City street while carrying radioactive materials:

*Trucks cruisin’ down the avenue*  
*carrying nuclear garbage right next to you*  
*and it’s legal*  
*it’s radioaction ridin’ like a regal*  
*load of jewels*  
*past the bars the cruel*  
*school house and the church and if*  
*the trucks wipeout or crash*  
*or even lurch too hard around a corner*  
*we will just be goners*  
*and it’s legal*

Jordan’s voice screeches in disbelief, when she says “it’s legal,” and her admonition not to be “jittery” is again contradicted by the closing stanza, which turns up the temperature, one more time:

*so hot so hot so hot so what*  
*so hot so what so hot so hot*  
*so hot so hot so hot so what*

Later, in another clip from BLKNWS, speaking live from what looks like a fund-raising site, the comedian/activist Dick Gregory explains that hurricanes are the spirit of black women. They all originate in West Africa, move across the Atlantic along the routes of the slave ships, unload in the Caribbean, and then move up the East Coast all the way to Maine. Gregory conjures up black weather as a response to atmospheric antiblackness through his own vernacular version of Hortense Spillers's flesh.<sup>2</sup>

Both Jordan's poem and Gregory's comments act within BLKNWS as an (in)formal conceit of sorts, which reverberates through the piece, repeated and multiplied with each clip and each transition between clips: blackness *gathers*. In both cases, as it is moved through dispossession, blackness gathers matter and momentum. When the heat is on, when black weather hits, it will *consent you* not to be a single being.<sup>3</sup>

I call it an (in)formal conceit to underscore how black form emerges from informality, as Fred Moten reminds us when, in *The Undercommons*, he asks us to pay attention to the beginning of Marvin Gaye's recording of "What's Going On," when we hear people "milling around and ... greeting one another," the chatter that precedes the song, the black social life that engenders the ensemble and its aesthetic work.<sup>4</sup>

BLKNWS presents itself as both the chatter and the song, black sociality and black art, an aesthetic gathering and a gathering of the aesthetic. It is an ongoing, open-ended archive that functions also as a broadcast platform and has been exhibited simultaneously in several locations at Stanford University (where it was incubated), Washington, DC, Tokyo, the Underground Museum in LA, private residences, and at the fifty-eighth Venice Biennale, where it is the only work featured in two distinct locations: Giardini and Arsenale.<sup>5</sup>

BLKNWS weaves together YouTube, social media, and news clips, as well as excerpts from film and music videos, sometimes overlaying a different soundtrack to existing footage (as when the Village People's "YMCA" provides the score for Donald Glover's "This Is America"), loosely framed by original footage of recalcitrant "news anchors" shot against a starkly white background: actors, artists, and curators from Joseph's circle of friends and interlocutors, or, more precisely, his ensemble.<sup>6</sup> On-screen, under the pretense of a "black news" format, and in the mode of digital blackness, some of Joseph's collaborators engage in "black study."



## Gathering Black News

Any “collage” or “montage” can be understood as a form of gathering, but here I am not simply thinking about editing, framing, or collecting. Rather, I am interested in how, when it functions aesthetically, as a curatorial principle, blackness puts pressure on the very concept of curation and demands that it acts as a “reunion,” not a collection, but a *collective*.<sup>7</sup> I also strategically approach Joseph’s BLKNWS and Arthur Jafa’s Golden Lion winner, *The White Album* (2018), as a small media ecosystem within the Venice Biennale, as a way to allow the call and response of the ensemble these two artists have engaged in over the years to echo even within the larger, sprawling, ecology of the international arts show.<sup>8</sup>

On some level, what accumulates and circulates in BLKNWS is digital blackness, since the work embraces, under the pretext of the “news” genre, the blackness of social media platforms. Yet, on another level, here black digitality is only channeling perhaps in more explicit ways already “compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed” black modes of being and, especially for Joseph’s and Jafa’s recent work, a specific type of practice that foregrounds its own ensemblic process, that is, *its aesthetic gathering as a gathering around the aesthetic*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while digital blackness explains what Kara Keeling calls the “algorithmic editing” first most spectacularly employed in Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), or a now quasi-pervasive meme aesthetic, the ensemblic practice that produces this aesthetic gathering is not bound to or limited by digitality.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it is a “liquid blackness” that precedes and exceeds the work’s (structurally un)finished form. It both builds and relies on the power, force, resilience, complexity, and “thickness” of black gathering. So hot, so hot, so hot...<sup>11</sup>

I call this blackness “liquid” because it moves seamlessly between product and process, aim and scope, the soloist and the ensemble, ethics and praxis.<sup>12</sup> “Liquidity” also underlines how it simultaneously develops horizontal, vertical, and recursive relationships within the temporal structure of black ana-originary, simply put, the question of whether blackness is solely the product of antiblackness or whether it is an unregulated generative force that precedes, and gives rise to, any effort to contain it.<sup>13</sup> It is liquid because of the way it circulates in unpredictable ways—through unruly archives and secret histories<sup>14</sup>—it moves and vibrates, it matters and accumulates, it thickens and sticks.<sup>15</sup> Finally, it is liquid because its dispossessed formal labor does not abide by the logic of exchange, equivalence, or the requirements of universality. Rather, it can be detected but not translated; it is an agent of movement but not transitive; it is not a moving toward, but a *passing through* or *gathering around*.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be held in place, but only, and precariously, *in suspension*.<sup>17</sup> Calling this blackness “liquid” thus strives to shift attention away from

the *labor* blackness performs for capital, politics, affect, and toward the *work* it performs to exceed the limitations of the sovereign subject and to become agentic, sentient, and critical. Black liquidity is a practice that responds to the dispossessive violences of abstraction with an accumulation of black social life through a thickening, gathering, and channeling of black aesthetics.

When, in Jordan's poem, trucks carrying radioactive materials barrel down New York City's streets, they do so because there is no aesthetic contradiction between the racialized abjection of the food stamp, the radioactive toxic waste and the nonwhite spaces in which they circulate. In turn, as Jordan's poem is "collected" under the pretense of black news media, BLKNWS doesn't just spread black news, culture, or style but allows blackness to accumulate and achieve density: so hot, so hot, so hot.

It is fair to say that audiences experienced a good amount of heat as they became exposed to Jafa's *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, heat that caused a proliferation of what Jafa characterized as "eight-minute epiphanies" especially on the part of white audiences. As Lauren Cramer has shown in her reading of the one-hundred-minute-long *akingdoncomethas* (2018), Jafa's extension of the duration of clips of black preachers then became essential to questioning what one might be moved by if one cannot sit still, in this specific case, before the complexity of black faith, motion and e-motion, unapologetically unfolding within, and "invading," the white cube.<sup>18</sup> Clip duration remains key also in *The White Album*, but this time in the service of presenting whiteness through an aesthetic of attrition, provocatively couched within a strategically ambiguous pursuit of a "white sublime," channeled by a representation (in its integrity) of the video for Oneohtrix Point Never and Iggy Pop's song "The Pure and the Damned" (2017) intercut with extreme close-ups of some of Jafa's white friends and art world collaborators.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, for the most part, BLKNWS does not practice the quick cut or the shocking abrupt transition; rather, it includes some long segments, even entire works, such as Josh Begley's short film *Concussion Protocol* (2018), and turns up the heat with the density of its cross-references, its openness about the collaborative work that sustains it, and its unapologetically black curatorial focus.

The clips that make BLKNWS (Figure 1), culled from social media digital archives and Jafa's and Joseph's personal archives, produce a thick interplay of homages, cross-references, and recollections. There are excerpts from Joseph's *Black Up* (2011), *Until the Quiet Comes* (2012), *m.a.a.d.* (2014), and *Process* (2017), among others, as well as shots originally featured in *Dreams are colder than Death* that Jafa used again in *Love Is the Message*, as well as figures that recur in both artists' works, such as Storyboard P.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 1 BLKNWS installation view at Venice Biennale. Alzo Slade reports on gang member's risk of PTSD in the left screen while the right screen features an image from Joseph's m.a.a.d. 2018-ongoing.

Whereas Bradford Young is seen crossing the screen left to right in *Love Is the Message*, BLKNWS cuts to one of the closing portraits from *Black America Again* (2016), the short film Young directed to accompany the release of Common's seventh studio album by the same title. It is a black-and-white portrait of a father holding a toddler on his lap, shot against a deeply saturated black background, at the limits of stillness. This is one of the many images where Young explicitly homages a beloved inspiration he shares with Joseph: Roy DeCarava's soundful black-and-white photography, whose work also appears in BLKNWS and Joseph recently showed in a dedicated exhibition at the Underground Museum in LA.<sup>21</sup> Some of the same "specialists" featured in *Dreams*, that is, scholars, intellectuals, and cultural critics, also appear in BLKNWS in YouTube clips of class lectures, workshops, and invited talks.<sup>22</sup> Crucially, almost without exception, they reflexively comment on the perceived illegitimacy of the gathering that has occasioned their speaking engagement: that it is taking place is in itself not only remarkable but an essential part of what, in *Dreams*, Moten describes as the jurisgenerative nature of Black being, its essential tethering between lawbreaking and lawmaking.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the fact that many of the clips that make up BLKNWS are available online (as is the case for *akingdoncomethas*, as Cramer attests) indicates how an ensemblic approach implements what Moten has described as an (under)privileged yet nonproprietary relation between black people and blackness, but

also between an artist, his or her ensemble, and their work. The goal here is not to claim originality or exclusivity, distinction or individuation, but to gather 'round.

### Ana-originary Time

The ensemble brings together political, aesthetic, and formal questions, but also historiographical or archival problems: it points to what Moten calls the “ana-originary” of blackness, the vexed question of what comes first: blackness or antiblackness? It forces us to ask: Is blackness always the product of antiblackness? If black is always associated with criminality—lawbreaking—what is the time of black generativity? Thus the ensemble that engenders this artwork, as well as the ensemble that this artwork engenders, is a type of gathering that performs within a specifically black time and black consciousness about this time, one in which “blackness is present to its own making.”<sup>24</sup> With each redaction and annotation, each loop, each cycle, it accumulates motion, matter, and heat: so hot, so hot, so hot.<sup>25</sup>

I walked into BLKNWS as it was playing Begley’s *Concussion Protocol* (Figure 2), a montage—mostly in reverse, and in slow or accelerated motion—of all the concussions reported during the 2017–18 NFL season.<sup>26</sup> Often described as a surreal violent ballet, timed to a suspenseful and mournful score composed by Samora Abayomi Pinderhughes,<sup>27</sup> the film participates also in the aesthetic of “psychedelic ethnography” or “shamanic cinema” practiced by Ben Russell in *River Rites* (2011), which is repeatedly excerpted in Jenn Nkiru’s *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* (2017), in turn clipped and inserted in a BLKNWS montage involving Sun Ra. Shot in one long Steadicam take in Suriname, *River Rites* flows backward, challenging perceptions of time, “finishing in the past to remember the future,” and therefore conventions of ethnographic knowledge and representation.<sup>28</sup> While *Concussion Protocol*’s temporal manipulation is dictated by the desire to evacuate the spectacle and commodification of black pain, inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s project of exposing the violence of the mundane without reproducing it, it also mimics the ana-originary temporality of BLKNWS more generally. “What is it to rewind the given?” asks Begley through Moten’s words:



Figure 2 A still image from Josh Begley's *Concussion Protocol* cannot render the aesthetic work of the film. However, it might participate in the project of slowing down, calling out, and holding close what, during a regular NFL game, happens too quickly and too cynically. 2018.

“What is it to wound it? What is it to be given to this wounding and rewinding?”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, as it attempts to “avoid the hard hit and show the ballet-like nature of the sport while *holding in tension* the way in which black athletes are being chastised for kneeling but sent back into the field,”<sup>30</sup> *Concussion Protocol* also shares an aesthetic of suspension that the *liquid blackness* group found in Joseph's early work, especially *Until the Quiet Comes*.<sup>31</sup>

## Hot Shit

I would not think about *River Rites* without having first encountered it in Nkiru's *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* (Figure 3), a frenetic visual and sonic montage of one-to-five-second clips of archival materials that often have been previously remixed, that is, “processed” in terms of movement, tempo, and sound-image relations, and therefore already share its remixed compositional form. *REBIRTH* intercuts several bits from *River Rites* with samples from Sun Ra's *Watusi*,<sup>32</sup> Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), Mel Stuart's *Wattstax* (1973), and Nkiru's footage of street dancers in South London moving backward but played in reverse.



*Figure 3 Jenn Nkiru shot this footage in South London and asked her dancers to move backwards although in the film the footage is played in reverse and they appear to move toward the camera. Thus she practiced the “rewind” as an aesthetic mode, while creating an unfamiliar set of bodily movements that put these bodies in spatial, temporal and metaphysical suspension. 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The density of these cross-references is meant to perform what Nkiru calls a “cosmic archaeology,” and, as Jenny Gunn argues, to appeal to coalitional diasporic audiences to reactivate the potential of twentieth-century black radicalism. In the manner of a DJ, digging through the crates, Nkiru performs simultaneously archaeological and ensemblic work.<sup>33</sup> This call and response BLKNWS establishes between Begley’s formal choices, his exploration of black ana-originary, and Nkiru’s “cosmic archeology” through the relay of Russell’s *River Rites* can be regarded as a microcosm of what, in another clip featured in BLKNWS, Jafa describes as “quantum intentionality” that characterizes the editing style employed in some of contemporary black art cinema and video both Jafa and Joseph claim as part of their extended ensemble: “movements in a basketball court accumulate intentionality on a quantum level,” he explains while discussing specifically black ways of playing, “*that’s why they say everybody needs to get their touches*; because on a quantum level, it’s about focusing energy around this object [i.e., the ball] that is going to end up in that hole [i.e., the basket].”<sup>34</sup>

Although Jafa evokes quantum physics, I don’t believe that the logic of this accumulation can be successfully explained through Michelle Wright’s “physics of blackness,” which is concerned more with spatiotemporal coordinates than with accumulating black matter.<sup>35</sup> And I am not invested in turning to the conceptual apparatus of new materialism to understand something that elsewhere Jafa’s

vernacular has so well expressed in relation to his editing (gathering?) philosophy: “dope shit connects to dope shit.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, as jurisgenerative aesthetic principle, liquid blackness is already the “stuff”—the “dope shit”—that engenders black form out of black social informality. But if we take this liquid blackness seriously, not only as aesthetic gathering but also as a *gathering of the aesthetic*, as Joseph and Jafa have done, then *the beat this shit produces* does not require a single being, just like the ensemble Joseph and Jafa have created refuses proprietary attachments and resists individuation. In this ensemble, blackness does things; *blackness is the subject of its own sentence*: blackness gathers, recalls, moves, and matters. It puts the heat on. So hot, so hot, so hot.

\* \* \*

Alessandra Raengo is Associate Professor of Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University, founder and coordinator of *liquid blackness*, a research project on blackness and aesthetics, and Founding Editor of its journal. She is the author of *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and of *Critical Race Theory and Bamboozled* (Bloomsbury Press, 2016).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnK6SAGVRds>. Last accessed October 6, 2019. Also collected in June Jordan, *Living Room: New Poems* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.

<sup>3</sup> ...if I am allowed the awkward syntactical construction. The allusion is obviously to Fred Moten’s “anappropriation” (my term) of Édouard Glissant’s concept “consent not to be a single being” to title his trilogy, which comprises the volumes *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018), all from Duke University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 129.

<sup>5</sup> See Sandra Feder, “Cantor Arts Center and Stanford University Incubating Kahlil Joseph’s BLKNWS,” *Stanford News*, April 25, 2019, <https://news.stanford.edu/2019/04/25/cantor-stanford-incubating-kahlil-josephs-blknws/>; “By



the People: Kahlil Joseph,” By the People Festival, 2019, <https://bythepeople.org/kahlil-joseph>; Andrew Goldstein, “The Age of Equivocation? Venice Biennale Curator Ralph Rugoff on Why Ambiguity Is the Aesthetic of Our Time,” *artnet news*, April 2, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/venice-biennale-curator-ralph-rugoff-interview-1505416>.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Hudgins, Henry Taylor, Alzo Slade, Amandla Stenberg, Hellen Molesworth, among others. “Ensemble” is the way Fred Moten theorizes a relationship between the part and the whole, the soloist and the group, whose model is the cooperative and improvisational relationship between musicians in the jazz ensemble, which he sees as constantly experimenting with forms of sociality, as well as lawmaking and lawbreaking at the level of form.

<sup>7</sup> On the idea of “gathering,” see Sarah Jane Cervenak, “Black Gathering: ‘The Weight of Being’ in Leonardo Drew’s Sculpture,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 26, no. 1 (2016): 1–16,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2016.1185242>; idea in turn “gathered” and developed from Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218, <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.0.0062>.

<sup>8</sup> On the years-long collaboration between the two artists, see at least Arthur Jafa on the works of Kahlil Joseph, with curator Natalie Bell, New Museum, December 10, 2017. <https://archive.newmuseum.org/videos/13557>.

<sup>9</sup> As Aria Dean puts it, “We have long been digital, ‘compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed’ across time and space. For blackness, the meme could be a way of further figuring an existence that spills over the bounds of the body, a homecoming into our homelessness” (“Poor Meme, Rich Meme,” July 25, 2016, <https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>).

<sup>10</sup> Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). Insofar as memes appear to model the circulatory movement of Black vernacular itself, see Laura M. Jackson, “The Blackness of Meme Movement,” March 28, 2016, <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement>; on the not-strictly digital roots of the ensemblic process, see Lauren Cramer and Alessandra Raengo, “Freeing Black Codes: *liquid blackness* Plays the Jazz Ensemble,” *Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 8–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2017.1329610>.

<sup>11</sup> It’s also a blackness that spills outwardly—in a clip, Godfrey the comedian reports on the spread of durags among white kids: “This is what happens in the suburbs: black culture to another level!” The clip is available at



<https://www.worldstarhiphop.com/videos/video.php?v=wshh42OtHCgd71Z0cJr8>.

<sup>12</sup> I am specifically thinking about the distinction Moten draws in Jafa's 2013 film, *Dreams are Colder than Death*, between the object/scope of Black Studies, which is the critique of Western civilization and its aim, which is Blackness.

<sup>13</sup> On black ana-originary, see Moten's critique of Kant in *Stolen Life* and David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). As Lauren Cramer and I argue in a dossier titled "Modes of Black Liquidity: Music Video as Black Art," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 2 (forthcoming), the ensemblic sensibilities at work here develop horizontally (through informal networks of collaborations and conversation among artists engaged in similar theoretical and formal projects); vertically (through connections to artistic lineages that plumb the depths of black sonic, visual, and expressive culture); and forwardly (through gestures toward "lineages to come," i.e., the artists of the future who will continue the same conversations).

<sup>14</sup> See Charles "Chip" Linscott, "Secret Histories and Visual Riffs, or, Miles Davis, Alice Coltrane, and Flying Lotus Go to the Movies," in Cramer and Raengo, "Modes of Black Liquidity."

<sup>15</sup> If blackness always entails an aesthetic encounter, as I think it does, then "liquid blackness" forces a recognition of this encounter. "Liquid blackness" is what Moten has described as the invaginated, materially, and sensorially qualified residue of Kantian aesthetic philosophy, "the sensible instantiation of the principle of the supersensible" Immanuel Kant so staunchly tried to disavow (Moten, *Stolen Life* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018], 13). See also Lloyd, *Under Representation*.

<sup>16</sup> The reference here is Larry Clark's film *Passing Through* (1977). See *liquid blackness* 2, no. 5 (2015), "Passing through Film," entirely devoted to Clark's film and the wider research project "Passing Through: The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble."

<sup>17</sup> On the idea of "suspension" as an ethics for the praxis of "liquid blackness," see *liquid blackness* 4, no. 7, "Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspension," partly inspired by Kahlil Joseph's work.

<sup>18</sup> See Lauren Cramer, "Arthur Jafa's 'Air above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures,' at Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *liquid blackness* art reviews, July 1, 2018. <http://liquidblackness.com/revival-lauren-cramer-reviews-arthur-jafas-air-above-mountains-unknown-pleasures-at-gavin-brown-enterprise/>

<sup>19</sup> Including Gavin Brown, who staged an official opening for *Love Is the Message* at his Harlem gallery in 2016.

<sup>20</sup> See the *liquid blackness* research project “Figuring Suspension: A Study of Visual Recording Artist Storyboard P.”

<sup>21</sup> In BLKNWS I recognized (at least) DeCarava’s *Couple Dancing* (1965) and *Bill and Son* (1962), both on view at the Underground Museum founded by Kahlil’s late brother Noah Davis and now directed by Joseph.

<sup>22</sup> Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten, among others. BLKNWS features also Christina Sharpe, whose book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) had not yet been published at the time Jafa was making *Dreams*. See Alessandra Raengo, “*Dreams are colder than Death* and the Gathering of Black Sociality,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 2 (2016), doi:10.2979/blackcamera.8.2.07.

<sup>23</sup> In *Dreams* Moten offers two examples of this jurigenerativity: one is the illegality of black assembly and the other is the formal lawmaking and lawbreaking that Miles Davis and John Coltrane were enacting, in each performance, with their music and their ensembles.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 184, 185. See also Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> On redaction and annotation see, Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

<sup>26</sup> Begley cited Jafa and Joseph as inspirations for this film.

<sup>27</sup> “Samora Pinderhughes,” <https://www.samorapinderhughes.com>. Last accessed October 6, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Max Goldberg, “Fifty Best Filmmakers under Fifty: Ben Russell,” *Cinemascope* 50, <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/ben-russell/>.

<sup>29</sup> Josh Begley, “Concussion Protocol,” *Intercept*, February 1, 2018, <https://the-intercept.com/2018/02/01/concussion-protocol/>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Lauren Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe: Diagramming Blackness in Kahlil Joseph’s *Until the Quiet Comes*,” *liquid blackness* 3, no. 7 (2017): 142-168. <http://liquidblackness.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Cramer.pdf> *liquid blackness*: it is the name of a research group I founded at Georgia State University in Atlanta, comprising graduate students and alumni of the doctoral program in Moving Image Studies collaboratively studying blackness and aesthetics; it is the name of an online scholarly journal that explores the intersection of aesthetic theory and Black studies; it is a theoretical concept that focuses on blackness as an aesthetic mode; and the

name of a praxis: an ensemblic mode of black study that blurs the line between scholarship and modes of sociality.

<sup>32</sup> The release date of the video used in Nkuru's film is unclear and so is the filmmaker. I asked her about it but did not get a conclusive answer. The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5nN8yK0Tsg>.

<sup>33</sup> Jenny Gunn, "Intergenerational Pedagogy in Jenn Nkuru's *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*," In Focus, "Modes of Black Liquidity: Music Video as Black Art," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 2 (forthcoming). See also Raengo and Cramer's introduction, "The Unruly Archives of Black Music Videos."

<sup>34</sup> "Love Is the Message: An Evening with Arthur Jafa," conversation with Steve Coleman, Hirschhorn, Washington, DC, November 17, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Cramer, "Arthur Jafa's."

## **Trans Self-Imaging Praxis, Decolonizing Photography, and the Work of Alok Vaid-Menon**

Ace Lehner

### **Trans Photography as Praxis, Decolonizing Photo Discourse**

As an identity and an analytic, trans offers a compelling challenge to photographic discourse. Trans, as a rejection of the assigned sex at birth, is a rejection of what was assigned to us based on our physical attributes, an assumption made about us based on our surface aesthetics. Trans rejects the physical surface in favor of living our lives based on an internal feeling: something that is not visible but manifested visually in a way that plays with the aesthetics and expectations of gender. As trans scholar and artist micha cárdenas has observed, trans is often about a rejection of the visible.<sup>1</sup> To picture trans subjects, then, is to make a surface rendering of something (the person's outward appearance) that is already de-essentialized from any necessary essence or "truth." Trans as an analytic offers a method to view the photographic image not only as distinct and distant from the referent but in tension with it. Trans as a method prompts a rethinking of surfaces in relation to essence, identity, authenticity, and fixity, unfixing the surface from the subject.

There are no as of yet trans methods of thinking photography, but there are pictures and methods about photography in postcolonial locations, locations that are similarly invested in reworking portrait photographs and decolonizing photography and discourses of photography. One thing that may not be readily recognizable but is critical to understanding photographic practices and discourse is that trans photography, while not necessarily practiced in locations that at first glance appear to be in postcolonial locations geographically, may often be in

postcolonial locations ideologically. As the binary gender system was set up along with the colonial project and is bound up with practices of executing oppression of one group by another via binary oppositions, the trans-self-representations that I study in this project are ideologically working in postcolonial locations. The self-images discussed herein are invested in a praxis of critically inserting themselves into visual discourse. They are also forwarding embodiments in between gender and reworking ontological understandings of photography. All of which works to break open ideologies inherited from the colonial project, including de-essentializing identity, undoing binary gender as the norm, mobilizing photography as not indexical, and undoing binary oppositions as necessary and natural ways to conceive of things.

In this essay and interview I think through some of the key issues surrounding a discussion I had with prolific selfie maker, performance artist, and non-binary trans femme of color Alok Vaid-Menon. Vaid-Menon creates some of the most compelling interventions in visual studies today. In the interview we discussed their self-imaging practice, their work overall, and the significance of self-representation. I posit some methodological framings as well as offer some insight into the specifics of their multipronged practice.

## Self-Portraiture

Self-portraiture has a long-standing art-historical tradition. Although not always explicitly stated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art this translates into the canonization of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials. Historically in Western art, the aesthetic aims of the self-portrait were to render oneself as true to life as possible; the materials used and the resulting composition were also expected to reflect tradition. For example, paintings made using oil on canvas and sculptures made of bronze or marble have been widely revered in the canon of Western art for centuries. Painted self-portraits depicted the artist from the waist or chest up, either in frontal or three-quarter view, and sculptural self-portraits were expected to be in bust form or a lifelike rendering of the subject. The sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer is widely recognized as a foundational figure in the genre of self-portraiture, as he was a prolific self-portraitist. In what may be his most recognized painting, titled simply *Self-Portrait* from 1500, Dürer painted an image exemplifying the aesthetic conventions and expectations of self-

portraiture that are still present today. The oil on canvas image depicts the artist from the elbows up in a frontal pose, cropped on the sides at the shoulder with a small space above his head; he is positioned in front of a dark background, and a soft sidelight illuminates his likeness. His eyes peer out of his emotionless face directly at the viewer. The shallow pictorial plane, the scant amount of negative space around the subject, the frontal orientation and the lifelike rendering are tenets of self-portraiture that have persisted for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Upheld as necessary and significant due to art-historical tradition, the aesthetics and materials of canonical self-portraiture also ensure that only certain factions of society have access to being validated as self-portraitists.

While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout Western art history. Although not always explicitly articulated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art this translates into the sanctification of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials.<sup>3</sup> It is both widely known and critiqued that Western art history has traditionally privileged the male Caucasian subject. Visual studies scholar Mieke Bal observes that it is via the canon of portraiture in the Western European and North American contexts that ideological value systems are continually reified. Bal eloquently argues that “the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow, and it is barely an exaggeration to say this interest is visible in the cult of portraiture.”<sup>4</sup>

Ideologically, the portrait in the Western European and North American context is bound up with a cultural belief that through a masterful representation, one can transmit the essence of the person depicted. In *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, Amelia Jones writes: “European-based cultures conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object.”<sup>5</sup> Jones observes that our cultural tendency—especially when it comes to portraiture—is to conflate the representation, the image, the portrait with the person it represents.<sup>6</sup> In his text *Portraiture*, art historian Richard Brilliant observed that “there is a great difficulty in thinking about pictures, even portraits by great artists, as art and not thinking about them primarily as something else, the person represented.”<sup>7</sup> Brilliant argues by equating portraits to semiotics: the portrait becomes the word, the person becomes the referent, and the portrait itself is a complex relationship in which meaning is created.<sup>8</sup> Even when we know that the image has been craftily rendered, highly fabricated, and intentionally

produced, we tend to view the image *not* as an image but as the *person* depicted. The culturally constructed belief in the ability of a portrait to convey something about the identity of the subject, *beyond* the surface aesthetics, is a cultural construction bound up with dominant cultures' exercising of regulatory systems via visual culture.<sup>9</sup>

The culturally held belief in the “truth value” of photographs is both longstanding and socially and intellectually problematic. While photographs are in some sense “indexical” and thus facilitate a belief in their ability to transmit information about that which is pictured, the myth of indexicality is deeply enmeshed with the cultural conception of looking in general in the North American context. The early photo theorist and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce was influential in framing our cultural conception of photography in modernist ideologies. He argued that nonphotographic images operate symbolically, while photographs are “effects of the radiations from the object.”<sup>10</sup> Peirce was arguing that because photographs are made in some sense mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity. This is also sometimes discussed as the “aura of machine objectivity,” which originates with the mechanical production via the camera.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural belief in the “truth value” of photography becomes particularly powerful when dealing with images of people. Elaborating on this issue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that the supposed transparency, indexicality and “truth” of the photograph has made it an “especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender.”<sup>12</sup> Solomon-Godeau, along with other postmodern photography scholars like John Tagg, John Berger, and Susan Sontag, has sought to attend to photography's relation to cultural ideologies and power structures.<sup>13</sup> Their scholarship has challenged the naturalized belief that through informed and astute looking we can come to know something about the person pictured. The photographer and visual culture theorist Allan Sekula poignantly argued that while pictures are not actual representations of the lived world, the cultural belief in the truth value of photography leads most people to consider photographs “congruent with knowledge in general.”<sup>14</sup> In “The Body and the Archive,” Sekula traces several ways bodies have not only been symbolically but physically possessed as well. He traces some of the histories of photography through the trajectory of physiognomy and phrenology and police use of photography to reinforce racial and class hierarchies.<sup>15</sup> He writes: “The archive [of police photographs] could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal, could assign each criminal body a relative and quantitative position within a larger ensemble.”<sup>16</sup> Sekula also contends that this racist classification or physiognomy is an impulse in photography that is difficult to repress.<sup>17</sup>

Post-structuralism, postmodern photography, and feminist debates all helped shift the discourse around photography and the conception of photographic images being indexical, objective, and having veracity. Feminism brought a demand that art address the historicity and culturally specific functions of images.<sup>18</sup> Feminists also articulated the problem of the tendency to theorize in ways that centered and privileged masculinity.<sup>19</sup> Shifts in discourse at large were also brought forward due to feminist critique and scholarship forwarding methods that reworked perspectives of representations, the gaze, oppositional readings, and attention to intersectionality among others.<sup>20</sup> Postmodern photographers began to question the veracity of images, as is observable in projects such as *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel.<sup>21</sup> Feminist postmodern artists like Cindy Sherman and Adrian Piper engaged in practices that called attention both to the constructedness of pictures and to the ways in which they are intertwined with ideologies about people and the constitution of identities. This era also saw post-structuralist thought and cultural studies forwarding concerns with representation and the construction of race.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to the above mentioned and other interventions, today, conceptions of photography have become more nuanced and complicated, and scholars now build on insights of previous eras to arrive at further interventions. For example, Jack Halberstam has observed that the conception of photography as indexical, which persists today, is rooted in a colonial project that set up visual distinctions between oppressed and oppressor.<sup>23</sup> Today visual culture scholars and photo theorists alike continue to make astute observations about the complexity of photographs and their relation to regulating identities. Susan Bright has observed that contemporary photographic portraiture is ambiguous yet still believes in its ability to convey some sort of “inner workings” of the subject.<sup>24</sup>

## Trans Femmes in Visual Culture

In June 2014 Laverne Cox, the trans actress and star of *Orange Is the New Black*, graced the cover of *Time* magazine, photographed by Gillian Laub for the article that coined our current moment as the “The Transgender Tipping Point: America’s Next Civil Right’s Frontier.” Written by Katy Steinmetz, the cover story positioned America as being “in transition” and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized, we had moved on to the next civil rights battle. As the first, and oldest, weekly news magazine published in the United States, *Time* holds a significant amount of cultural weight as a medium of transmission of cultural ideologies. Thus when early on in the story, Cox is quoted as saying, “more of us are



living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly,” and because of this people can say, ‘Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.’”<sup>25</sup> The takeaway suggests that culturally we are on the brink of a new day for acceptance of trans folks, as evidenced solely by and reinvesting in an inaccurate and unfounded belief that an increase in representation of trans characters and a handful of trans celebrities in mainstream culture equals political and social progress. The problematic conceptualization behind this move—forwarding the belief that visibility equals progressive or radical social change—is that representations are far more complex than they may seem, and the proliferation of trans representations needs to be seriously attended to in order for their impact and significance to be fully comprehended.

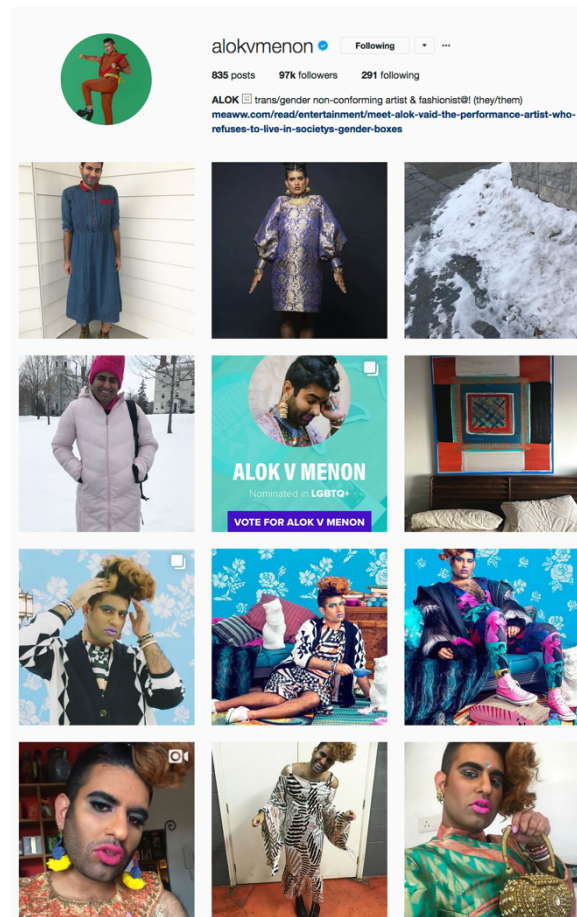
While the current moment of increased trans representations has been broadly embraced as the “Trans Tipping Point,”<sup>26</sup> many trans scholars, artists, and activists have critiqued this as not only a misnomer but politically dangerous. In the recently published book *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam makes the pointed remark that in the current moment of trans proliferations, what we are witnessing is the attempted co-option of trans representations by mainstream culture.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, trans artist Juliana Huxtable has suggested that a more fitting term for what is transpiring currently might be “neoliberal spotlight,”<sup>28</sup> underscoring the theatricality and fleetingness of the phenomenon. For cárdenas, trans people are a new object of dominant cultural fascination, mobilizing trans icons to “sell magazines.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than facilitate social progress, as the term *trans tipping point* fictively suggests, the appearance of trans icons in mainstream culture seems to be motivated not by any interest in effecting political or social change but by an apolitical commitment to capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

The African American trans femme activists CeCe McDonald and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy discuss how the hypervisibility of Laverne Cox has in many ways led to the increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of color. McDonald and Griffin-Gracy suggest that because Cox is presumably unreachable, racist transphobic would-be aggressors of Cox turn their acts of violence against those who come into their proximity.<sup>31</sup> Griffin-Gracy suggests that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation.<sup>32</sup> She notes that to be feminine, folks need to fit into highly regimented molds reflecting rigidly predetermined physical traits, voice parameters, and overall aesthetics.<sup>33</sup> Griffin-Gracy’s observation about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetails with cárdenas’s argument that “the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable. “Now more than ever,” cárdenas writes, “it is evident that visibility is a trap.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Nicole Archer views that in the current moment, trans bodies and desires are outlined by mainstream culture.<sup>35</sup> In other words, much of

what trans scholars are observing today about trans visual culture is that stereotypical representations promote certain “acceptable” ways of appearing as trans in the world while sanctioning acts of aggression toward those who fail to replicate stereotypical representation or passable versions of binary gender identities.

## Selfie Debates

Due largely to the advent of the selfie, self-imaging has become a defining factor of globally networked contemporary life. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via a social media platform, the popularity of online users sharing selfies on social media sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram led Oxford Dictionaries to proclaim *selfie* as its 2013 word of the year. Since then, there has been a continued proliferation of self-imaging and great popular and intellectual interest in selfies. Not only are they a ubiquitous part of contemporary life, selfies are a complex form of social interaction and an emerging aesthetic, and they are having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture. While there is increased scholarship on selfies, the complexity of selfies remains underarticulated. Many selfies, for example, are in a rich lineage of radical performative self-portraiture committed to challenging representational politics, canonized aesthetics, and the parameters of portraiture, but this is an area yet to be significantly explored. In its very definition, self-portraiture is both specific and amorphous. It is a representation, a production, and a creation of someone made by that same individual, but the specifics of how and why are unarticulated. The advent of the selfie has highlighted the problematic politics of this fickle definition. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines a self-portrait as “a portrait of oneself done by oneself,” while the Oxford Dictionary defines self-portrait as “a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist.” What a self-portrait is and what its aims are remain up to the maker. The distinction about who is authorized to create a self-portrait—“oneself” or an “artist”—is at the core of the contention around self-portraits and selfies. Through an art-historical perspective, questions around the ontology of self-portraiture do not seem so new. While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout art history. Scholarly discourse around selfies has moved these contentions to the fore.



*Figure 1 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled, 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

Social media provides a venue that is unregulated and, as such, has become the arena in which nuanced and expansive trans and nonbinary trans people—particularly those of color—produce self-representations. These performative photographic self-portraits push the boundaries of how we understand gender identity, intersectional, nonbinary identities, and various relations between aesthetics, gender, race, and class. Vaid-Menon’s selfies are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture and exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as avant-garde contemporary art. Currently the most image-driven of social media platforms, Instagram, has become the go-to venue for visual communication and image circulation. It is via Instagram that image makers whose constituencies and likenesses have been eradicated from mainstream media insert their radical corporealities and aesthetics into visual culture. Due to their ubiquity, immediacy, and relative democratization, selfies have become the primary venue for producing intersectional



Figure 2 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed usie or group shot), 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.

and hybrid trans and nonbinary representations. Not all selfies are created equal, yet as a form they can be mobilized to different ends—just like any self-portrait. In our current cultural climate, the inclusion of marginalized voices that selfies facilitate has become increasingly urgent. While the aesthetics of selfies may be different than those of art-historical self-portraiture, and the act of taking pictures of oneself and sharing them on social media may seem so ubiquitous as to become banal, what selfies represent is, in fact, the most widely used form of visual communication today. But beyond this, they are a new genre of portraiture in which new practices and aesthetics of self-portrait photography are rapidly evolving.

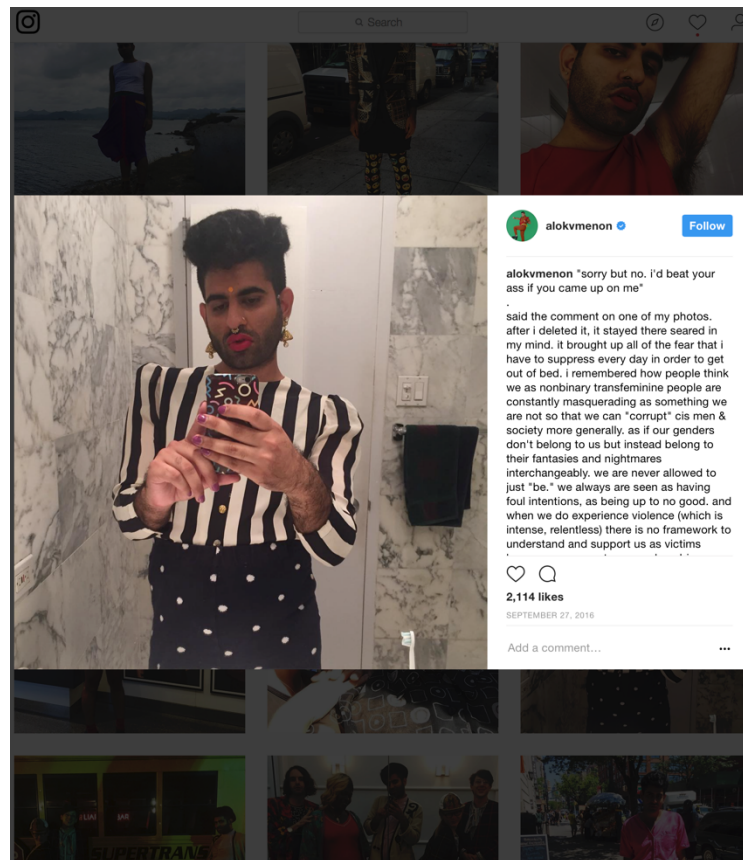
Within the relatively democratized space of the internet, selfies defy established systems of power. Here they can circumnavigate hierarchical channels of the art world that have historically marginalized them, and they can intervene in media and be circulated (often) prolifically, without the need for dominant culture's sanctioning. Art historian and visual studies scholar Jennifer González has observed that recent forms of activist art use the Internet and mass media while also interrogating "the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze."<sup>36</sup> Visualizing new subjectivities outside sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting on a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and nonbinary self-images introduce radical intersectional subjectivities that have the potential to circulate prolifically via social media.

Selfies are a potentially radically disruptive form of self-imaging. They challenge established modes of production, circulation, and consumption.<sup>37</sup> The massive impact that selfies are having across a vast array of aspects of contemporary

life is illustrated by the growing corpus of research on selfies from scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology to anthropology to art history and beyond. A significant portion of the research on selfies deploys intersectional methods to unpack their indelible impact on art, self-portraiture, social life, and visual culture. The establishment of the Selfies Research Network, conferences like the Kern, which is based at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and research focusing on the complexity and specificity of selfies reflect the growing interest in selfies. Art historian and visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that the power of selfies lies in their ability to enable new forms of self-representation and their redistribution of the power of self-imaging.<sup>38</sup>

### **Redefinition**

In all their ubiquity, selfies have faced a significant amount of rejection and derision. I would like to suggest that at the heart of the backlash is a discomfort over the massive shift in imaging power that selfies have facilitated. While there may be some need for distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, I want to suggest that we should view this distinction as technological and not qualitative. That is to say, selfies may be made via smartphones and tablets, while self-portraits are made in other media, it is necessary to realize that the derision of selfies is precisely about their mass cultural appeal and accessibility to numerous people, not necessarily about their quality. I want to redefine the terms by which we articulate the distinctions between self-portraits and selfies and view them both as in the same category of self-imaging. I believe that this will enable a more productive and more rigorous study of what is transpiring with the visual culture of self-imaging today. Furthermore, I want to stress that some selfies may be categorized as self-portraits and that self-portraiture needs to be more clearly defined. I propose a slightly more nuanced definition of self-portrait: a self-portrait is an image representing oneself made by oneself, engaged in a critical practice reflecting on and expanding established definitions of identity categories. In redefining self-portraiture in this way, a direct effort is made to emphasize critical engagement with representational politics and to avoid a hierarchy of equipment used to produce the images. I posit that some selfies are also self-portraits made using social media.



*Figure 3 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed bathroom mirror selfie), 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

### Alok Vaid-Menon

Alok Vaid-Menon is a gender-nonconforming trans femme, Indian American poet, performer, and activist, and also a prolific selfie maker with over 269,000 Instagram followers.<sup>39</sup> Vaid-Menon’s images are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture, are reflective of the complexity of trans identities, and are exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as avant-garde contemporary art. Vaid-Menon describes their work as “showing the world that it is possible to claim space as a visibly gender non-conforming transfeminine person of color.”<sup>40</sup> Through their use of self-imaging on Instagram, deploying a process they describe as “femifesting,” Vaid-Menon not only brings into being a visual commitment to self-conscious self-creation but also continually and consistently intervenes in the visual field of trans representations, and engages in a praxis that redefines understandings of contemporary self-portraiture. Through performative iterations of self, their Instagram feed pushes open nonbinary trans femme of color representations.<sup>41</sup>

## Interview

On January 9, 2018, I had a thoughtful exchange with Vaid-Menon about their Instagram work and how it relates to identity formations and their oeuvre on the whole. Delving in to some of the many issues surrounding representations of trans femmes of color, social media, and contemporary portrait photography, I engaged in a fruitful interaction with the busy and prolific Vaid-Menon. Interspersed throughout the interview transcripts, the above essay continues to further contextualize and unpack their rich work.

**Ace Lehner:** You grew up in a small town in Texas which you've described as primarily white, cis, heteropatriarchal, misogynist, and generally conservative, and you earned a scholarship to get out of there as soon as you could, attending Stanford University in California, where you pursued activism and an interest in social justice. While there, you began performing with Janani Balasubramanian as the duo DarkMatter around 2009. You identify as a nonbinary trans femme, Indian American poet, and activist. Your performances are a mixture of spoken word and performance art, often using personal experiences of living as nonbinary and brown to critically, humorously, and emotionally engage with issues of trans-misogyny and racism. You prefer the pronoun "they," and as DarkMatter you performed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre, the Brooklyn Museum, Nuyorican Poets Café, and the Asian American Writer's Workshop.<sup>42</sup> Is that all correct, and am I missing any key information in this abridged biography? Do you ever still perform together? Can you talk a little about how your work has evolved since going solo?

**Alok Vaid-Menon:** This is correct. No, we no longer perform together. Since going solo, I would say that my work is less "spoken word" and more "performance art." In my new show, "Watching You / Watch Me," which I developed as part of the Performance Act Award at Centrale Fies summer 2017, I am dancing, singing, and doing comedy sets. I feel like performance better encapsulates what I'm doing now. I just finished a prolific year of touring twenty-seven countries in 2017.<sup>43</sup>

**AL:** In your work you talk about your visual presentation disrupting ideas about how people are supposed to be and look. You are a prolific Instagrammer; can you



talk a little about the relation between your experiences in life, your performance work, and your use of Instagram?

**AVM:** I suppose that the boundaries between the three are porous. The staging of my life, my performance, my Instagram are all attempts to portray something meaningful about myself to other people. I say “meaningful,” instead of “authentic,” because I feel like the structures of these three platforms—life, the internet, the stage—have each made me uneasy about the false binary between the real and the performative. Which goes to say: I am constantly attempting to communicate what I feel (and occasionally what I know), and I find these all to be avenues to do that.

### Practices of Performative Self-Portraiture

Practices of performative self-portraiture often engage in practices of critical self-reflection, self-awareness, and interrogation of self-in-relation to broader discourses and identity formations. The photography scholar Susan Bright has observed “the deliberately ambiguous strategy of ‘performed’ portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions.”<sup>44</sup> Practices of performative self-portraiture also intervene in the way photography functions, calling to attention the very ontological contradictoriness of pictures and pointing to a discussion about the complex relation between photography’s performativity and indexicality. In recent years, artists have increasingly turned to the photographic portrait to interrogate both the limits and advantages of working with photographs and the complexity of identity formations.<sup>45</sup>

**AL:** On YouTube and Instagram, there is a proliferation of trans self-representations occurring, much of which seems to facilitate self-introspection. Other trans artists have talked about the practice of self-imaging being integral to the formation of their identities and their self-articulation. It also seems to be a place of critical intervention into visual culture enabling otherwise representationally marginalized people to create images in their likeness. How much of a role (if any) has self-imaging played in your self-definition? Did you have a practice of self-imaging before Instagram? Do you now? When did you begin your Instagram account? Do you see it as part of your practice now?

**AVM:** Yes. I would not exist if I hadn’t created the image of myself. And that “I”



is a collaborative I, one that comes from interlocutors both online and offline imagining ways to exist outside the Western colonial gender binary. The story feels trite, but that doesn't make it any less true: I didn't have access to representation that looked like me from anywhere, and so I turned to the internet to find it and then recognized it was less about finding and more about creating. I have been an internet kid for a long time—at the age of thirteen I started to post graphic designs online and had a vibrant digital art life. From a young age I learned the power of the internet for self-birthing and creation. Instagram (which I started to use in early 2014) feels like a continuation of what I've been doing for over a decade: becoming.

When depicted in mainstream culture, trans femmes of color are overwhelmingly imaged as stereotypes, as confluents of various problematic, reductive, and unfounded beliefs. They are often imaged as working in dangerous professions, marginally housed, and often victims of sexual assault and various hate crimes. This trope transcends all aspects of mainstream visual culture from cinema to the nightly news. This phenomenon can be understood as what the postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha has described as the stereotype. Bhabha observes that via anxious repetition of fixed representations of a given constituency we begin to culturally understand a group of people as all being a certain way.<sup>46</sup> This, in turn, forms a cultural belief and expectation about a given group of people. Representations of these constituencies are often the only trans subjects that most people encounter, and inform how members of said constituencies will and should be treated.

When encountering trans femmes of color in physical space, people have already been ideologically informed via visual culture as to how to treat them based on stereotypic representations. Via assessing the bodies of trans femmes of color, viewers ascribe them statuses of less than human based on the relative darkness of their appearances and on nonnormative gender characteristics.<sup>47</sup> The real-life implications of the assigning of statuses of “human,” “less than human,” and “non-human” to bodies, based on their corporeal markers, is often unconscious, reified through visual culture and detrimental to those marked through visual encounters as less than human.<sup>48</sup> This process is exponentially dangerous when the subject at hand sits at an intersecting point on two visual matrixes that position them as unworthy of life. Vaid-Menon, CeCeMcDonald, and the characters of Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra seen in *Tangerine* all live in a similar intersectional location in the field of racialization and gender. Their dark brown skin places them all in danger, as their flesh and phenotype are often translated through sociopolitical process into the category of less than human.<sup>49</sup> Related to this, all their gender

presentations disrupt binary gender aesthetics and expectations, putting them double in peril.<sup>50</sup>

**AL:** Can you talk about the process of curating your Instagram feed, the process of creating the images and the importance of the work to you?

**AVM:** What I've always found curious about the platform is that while we attribute accounts to individuals, the fact remains that those individuals often need someone else to take photos of them for the account. Yes of course there is the "selfie," which is a particularly important form of expression for me because I can make it happen when I'm in places that are hostile to my gender expression (i.e. everywhere). But my favorite shots are the full-body ones of me in public: just showing the world that it is possible to claim space as a visibly gender-nonconforming trans-feminine person of color. The logistics of getting these shots are so exhausting: I have to think about where I'll be and who I'll be with and whether or not I feel comfortable asking them to take a photograph of me. I have to be clear about what my expectations and desires are for how I should be shot. Most of the time my photos are taken by cis people—so there are power dynamics in that as well—the staging of my gaze through someone else's. Which goes to say, I think about this process a lot.

Culturally, we have been trained to visually read representations (and the people for that matter) for some sort of understanding about them based on how they look. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed, made up almost exclusively of self-images, creates a new type of self-portrait. Their self-portrait consists of multiple images, produced over time, continually added to, ever augmenting, and always transforming. As a platform, Instagram enables ongoing proliferation of complex self-representations. This is particularly significant when it comes to trans, nonbinary, and femme-identified people, especially those of color, precisely because dominant culture has produced cultural understanding of these constituencies as fixed and essentialized rather than dynamic, expansive, and discretely unique.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the way stereotypes are created and maintained is via a fixed type of image that is reductive and limiting that circulates prolifically.

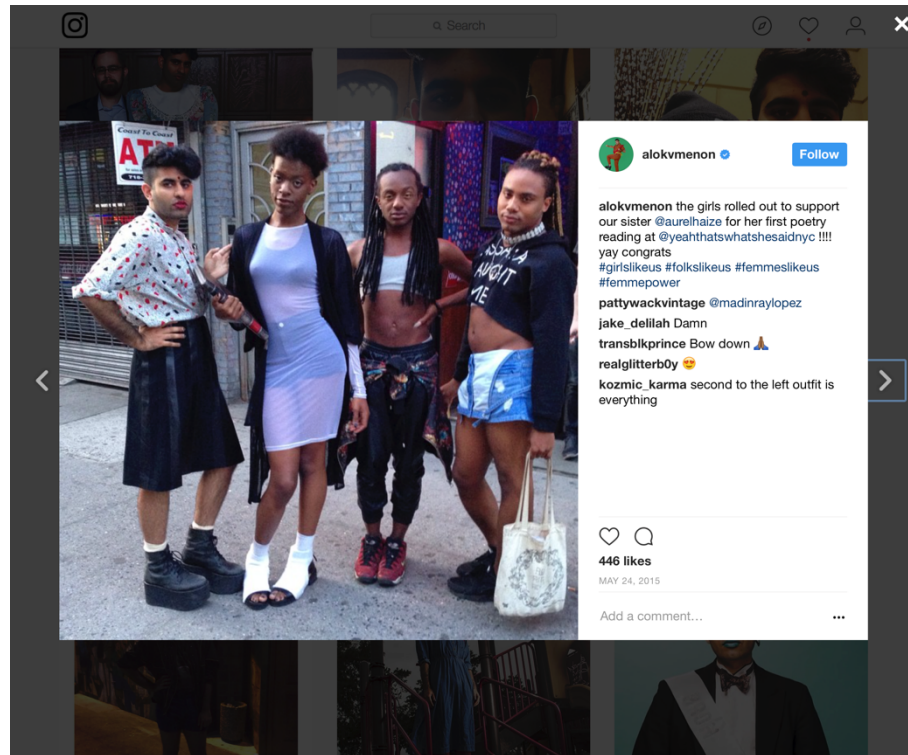


Figure 4 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed usie or group shot of four), 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.

From pursed purple lips to the coy tilt of their head, from a sassy hand on a hip to color-blocked retro outfits, from street-style femme poses to T-shirts, to tube tops, from desert femmes' fashion shoots to the captions beside them, Vaid-Menon's steady stream of self-representations are conceptual, performative self-portraits, presenting a complex hybrid, intersectional subject, uncontainable and always in flux. Visually assessing Vaid-Meon's feed, a new understanding and definition of gender emerges. Gender becomes unfixed. Shifting their gender from one image to the next, the stream of performative iterations of self suggest that gender has no necessary correlation to biological sex or to sexual orientation. Femininity is unfixed and exists in relation to bodies, people, place and time, class, ethnicity, and racialization, and various other identity categories like subcultural affiliations.

**AL:** Your process of self-imaging relying on someone else to take the picture is really in line with conceptual art photographic practices and recalls the work of Nikki S. Lee. In her *Projects* series, Lee appears in each image as part of a member of a specific subcultural group, but she is never the person physically behind the camera clicking the shutter. She is the author of the work in that the concept of

the work is all her own. And in fact, having some one else shoot the photo is part of her sophisticated and complex conception of the work.<sup>52</sup> Lee remains the artist because it's her concept, her direction, and her performance that makes the work, not the person who fires the shutter. Thinking about these ideas regarding authorship and conceptual photography, I'm curious about how you see the process of image making and the collective act of working with others to make the images? Is this collaboration; if so, to what ends?

**AVM:** Yes. I don't think we know (and I include myself and other trans people in this we) how to approach or look at the trans body outside the cis imagination. What I'm trying to do with my selfie-work is imagine myself on my own terms, outside the grammar of cis colonial gender binaries. I use the word *becoming* a lot, which I understand as interchangeable with decolonizing/femmifesting—finding ways of excavating meaning from the ruins.

In the space of group selfies or “usies,” Vaid-Menon's images demonstrate a variety of femme gender presentations in the frame of one image. In usies, or photos where Vaid-Menon images herself with other brown, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming femmes, they create a multisubject disruption of binary gender and racialized aesthetics of beauty. With their hand on their hip, Vaid-Menon wears a polka-dot top, black platforms, a high-top bouffant hairstyle, and deep red lips. They gently touch the shoulder of a friend to their left, who wears a sheer fitted dress over a dark sports bra and dark denim short shorts. In the right-hand side of the frame, two other femmes join them on the city sidewalk. Their looks embody a mixture of athletic wear and street style. Taken together, these four femmes propose multiple ways of being nonbinary and brown. Such interventions are critical.<sup>53</sup> Collectively, they embody various aspects of femininity and self-assuredness while wearing flashy, fashion-forward looks. Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate their lack of interest in presenting within frameworks of binary gender. Instead, they unapologetically disidentify with femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with both masculinity and femininity.<sup>54</sup>

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist heteropatriarchal notions of beauty, Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate gender as performative, but also as a free signifier, contingent on aesthetics, gestures, and glamour. The photograph visually asserts femme-ness as a free signifier not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics. By creating a multiplicity of nonbinary, brown, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Vaid-Menon expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate, and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being.<sup>55</sup>

This work begins to create space for a new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness.<sup>56</sup>

**AL:** Yes, the process of becoming reflects the notion of femmifesting. When self-imaging trans nonbinary brown subjectivity, such artistic interventions are significant, for they not only become or bring subjectivities into being in the present or femmifest, but they also directly counter stereotypic representations of trans femmes. The postcolonial scholar and astute observer of culture Homi K. Bhabha describes a stereotype as “a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.”<sup>57</sup> While Bhabha was not writing about trans subjects, the operation of the stereotypic representation functions similarly when it comes to trans constituencies. Thus when trans and nonbinary people self-image on Instagram, they create aesthetics otherwise unseen and image ever-evolving versions of self, thus creating new, not essentialized, and unfixed identity categories. Self-imaging in a very public way brings into existence identities that are otherwise unimaginable. Indeed the choice to use Instagram in the way you do continually self-images on a venue where all past self-portraits are visible concurrently creates new representations that are not simple, essentialized stereotypes but rather a multifaceted self-portrait of a subject continually evolving—a self-portrait that is in a state of perpetual becoming constantly augmenting, ever femmifesting. On your Instagram not only do you post many selfies, but you often post a good deal of text along with your images: how do you see the work of your pictures and text?

**AVM:** That’s how I experience the world: image and text. What I like about image is it allows the audience to have their own reading. What I like about text is it allows the subject to speak back to this reading. This collision is so productive for me—it’s where art lives. What you think versus what I think, smashed.

**AL:** There has been some divisiveness aimed at selfies; in the recent past they’ve been described as part of “narcissistic consumer culture.”<sup>58</sup> You are what I might call a prolific selfie-maker, how do you respond to this criticism?

**AVM:** What is not part of “narcissistic consumer culture?” I think we continually conjure this idea of a subversive space—something that exists outside the hegemonic logics, but I have yet to find it. What I find more telling is what we see as the problem—and across the board (trans)misogyny makes us associate femme artforms/expressions/ways of being as “the problem,” and specifically as “narcissistic/vain.” That’s just sexism. It’s boring. And besides: so what if I am vain? In

a world that is trying to disappear people like me from the public imaginary, perhaps being vain is a form of resistance itself?

**AL:** Absolutely, being self-assured when the world is trying to erase us is certainly necessary and often viewed as vanity or narcissism especially when dominant culture sees us as unworthy of life or less than human. Speaking of resistance, in your performances and on your Instagram feed you address the issue of adverse and often explosive reactions to you. What are the differences you see between these experiences in public space, and on social media? For example, in an image like the bathroom mirror selfie included here, you include some volatile rhetoric posted in reaction to your selfie; since selfies are a form of performance that is mobilized via social media and not in physical space, is there a sense of a bit of safety from the reactionary comments online as opposed to aggression in physical space? Or is there safety in physical public space, in that sometimes others stand up for you?

**AVM:** I don't say this to be fatalistic or incendiary but just to be honest. I don't really feel safe in either space: online or offline. Transmisogyny is a constant between the both. They take different forms; both are devastating. One thing that does feel different, though, is I can fashion myself online without the (immediate) risk of physical violence. That's not the case for the public, where when I step outside I am under the very real risk of attack. I've written about this in the past, but I often worry that my Instagram contributes to the false notion that I can look like I do in all of my photos everywhere that I go. That's just not the case—many times I have to go “stealth,” pass within the binary to avoid very real danger. So my self-portraiture becomes a sort of idyllic space too—an imagination of what I could look like/become without fear of harassment.

**AL:** Do you find as you travel, and as you are in different locations, reactions to you change? Do you see your corporeality interpreted differently, or does the matrix of gender situate you differently in various places and communities? And how do you see this in relation to processes of racialization?

**AVM:** Yes absolutely. Gender and race are localized formulations. Each place has its own vexed histories and preoccupations. People mistakenly understand Western cities like NYC and London to be the most “safe” for trans/gender-nonconforming people, but I've experienced them as the most hostile.

**AL:** Do you find that explosive reactions to you are primarily about your physical appearance? Or do you see that people react aggressively toward your voice, personality, ideas? Or a combination or something different?

**AVM:** The composite. It's not just physical, it's how I move, how I exist. Transmisogyny flattens the materiality of transfemininity—we are seen as “just” men in dresses, men with “painted nails.” We are only permitted the physical (and if that, superficially). But the way that we move, speak, gesture, talk, all of that—is rigorously policed, not just by men but also by women.

**AL:** When people react favorably to you does it seem to be out of a sense of finding you and your work as liberatory or encouraging new possibilities and giving a sense of hope and maybe even queer futurity? Is your presence inspiring, or something else entirely?

**AVM:** I mean it's the whole range. Some of the compliments I receive are rooted in the same transmisogyny as the insults (the idea that I am a spectacle, that I am exceptional, that I am a symbol, a metaphor, not a person experiencing violence). The compliments that ring the most true are the ones where people link my becoming to theirs—how I have helped on their journey to self-actualization, made them reflect on their own gender and subject positions.

**AL:** Conceptions of portrait photography in European and North American contexts are rooted in the legacy of portrait painting dating back to the Renaissance, which has led to the cultural belief and investment in the notion that a portrait reveals something of the person pictured.<sup>59</sup> The belief in the truth value of the photograph often enables portrait photographs to be mobilized by heteropatriarchal, transphobic, and racist powers to create stereotypes of various constituencies to legitimize ill-treatment of those constituencies and to further racist, misogynist, colonialist, and transphobic agendas. In postcolonial locations, photographers have used props, backdrops, patterned clothing, and other visuals to call attention to the surface of the picture plane. In doing so, these photographs defy the notion that a picture is a window into a world and thus to confound the belief in the photograph as being able to convey insight about the person pictured.<sup>60</sup> You often wear loud-patterned clothing; color-blocked outfits, and fashion-forward and retro styling in your self-images on Instagram. You've spoken about fashion being both political, about safety and a “form of armor.”<sup>61</sup> Can you talk about the role fashion and image-making play for you and any thoughts you may have on the cultural and social function of fashion in your images with regard to the theories and discourses

mentioned

above?

**AVM:** From a young age I learned that I didn't have access to the power to be granted nuance, subjectivity, complexity, narratively. There was a narrative ascribed to me on the basis of my skin and on my gender presentation. Fashion became the space that I could disarticulate the stereotypes and narratives mapped on me—to say actually there is something more complicated going on here. I am more than you think that I am. I use fashion as a tool. I don't think it's an end-all-be-all, but it's a tool to communicate a selfhood beyond/outside/unmediated by white supremacy and transmisogyny. Like any tool it is flawed, but I believe it is still doing something. I notice how aesthetic work is often undervalued as real “political” work, because it's not seen to be “doing something” tangible. But I see my fashion doing things every day—I have stopped traffic. I have made everyone stare. That visibility work—labor that transfeminine racialized people do every day—is what gives queerness meaning and power. And it feels important to name that.

**AL:** You talk about trans feminine people only being allowed to be “fabulous” and how the perception of trans feminine people is that they fail to conform to binary gender standards. Queer theorists have discussed the ways that failure can be a productive form of expanding possibilities and producing alternatives.<sup>62</sup> But theory can only go so far; today trans issues and representations are intertwined but they are not the same. One problem with mainstream representations of trans people is that they create stereotypic representations and set up expectations about trans people (particularly trans people of color), expectations that suggest all trans people will live less than desirable lives and will meet untimely and horrific ends. Representation itself does not remedy this, but it can be a tool in changing expectations and understandings.<sup>63</sup> How do you see your self-images in relation to other artists and ideas?

**AVM:** I operate from the premise that academic queer theory was not written for us as transfeminine racialized people. It was written about us, but it wasn't written for us. I don't find much of it to be particularly useful because it gentrifies our experiences, isn't actually attenuated to the real violence we experience. The queer theory that I am invested in starts for and by racialized transfeminine people and that has not (and continues to not be) recognized or published by the academy. I do believe my images are contributing to this body of work. I think so often as trans artists of color we are dismissed as minoritarian, as only speaking to our subject experiences. But I believe we are generating theories and methods that are



widely applicable. One of them that I have been invested in is the idea that fabulosity/beauty/self-love politics are part and parcel of the neoliberal state. Now trans people must be fabulous in order to be real. But this fabulosity is work we have to do ourselves (with very few resources), rather than systems actually providing us with safety, desirability, and recognition. Fabulosity—and the politics of visibility more generally—are a trap unless they also involve material redistribution. That gets lost from trans politics today because of transmisogyny—we are rendered aesthetic props, not workers. Our labor is generalizable, our violence is generalizable, our self-fashioning is generalizable—so much that we only have worth inasmuch as we can be used.

**AL:** Speaking of collectivity and an ethics of image making as connected to real-life politics, there are many usies (group selfies) on your Instagram feed, and they seem to have a hefty social and political weight. Can you talk about how important (or not) collaboration and community are to you and your performance and photography? How do you see the role of images of yourself and other trans and non-binary femmes of color? What is the significance of these pictures for you? What do you imagine their impact is for broader audiences?

**AVM:** All work is collaborative. Everything I am is because of the people (and nonpeople) in my life! The photos of my peers help me femmifest myself, and I hope mine help them. I think this is all part of a transfeminist ethic—we support each other because no one else supports us. Often the only people who defend me from harassment on the streets are other transfemme people, and I think that extends to how we relate to one another's work and livelihood. So much of the experience of enduring transmisogyny is one of social isolation, so it's so beautiful and generative to be part of a larger community and movement of trans artists.

**AL:** In the past, you have defined your gender as both a man and a woman and neither a man nor a woman. As a nonbinary trans person and scholar, I get that on both a personal level and a conceptual level. It is difficult to define gender outside entrenched colonial binary language and ideology. When I think and write about gender, I often frame it as something that is always in relation to place, time, community, racialization, and class while also being personal and performative. I also find gender to be malleable, and that gender can shift and change over a lifetime or the course of a day, that it is also relational and contingent on whom we're engaging with. How do you define gender? How do you identify today?

**AVM:** Gender resists definition; I resist definition. I think the imperative to identify is the problem itself! Why must we be known in a language we didn't consent to?

**AL:** Well said. What a fantastic question to continue to contemplate after we conclude. Thank you ever so much.

## Tranifest

Trans self-representations are often a praxis of bringing into being and forwarding new methods along with new identities. This praxis can be described through borrowing a term “tranifesting,”<sup>64</sup> coined by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison and deployed to mean “transformative manifesting,” and developed in relation to what they view as the process of creating a flexible community across differences to facilitate healing and mobilizing. According to Green and Ellison, the term is used to “enact resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would capitalize for others the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing.”<sup>65</sup> Green and Ellison situate the term in the lineage of black feminism and seek to push for intersectional approaches between black feminist thought and trans studies to generate transformative politics. For, as they observe, both areas challenge essentialist identity categories and make the limits of Caucasian feminism more pliable.<sup>66</sup> Pushing the idea of tranifesting further to be used to describe acts of identity formation produced and sustained by trans individuals or groups of trans people tranifesting in this contest is applied to acts of visual culture production that bring into being trans identities in relation to intersectional trans feminist and queer of color discourse and as a means of mobilizing trans across differences as a form of visual culture production that is radical, political, intellectual, and proposes new alternatives.

In this respect, tranifest can be used to describe singular processes of trans people bringing themselves into being and can be used on more widely observable levels when trans people with larger platforms not only make themselves in their own image but push the boundaries of what trans lives are possible by intervening in visual culture. Bringing ideas like tranifesting into conversation with visual studies methods, what is observable is how trans visual culture projects tranifest or bring into being radical instantiations of identity. Remaining invested in the amorphousness and anti-essentialism at the core of tranifest as defined by Green and Ellison, I argue that tranifest can also help us to not fall into the binary and

essentialist thinking about identity and resist reproducing outmoded methods of scholarship that I work to push beyond.

Vaid-Menon's photographic practice tranifests: they engage in performative self-portraiture intervening in the legacies of self-portraiture we have inherited in the Western art-historical context. This brings into view the constructed and contradictory way self-portraits are discursively framed, which enables the leveraging of various arguments about portraits (and people), depending on who is imaging them and who is viewing them. In this way they intervene in the way photography functions, calling to attention the very ontological contradictoriness of pictures, pointing out the complex relation between photographs, performativity, and indexicality. Vaid-Menon's work engages a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming "truth value" of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

Vaid-Menon's self-imaging praxis provides visual studies a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about photography and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive, methods. Trans visual praxis facilitates an opening up of new ways of apprehending photography's relationship to assumed truth, revealing that the indexicality we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification.

Writing about the emergence of new (albeit written) language used in describing trans people and trans experiences, Jack Halberstam proposes that with emerging terms comes the signaling of an end of an era of medical and psychiatric control and thus a paradigmatic shift when it comes to how trans constituencies and individuals bring themselves into being.<sup>67</sup> Halberstam's understanding of the significance of self-naming is akin to self-imaging, as both bring trans subjectivities into existence on their own terms.<sup>68</sup> James Hall, an art historian, critic, and researcher of self-portraiture, has noted that moments of cultural and social significance are often accompanied by substantial increases in the production of self-portraiture.<sup>69</sup> Scholars have observed that performative self-portraits historically have often been used in efforts to undo the modernist assumption that the photograph can deliver "truth" about a subject.<sup>70</sup> Dovetailing with this observation and informing the study at hand is Hall's observation that self-portraiture is often intertwined with moments of cultural significance, often being mobilized to influence society and ideas about identity.<sup>71</sup>

Through continuous self-imaging and using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of an ever-evolving self, Vaid-Menon's works

directly intervene in our cultural belief in the ability of the singular image to accurately and concisely represent the person pictured. Completely controlling gesture, style, lighting, fashion, and mise-en-scène, selfie makers like Vaid-Menon fully control and produce their images, engaging critical questions of representation and performativity. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed, along with other nonbinary trans femmes like Travis Alabanz @travisalabanza, Joshua allen@joshuaobawole, and Vqueeram Aditya Sahai @vqueer, prolifically self-image femifesting brown, non-binary, trans-femme iconography embodying complex, changing, and intersectional identities. But beyond this, they also produce a variety of new visual culture exemplars for others to model themselves after, creating urgent and necessary interventions into visual culture that otherwise demeans and eradicates their existences. Furthermore, precisely the ways in which they mobilize Instagram as a form of bringing into being and continually augmenting undoes the ideological conceptions of portrait photography we have inherited in Western contexts.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, Micha Cardenas. "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 161-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2018.1473988> See also Jack Halberstam,

*Trans\**: *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Halberstam observes that trans rejects the voracity of the visual (96). <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520966109>

<sup>2</sup> Artistic merit and skill could be judged based on the closeness with which the resulting image matched the corporeal reality. For more on Albrecht Dürer's self-portraiture, see Jeroen Stumpel and Jolein Van Kregten, "In the Name of the Thistle: Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portrait of 1493," *Burlington Magazine* 144, no. 1186 (2002): 14–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/889419>. See also Erika Mary Boeckeler, "Type/Face in Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portraiture," in *Playful Letters: A Study in Early Modern Alphabets* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 97–122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q23ng.7>.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q23ng> See also Rainer Stamm, "Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Body in Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 30, no. 2 (2009): 22–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40605295>. See also Herbert J. Erlanger, "The Medallion Portrait of Albrecht Dürer," *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 10 (1962): 145–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43573410>. See also Corine Schlieff, "The Making and Taking of Self-Portraits: Interfaces Carved between Riemenschneider and His Audiences," *Studies in the History of Art* 65 (2004): 214–33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622367>.

<sup>3</sup> The art-historical tradition of the canonization of self-portraits of Caucasian, masculine corporealities is highly disproportionate and suggests that these subjects should be deeply considered and understood as infinitely nuanced, complicated, and revered. Sidelining and erasing representations of other subjects from the canon of self-portraiture in this art-historical tradition symbolically marks nonimaged constituencies as not valuable to said culture. The cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, and the visual studies scholars Mieke Bal and Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by R. Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315617091>

<sup>4</sup> Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290300200101>

<sup>5</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2–5, 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> Western art-historical and social conceptions of representation originated in the Renaissance. It was during this time that the belief in the ability of the artist to

render truth and insight into a subject through representational likeness was established. For more on the discussion of conception of representations as subject originating in the Renaissance, see Jones, *Self Image*. See also Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 3–21. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16716-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16716-6_5)

See also Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 15–64.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–31.

<sup>9</sup> For his discussion of stereotype, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>

<sup>10</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>. Charles Saunders Peirce (1839–1914) was an American philosopher, theorist, mathematician, and scientist. He was influential in developing philosophies about photography.

<sup>11</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essay on Photographic History, Institution, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 257.

<sup>13</sup> For postmodern scholarship on photography and its relation to power dynamics and ideology, see

John Berger and Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, First edition (New York, NY: Aperture, 2013),

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1993),

<sup>14</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39, 1986. 56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11. The eugenics discussion is on pages 51–56. Physiognomy is generally understood as the assessment of a person’s character or personality from their outer appearance, especially one’s face. Sekula describes at length the racist underpinnings and evolutionist tendencies of this assessment. Phrenology is generally

described, as what is known understood to be a racist pseudoscience that once believed a person's skull could determine their character.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>18</sup> David Campany, "Preface: Art and Photography," in *Art and Photography* (London:

Phaidon, 2003), 11–43.

<sup>19</sup> Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699386>

<sup>20</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9> See also Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–299. doi:10.2307/1229039. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

<sup>21</sup> Larry Sultan et al., eds., *Evidence* (New York: Distributed Art, 2018). See also Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), particularly the chapter devoted to document; and Philip Gfelter, "The Staged Document," in *Photography after Frank* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2009), 50–51.

<sup>22</sup> David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, "The Vertigo of Displacement," in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003). See also Kobena Mercer, ed., *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers: Annotating Art's Histories* (London: Iniva, Institute of International Visual Arts, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Halberstam, *Trans\**. In this text Halberstam traces how photography is linked to the colonial project. This also relates to Bhabha's discussion of how the stereotype functions in *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>24</sup> Bright, *Art Photography Now*.

<sup>25</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "The TransGender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Rights Frontier," *Time*, June 9, 2014, 40.

<sup>26</sup> In June 2014 the trans actress and trans rights activist Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine, standing tall and poised, in a form-fitting sleeveless dress against an off-white background, hands gracefully at her sides. Cox's now iconic likeness looks out of the frame, meeting our gaze, accompanied by the title of the cover story, "The Transgender Tipping Point—America's Next Civil Rights Frontier." Photographed by Gillian Laub for an article by Katy Steinmetz Cox, the

cover story positioned America as being “in transition” and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized we’d moved on to the next civil rights battle. Early in the story Cox talks about how it is now more prevalent than ever for trans people to live “visibly” and “pursue our dreams visibly.” Cox suggests that because of this increased “visibility,” more people can now say, “Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.” For Cox, this means that people now have points of reference that are “humanizing, that demystifies difference” (*New York Times*, June 9, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Halberstam, *Trans\**, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable quoted in “Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmer,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Ochoa has written extensively about the complexities of fitting in to nationally and medically recognizable embodiments of gender. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376996>

<sup>31</sup> Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeCe McDonald quoted in Toshio Meronick, “Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 29. McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on McDonald, see Sabrina Rubin Erdely, “The Transgender Crucible,” in *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-transgender-crucible-114095/>; and Dee Lockett, “The Traumatic Reality of Getting Sent to Solitary Confinement for Being Trans That Orange Is the New Black Cant Show,” *Vulture*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/06/cece-mcdonald-as-told-to-orange-is-the-new-black.html>. See also CeCe McDonald, “I Use My Love to Guide Me through Those Fears,” in BCRW, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/fellows/cece-mcdonald/>; Selena Qian, “Activist CeCe McDonald Takes Allies to Task in Public Talk,” *Chronicle*, Duke University, November 11, 2017, <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2017/11/171129-qian-cece-mcdonald/>; Cece McDonald, <http://supportcece.wordpress.com/>

<sup>32</sup> Cárdenas discusses how heightened imaging of trans people has solidified who is acceptable as a trans person and who is a disposable trans person. See cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 170–73.

<sup>33</sup> Griffin-Gracy and McDonald quoted in Meronick, “Cautious Living,” 32.



<sup>34</sup> Cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers,” 170.

<sup>35</sup> Nicole Archer, “Dynamic Static,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 298.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Flanagan et al., “Feminist Activist Art: A Roundtable Forum,” *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2005): 24–31. <https://doi.org/10.2979/nws.2007.19.1.1>

<sup>37</sup> Circulation, production, consumption, and regulation are the concerns of cultural studies, the underlining methodology I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion of cultural studies, see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> See Derek Conrad Murray, “Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,” *Consumption Markets and Culture* 18, no. 6 (2015): 490–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967>

<sup>39</sup> This figure indicates the number of followers at the time of publication in November 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Alok Vaid-Menon, interview with author, January 9, 2018, New York NY/email.

<sup>41</sup> In addition to their live performances Vaid-Menon’s Instagram presence is another perhaps even more prolific way that they intervene in culture. With 181,000 followers at the time of writing, it is by far the venue of their cultural production that reaches the largest audience at one time. For a scale comparison as of March 10, 2019, Cindy Sherman’s Instagram account has 241,000 followers and Nikki S. Lee’s has 2,455 followers.

<sup>42</sup> Vida Weisblum, “Dark Matter(s): Meet One Half of the Trans Performance Duo College Kids Love,” *Observer*, August 24, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/08/dark-matters-meet-one-half-of-the-trans-performance-duo-college-kids-love/>. See also “DarkMatter Poets: Moving Past Trans and Gender Nonconforming Stereotypes,” *Mashable News*, March 25, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kT\\_pNzqxDZI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kT_pNzqxDZI).

<sup>43</sup> For more on their recent work, tours and upcoming tour dates, see <https://www.alokvmenon.com/#new-page>.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd, rev. and expanded ed (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 19–21.

<sup>45</sup> For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations, see Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). See also Bright, “Portrait,” in *Art Photography Now*; Fillipo Maggia, “Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Long Live Art! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!” in *Yasumasa Morimura* (Milan: Palazzo Casati Stampa, 2008). See also Liz Wells, “Image and Identity,” in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003); Bailey and

Hall, “Vertigo of Displacement”; Samantha Noel, “Putting on a Bold-Face: How Renee Cox and Sonia Boyce Pull Ethnographic Art Apart,” *Third Text* 28, no. 2 (2014): 163–76;

Larry Qualls, “Performance/Photography,” *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 1 (1995): 26–34.

<sup>46</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

<sup>47</sup> The concept of colorism may also be discussed in relation to the hieroglyphics of the flesh and racialization as a related and similarly operating phenomenon. See Ya Azibo and Daudi Ajani, “Teaching the Mulatto Hypothesis to Combat African-U.S. Colorism: Just Knowing Can Cure,” *Race Gender and Class* 21, nos. 3–4 (2014): 88–100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496986>.

<sup>48</sup> See: Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Mel Chen, “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*; Halberstam, *Trans\**, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Griffin-Gracy and McDonald quoted in Meronick, “Cautious Living,” 23–37.

<sup>51</sup> Ariana Marinin, “This Trans-Feminine Poet Shares What It’s Like to Exist outside the ‘Gender Binary,’” *A Plus News*, June 29, 2015, [http://aplus.com/a/alok-void-menon-trans-feminie-poet-gender?no\\_monetization=true](http://aplus.com/a/alok-void-menon-trans-feminie-poet-gender?no_monetization=true). See also “The Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender: Alok Vaid-Menon,” in *The What’s Underneath Project*, StyleLikeU presents, June 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7Gh2n9kPuA&spfreload=1>; “DarkMatter Poets”; Alok Vaid-Menon, “You Don’t Need to Be a Boy or a Girl / Get Real,” *Refinery29*, October 7, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> For more on Nikki S. Lee’s projects, see <http://www.tonkonow.com/lee.html>. See also Nikki S. Lee, Russell Ferguson, Gilbert Vicario, and Lesley A. Martin, *Projects* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7t9f0>

<sup>54</sup> José Esteban Muñoz developed the indispensable concept of disidentification in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999). The term describes acts wherein queer performers adopt parts of dominant identificatory categories while perverting and jettisoning other parts of those identities with which they do not identify.

<sup>55</sup> Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 21–22.

<sup>56</sup> For more on creating new aesthetics of trans beauty that is not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very

transgressiveness, see Riki Wilchins, “Is Trans Beautiful?” *Advocate* 7, March 2017, <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2017/3/07/trans-beautiful>.

<sup>57</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance,” *Third Text* 29, no. 3 (2015): 156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2015.1082339> Attempts to discredit selfie makers are impulsive reactions to representationally disenfranchised constituencies taking control of how they are represented in visual culture. A significant portion of the discourse on selfies reflects efforts to undermine selfies and their makers. When constituencies normally not imaged by dominant culture begin to appear in visual culture, members of the dominant group—that is, those benefiting from Caucasian and heteropatriarchal power structures—tend to produce reactionary rhetoric aimed at reestablishing existing regimes of power. Selfies have been chastised by several scholars for ostensibly being made by narcissists and people with other personality disorders. See, e.g., Gwendolyn Seidman, “What Is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?” *Psychology Today*, August 6, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201508/what-is-the-real-link-between-selfies-and-narcissism>; Fiona Keating, “Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction, and Mental Illness, Say Scientists,” *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480>. This discourse around selfies has been hotly contested and is changing with the establishment of selfie scholar network and writing by the likes of Derek Conrad Murray in “Selfie Consumerism in a Narcissistic Age,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2018.1467318>

<sup>59</sup> Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012); and Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Okwui Enwezor, International Center of Photography, and Exhibition Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography, eds., *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384717>

<sup>61</sup> “DarkMatter Poets.” See also “Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender”; and Dylan Thomas, “The Ordinary Non-Binary Life of Alok,” *SYRO*, <http://shopsyro.com/community/2017/11/14/meet-alok>.

<sup>62</sup> For theorization on the benefits of queer failure, see Halberstam, *Trans\**; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

<sup>63</sup> Contemporary photographers, particularly since Cindy Sherman’s highly influential *Untitled Film Stills*, are regularly engaged in performative self-portraiture to call into question the limits of representation, to think through visual encounters, and to explore the constitution of identities. I often mobilize such strategies in my own photographic work, and in fact there are many versions of performative self-portraiture interrogating the politics of representation, observable in work by photo-conceptual artists such as Nikki S. Lee, Tammy Rae Carland, Yasumasa Murimura, Rotimi Fani Kayodi, and many others.

<sup>64</sup> Tranifestig is discussed in *TSQ* by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, who trace its origin to a conference in Durham, North Carolina, where the term was deployed as art of an “experimental lexicon,” as they refer to it used in effort to create a community across differences in June 2011 at a conference called Indigo Days. See Green and Ellison, “Tranifest,” in *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, edited by Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, special issue, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 223.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Halberstam, *Trans\**, 10–11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> For more on contemporary photographic discourse and practices on performative self-portraiture, see Amelia Jones, “The “Eternal Return”: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,” in *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947–78; and Bright, “Portrait,” 19–21. For more on deskilled look invested in the performance, see Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). See also Wells, “Image and Identity,” 375–79.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, *Self-Portrait*.

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**(Un)veiling Sappho: Renée Vivien and Natalie Clifford  
Barney's Radical Translation Projects**

Rebekkah Dilts

In 1894 a strange book titled *Les chansons des Bilitis* (*The Songs of Bilitis*) was published by the popular French writer Pierre Louÿs. A collection of erotic poetry, it began with an introduction that claimed the poems were found on the walls of a tomb in Cyprus and were written by an ancient Greek woman named Bilitis, a courtesan and contemporary of the ancient Greek poet Sappho:

Bilitis [a connu] Sapphô, et elle nous parle d'elle sous le nom de Psappha quelle portait à Lesbos. Sans doute ce fut cette femme admirable qui apprit à la petite Pamphylie l'art de chanter en phrases rythmées, et de conserver à la postérité le souvenir des êtres chers. Malheureusement Bilitis donne peu de détails sur cette figure aujourd'hui si mal connue, et il y a lieu de le regretter, tant le moindre mot eût été précieux touchant la grande Inspiratrice.<sup>1</sup>

(Bilitis knew Sappho, and she speaks to us of her using Psappha [Sappho], the name she held in Lesbos. This admirable woman without a doubt taught the young Pamphylie the art of signing rhythmic phrases, and of preserving for posterity the memory of those most dear. Unfortunately, Bilitis left us very few details about this figure, about whom so little is known today, and it is regrettable, since even the slightest word would have been precious regarding the great Inspirer.)<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Louÿs fabricated Bilitis and the majority of the poems in the collection. He cites some of Sappho's real verses, but credits them to his invented Bilitis. To lend authenticity to the forgery, he listed some of the poems as "untranslated" in the book's index, and included a bibliography with earlier translations of collections of Bilitis's poetry, which were, of course, also false. Yet upon publication, the fraud eluded even the most expert of scholars. Perhaps most surprisingly, even when the literary hoax was eventually exposed, it did little to diminish the book's popularity. Louÿs's endeavor both challenges the ethics of "faithful" translation and raises the question: why didn't readers care that Bilitis wasn't a real poet?

The success of *Les chansons des Bilitis* is indicative of the veritable obsession with the Greek poet Sappho in the nineteenth-century French literary world through a plethora of plays, novels, poems, commentaries, and translations. Because so much of the focus in this historical moment was on futurity and modernization, it may seem surprising that a female figure from antiquity would capture so much attention. Yet the nineteenth century paradoxically involved not only the development of new disciplines and discourses but also a nostalgic idealization of the past—the Hellenistic period in particular—because ancient Greece was considered the forerunner of Western European civilization. Sappho's prominence during this period fascinatingly supported its concerns and obsessions with nationalism, sexuality, and race, most especially because there was so little known about Sappho, and because her poetry survives only in fragments, allowing writers and translators to fill them in based on their ideological stakes. Louÿs even notes that there is a dearth of information about Sappho, "cette figure aujourd'hui si mal connue" (this figure about whom so little is known today), but, unlike many of his contemporaries who translated Sappho's poetry and invented biographical details, he chooses to attribute Sappho's poetry to an entirely imagined female figure.

The driving force of interest in Sappho and translations of her poetry consistently coalesced around the desire to determine her sexual identity. In the landmark scholarly account, *Fictions of Sappho* (1989), Joan DeJean describes how the image of Sappho underwent an incredible transformation during the nineteenth century, from a representation of chaste Christian virginity to that of a deviant, erotic homosexual:

In the course of the nineteenth century in France, Sappho leaves behind the often modest and always timid heterosexuality in which she had been disguised for nearly a century to reemerge as a figure of highly charged sexuality, first a courtesan, later a (sometimes depraved, sometimes oversexed) lesbian.<sup>3</sup>

The history of Sappho and of female homosexuality in nineteenth-century France and Western Europe has been well documented by scholars like DeJean and by Nicole G. Albert in her book *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France* (2016).<sup>4</sup> For DeJean, Albert, and other feminist scholars, Sappho's importance during this period is an example of how a historical female figure became caught in a political battle over her sexuality and defined the contemporary conception of lesbianism in Western discourse.<sup>5</sup>

While the majority of translations and invocations of Sappho over the first half of the nineteenth-century were penned by men, Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien (American and English, respectively) became two of most well-known female writers and translators of Sappho at the turn of the century. Inspired and encouraged by Louÿs, they initiated both a literary and an erotic movement now known as "Sappho 1900," a moniker that came from the French writer Paul Lorenz's twentieth-century book *Sappho 1900: Renée Vivien* (1977).<sup>6</sup> Lorenz gave attention to the nineteenth-century French female writers and translators of Sappho (Vivien specifically), because these women and their translations were largely unknown, and even to date, much of their work remains untranslated and unincorporated in the scholarly context of Sappho's oeuvre. Scholars like DeJean and Albert, who have written about Barney's and Vivien's translations and invocations of Sappho, have rightfully noted that their interpretations sought a version of a lesbian Sappho that could be emancipatory for women, in opposition to the male visions and fantasies of her same-sex desire that predominated.

The purpose of the present essay is to consider how Barney's and Vivien's invocations of Sappho's poetry, unlike even Louÿs's unconventional attempt, represent a radical approach to translation than those canonical and phallogocentric—an approach that echoes Luce Irigaray's theoretical feminist approach to rewriting classical Greek texts. DeJean and Albert offer a comprehensive historical account of the translations and commentaries on Sappho in nineteenth-century Western Europe; for context, I briefly discuss several of the primary works of translation and interpretation that appeared during the period and those that were of most influence to Vivien and to Barney (some of which are cited directly in their writing and translations). In nearly all these works of translations, even when it is unintentional, fantasy is integrated with what its editors and translators considered historical accounts. In the cases of the literary writers Charles Baudelaire and A. C. Swinburne, their writing is not translation or scholarly in aim, but the appeal of their poetry in fact inspired historical analysis, scholarly pursuits, and the modern definition of the word *lesbian*.

Nearly half a decade before *Les chansons de Bilitis*, there emerged the first fictional French account of Sappho in two centuries that posited her sexuality as



unconventional. Authored by a left-wing writer and socialist, Émile Deschanel, the 1847 article “Les courtisanes grecques: Sappho et les lesbiennes” (“Greek Courtesans: Sappho and the Lesbians”) affirms “notre Sappho, si grand poète...elle fut Lesbienne dans toute l’étendue de ce terme” (our Sappho, the great poet...was lesbian in every sense of the term).<sup>7</sup> The popularity of his interpretation and its sensational account of Sappho’s sexuality is credited with reinvigorating the Sapphic tradition in late nineteenth-century France; while DeJean makes clear that “there is no great merit in Deschanel’s argument,” she emphasizes:

So powerful is Deschanel’s vision that it alters the entire course of Sappho’s history in nineteenth-century France. ...Immediately after its publication, the center of speculation shifts not only from chastity to sexuality but also from erudition to fiction. The first half of the century had produced almost no powerful fictions centered on Sappho. In Deschanel’s wake, however, writers from Baudelaire to Daudet, from Louÿs to Vivien, gave Sappho a hold on the French literary imagination more powerful than any she had exerted before. ...Deschanel touched the pulse of his century.<sup>8</sup>

Less than a decade after Deschanel’s article, there appeared what would become the definitive nineteenth-century translation and commentary of Sappho’s poetry in Latin, *Anthologia lyrica* (1854), by the German philologist Theodor Bergk. Scholars credit Bergk’s translation with conferring Sappho’s nineteenth-century lesbian status because of his translation of “The Ode to Aphrodite” (the only complete surviving poem attributable to Sappho). In the poem, the speaker, named Sappho, calls out to Aphrodite to alleviate the scorn of an unrequited lover; Bergk used a female pronoun for Sappho’s lost lover, whereas in previous versions, a male pronoun was used instead. He did not, however, note the reason for this decision linguistically or otherwise. As DeJean writes, “Scholars eulogized his edition, but almost no one maintained his [homosexual] reading [of “The Ode to Aphrodite”].”<sup>9</sup>

Baudelaire’s extremely popular and controversial book of poetry *Les fleurs du mal* was published in 1857, although most of the poems had already appeared in journals throughout the decade prior to the collection’s publication. The original title was in fact *Les lesbiennes* because its most popular previously published poems, “Femmes damnées (Delphine et Hippolyte)” and “Lesbos,” were about deviant ancient Greek female lovers. In “Lesbos” Baudelaire portrays Sappho as an androgynous poet, more beautiful in her deathly pallor than Venus. These poems had an enormous influence on popularizing the decadent lesbian image of Sappho,

inspiring a wide number of writers, artists, scholars, and translators. He was also famously put on trial following the book's publication for "outrage à la morale publique et aux bonnes moeurs" (outrage to public morality), which was largely attributed to the homosexual content in "Femmes damnées" and "Lesbos."

Algernon Charles Swinburne published his collection *Poems and Ballads* in 1866; like Baudelaire's, Swinburne's poetry was considered quite controversial due to his subversive and erotic invocation of Greek figures like Sappho. In his very popular poem "Sapphics," he deems Sappho and her lover Anactoria "lesbians" and depicts them kissing.

While Swinburne's poems were his own invention, they attempted to mimic Sapphic verse. Even though the first documented use of the word *lesbian* to refer to female homosexuality was in 1870, four years after the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne is considered one of the first to popularize it as a term for same-sex love.<sup>10</sup> Both Vivien and Barney were great fans of his and cite from *Poems and Ballads* frequently in their writing.

The English scholar Henry Thornton Wharton is credited with bringing translations of Sappho's poetry to Anglophone audiences in 1885, when he published the first of three editions of *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*. Unlike some of his French contemporaries, Wharton seemed more conscious of the challenge translating Sappho's fragments presented. In the preface he writes:

My aim in the present work is to familiarise English readers, whether they understand Greek or not, with every word of Sappho, by translating all the one hundred and seventy fragments that her latest German editor thinks may be ascribed to her. I have contented myself with a literal English prose translation, for Sappho is, perhaps above all other poets, untranslatable. The very difficulties in the way of translating her may be the reason why no Englishman has hitherto undertaken the task.<sup>11</sup>

Wharton's book was Barney's and Vivien's first exposure to Sappho's poetry, and the collaborative structure of his approach to translation was very influential to the one Vivien would take in hers: Wharton includes original Greek fragments, literal translations in English, other English translations that he deemed "worthy of such apposition," and "a note of the writer by whom, and the circumstances under which, each fragment has been preserved."<sup>12</sup> He even includes citations from Swinburne's poetry. Bergk's translations in Latin also appear frequently in Wharton's edition, and he maintains the homosexual interpretation of "Ode to Aphrodite."

Yet he avoids directly confronting the question of Sappho's homosexuality, leading DeJean to characterize his Sappho as "ambivalent" and "bisexual."<sup>13</sup>

André Lebey, a French writer, poet, and editor of *La Revue socialiste*, was one of the scholars who claimed Baudelaire's poem "Lesbos" was a motivating influence on his desire to translate Sappho's poetry—which he did in his 1895 collection, *Les poésies de Sappho: Traduites en entier pour la première fois* (*The Poems of Sappho: Translated in Their Entirety for the First Time*). Lebey considered his approach to translation more accurate than those of others because he included all of Sappho's fragments, and edited them very little, not taking the license many nineteenth-century translators did. In the introduction to his translations, he claims the merit of Sappho's poetry matters more than her "mœurs" (morals) or controversial sexuality: "Sapphô n'a pas besoin de justification; ni la pudibonderie des petites bourgeoises de protester. Une nature vraiment puissante a le droit de se mettre hors des règles communes" (Sappho needs no justification, nor the prudish protestations of the petite bourgeoisie. A person with a truly powerful nature has the right not to follow the common standards of decency).<sup>14</sup> Yet Lebey seems to have taken inspiration from Louÿs (to whom he dedicated the book), by including bawdy, exotic descriptions of Sappho's ancient Greece, rendering the introduction contradictory in tone. Lebey's translation of "The Ode to Aphrodite" also broke with Bergk's then-definitive one, refuting Sappho's lesbian status by using a male pronoun for the lover.<sup>15</sup> Lebey's book ultimately did not sell well, and there were just under three hundred copies ever printed. DeJean praises his translations, however, claiming that "Lebey's 1895 volume is easily the best French edition of the century" because "he respected [the] fragmentary status" of Sappho's poetry and resisted "the impulse to which almost all his precursors had succumbed, of sewing them together into ersatz units."<sup>16</sup> He also publicly denounced Vivien's book of translations when he heard that she was intending to publish one, prompting Vivien's publisher to respond publicly with a cutting reminder that Lebey's book was out of print.<sup>17</sup>

In 1911 the French archaeologist and Hellenist scholar Théodore Reinach first published his book of translations, *Alcée. Sappho*, the revised 1937 version, remains today one of the definitive French translations of Sappho's poetry.<sup>18</sup> Reinach initially took great pains to argue that Sappho was chaste, changing his opinion by the second edition of the translations. In 1879 Western Europe's archaeological and burgeoning colonial projects led to the discovery of the first new Sapphic fragment since the early seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> Reinach is credited with deciphering it for French audiences in the 1901 issue of the *Revue des Études Grecques* (*Review of Greek Studies*). Prior to the 1911 publication of his first translations of Sappho's poetry, Reinach wrote to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres (Academy

of Language and Literature), claiming that the newly recovered fragment definitively proved Sappho was chaste, and therefore “le procès de Sappho” (Sappho’s trial) should be reopened.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, even the most avowedly historical editions of translations or publications about Sappho reflect misogynistic representations of female sexuality and the body that were widely held during the period. Likely because disciplines like archaeology and philology were part of nationalism and colonialism, many of the characterizations of Sappho and of the island of Lesbos are infused with nineteenth-century sexual and racial fantasies. For example, while Deschanel’s portrayal of Sappho is radical in his claim that she is a lesbian, he was also, as the title of his article might suggest, interested in “Lesbians” as both a sexual and a racial group with whom modern women could establish affinity:

Une institution très réelle, destinée à entretenir et à perfectionner la race, c’étaient le concours de beauté. Elles seules [les femmes de Lesbos], dans la société antique, pouvaient jouer le rôle de ce que l’on nomme les femmes du monde dans la société modern.<sup>21</sup>

(The beauty contest was a real institution, destined to maintain and perfect the race. They alone, in ancient society [the women of Lesbos], played the role of what we might call worldly women in modern society.)

While this image of Lesbos and its inhabitants renders them sexually liberated, it also suggests that race endows bodies with different kinds of sexual proclivities and that a particular race could itself be “perfected.” Deschanel’s Lesbos is an exotic place that reflects the colonial imaginary that would flourish in France for years to follow.

Baudelaire’s and Louÿs’s writing similarly represents Lesbos as an exotic space of otherness where Sappho and Lesbians are of a different race that allows for different kinds of sexual and erotic practices. Nearly every refrain of Baudelaire’s poem “Lesbos” begins with a description of an exotic Greek island: “Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses / Qui font qu’à leurs miroirs, stérile volupté! / Les filles aux yeux creux, de leur corps amoureuses / Caresent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité / Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses” (Lesbos, Land of hot and languid nights / Which make, before their mirrors, sterile pleasure! / The hollow-eyed girls / Caress the ripe fruits of their amorous bodies’ nubility / Lesbos, land of hot and languid nights).<sup>22</sup> In *Les chansons des Bilitis*, Louÿs

claims Lesbos was “le centre du monde” (the center of the world), and that its capital, Mytilene, was “une cité plus éclairée qu’Athènes et plus corrompue que Sarde, bâtie sur une presqu’île en vue des côtes d’Asie” (a city more enlightened than Athens and more corrupt than Sardinia, built on a peninsula in sight of the shores of Asia).<sup>23</sup>

In her scholarly account, *Sappho* (2015), Page duBois suggests that because Lesbos is “facing East” (the island is in the Aegean Sea, closer to Turkey than to mainland Europe), it may explain differences that characterize Sappho’s poetry and its reception from that of other classic Greek poetry:

Lesbos lies near the coast of Asia...and to understand [Sappho] better is to come to terms with the ways in which she faces eastwards, rather than towards the more familiar metropolis that was Athens in the classical period. ...For some, Sappho matters deeply because her work illuminates the position of the Aegean island of Lesbos, so close to Asia, and remote from the Greek mainland, and therefore turns our gaze on the ancient Greeks away from Athens and towards a wider, eastern landscape.<sup>24</sup>

Arguably, the conception that Sappho was closer to the “East” further ignited the orientalism and exoticism of nineteenth-century Western Europe. There was even conscription of Sappho onto non-French female writers; the Haitian poet Virginie Sampeur, for example, who was married to the famous Haitian poet and politician Oswald Durand (whom she ultimately divorced), lived in France during the late nineteenth century and earned attention from the French literary world. Sampeur was dubbed the “Haitian Sappho,” her poetry and biography interpreted through Sappho’s:<sup>25</sup>

Nouvelle Sappho abandonnée par son Phaon, elle tend toutes les cordes de son coeur pour crier musicalement son désespoir vrai...Elle fut délaissée par Oswald. C’est cette histoire qu’elle nous conte dans la pièce qu’elle a intitulée, “L’abandonnée.”<sup>26</sup>

(The new Sappho abandoned by her Phaon, stretches the strings of her heart to musically cry out her true despair...She was deserted by Oswald. It is this story she recounts in the play she titled, “The Abandoned.”)

I emphasize the characterization of writers like Sampeur, the racism and misogyny in the writing of male authors, to set the stage Barney and Vivien entered as women writers and translators. There were notably no published translations of Sappho's poetry by a woman in nineteenth-century France until Vivien; as Sampeur's characterization indicates, female writers frequently became themselves "Sapphos" or other characters the poets and historians were constructing, to which Barney fell victim.<sup>27</sup> Vivien's invocations and translations of Sappho have, even in contemporary scholarship, frequently been read through her biography.

Of Barney and Vivien, Vivien was the only one to perform direct translations of Sappho's poetry.<sup>28</sup> Her desire to translate Sappho was likely of such great importance because there was a dearth of women writers in the translations, commentary, and poetry indebted to Sappho. As Barney confirms in her biography, *Souvenirs indiscrets* (1960), Vivien was inspired by Wharton's translations of Sappho's poetry and kept them at her bedside.<sup>29</sup> Born in London with the name Pauline Tarn, she had an English father and an American mother, permanently immigrating to Paris as an adult after inheriting her father's fortune. This inheritance allowed her the freedom to live independently, to travel extensively, and to write. Because she spent much time in France throughout her childhood, Vivien learned French from an early age, and all her literary writing was done in French. She identified as homosexual and had romantic relationships with women exclusively (hers with Barney being one of the most significant), although she had strong intellectual friendships with male writers and editors.<sup>30</sup> Yet she struggled with depression, alcoholism, and anorexia, and committed suicide in 1909 at the age of thirty-two after several unsuccessful attempts. She was, however, quite prolific in her short life, publishing close to a dozen works of poetry and prose. While there has been increased attention paid to Vivien's writing, most of it has not been translated into English or republished in French.<sup>31</sup>

Her translation of fifty of Sappho's poems, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec* (*Sappho: New Translation with the Greek Text*), was published in 1903. It was her second publication, but the first to bear her nom de plume, Renée Vivien.<sup>32</sup> The book includes a preface, a biography of Sappho, and three subsequent sections: "Odes," "Épithalames," and "Fragments," a structure that modeled Wharton's, although Vivien makes clear in her introduction that Sappho loved women. In addition to printing the poems in ancient Greek, she attempts a literal prose translation, and often a fuller version that tries to mirror the structure of Greek verse. The translations and poems of others are frequently included as well:

*Je t'aimais, Atthis, autrefois...*

Le soir fleurir les voluptés fanées,

Le reflet des yeux et l'écho de la voix...

...Je t'aimais, au long des lointaines années,

Atthis, autrefois.<sup>33</sup>

And they shall know me as ye who have known me here

Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year

When I love thee...

SWINBURNE: *Poems and Ballads, Anactoria*<sup>34</sup>

Swinburne's poem is a playful attempt to mimic Sapphic lyricism, and Vivien endeavors to do the same in her second, more extended translation. In an essay titled "Anne Dacier (1681), Renée Vivien (1903): Or What Does It Mean for a Woman to Translate Sappho?," Jacqueline Fabre-Serris situates Vivien as the first major French female translator of Sappho since Anne Le Fèvre Dacier in the seventeenth century. Fabre-Serris believes Vivien's translations and "poetic pairings"—her use of Swinburne's and Catullus's poems in Latin included alongside Sappho's—so "remarkably successful" that the book "should be taken as [a] clue on how to read Sappho 'today'" (100). Yet DeJean considers the liberty Vivien takes in "making the briefest of fragments into full-fledged poems" problematic, and an "important departure from her stance of scholarly respectability, a departure which is largely responsible for her edition's notoriety." DeJean continues:

[There is an] unsettling quality [to] these "translations." Because her expansions so greatly overburden the often fragile remains, Vivien seems to assume Sappho's voice, to try to replace the original. ...Vivien's doubly Sapphic poetry ultimately seems designed only for an initiated public. ...Even a sympathetic reader can hardly avoid the inevitable realization of Vivien's morbid identification with Sappho. ...At the very least, this text is so violently different from other editions available to fin-de-siècle readers, that it must have been easy to dismiss it as an invention. The scholarly tradition, for example, remains prudently mute on the subject of Vivien.<sup>35</sup>

If DeJean interprets Vivien's characterization of Sappho "morbid" because of Vivien's own suicide, it is ironic, since Sappho's alleged suicide and the reasons for it have had such a problematic influence in the translations and interpretations of her poetry. DeJean is not the only one; other scholars have echoed the conclusion that Vivien's invocations of Sappho convey macabre undertones.<sup>36</sup> While a separation between author and text is necessary in literary analysis, to interpret Vivien's translations as an identification with Sappho's supposed suicide and as a harbinger of Vivien's is also to ignore the larger implications of the project. Instead of a veiled suicide note, these unconventional translations can be read as a feminist intervention that echoes those Irigaray performs on the Greek canon.

A linguist, psychoanalyst, philosopher and gender theorist, Irigaray has devoted the majority of her academic career to exposing the patriarchy inherent to Western discourse, which has offered women neither a "feminine" language nor a female subjectivity. Because women have not had their own subjectivity or their own language, they have had to exist within masculine discourse, making them "multiple." In *Speculum de l'autre femme (Speculum of the Other Woman, 1974)*, for example, Irigaray writes that "[woman] is forced to serve many functions, torn apart, drawn and quartered in the service of the specific unit(y) of a field, a name, a sex, a gender, that are devoid of all possibility of touching again. ...Never is she one, either male or female."<sup>37</sup> Conversely, masculine subjectivity has been based on binary systems that privilege mastery and unity—"a logic of pairs of opposites: activity/passivity, love/hatred, nearness/distance, male/female and even I/other(s)"—excluding women as diffuse or as lack.<sup>38</sup> Instead of denouncing dominant masculine discourse, however, Irigaray mimics or reinterprets master narratives in order to articulate a possible feminine language from the diffuse and ambiguous representations of women. A new language, for Irigaray, can lead the way to a female subjectivity unbound to masculine subjectivity. While the way in which she defines the feminine is often characterized as essentialist—by Judith Butler notably—Drucilla Cornell articulates Irigaray's feminine as "a kind of radical otherness to any conception of the real" and as a separate category to that of "female," since Irigaray's conception of the feminine subject can extend outside biological or anatomical identification.<sup>39</sup> I agree with Cornell that Irigaray's conception of female subjectivity is not necessarily limited to "female" in its distinct biological or social sense; rather, it signifies a conditional subjectivity, one dependent on its relationship to masculinity.

Irigaray's theoretical approaches are especially useful in the context of Barney's and Vivien's invocations of Sappho because the field of translation has historically been a male-dominated one that privileges mastery. Irigaray has also been invested in performing mimetic rereadings of canonical Greek texts in



particular because, as the nineteenth-century French obsession with antiquity affirms, ancient Greece has been the foundation for so much of contemporary Western discourse. In a collection of essays about her mimetic practices of rereading ancient Greek discourse, *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and "the Greeks"* (2010), Irigaray argues that Greek culture has, for the contemporary Western world, elicited "nostalgia for an impossible return."<sup>40</sup> In their introduction, Elena Tzelepis and Athena Athanasiou explain:

Irigaray renders the archive of Western metaphysics available for a rereading. ...[this] rereading does not seek to bring the disclosed aspects of the Greek text to the propriety of full presence and the mastery of interpretation. It is not a cognitive commentary but rather a performative engagement; one that, in bringing forth the internal production of difference and improper usage, works as an affirmation and reinvention of the dispersal. ...[She] returns persistently to the founding discourses of Ancient Greek thought whose genealogical transmission through the ages has been too singularly generated through phallogocentric lines. She does so by deploying strategies of free-indirect citing, miming, specularizing, and displacing monologic classical Greek metaphysics with polylogic, pre-Hellenic genealogies.<sup>41</sup>

Irigaray has performed mimetic rereadings of Plato's Cave, as well as Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In what has been called her "most thoroughly Greek text," *Amante marine: De Friedrich Nietzsche (Marine Lover, 1980)*, she takes the imaginary position of Nietzsche's lover and enters a textual dialogue with Nietzsche by citing his writing and then commenting on it with her own.<sup>42</sup> The section "Veiled Lips," in particular, "reads as a kind of 'Greek' rewriting" in which Irigaray proposes alternative feminist interpretations of the Greek goddesses Athena, Ariadne, and Persephone.<sup>43</sup> She suggests, for example, that Persephone's passage back and forth from the underworld can be interpreted as one of empowerment as opposed to one of objectification: "Persephone has experienced the two veils, the two masks/hiding places, the two edges, the two faults in the invisible."<sup>44</sup> Irigaray inserts images that she considers innately feminine into male discourse, like veils, and like lips. Lips are not only indicative of the mouth but also of the vulval lips, which Irigaray equates with the possibility of a feminine language because "[they] are always at least two—joined in an embrace—so women's language will be plural, autoerotic, diffuse and undefinable within the familiar rules of (masculine) logic."<sup>45</sup> Sara Speidel, who has translated some of Irigaray's writing into English, claims that

“Irigaray unsettles the notions of meaning at work in any simple approach to translation”:

She evokes the possibility of a feminine writing, in a style which diverges radically from traditional syntactical forms. Fragments of sentences exist side by side, without subordination—parts which are whole and yet “without unity.” Words evoke multiple sense—simultaneously—setting in motion a continuous play in which no single, “proper” meaning can be identified. This plural, rhythmical, “non-unitary” mode of writing asks to be read “differently”—outside “the logic which dominates our most everyday statements,” and beyond the models of discursive coherence and closure which, according to Irigaray, amount to a “death” sentence for woman (always defined negatively in the theoretical discourse of Western philosophy—as man’s opposite, his “other,” not-man).<sup>46</sup>

While Irigaray’s dialogue with Nietzsche in *Marine Lover*—and her mimetic rewritings of other canonical texts—are not translation in a strict sense, Vivien and Barney employ strategies that similarly “unsettle” the field of Sapphic translations to provide an alternative “performative engagement” with Sappho than the masculine translations and accounts of their generation. Like Irigaray’s approaches, theirs enter dialogues with male writers, purposefully rewrite established biographies, and use images—like the veil—to conceive an alternative representation of Sappho, her fragments, and feminine language.

While translation is typically grounded in determining a singular interpretation, Vivien chooses to juxtapose multiple translations and invocations of Sappho’s poetry, resisting a position of dominance taken by translators like Lebey, who pronounced his approach superior. A textual dialogue with other translators and writers emerges in Vivien’s version, one that in fact includes Lebey’s translation for what is considered Fragment 30 (she does not number it or any of the fragments): “*Je ne sais que faire: j’ai deux pensées. Je ne sais pas ce qui me manque; mes pensées sont doubles. Trad. André Lebey*” (*I don’t know what to do: I have two thoughts. I don’t know what I lack: my thoughts are double*).<sup>47</sup> Vivien then weaves markedly different translations of the same Sapphic fragment into a series of new translations; one translation reads that the speaker *slept* with a woman in a dream, for example, and the other reads that the speaker *spoke* to a woman in a dream (emphasis added):

**Ζὰ δ' ἐλεξάμην ὄναρ Κυπρογενήα.**

*Et certes j'ai couché dans un songe avec la fille de Kupros.*

Autre version du fragment:

**Ἡράμην μὲν ἔγω σίθεν, Ἄτθι, πάλαι πόντα.**

*Et certes j'ai parlé en songe avec la fille de Kupros.<sup>48</sup>*

*(And certainly I slept in a dream with the daughter of Kupros.*

Other version of the fragment:

**Ἡράμην μὲν ἔγω σίθεν, Ἄτθι, πάλαι πόντα.**

*And certainly I spoke in a dream with the daughter of Kupros.)*

Albert believes that Vivien's incorporation of these disparate translations is a form of reader response that "asks the reader to decide" among them; their inclusion also makes visible to readers the liberty taken by translators to suppress indication of Sappho's possible homosexuality and to transform Sappho into their desired image.<sup>49</sup> Yet Vivien never interjects as a translator to privilege any particular version.

The extended translations Vivien offers—or the "amplifications" that De-Jean thinks replace Sappho's voice—are a purposeful blurring between Vivien and Sappho that seek obscurity. Vivien writes: "c'est en vain que la nuit de Lesbôs / M'appelle, et que l'or du paktis se prolonge... / Je t'ai possédée, ô fille de Kuprôs, / Dans l'ardeur d'un songe" (it is in vain that the night of Lesbôs / Calls me, and that the gold of paktis is prolonged... / I possessed you, O daughter of Kuprôs [Cyprus], / In the ardor of a dream), and "Un clair souvenir se rythme et se prolonge / Comme un son de lyre indécié et voilé... / Fille de Kuprôs, je t'ai jadis parlé / A travers un songe" (A clear memory is rhythmic and prolonged / Like the sound of a lyre undecided and veiled... / Girl of Kuprôs, I spoke to you long ago / Through a dream).<sup>50</sup> While both versions are equally erotic in their interpretation of the source fragments, their eroticism does not provide certainty as to the relationship between the speaker and the female object of desire. Vivien excises the

adverb *certes* (certainly) or a synonym; the call of night is “en vain,” or futile; her comparison of “un clair souvenir” (clear memory) to the “indécis et voilé” (undecided and veiled) sound of a lyre is a false comparison that renders memory unclear. Fabre-Serris characterizes Vivien’s word choice connoting ambiguity as intervention:

In her [version of Sappho’s] poems, it is the choice of vocabulary which creates an atmosphere that is different from the ancient original...a predilection for a background made up of immobility, of uncertainty, of the evanescence of things, and emotions in the past and in dreams.<sup>51</sup>

Irigaray frequently invokes the image of the veil in her mimetic rewritings because it is a feminine image that signifies both a barrier and a partial opening. In the essay “Textiles That Matter: Irigaray and Veils” that appears in *Rewriting Difference*, Anne-Emmanuelle Berger finds the image of the veil essential to Irigaray and her rewritings of Greek discourse, even though it does not necessarily have any relationship to ancient Greece. Berger claims that “Irigaray tries to counter the veil of metaphysics with another kind of ‘veil,’ a material envelope that would delineate boundaries without closing borders, and that would neither veil the truth nor be subjected to cover-ups, whether philosophical or cultural.”<sup>52</sup> In her translation of Sappho’s fragments, Vivien uses the veil as a paradoxical symbol of female oppression and protection. Sappho has been veiled by the many interpretations and translations of her, but Vivien’s version does not try to unveil her.

Instead of adding words when presenting some of the fragments, Vivien alternatively intersperses the text with watermarks, artistic symbols, and even brackets to intimate the missing fragments of Sappho’s poetry: a nonlinguistic approach to purposefully “veiling” Sappho’s corpus (Fig. 1). In Anne Carson’s unconventional but lauded translation of Sappho’s poetry, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2003), she, too, purposefully elects not to fill in Sappho’s fragments—either in their ancient Greek or in her English translation of them—to expose the desire for mastery and wholeness that has dominated translations of Sappho’s poetry and her biographies.<sup>53</sup> Like Vivien, Carson includes brackets to indicate the missing pieces of fragment. In her introduction, she explains:

When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that ] or [ indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. ...Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward

the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it. ...I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.<sup>54</sup>

The use of brackets is for Carson an “aesthetic gesture” that calls attention to the absence of an accurate record of Sappho and her poetry in its entirety. While the proliferation of formal and artistic symbols on the pages of Vivien’s are admittedly the opposite of the “free space” on Carson’s, they too invite “imaginal adventure,” signaling how little of Sappho’s fragments exist and the imagination—and literal images—required to fill them in. I include an image of a page from Vivien’s book because these symbols have an effect on the experience of reading, but cannot be “translated” or reproduced in the citations I provide: they represent another kind of veil draped between Sappho and meaning.

Rather than a provocative proclamation that Sappho loved women, as it has often been interpreted, the “Biographie de Psappha” at the beginning of Vivien’s book can be read as strategically miming the biographies that male translators like Lebey added at the beginning of their books, and of the overeroticized descriptions of Sappho and of Lesbos that appear in Baudelaire’s and Deschanel’s writing. In the introduction to his book, Lebey simultaneously avoided and renounced the question of Sappho’s homosexuality, claiming that a truly great poet does not need justification—but he still affirms that Sappho was a great “beauté” (beauty):

Vous savez ce que fut que Sapphô...Il est donc inutile que je le redise...au plaisir de me répéter à moi-même: Sapphô fut très belle. Sa peau était un peu brune. Ses yeux, bleu clair insondable, illuminaient le cercle d’ombre où ils apparaissaient enchâssés.<sup>55</sup>

(You know who Sappho was...It is therefore useless for me to restate it...It is with pleasure that I repeat to myself: Sappho was very beautiful. Her skin was somewhat brown. Her eyes, an unfathomably clear blue, illuminated the shadowed circle in which they seemed to be encased.)

In her biography, Vivien writes of Sappho:

De la femme qui atteignit jusqu'aux purs sommets de la gloire nous ne savons presque rien, les siècles ayant trop impénétrablement embrumé la splendeur de son lointain visage. ...En face de l'insondable nuit qui enveloppe cette mystérieuse beauté, nous ne pouvons que l'entrevoir, la deviner à travers les strophes et les vers qui nous restent d'elle. Et nous n'y trouvons point le moindre frisson tendre de son être vers un homme.<sup>56</sup>

(Of the woman who reached the highest peaks of glory, we know almost nothing; the centuries having too impenetrably obscured the splendor of her distant face. ...In the face of the unfathomable night that envelops this mysterious beauty, we can only glimpse her, guess at who she is through the strophes and verses that remain. And in them, we find not the slightest tender shiver for a man.)

Vivien's characterization of Sappho, "cette mystérieuse beauté" (that mysterious beauty) whom we can only glimpse "[e]n l'insondable nuit" (in the unfathomable night), is an ironic recollection of Lebey's, Louÿs's and Baudelaire's depictions of Sappho, and the erotic scenarios they staged between women on humid nights in Lesbos. Vivien even uses the same adjective Lebey uses—"insondable" (unfathomable)—but in Lebey's description, it is Sappho's eyes that are unfathomable, whereas in Vivien's, it is the night. Instead of a time and space of deviant sexual possibility, the night is the uncertainty and obscurity that does not allow Sappho to be fully seen. In Vivien's translations, Sappho remains strategically veiled by the watermarks and symbols placed in between the Greek fragments and translations, and by the diverse translations and interpretations of her that Vivien cites. Yet Vivien's version still unleashes the eroticism of Sappho's fragments to convey forms of female desire that are not bound to the figure of Sappho. The "nous" (we) who will find no "frisson tendre vers un homme" (tender shiver for a man) is indeed an "uninitiated public," as DeJean surmises, to whom Vivien's translations offer a radically different encounter with Sappho's poetry.

While Vivien, even if criticized, has entered conversations on translations and commentaries of Sappho's poetry, the literary work Barney produced was—and still is—rarely analyzed or discussed in scholarly settings. When she was first published, Barney was considered a less serious or well-trained poet and writer than was Vivien, and interest in her was dominated by her spectacular life. Barney was born to an extremely wealthy American family in 1876, and her mother, Alice Barney, was a well-connected painter and artist. Natalie Clifford Barney grew up

predominantly in the United States, but attended a boarding school in France. She was therefore fluent in French by the time she was an adult, and expatriated to France at the turn of the century, where she would remain until the end of her long life in 1972. She was introduced to Vivien through a mutual friend and was struck by Vivien's poetic talent. Their relationship was one of friendship, romance, and literary collaboration, although fraught; Vivien's suicide was its tragic end. As Barney details in *Souvenirs indiscrets* (1968), she was encouraged to publish her writing by Vivien, and the two women bonded over a mutual adoration for Sappho and for France: "Renée Vivien a joué un rôle considérable dans ma vie, et sans doute la réciproque fut-elle vraie. Nées toutes deux à la même époque, elle en Angleterre, moi aux Etats-Unis, nous fûmes, dès notre adolescence, attirées par ce même centre d'attraction: Paris" (Renée Vivien played a considerable role in my life, and no doubt the same was true for her. Both born at the same time, she in England, I in the United States, we were, from our adolescence onward, lured by the same center of attraction: Paris).<sup>57</sup> Barney also identified as a lesbian, and in addition to Vivien, she had well-publicized relationships with the famous French courtesan Liane de Pougy and with the painter Romaine Brooks, who provided illustrations for some of Barney's books. Yet Barney opposed monogamy, and valued friendship above all forms of relationship, a belief fused with her connection to Sappho and with her pursuit to support other women writers.<sup>58</sup>

Undeniably, the contribution she is most known for is her literary salon. It ran for almost sixty years at Barney's home on Paris's Left Bank, and had in its yard what she deemed "Le Temple d'Amitié" (The Temple of Friendship). To her salon, she welcomed some of the most lauded French, American, and British writers and artists of the twentieth century: Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust, Rachilde, Paul Valéry, and Colette, for example. In a rare film interview with the BBC in 1966, Barney claimed that her initial motivation for establishing an international Anglo-French literary salon was in fact translation: "I thought that the French and the American and the English should meet and translate each other's work as much as possible, so I opened [the salon] in that view."<sup>59</sup> Translation for Barney was essential to formulating new encounters with language that could foster new kinds of relationships and erotic encounters. It may be precisely because French was not their first language that Vivien and Barney were so interested in translation and were more playful and poetic in their use of French. Barney's was, however, an unusual form of the language. In *Women of the Left Bank* (1986), Shari Benstock argues that Barney invoked an older form of French to articulate an alternative feminine perspective:

Barney consciously chose an outdated form of French prosody in which to declare her commitment to female eroticism. ...Why would a woman so philosophically, sexually, and politically in advance of her time revert to older forms for poetic expression, especially when the subject matter might seem to call for an equally radical and unconventional form of expression? Barney's poetry addresses a subject that has been denied a literary tradition of its own. Although the external forms of this poetry were traditional, even clichéd, they enclosed a radical sentiment.<sup>60</sup>

While I wish to avoid conforming Barney's linguistic choices with her personality or lifestyle, Vivien and Barney consciously elected to compose their literary writing in French—in contrast to other Anglophone feminist writers and ex-patriots, like Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, who were also invested in constructing new forms of language and sexual identities. French, it seems, allowed both Vivien and Barney new ways to articulate their sexuality and eroticism.

While Barney did not attempt a literal translation of Sappho's poetry, and her literary style differs significantly from Vivien's, her invocations of Sappho take very different forms than those of her contemporaries and can be considered radical approaches to translation. In *Éparpillements* (*Scatterings* or *Fragmentations*, 1910), her best-selling book, Barney famously wrote, "Faire des fragments" (Make fragments). Composed of aphoristic musings on feminism, art, and society, some scholars have claimed the call to "make fragments" and the structure of the text as a whole was directly influenced by Sappho and her poetry fragments.<sup>61</sup> Like Irigaray, Barney is interested in emphasizing forms of language—like linguistic fragmentation—that mimic the fragmented representation of the feminine in phallogocentric discourse.

While Barney began learning ancient Greek, she did not perform prototypical translations of Sappho's poetry and chose to nest the fragments within her fiction and in her nontraditional autobiographies.<sup>62</sup> The most direct invocation of Sappho's poetry is in the play "Équivoque," which appears in Barney's 1910 book *Actes et entr'actes* (*Acts and Intermissions*). The narrative is an alternative version of Sappho's life in which her friends Eranna and Gorgo (the names of Sappho's supposed disciples) discover that the reason for her suicide was not because of her unrequited love for Phaon but because of her love for her female student—and Phaon's fiancée—Timas. The title of the play, "Équivoque," translates to "equivocal" or "ambiguous" in English, and ambiguity extends to the play's formal elements.<sup>63</sup> While the dialogue is Barney's invention, it integrates sixteen lines of Sappho's fragments into the speech of Sappho and into the speech of the other



characters. The Sapphic fragments are printed in ancient Greek in a postscript that follows the play:

Eranna: Leurs regards nuptiaux sauront t'humilier  
Si tu restes...

Sappho: Je reste.

Gogro: Et tu crois oublier! Songeant au proche hymen, ton front penché  
se trouble.

Sappho: Je ne sais que choisir car ma pensée est double. (1)

(1) *Les chiffres entre parenthèses se réfèrent aux fragments de Sappho utilisés et qui se trouvent à la fin de pièce.*<sup>64</sup>

(Eranna: Their nuptial gazes will humiliate you  
If you stay...

Sappho: I'm staying.

Gorgo: And you believe you can forget! Thinking of the marriage so  
imminent, your inclined face is troubled.

Sappho: I do not know what to choose because my mind is double. (1)

(1) *The numbers correspond to Sappho's fragments that have been used here and that can be found at the end of the play.)*

It is Vivien's translation of the Sapphic fragment "je ne sais que choisir car ma pensée est double," that Barney uses to convey Sappho's ambivalence about whether to stay or flee after her lover marries. In *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi* (2018), Samuel N. Dorf writes that the play's "format is reminiscent of Louÿs's faux scholarly apparatus in *Les chansons des Bilitis*, but instead of deceptively leading the reader to an imaginary fabricated Lesbos, Barney reverses the project. Her footnotes root her fabricated imaginary Lesbos to the real shards of poetry."<sup>65</sup> Like Louÿs's *Les chansons des Bilitis*, Barney's play intentionally eludes accuracy and offers a purposeful fiction instead. Yet importantly, the fragments printed in the postscript of "Équivoque" are *not*

translated, printed only in ancient Greek. By citing Vivien's translation, Barney leads her audience to Vivien as well as to Sappho.

According to Barney, the play was intended to be acted by and for women only.<sup>66</sup> It was first performed at the home Barney lived in prior to moving to her famous apartment in a town outside Paris; in fact, after the landlord discovered the play was about lesbianism, Barney was evicted and she moved to the Left Bank, where more renditions would be performed. Colette famously took part in these performances, as did other well-known female actresses of the period.<sup>67</sup> There have been a number of thoughtful books and essays on the relationship between performance and queerness in the performances of Barney's plays, which were accompanied by live music and dance.<sup>68</sup> It is especially significant that Barney elected to have only women perform and view "Équivoque" because, along with the numerous translations and literary publications about Sappho that emerged in nineteenth-century France, there were many popular plays that cast Sappho as a deviant femme fatale. Racine's play *Phèdre* (1677), for example, was revived and performed to packed audiences.<sup>69</sup>

In "Double Consciousness in Sappho's Lyrics" (2002), J. J. Winkler suggests that there is a "double consciousness" or multiplicity of perspective inherent to Sappho's poetry because, whoever Sappho might have been, she identified as a female subject and therefore had to ventriloquize the dominant male poetic voice in addition to offering a feminine perspective:

Sappho seems always to speak in many voices: her friends', Homers', Aphrodites', conscious of more than a single perspective and ready to detect the fuller truth of many-sided desire. But she speaks as a woman to women: her eroticism is both subjectively and objectively woman-centered.<sup>70</sup>

Winkler also contends that, because Sappho's poetry was to be delivered as lyric song in public, it intended to stage an intimate female experience:

Sappho often seems to be searching her soul in a very intimate way but this intimacy is in some measure formulaic and is certainly shared with some group of listeners. And yet, maintaining this thesis of the public character of lyric, we can still propose three senses in which such song may be "private": first, composed in the person of a woman (whose consciousness was socially defined as outside the public world of men); second, shared only with women (that is, other "private" persons: "and now I shall sing this beautiful song

to delight the women who are my companions,” frag. 160 L-P,10).<sup>71</sup>

Barney’s “Équivoque” cultivated public intimacy among women writers and artists not by simply invoking Sappho but by distilling the public intimacy Sappho’s poetry evokes into a collective and performative feminine experience.<sup>72</sup> In *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien* (1988), Karla Jay claims that because of its lack of coherent plot, “Équivoque” “would probably baffle even the most sympathetic audience.”<sup>73</sup> Like DeJean, who believes an “uninitiated public” could not comprehend Vivien’s translations, Jay fails to interpret disorientation as one of the objectives of a radical project that intentionally deviated from other theatrical versions of Sappho that catered to mostly male audiences.

Barney’s most unconventional invocation of Sappho is in *Pensées d’une Amazone* (1920), her answer to a feminist manifesto and the genre “pensées.”<sup>74</sup> As with her *Éparpaillements*, the text is self-consciously fragmentary. In the section titled “Le malentendu ou le procès de Sappho (fragments et témoignages)” (The Misunderstanding or the Trial of Sappho [Fragments and Testimonies]), Barney intersperses translations of Sappho’s poetry by the writers and translators of the period (including Vivien) with racial, sexual, and psychological discourse to question its authority on homosexuality:

Sappho songe peut-être aussi à arracher sa bien-aimée à celui qui la possède.

*«Il me paraît l’égal des dieux, l’homme qui est assis en ta présence et qui entend de près ton doux langage et ton rire désirable, qui font battre mon cœur au fond de ma poitrine. Car lorsque je t’aperçois, ne fut-ce qu’un instant, je n’ai plus de paroles, ma langue est brisée, et soudain un feu subtil court sous ma peau, mes yeux ne voient plus, mes oreilles bourdonnent, la sueur m’inonde et un tremblement m’agite toute; je suis plus pâle que l’herbe et dans ma folie je semble presque une morte...Mais il faut oser tout». («Ode à une femme aimée»; Sappho, trad. Renée Vivien).*

Et dans ses «Sapphiques»:

“Ah the singing, ah the delight, the passion! All the Loves wept, listening; sick with anguish, Stood the crowned nine Muses about Apollo; Fear was upon them, “While the tenth sang wonderful things they knew not. Ah the tenth, the Lesbian!...”<sup>75</sup>

Les livres de physiologie traitent d'exemples parfois moins poétiques, et autrement définis: «En naissant elle était très petite. Sur un portrait d'elle à 4 ans, le nez, la bouche et les oreilles sont d'une grandeur anormale et elle porte un petit chapeau de garçon...» (L'inversion sexuelle par Havelock Ellis. Cas. IV, etc):

Si j'ai choisi mes exemples plutôt dans la littérature, c'est que les êtres doués d'expression se racontent avec plus de subtilité et d'étendue, et dans une forme plus acceptable.<sup>76</sup>

(Sappho is also perhaps thinking of wresting her beloved from he who possesses her.

*“He seems to me the equal of the gods, the man who sits in your presence, bears your sweet words from nearby and your delightful laugh, which makes my heart beat in the depths of my chest. Because when I see you, even for a moment, I no longer have words, my tongue is broken, and suddenly a subtle fire runs under my skin, my eyes do not see, my ears buzz, I am flooded by sweat, and a trembling shakes my entire being; I am paler than grass and in my madness I seem almost dead...But we must dare it all.”* (“Ode to a Beloved Woman,” Sappho, tran. Renee Vivien).

And in her “Sapphics”:

“Ah the singing, ah the delight, the passion! All the Loves wept, listening; sick with anguish, Stood the crowned nine Muses about Apollo; Fear was upon them, “While the tenth sang wonderful things they knew not. Ah the tenth, the Lesbian!...”

Physiology books often provide less poetic examples, and defined otherwise: “At birth she was very small. In a portrait taken at the age of 4 the nose, mouth and ears are abnormally large and she wears a little a boy’s hat...” [*Sexual Inversion*, by Havelock Ellis. Case IV].

If I take my examples from literature instead, it’s because beings who have been endowed with expressive skill tell their stories with more subtlety and range, and more in a more acceptable form.)

The section's title, "Le malentendu ou le procès de Sappho," is a reference to Théodore Reinach's proclamation that the question of Sappho's homosexuality be reconsidered after the discovery of the new papyrus fragment in 1879 that Reinach believed proved Sappho was definitely chaste. Barney, however, reverses the "trial" and uses Sappho's fragments to contemplate the limits imposed by the burgeoning fields of psychology, biology, and the medical sciences, to adequately address homosexual love and desire. Arguing that literature is able to articulate the experience of sexuality in ways that other forms of discourse cannot, she constructs a textual dialogue with other literary writers, citing from the work of Montaigne, Voltaire, Chaucer, Whitman, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Oscar Wilde on love. Barney's "Le malentendu ou le procès de Sappho," like Irigaray's *Marine Lover*, uses preexisting and often opposing forms of discourse to articulate new possibilities for female sexuality.

Despite the privilege that afforded Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien an education and lifestyle unavailable to most of their peers, it did not prevent their absence from conversations on translation and literature. It remains difficult to acquire most of their texts, even in French. In her preface to Chelsea Ray's recent English translation of Barney's prescient text, *Women Lovers or the Third Woman*, Melanie Hawthorne writes:

[Barney's] role as salon hostess has become the stuff of legend, and her social connections to the literary lions of modernism has long been recognized, but her own contributions to modernism and the international waves that shaped it have been vastly underrated. ...much of the work she chose to publish during her lifetime is in a genre that does not speak to the Anglophone world and its contemporary literary traditions.<sup>77</sup>

Luce Irigaray (whose theoretical work has also not spoken to the Anglophone world as fluidly as have her French contemporaries) establishes radical textual encounters with the Greek canon that expose the construction of female subjectivity by phallogocentric discourse. For her part, the figure of Sappho, whomever she may have been, seems capable of intervening in the sexual politics of disparate historical moments. Indeed, the republication of Loüys's *Les chansons des Bilitis* added a dedication to "les jeunes filles de la société future" (the young women of a future society).<sup>78</sup> Vivien's and Barney's translations of Sappho are thus not only connected to the past (and various imagined pasts) but also imagine futures and utopic spaces. In 2004 DeJean published an article titled "The Time of Commitment: Reading Sappho 1900," revisiting her previous scholarship to posit a possible

alliance between Barney and Vivien and the “Dreyfusards or pro-Jewish thinkers” (those who supported Dreyfus and spoke out against anti-Semitism). She concludes her essay with the question: “Who can tell what will happen to Sappho in the new Europe now being proclaimed, a Europe without airtight frontiers that sheltered the rise of nationalism?”<sup>79</sup> How are translations of Sappho still dedicated to those of “future societies?” Sappho continues to offer radical possibilities for translation, sexuality, and female authorship, even outside Western Europe and the United States. In 1950s Jamaica, for example, there were attempts to create a “Sapphic club,” the first Caribbean woman’s literary salon that described its project as a sacred sorority and Sappho as its honorary president. In the twenty-first century, 2010, a kuchu-queer club named Sappho Islands opened in Kampala, Uganda; because the Ugandan government passed more restrictive laws against homosexuality, the club was forced to close a year later. The story of Sappho Islands’s emergence and subsequent closure became the subject of a theatrical project, *Clubscenen*, that premiered in 2012 in Stockholm. Just as her nineteenth-century revival took place in the political and social sphere of the literary salon, Sappho’s presence has continued to animate groups to convene beyond the pages of books.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Louÿs and Mariette Lydis, *Les chansons de Bilitis* (Paris: G. Guillot, 1948), 10.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Albert's book was originally published in French, under the title *Saphisme et décadence dans Paris fin-de-siècle* (2005). I cite from the English version of Albert's book, translated by Nancy Erber and William Peniston, and published in 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The classical scholar Page duBois, for example, whose several books on Sappho—*Sappho Is Burning* (1995) and *Sappho* (2015)—use feminist approaches, among others.

<sup>6</sup> Lorenz's title is actually a vindication of the pejorative title “Sappho cent pour cent” that was given to the group retrospectively by the critic and editor André Billy in the 1950s. Billy was critical of Barney's and Vivien's unconventional translations of Sappho's work. The French spelling of Sappho used only one “p” for her name—“Sapho”—hence it will be spelled this way in nearly all the French accounts I cite. For more information, see DeJean's *Fictions of Sappho*.

<sup>7</sup> Émile Deschanel, “Les courtisanes Grecques, Sappho et les lesbiennes,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, no. 83 (1847): 343.

<sup>8</sup> DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 261.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>10</sup> The emergence of vocabulary to connote homosexuality was different between France and England, although they influenced each other. DeJean details:

In France, Sappho really becomes a homosexual poet only after the vocabulary of homosexuality had been developed, when female same-sex love had been renamed. However, this statement should not be taken as confirmation of the theory that the homosexual in the modern sense only came into existence: the relation between word and sexuality is more elusive than my first sentence reveals. Dictionaries note “saphisme”'s existence in the sense of “female homosexuality” as of 1867 (post-Deschanel), and the entrance of homosexual only in 1906. This evolution is reversed in English, in which a vocabulary for female same-sex love develops later than in

French: sapphism and lesbian seem to have been associated with same-sex love only after “homosexual”’s implantation. For the scholarly sexualization of Sappho, English usage is more important than French: two years after Symonds introduced “homosexual” in his commentary on ideal love, he provided the translation of Bergk’s homosexual Sappho into a modern language, that inspired the same revision in French. (*Fictions of Sappho*, 237)

<sup>11</sup> Henry Thornton Wharton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> See DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 234.

<sup>14</sup> André Lebey, *Les poésies de Sappho traduites en entier pour la première fois* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1895), 15.

<sup>15</sup> The following is Lebey’s translation of “The Ode to Aphrodite” (italics added):

Quel est-*il*, ô — Sapphô, celui dont tu te plains?  
— Car, s’il fuit, bientôt il te recherchera, — et s’*il* refuse tes présents, *il* t’en donnera d’autres, — et s’*il* ne t’aime pas, bientôt *il* t’aimera — même si tu ne le veux pas.— Viens à moi encore maintenant, délivre-moi d’une chagrine — pensée ; ce que je célèbre, — ce que mon coeur désire, achève-le! Toi-même — sois mon alliée! (26)

(Who is *he*, O Sappho, the one you’re complaining about?  
For if *he* flees, *he* will soon search for you, and if *he* refuses your gifts, *he* will give you others, and if *he* does not love you, soon *he* will love you—even if you want it not. Come to me again now, deliver me from sadness, thought; that which I celebrate—that which my heart desires, fulfill it! You—be my ally!)

<sup>16</sup> DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 261.

<sup>17</sup> See Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 182–83.

<sup>18</sup> Reinach actually died in 1928, but Aimé Puech continued with the revision of the book, hence his name is credited as a co-collaborator in the title.

<sup>19</sup> Found near central Egypt, it is often referred to as the “Berlin fragment” because it was deciphered by a German linguist and housed at a university in Berlin.



<sup>20</sup> Reinach's demand was published as an essay titled "Pour mieux connaître Sappho," *Compte rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 55, no. 9 (1911): 718–34. As I later discuss in more detail, in her book *Pensées d'une Amazone* (1920), Barney titled a section "Le malentendu ou le procès de Sappho" ("The Misunderstanding or Sappho's Trial") in reference to this debate.

<sup>21</sup> Émile Deschanel, "Les courtisanes Grecques, Sappho et les lesbiennes," 237.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal* (Paris: Le Livre du Poche, 1964), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Louÿs, *Les chansons de Bilitis*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Page duBois, *Sappho* (London: I. B. Tauris), 47.

<sup>25</sup> The citation includes a tacit reference to Ovid's *Heroides*, where Ovid stages the laments of abandoned female literary figures. He includes a letter from Sappho to Phaon which became very important for poets in early modern England. The myth of Sappho the abandoned (heterosexual) lover is implicit in the characterization of Sampirey as Sappho.

<sup>26</sup> Duraciné Vaval, *Histoire de la littérature haïtienne ou "L'âme noire"* (Port-au-Prince: Édouard Heraux, 1933), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Barney was called an "Amazon" by the French writer Remy de Gourmont and was often the subject of tabloids—both in France and in the United States.

<sup>28</sup> Vivien worked with the Hellenist scholar Jean Charles-Brun and Gaetan Baron to learn ancient Greek.

<sup>29</sup> In the section titled "Renée Vivien," in Barney's memoir *Souvenirs indiscrets*, she writes:

"Peu de temps après ses premiers succès, [Renée] m'emmena chez elle, à Londres, où je pus retrouver...un exemplaire des fragments de Sappho, traduits par Wharton...Ce précieux recueil servit à Renée Vivien de comparaison avec sa traduction française, devint son livre de chevet et la source où elle puisa l'inspiration païenne de plusieurs de ses livres à venir" (Shortly after she'd had her first success, Renée took me to her home in London, where I was able to find a copy of Sappho's fragments, translated by Wharton. This valuable collection served as comparison for Renée Vivien's French translation, became her bedside book, and was the source of pagan inspiration she drew from in many of her books to come) (87).

<sup>30</sup> Like Louÿs, Salomon Reinach, and the editor and Hellenist scholar Jean Charles-Brun.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Goujon, Vivien's biographer, previously recounted that she was introduced to Sappho by Eva Palmer, in 1900. Yet among the letters Reinach deposited are three from the scholar Gaetan Baron, who wrote that he first met Vivien in Paris in 1898, "quand elle eut la velléité d'apprendre le grec" (when she wanted to

learn Greek). He believes that he was likely her first Greek tutor, and describes Vivien as she translated Sappho's poetry: "les plus informes fragments de Sappho prenaient instantément forme et vie, à l'appel de ses évocations" (the most unformed of Sappho's fragments instantly took form and life, at the call of her evocations). The first of these citations comes from a letter Baron wrote to Reinach, dated March 29, 1920; the second comes from Baron's memoirs, dated February 27, 1916. They are both in the archive Reinach bestowed to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, under *Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn), II*, NAF26583, F13-18, Département des manuscrits.

<sup>32</sup> Her first collection, *Études et préludes*, is under the name "R. Vivien," to conceal the fact that she was a female author. There is speculation that she chose the name "Renée" after the deviant character Renée in Émile Zola's *La Curée*. See *Renée Vivien à rebours: Études pour un centenaire*, Nicole G. Albert, ed. (Paris: L'Harmattan: 2009), 97.

<sup>33</sup> *I loved you, Atthis, long ago... / In the evening faded delights bloom / The reflection of your eyes and the echo of your voice... / ...I loved you, all throughout those distant years, / Atthis, long ago.*

<sup>34</sup> Renée Vivien, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1903), 16.

<sup>35</sup> DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 287.

<sup>36</sup> See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 362; and Melanie Hawthorne's introduction to Chelsea Ray's translation of Natalie Barney's *Women Lovers or the Third Woman* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 24.

<sup>37</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian G. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 187.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>39</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Elena Tzelepis and Athena Athanasiou, eds., *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and "the Greeks"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 372.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> See Luce Irigaray and Sara Speidel, "Veiled Lips," *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (1983): 96.

<sup>43</sup> Tzelepis and Athanasiou, *Rewriting Difference*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Irigaray and Speidel, "Veiled Lips," 103.

<sup>45</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Irigaray and Speidel, “Veiled Lips,” 93.

<sup>47</sup> Vivien, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle*, 88. Since Vivien’s translation appears in italics in the book, I have maintained her format in the citation.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> See Albert, *Lesbian Decadence* 249.

<sup>50</sup> Vivien, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle*, 40–42.

<sup>51</sup> Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, “Anne Dacier (1681), Renée Vivien (1903),” in *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, edited by Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102.

<sup>52</sup> Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, “Textiles That Matter: Irigaray and Veils,” in Tzelepis and Athanasiou, *Rewriting Difference*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Albert writes that the “ornamental insets of different sizes...lighten the page presentation but sometimes give it a distracting, collage-like appearance” *Lesbian Decadence*, 231).

<sup>54</sup> Anne Carson, trans., *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Vintage, 2003), xi.

<sup>55</sup> André Lebey, *Les Poésies de Sappho: Traduites en entier pour la première fois*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1895), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Vivien, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle*, xi.

<sup>57</sup> Natalie Clifford Barney, *Souvenirs indiscrets* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 67.

<sup>58</sup> She greatly inspired the English author Radclyffe Hall, for example, who wrote *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), hailed as the most famous lesbian novel of the twentieth century, which was famously banned in England but published in France (Barney also appears as the character Valerie Seymour in the book). Illustrated with woodcuts, Djuna Barnes’s *Ladies Almanack* (1928) was about Barney, who appears in the narrative as Dame Evangeline Musset, a character who helps women in need, provides them with wisdom, and is ultimately made into a saint: “[She] was in her Heart one Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and the Distraction, or such Girls as in their Hinder Parts, and their Fore Parts, and in whatsoever Parts did suffer them most” (42). Barney even attempted to create L’Académie des Femmes (The Academy of Women) as a female alternative to the formerly all-male Académie Française.

<sup>59</sup> This citation comes from Tristram Powell’s 1967 BBC documentary, *Natalie Clifford Barney*.

Powell, Tristram. "Tristram Powell." Last modified 2019. <http://tristrampowell.com/cms/index.php/documentary/7-natalie-clifford-barney?play=ihzoL-rUkNoc>

<sup>60</sup> Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 273.

<sup>61</sup> See Mary C. Greenshields, "The Amazon in the Drawing Room: Natalie Clifford Barney's Parisian Salon, 1909–1970," Master's thesis, University of Lethbridge Department of English (2010); and Samuel N. Dorf, *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi, 1890–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>62</sup> Barney introduced Vivien to Charles Brun, who became one of Vivien's Greek tutors, one of her editors, and one of her confidantes.

<sup>63</sup> The play was apparently first titled "Sappho," which created controversy because it shared its name with Alphonse Daudet's extremely popular novel *Sappho* (1884).

<sup>64</sup> Natalie Clifford Barney, "Équivoque," in *Actes et Entr'Actes* (Paris: E. Sansot, 1910), 57.

<sup>65</sup> Dorf, *Performing Antiquity*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> This controversy was reported by the *Dayton Journal* in Dayton, Ohio, Barney's hometown, in November 1909. While the author defends Barney and praises her intelligence, he fascinatingly did not understand the play's plot twist: that Sappho does not love Phaon but his fiancée.

<sup>67</sup> Charlotte Lysès, Marie Rambert, Penelope Duncan, and Marguerite Moreno, for example.

<sup>68</sup> See Dorf, *Performing Antiquity*.

<sup>69</sup> Arsène Houssaye and Francis Vielé-Griffin also wrote plays about Sappho that were quite popular. See *Fictions of Sappho* for more detailed information.

<sup>70</sup> J. J. Winkler, "Double Consciousness in Sappho's Lyrics," *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, edited by Laura McClure (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2007), 74.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>72</sup> She in fact describes her frustration with Colette's famous partner, the writer Willy, for insisting on accompanying her to one of the performances. See page 237 of *Souvenirs indiscrets*.

<sup>73</sup> Karla Jay, *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 137.

<sup>74</sup> *Pensées* is a series of fragments written by the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal and published posthumously. They are primarily about the reasons for his conversion to Christianity.

<sup>75</sup> This text was printed in English.

<sup>76</sup> Natalie Clifford Barney, *Pensées d'une Amazone* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1921), 76.

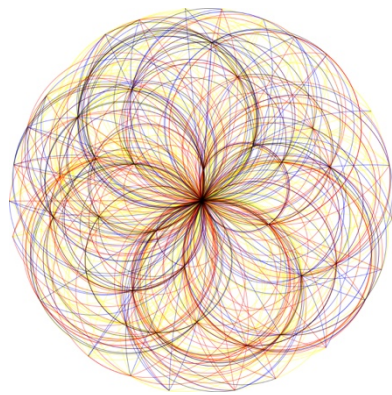
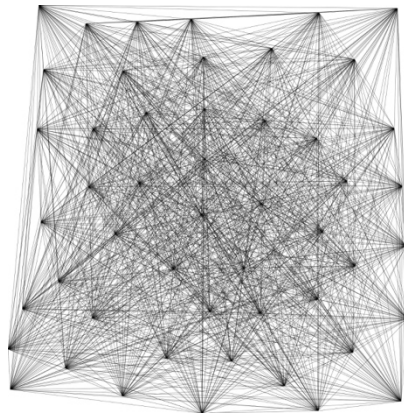
<sup>77</sup> Chelsea Ray and Natalie Clifford Barney, *Women Lovers, or the Third Woman* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 12.

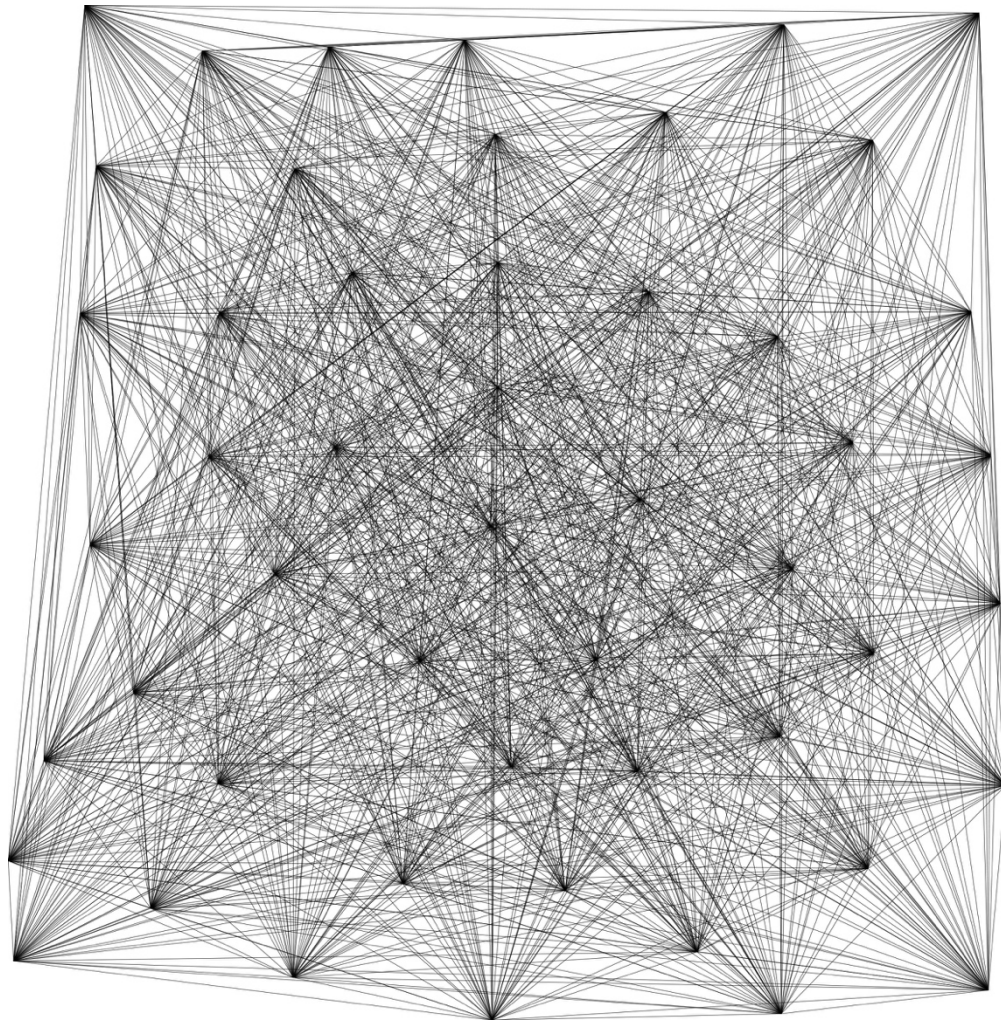
<sup>78</sup> Louÿs, *Les chansons de Bilitis*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Joan DeJean, "The Time Commitment: Reading Sapho 1900," *Modern Language Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2004): 59.

*LeWitt Transpositions*

Marc Miller



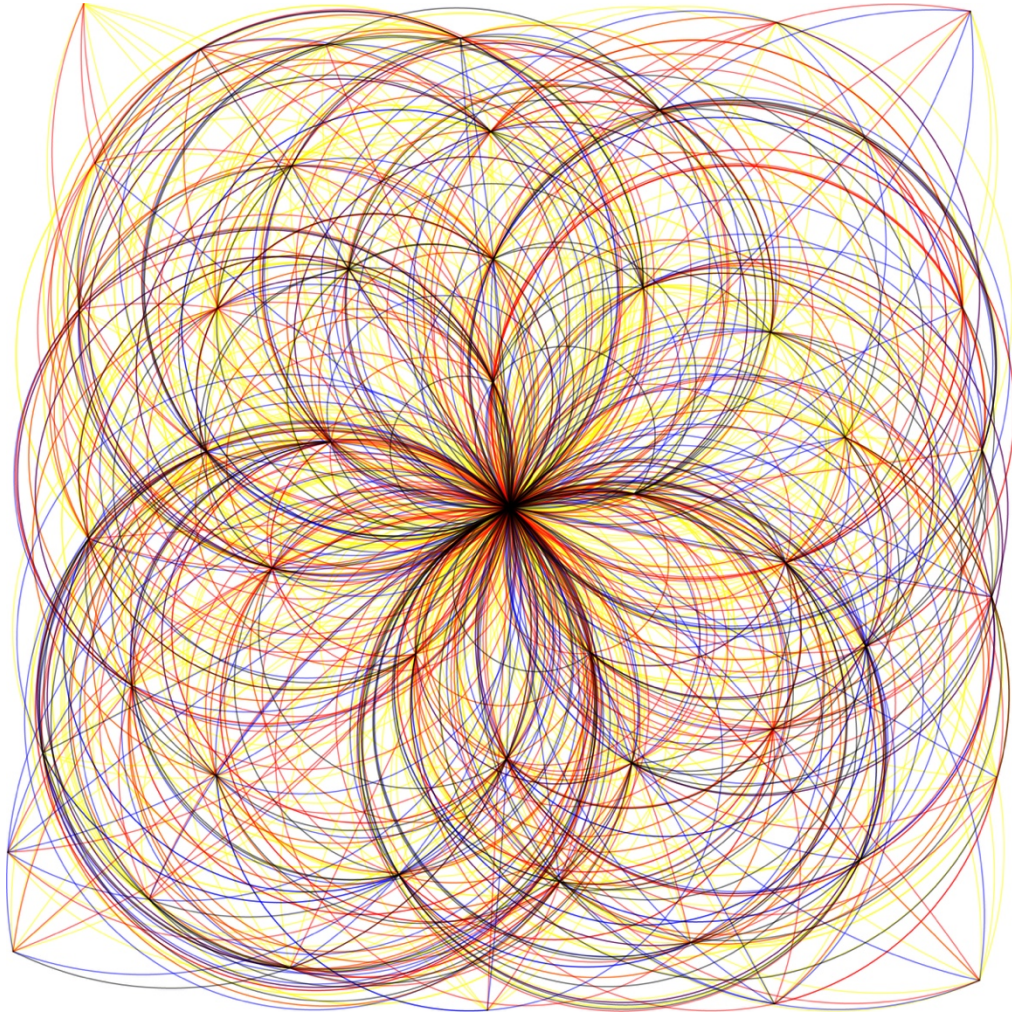


*Figure 1 Marc Miller, Transposition 118- Derivation 118-0. Image courtesy of the artist.*

“On a wall surface, any continuous stretch of wall, using a hard pencil, place fifty points at random. The points should be evenly Distributed over the area of the wall. All of the points should be connected by straight lines.”

Define a square boundary, 7”x7”;  
Randomly seed fifty points within the boundary;  
Construct lines that connect all the points.



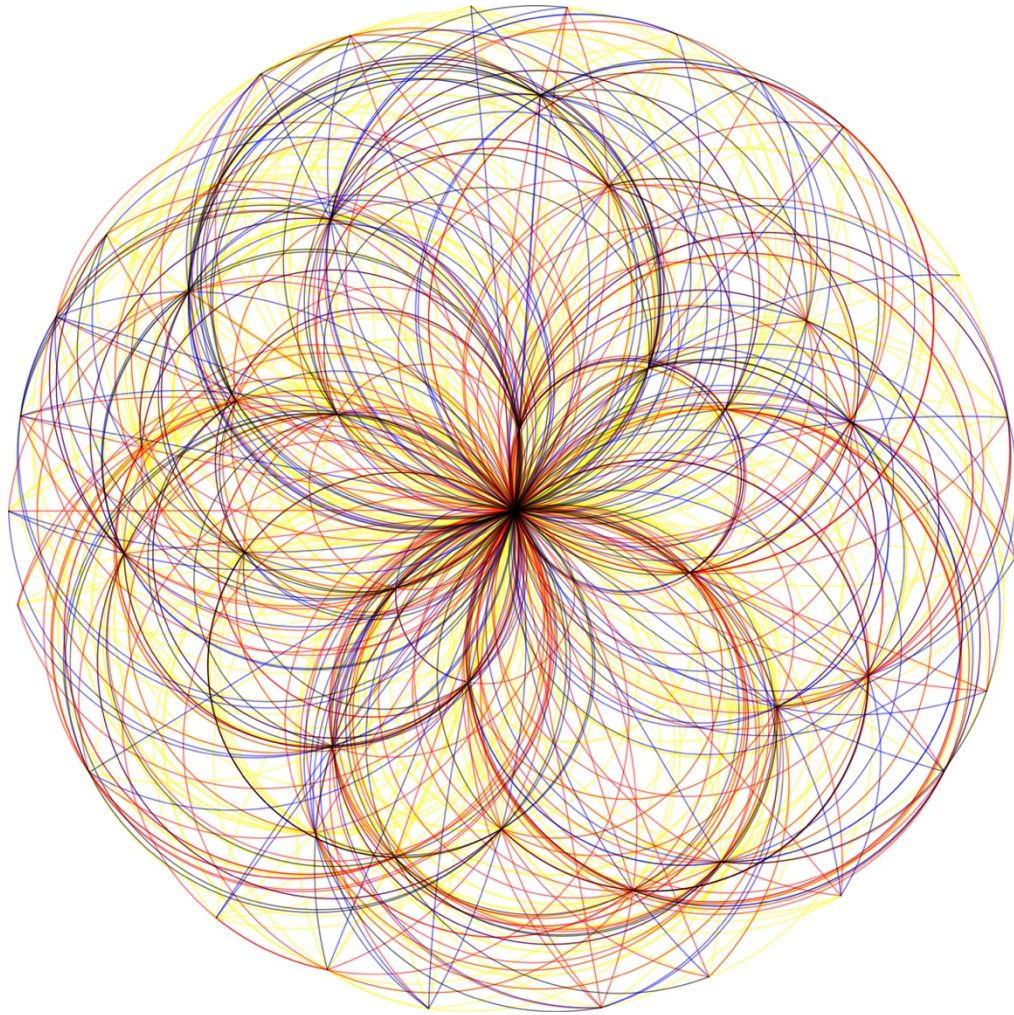


*Figure 2 Marc Miller, Transposition 118- Derivation 3. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Define a square boundary, 7"x7";  
Randomly seed fifty points within  
the boundary;  
Construct arcs that connect all the  
points using the center of the  
bounded area as one of the construc-  
tion points;

Draw only those lines that do  
not intersect with the boundary;  
Randomly assign the curves with one  
of three colors.

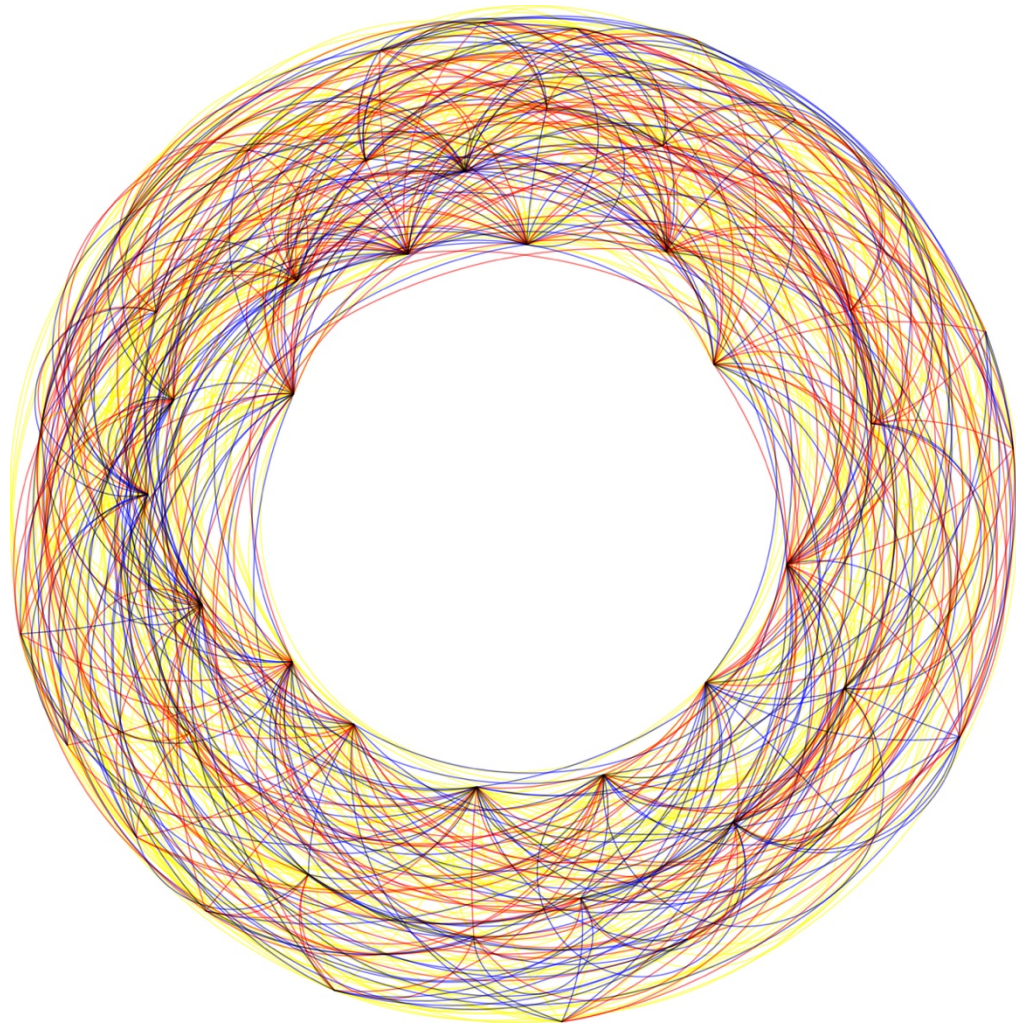




*Figure 3 Marc Miller, Transposition 118- Derivation 4. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Define a circular boundary;  
Randomly seed fifty points within  
the boundary;  
Construct arcs that connect all the  
points using the center of the bound-  
ary as one of the construction points;

Draw only those lines that that do  
not intersect with the boundary;  
Randomly assign the curves with one  
of three colors.

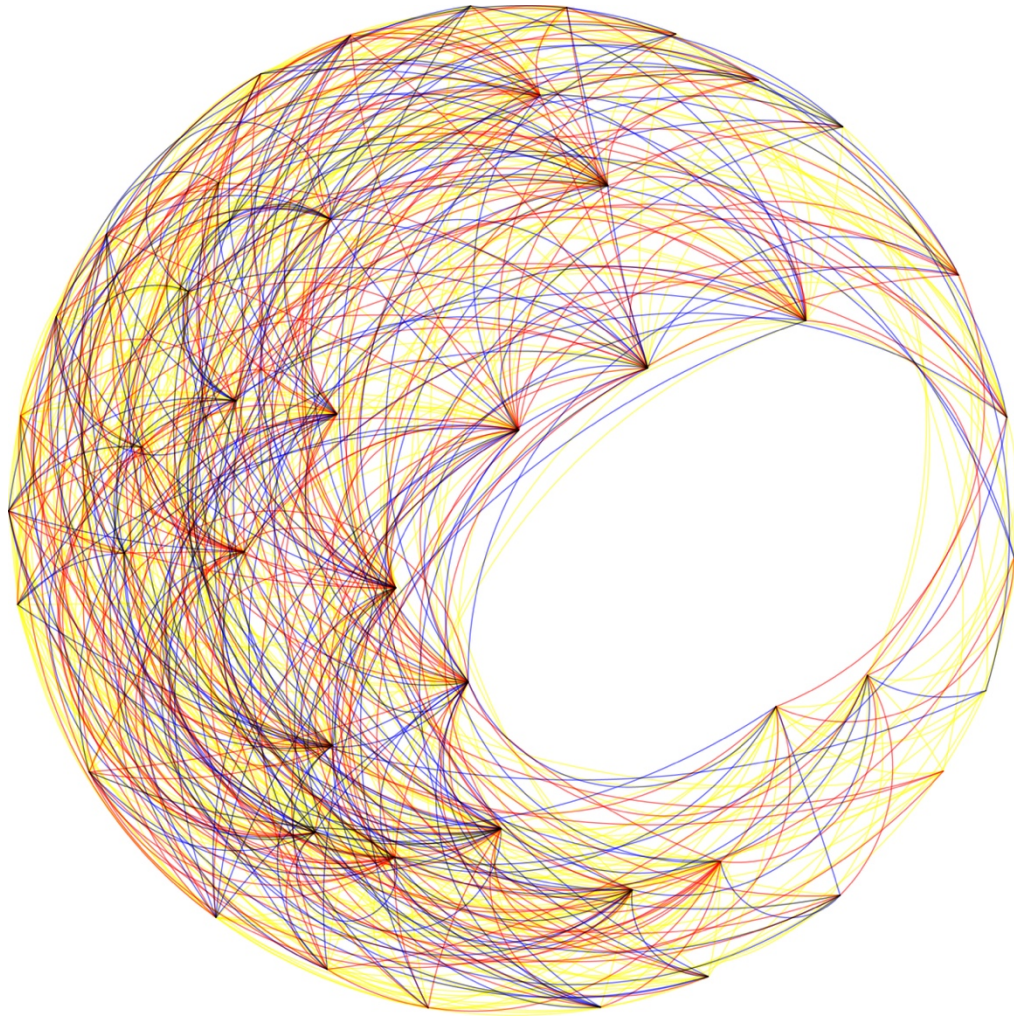


*Figure 4 Marc Miller, Transposition 118- Derivation 5. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Define on circular boundary with a radius not to exceed 7";  
Define a second circulate boundary using the same center point with a radius not to exceed 6";  
Randomly seed fifty points between the two boundaries;

Construct arcs using the points and the center of the boundaries as one of the construction points;  
Draw only those lines that that do not intersect with the boundaries;  
Randomly assign the curves with one of three colors.





*Figure 5 Marc Miller, Transposition 118- Derivation 6. Image Courtesy of the artist.*

Define a circular boundary not to exceed 7”;

Randomly seed fifty points within the boundary;

Randomly select three points to construct an oval within the circle;

Remove all points that are within the oval;

Construct arcs using the remaining points and the center of the boundary as one of the construction points;

Draw only those lines that do not intersect with the boundaries;

Randomly assign the curves with one of three colors.

## Conceptual Transpositions: Considering the Grammars of Conceptual Art and Parametric Drawing

Marc Miller

In the 1970s, artists and designers were trying to formalize their respective processes using rules. In the fine arts, there was a long period of reflection that had gained traction within the modern art movement.<sup>1</sup> For designers, it presented an opportunity to formalize design practices and procedures, thus providing a rationale for repetitive processes. In both cases, grammar and syntax were used to frame the process of translating the rules into operations.

Generally speaking, grammar is the system and structure of a given language. Syntax helps determine if the statement makes sense and helps make ambiguities evident. Through rules and organizational systems, information or instructions can be communicated. The use of grammar and syntax allowed the process of making artifacts to be described using narratives or calculations. These descriptions were used to make instructions that were executable by others, translating the instructions into operations.

The artist Sol LeWitt was recognized for his interest in conceptual art, in particular, for focusing on the *idea* of making more than actually making physical artifacts. For LeWitt, this led to an interest in the processes by which these instructions were translated from instructions into actual working operations. As part of his interest in conceptual artwork, the instructions that he provided were more important than the drawing artifacts that were the result of executing the instructions.<sup>2</sup>

LeWitt relied on the agency of the drafts person to interpret the instructions and to execute them, believing that they were integral participants in the process of drawing. Working in situ, drafts persons interpreted the instructions and

executed them. This process of interpretation created a random outcome from execution to execution. The randomness was the result of LeWitt's focus on the syntax of the text to create the instructions instead of preparing highly specified instructions.

Prepared in 1971, *Wall Drawing #118* is an example of how LeWitt prepared a set of instructions that had a clear syntax but resulted in variable outcomes. In nine lines of forty words of text, LeWitt specifies that fifty points are to be randomly located on a wall surface and subsequently connected by straight lines.<sup>3</sup> He does not specify the wall surface as part of the instructions. Also, the random location of the points is spelled out as part of the instructions, signaling his reliance on decisions made by the draftspersons to complete the work.

At the same time LeWitt was creating conceptual art, the design and computation theorists George Stiny and James Gips were exploring syntax and non-representational drawings in design. Their approach differed from other applications of computerized drafting at the time because they were interested in preparing instructions to create drawings in ways that were similar to LeWitt. In their seminal paper, they described how they made nonrepresentational drawings using computers.<sup>4</sup>

The rules followed a simple set process that analyzed initial conditions in a drawing environment, transformed the drawing based on instructions, and executed that transformation until otherwise instructed. In contrast to the instructions prepared by LeWitt, the syntax used in a computational environment requires that each step be explicitly articulated using proper grammar and syntax. Unlike the written set instructions that are interpreted by a person, the ambiguous or improper syntax in the computational drawing environment can lead to a "failed" outcome.

While not evident then, the paper by Stiny and Gips, which introduced their concept of shape grammars, has had a significant impact on how contemporary drawing software operates. Parametrics, or the use of parameters as part of architectural design, has become increasingly utilized. Restraints determine outcomes using measurable variables. As programs, they are repetitive, iterative, and easily modified to test variants.

Parametric drawing systems are often software interfaces that use object-oriented coding interfaces. These coding systems employ the three basic operations of an analysis, a transformation, and an endpoint. Grammar (objects) and syntax (organization and flow) are seen, instead of typed, as linguistic commands. The visual nature of the programming environments has the added advantage of allowing the draftsperson to focus more on the outcomes. The benefit of parametric drawing is that the draftsperson can focus on discovering outcomes instead

of reproducing a known result, which produces a difference in how implicit and explicit instructions are interpreted. An implicit part of parametric drawing bears some resemblance to LeWitt's conceptual artwork.

*Wall Drawing #118* is transposed from the original instructions into an object-oriented programming environment embedded within the drafting program Rhinoceros (Figure 1). This transposition is done to test the parallels in language between LeWitt and programming environments inspired by Stiny and Gips, which reveal both a requirement to set up explicit conditions and an implicit reliance on the scripted algorithm to execute operations (Figure 2). The process is being described as a transposition due to these differences in implicit and explicit instructions.

Subsequent derivations illustrated in Figures 3–6 were made to explore issues of ambiguity and to develop complexity in the rule set. Like LeWitt, instructions are included for each drawing. However, the process does not describe the drawing process. Instead, the programming instructions for the draftsman are described. Still, these instructions are written to encourage exploration within the software interface.

As drawings that are made using radically different technologies than the ones used by the reference artist, they are tools made to learn from precedents through mistakes and misunderstandings.<sup>5</sup> This transposition of an analog process into the computational environment creates an opportunity to make new grammars that emulate analog practices. It also creates opportunities for new practices that may be influenced by the earlier work, but takes advantage of the computer to execute operations that may not be completed by hand. This is explored in Figures 3–6, where the instructions call for the elimination of lines that intersect the boundaries of the work space. These constructions of boundaries are made increasingly complex with each subsequent derivation.

Like LeWitt's instructions for wall drawings, the instructions are intended to enable a draftsman to discover in and throughout the process of making. In this case the process of discovery focuses on learning the language to make artifacts versus interpreting instructions provided to them.

While these initial exercises focus on LeWitt's work, there are opportunities to apply this process to other artists like Bridget Riley and Chuck Close, who also used rules to produce artwork. In examining these artists, the process of creating the algorithm is an activity that codifies the analog activities. Going one step further and translating those algorithms into text may enable comparative examinations of making instead of focusing on the finished artifact.

\* \* \*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Rosenblum, “Notes on Sol LeWitt,” in *Sol LeWitt: The Museum of Modern Art*, edited by Alicia Legg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967), 200–203.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Russeth, “Here Are the Instructions for Sol LeWitt’s 1971 Wall Drawing for the School of the MFA Boston,” *Observer*, October 1, 2012, <https://observer.com/2012/10/here-are-the-instructions-for-sol-lewitts-1971-wall-drawing-for-the-school-of-the-mfa-boston/>.

<sup>4</sup> G. Stiny and J. Gips, “Shape Grammars and the Generative Specification of Painting and Sculpture,” in *Information Processing 71: Proceedings of IFIP Conference 71*, no. 2 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1972), 1460–65.

<sup>5</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (1969), 11-13.

## *Translation, Translation, Rehearsal in Conversation*

Scott Hunter and Alexandra Macheski

Scott Hunter's "Translation, Translation, Rehearsal"<sup>1</sup> is a sound piece that explores issues of translation when a tarot deck is used to dictate the fate of each note for a saxophone quartet. Each translation of a tarot card, be it "the fool" or "the hermit," manifests in a harmonic progression of rehearsals that culminate in an infinite play on what is lost, or not lost, in the act of translation. Accompanying "Translation, Translation, Rehearsal" is a brief interview between Scott Hunter, a PhD student of literature at UC Santa Cruz, and Refract editorial board member Alexandra Macheski about how tarot and music composition, and the concept of rehearsal can create new and unforeseen harmonies. This interview, from June 15 to August 4, 2019 started as a face-to-face conversation in Santa Cruz, California, and then moved to written correspondence.

**Alexandra Macheski: What sparked your exploration in translation with a tarot card deck and music?**

**Scott Hunter:** I started using tarot cards in my musical practice as an aleatory procedure. I wanted a more concrete and regular way of working on music than sitting around and waiting for an idea to come, so I tried to turn the tarot into a machine with which I could generate raw material in a fairly reliable way. At first the question was: how do you translate a spatial arrangement into a sequence of time? Of course, this is what it is to read music in the first place. But musical notation is legible as music. Tarot is "legible" in a totally different sense—or maybe I should say it's infinitely suggestive, which gives it a mask of legibility.



To try to “read” tarot as music meant playing music that came to me more or less intuitively in response to a suggestive group of images. This is more ekphrastic than aleatory, which meant that I was back where I started: waiting for an idea to come. My next step was to try and codify the logic by which I “intuitively” read a musical phrase from a given spread of cards, so that I could use that logic to give the element of chance more of a voice. This involved learning a lot more about the structuring principles of tarot—various numerologies, symbols, the significance of different colors, and so on. I became fascinated with the potential that a shuffled tarot deck—as a whole—could be made to determine the overall structure of a composition. So the practice I ended up with, which produced this piece, was to begin with an “intuitive” reading of a few cards; to construct a kind of cipher which took that reading as a direct “translation” of each card into a tone and a duration; and to use that cipher to translate the whole deck into a harmonic sequence.

**AM:** Can you describe the methodology, or your practice, when you composed this piece?

**SH:** It’s essentially a game I play with the tarot deck. So my answer will begin with a description of the deck before I try and explain the “rules” of my game. A tarot deck consists of seventy-eight cards—fifty-six minor arcana, and twenty-two major arcana. The minor arcana is split into four suits: wands, cups, swords, pentacles. Each suit consists of ten “pip” cards, numbered one to ten, and four face cards—page, knight, king, queen. The major arcana are numbered zero to twenty-one and do not have suits. When I begin, the major arcana are the only cards that have a fixed note value—I use the note values assigned to the major arcana by an occultist named P. F. Case, about whom I should probably know more.

I draw out the shuffled cards by three until one of the major arcana shows up and declares a note. And then I start assigning notes to the minor arcana as they appear in the spread in relation to that major arcana. I try to do so as “intuitively” as possible. The trick is that once I’ve assigned a note value to a pip card or a face card, all cards of that number or face are also assigned a value in relation to the one I’m seeing. So I have a total of fourteen decisions to make in the process of laying out the harmonic progression. Most of my decisions will be made in the space of five or six triads. What I have at the end of the procedure is a sequence of twenty-six triads of variable duration which I call the “Rehearsal.” The simplest way to define a Rehearsal is that it is a chord chart derived from a tarot deck in the way I’ve been describing, or an interpretation of such a chord chart.

**AM: Can you speak of other composers who have played with translation? How do you situate your work among them?**

**SH:** To begin with, I think that questions of translation are implicit in the production of music. Musical genres, I think, can be usefully defined by the kind of stance they take on the question of translatability. I'm thinking of the way generic subcultures navigate their distance from a mainstream fantasy of full inclusion. To paint with very broad strokes: hardcore, noise, black metal, and other types of "extreme" music are forceful negations of that fantasy of inclusion. If you do not "get" the music you hear at a black metal show, for example, it's not because the musicians have failed to speak the universal language, and it's not because something has been lost in translation. You heard exactly what you heard, and it wasn't for you. In this sense, I think filtering my musical intuition through a tarot game is a way of productively mediating contradictions in my thinking about inclusion and elitism—accessibility and esotericism—in the music world. I want everyone to be open and accepting; but I also want to hear music that is off-putting, often strategically so, to the majority of people.

But it's more common, I think, to try and sidestep questions of translation altogether, no doubt because the experience of music seems to lack mediation—hearing those sounds, I feel this way, and it feels truly immediate. Full enjoyment of music, I think, begins with giving yourself over to that sense of immediacy, conflating your affective response with the music itself. But as soon as you carry that conflation of reaction and content away from the moment of listening, then you begin to think in terms of a quality of immediacy intrinsic to music, which renders translation beside the point. That sidestepping tends to take one of two routes: there's the Pythagorean approach, which appeals to the "music of the spheres," and there's the humanist approach that celebrates music as a "universal language."

If music is regarded as a universal language, then the sphere of music production becomes a utopian space where nothing can ever be lost in translation. This notion might seem innocuous, but if we look at the history of its deployment, then we find that some languages are more universal than others and need to be "universalized" by someone like, to take the obvious example, Elvis Presley. Material theft of the kind that followed from Elvis's imitation continues to be licensed by precisely the claim that music is a universal language that needs no translators. To call music a "universal language" is to enable the music industry's conflation of mimesis and revision with intellectual property theft. This does nothing to correct the distributive problems arising from cultural appropriation and does quite a bit to stunt the evolution of music as an art form.

If music derives from the “music of the spheres,” on the other hand, then a bit of mathematical work is necessary to make that music audible—to make it music at all. The harmonic vibrations of the planets, on this line of thinking, are too vast for us to hear, and so they must be transposed to a scale we can manage—say, a length of string on a lute. Musical harmony is a transposition of cosmic harmony, and there is only one cosmos—therefore, music is universal. But the math connecting lute-string vibrations to the heavens proceeds from false premises—geocentricity and so on—which means that in effect, the rules of harmony were produced by a “translation” that used math as a universal interpretant. All the credit for this translation went to the heavens. I’m interested in the Pythagorean view, not because I think there’s anything sound about it from an ontological perspective, but because something interesting happens to the concept of originality when it is understood to be both a given and beyond reach: music is allowed to retain the mystery that gives it power in the first place, and the paradigm for music production begins to look less like origination (producing intellectual property) and more like creative translation.

To answer your question in more concrete terms: my process takes cues from experiments in scoring (Pauline Oliveros, Julius Eastman); from aleatory music (John Cage, Brian Eno); and, though it probably doesn’t come through in this recording, from the traditions that get lumped together as spiritual jazz. I love Albert Ayler and Alice Coltrane, and in more contemporary terms I’ve been really excited by a lot of stuff from International Anthem—Resavoir, Ben Lamar Gay, Makaya McCraven.

**AM: How does your background as literature scholar influence, or direct, your acts of translation in this piece?**

**SH:** As a scholar of literature, I’m thinking about fiction as a force of subjectivation. What do subject positions in narrative have to do with lived, embodied, historical subjectivity? What other subjects are fixed into place when, for example, a chivalric hero proves his worth? What imaginative possibilities are foreclosed by the formal resolution of a fictional narrative? What does reading have to do with that foreclosure?

These questions are surely present in the back of my mind as I read a story into a random spread of cards and as I try to translate some version of that story into a harmonic progression. Following through with that initial reading—that is, reading the rest of the deck according to the logic by which I read the original spread—is a way of staging those questions. In literary scholarship, these questions can be partially answered—that’s what the profession is about. But my approach

to creative work, on the other hand, consists in tracing the changes that questions undergo as they persist in being unanswered—of allowing mystery to remain mysterious, that I might continue to respectfully and amateurishly mess around with it.

**AM: Why “Rehearsal?”**

**SH:** The name is a nod to the novelist Wilson Harris and the ways in which reading his work nudged my own work along in this particular direction. I like the term because it suggests that the object itself is constitutively unfinished, open to interpretation and revision. The concept of rehearsal is central to Harris’s work and bears a fascinating relation to his ideas about originality. In a 1996 radio broadcast called “The Music of Living Landscapes,” Harris poses the question: “Is there a language akin to music threaded into space and time which is prior to human discourse?” He doesn’t answer, but the question isn’t exactly a rhetorical one. Though he proceeds with his creative work as though the answer were a definite yes, Harris is careful to never claim that there is anything universal about the language he imagines. Rather, he endows his imagined language with a quality of transcendent originality that cannot be finally understood, in large part because it is always in a state of evolutionary flux. This is not a historically specific point of origin, like the big bang. It is, rather, a transcendent, ongoing “originality” vaguely related to that of Pythagorean numbers.

The site of this originality goes by a number of names in Harris’s work—“the cross-cultural imagination” is perhaps the most concise, but Harris is also particularly fond of calling it the “shamanic womb of space.” It is a speculative construct—significant not because it is true in any empirical way but because it can serve as a tool for making truths visible. To use this tool, for Harris, requires great introspection—knowledge of the shadow one casts simply by existing in time and space, awareness of one’s own internal alterity, and an attitude of humble patience toward the shadows of others. The process of cultivating these things can come to no end—it is, to invoke the title of one of Harris’s novels, an “infinite rehearsal” of encounters with alterity.

**AM: I am interested in the sensorial, visceral, and visual aspect in the translation of tarot cards into the aural. What deck did you use? Could you offer some meditations on how the effect of the visual can be translated into a harmonic soundscape?**

**SH:** I use the Rider-Waite deck because it is designed specifically to create the illusion that it is communicating wisdom from another sphere. Tarot cards, I

should mention, were not used for cartomancy until the eighteenth century, when Antoine Court de Gébelin decided the tarot deck was a repository for the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus, and people broadly agreed to believe him. A. E. Waite, who is credited with directing Pamela Colman Smith's illustrations of the Rider-Waite deck, was ambivalent about this claim: on the one hand, he was positive that the tarot system held the key to a great deal of eternal mystery; but on the other, he knew, and insisted in his writings, that the "mystery" did not come from ancient Egypt. I think Waite's ambivalence goes a long way toward explaining why the deck is so effective: the creation of the deck was motivated by Waite's unwavering faith in the ability of tarot to house and dispense eternal wisdom; but Waite was too ethical a scholar to make any unfounded claims about the real content of that eternal wisdom. The deck, as a result, is a jungle gym for the cognitive faculties, which are mystified by the games they play with numerology, symbolism, color schemes, depictions of movement, and so on.

The only real "mystery" about tarot cards is the mystery of consciousness itself; the only thing tarot can reveal to you is your own fixations and habits of mind. But fixations and habits of mind turn out to be quite meaningful when you pay attention to their interplay, as tarot tricks you into doing. I think of tarot as a mask you put on your subconscious in order to negotiate with it. The translation from the "visual" to the "aural" begins with that process of negotiation, as I try to find a musical expression that fits a spread of cards. But after all the negotiations are over, and my decisions are made, and the cards are continuing to present me with the consequences of my final decisions, then I am stuck with a bunch of really wonky harmonic moves that I would never have chosen to make. I think of these as a kind of return of the repressed, the "repressed" here being the contingency of the original spread of cards, or as a way of voicing precisely what was "lost in translation" when I chose to "translate" the spread the way I did.

**AM:** In the background of each tarot, you said you notice unique continuities within a projected landscape. However, the tarot card user needs to identify these visual continuities and mentally project themselves into this world to experience them as a unified environment. Do you see your composition as an act of filling in the physical gaps that separate each card? Meaning, is your soundscape piece actually a landscape? How does rhythm in your piece act as a unifying force and what role does translation play in rearticulating, or suturing together, an environment of some sort?

**SH:** A common conception of tarot is that each individual card is a gateway to a space where, the thinking goes, you encounter the card's specific "energy" directly. Each card is, furthermore, also expressive of two distinct wholes: the whole of the

spread in which it appears, and the whole of the deck from which it came. I think of the whole of the spread as an allegory and the whole of the deck as the entirety of the language in which that allegory found expression—a language comprising no more or less than seventy-eight parts.

I reject the idea that the cards themselves have any “energy,” but I find the spatial conceit of projection to be really useful for reasons that have mostly to do with memory. I use a “memory palace” technique to memorize the deck—this means envisioning a very concrete space and placing memorable details from the cards within that space. The cards are now “triggers”; pulling any one card, I go to that spot in my memory, which helps me remember the card’s position in the totality of the deck.

When I pull a random spread of cards, however, the utility of the memory palace is limited to individual cards, and I have to do a different kind of projecting. This is where the topographical detail in the cards’ imagery comes in handy: say I pull Temperance, the Moon, and the Ace of Pentacles. I notice a pathway runs through each of these cards, and I leap to the conclusion that I am looking at three different segments of one long path. Why? Because I know that there are only four cards in the whole deck that show paths explicitly—the three cards I’ve pulled, and the Eight of Pentacles. This is a pattern—a very unlikely one—and it is impossible to traverse in the memory palace with which I recall the deck. So I have to put aside the memory palace for a moment while I assemble a projected space out of those parts of it I see in front of me in the spread. This is an exercise in apophenia—in freely translating pattern into allegory.

The process of composing a “Rehearsal” begins with fixing that allegory into place musically—with a harmonic progression that I think resolves in accordance with the allegory I see in the spread before me—and then proceeds to destroy that allegory by gradually reintroducing all the other elements of the deck. What is being staged at this point is a kind of cannibalization of the spread by the deck—of an allegory by its language. With that cannibalization, the allegorical space of the spread is reincorporated in the space of the deck—put away in the “memory palace.” There’s certainly a therapeutic aspect to this process, an aspect of getting to know my “shadow,” so to speak. The “Rehearsal” is the by-product of that therapeutic moment, both a memorial to the allegory whose wholeness was lost to its language and a monument to what was lost in the translation I imagined my initial reading to be.

The harmonic progression, then, belongs in a separate space, a differently structured space, from the projected space I associate with tarot. This space is no longer structured by visual or architectural detail, or by anything taken from the tarot cards, but by harmonic structures. For this particular piece, my rule for the

rhythmic progression was to stay with a given triad for the number of beats that corresponded to the number on the card positioned at the top of the triad; if the top card of a triad is an Ace, I have one beat to express that triad; and if the top card is the World, I must stay with that triad for twenty-one beats. Rhythm is a unifying force here in the sense that I am forced, as an improviser or composer, to keep passing through the structure at the prescribed pace, to linger on or pass through each triad as dictated by the chord chart.

**AM: I find it intriguing that you chose a saxophone quartet for your piece. Can you tell me why?**

**SH:** I was listening to a lot of Julius Hemphill, particularly his work with the World Saxophone Quartet, when I made this piece—so the simple answer would be that I wanted to explore a form I found exciting. On a pop-cultural level, the figure of the saxophonist—whether Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Clarence Clemons, Bill Clinton, or Lisa Simpson—steps out in front of the band and asserts their individuality. Because of this cultural baggage, if you have more than one saxophonist improvising at a time, the tendency has long been to treat it as a battle: Who is outplaying whom? Who is building higher on the foundations provided by the rhythm section?

But when you remove the rhythm section from the equation, the whole paradigm changes. Absent the solid foundations of a rhythm section, there is nothing to “battle” over, so to speak. The saxophone quartet seems to hold itself together by a kind of surface tension, floating through time like a bubble. Initially, I chose to write for a saxophone quartet because I was interested in messing around with that surface tension. I can’t say I really achieved the effect here, but it is what drove me to try and work in the form.

**AM: What computer software did you use to generate “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal?” Can you comment on the quality of sound and the aural simulacrum of a computer-generated piece in regard to understanding or playing with another layer of translation?**

**SH:** As soon as I have a song structure on paper, I start improvising through it on the keyboard. I’ll write down whatever melody sticks in a program called MuseScore, and then I’ll add in voices in support and counterpoint the first voice. The program has a MIDI-playback feature, so I’m constantly listening back to the MIDI simulation and tweaking my lines in response to what I hear. This particular version is the result of a whole lot of such tweaking—so I guess MIDI has to be

counted as a participant in the process. As for the recording: computer simulation was a concession to the limitations of time and money.

**AM:** Do you consider “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal” an end product of translation? What are your thoughts on “an end product” and how do you consider your role as a musician in this process?

**SH:** No—I don’t think this is an end product. I think of this as a snapshot of a process. I would love to get the chord charts into the hands of more able musicians so that they can unmask me as a charlatan with tarot cards. My role as composer in this process is first to bring the structure of the song into being, and then to revise and reenvision the network of paths that might be taken through the structure in time.

\* \* \*

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scott Hunter’s *Translation, Translation, Rehearsal* is available for listening at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6kg3223z#supplemental>.



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## *Daisy Bell*

Ryan Page

Near the end of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as the artificial intelligence system HAL 9000 is being disabled, it asks if Dr. Bowman would like to hear it sing a song. The piece of music that it chooses is "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)," a composition that, not coincidentally, was used by the composer Max Mathews to demonstrate the first digital speech synthesis algorithm in the early 1960s. It was upon hearing a demonstration of this work at Bell Labs that science-fiction author and inventor Arthur C. Clarke incorporated the aforementioned incident into the screenplay he created with Kubrick for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Mathews's rendition of the song—derived from an earlier, popular composition written by the British composer Henry Dacre in 1892—has become an iconic instance of digital simulation and uncanniness; after a stilted introduction featuring synthesized strings and piano, a digital voice croons

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true. I'm half-crazy over the  
love of you. It won't be a stylish marriage. I can't afford a carriage.  
But you'll look sweet. Upon the seat. Of a bicycle built for two.

"Daisy Bell" was later coded into a program for generating sounds from the read/write-head of the Commodore 64 disk drive (released 1982), and Microsoft's Cortana (released 2014) will sing the song if asked; also, in the Netflix original series *Stranger Things* (2016–19), a carousel playing "Daisy Bell" is the tipoff to a Russian invasion of the United States. As the technological infrastructure underlying speech synthesis changes, it is important to consider the meaning of successive translations of the same song. What is considered essential? What qualities are preserved and, perhaps more important, what changes? "Daisy Bell" functions

symbolically as both a shorthand for the uncanny flat effect of the digital and its potential malevolence.

I have constructed this rendition<sup>1</sup> of “Daisy Bell” using the aforementioned dialogue from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a YouTube demonstration of the Commodore 64 disk drive playing the piece, Mathews’s synthesized version, a re-creation using a modern form of speech synthesis known as a vocaloid, and several traditional recordings of the song. The result is a bizarre piece of music that takes the voices of the now-dead as transcribed onto wax cylinders or phonographs and juxtaposes those sounds with voices that were never alive to begin with. It is intended to be uncanny, funny, hopeful, and sad. This work is part of a larger project exploring the ontological problems that emerge from simulation, and in particular how nostalgia and uncanniness—with their respective semantic origins in homesickness and the quality of being “un-home-like”—are an intrinsic aspect of the digital.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Daisy Bell* (2019) is available for listening at <https://escholaship.org/uc/item/6cd60127>.

## **Lupine Sensibilities: Dynamically Embodied Inter-subjectivity Between Humans and Refugee Wolves**

Austin D. Hoffman

### **Introduction: The Transformative Potential of Wolf Greetings**

One by one, the students steadily marched single file through the wooden gate as I held it open for them. Most kept their chins up and eyes fixed squarely in front of them, as they were instructed to do. Some, however, could not help but sneak a furtive glance to their right to watch the creatures as they bounded down the hillside to greet the human delegation. Before these bipedal visitors could even find their seats, the wolves were upon them.

This particular group of humans was from United World College, an international school that takes its students off the beaten path for service-learning trips with a focus on social change and experiential learning.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the students were originally from urban metropolises—New York, San Francisco, London, Delhi, São Paulo, Tokyo—and were quite out of their element in a remote mountain eco-village for a whole weekend alongside thirty-some feral canines.

One girl in the group was from Pakistan, and when we were doing introductions earlier that day, she candidly admitted that she was quite afraid of dogs, let alone wolves. In Pakistan and India, it is not uncommon for people to be attacked by wild dogs that live on the refuse of burgeoning megacities like Karachi and Kozhikode.<sup>2</sup> During our visit, most of her classmates were desperate for attention from the wolves and wolf-dogs, some even attempting to get the coveted “wolf selfie” to post on their Facebook or Instagram account (a stunt we advise



*Figure 1 Zeab is a nine-year-old pure Canadian gray wolf. Unlike most adult male wolves he has an incredibly low flight-reflex and is quite curious about humans. Pictured behind him is Abraham (Abe), a twelve-year-old low-content wolf-busky cross and Zeab's foster-father. Photo courtesy of Jenny Thompson, July 2017.*

against, since more than one cellphone has become a wolf chew toy); but she just meekly observed, trying not to give the pack any reason to approach. I walked over and knelt down next to her. “Do you want to try and meet one of them?” I asked. Anxiety flashed across her face for an instant before she composed herself. “Um, yeah sure,” she replied shyly. “Okay, if you’re comfortable, just stand up, walk confidently, and go sit down by that lower log,” I pointed down the hill three or four yards away as I gave her instructions. She scanned the terrain and pointed to where she thought I was referring: “You mean right there?” I nodded. “Yes, right down there to the right of the big tree.” After a little hesitation, she stood up and stiffly walked to the indicated spot. Almost instantaneously, her movement caught the attention of Zeab, a male Canadian gray wolf, by far the largest of the pack (Figure 1). He excitedly trotted over and gently pressed his nose against hers, and thoroughly sniffed her face and hair for investigative purposes. To the delight of everyone, she showed no fear. In fact, a smile began to slowly spread across her face as she reached out and began scratching Zeab on his chin and chest as if they were already well acquainted. For those of us who lived and worked alongside these animals, it was a relatively common occurrence to watch a 120-pound wolf that possessed the jaw strength to snap through a femur grin with delight as the

fingers of a comparatively tiny human massaged behind his ears. Most first-time visitors to the sanctuary, however, are utterly incredulous when they see these playful interactions between humans and apex predators.

I watched contentedly from across the enclosure, knowing that I had gauged the situation appropriately and done my job well. An instructor from United World College turned around, mouth agape, and gave me a look of shock and awe. “I can’t believe she was face-to-face with that wolf! She was so nervous about this before we came here!” he exclaimed after the session ended. “That experience is going to change her forever.”

This is just one salient example, among countless others, of embodied wolf-human interactions that I have participated in or been witness to at Mission: Wolf (M:W), a wildlife sanctuary for rescued wolves and wolf-dog crosses. While not all visitors to the sanctuary are as profoundly affected by meeting a wolf as the Pakistani girl at the center of this vignette, I cannot overstate the transformative potential of these interspecies encounters, however brief they may be. It is also crucial to note that such connections do not just serve the whimsical fantasies of ecotourists and the agendas of posh alternative schools. For many human members of the M:W community, these connections served as the bedrock of deeply complex and emotionally nuanced interspecies relationships and trans-species identities. The purpose of this essay is to understand and articulate the pedagogical and embodied dimensions of these processes.

I first contextualize the site of these interactions through a brief overview of the little-known practice of wolf and wolf-dog breeding in the United States and Canada, and how sanctuaries like M:W emerged in response to it. Throughout the essay I also discuss the educational philosophy and pedagogies of M:W and how they are used alongside embodied interspecies communications to illustrate lessons about wolves and wildlife ecology. Some of this contextual information may seem excessive or irrelevant, but having an understanding of the preconceived notions, anthropomorphic projections, and stigmas that humans bring to bear on their encounters with these canines allows us to better analyze these multispecies communicative practices. After providing historical and theoretical context, the majority of this essay attends to the minute and intricate details of the human-wolf interactions themselves. I use the anthropological paradigm of dynamic embodiment as articulated by Brenda Farnell and Charles Varela, as well as (re)formulations of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and Peircian semiotics, to describe how deictic bodily orchestration and spatial orientation are used to facilitate intersubjective understanding across species lines.<sup>3</sup> In doing so I also borrow, with some qualifications, from Kenneth Shapiro’s tripartite methodology of understanding

animals through kinesthetic empathy, social constructions, and individual histories.<sup>4</sup>

The French existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty frequently drew from studies of animal communication to theorize about human perception in his early works such as *The Structure of Behavior* and in his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>5</sup> Although he did often refrain to a tacit species hierarchy of “higher” and “lower” animals, near the end of his life he contradicted his earlier ideas as he began to critically interrogate the arbitrary barriers between humanity and nature. He moved away from anthropocentrism and toward a decentering of the human, ultimately suggesting a social field or milieu in which human consciousness necessarily unfolds in dialectical relationships with nonhuman forms of consciousness. In the *Course Notes on Nature*, Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to equate human and nonhuman sociality by saying that “we can speak in a valid way of an animal culture.”<sup>6</sup> These inchoate ideas reach their most refined form in his unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>7</sup> Louis Westling says it is here that Merleau-Ponty outlines “a horizontal kinship between humans and other animals . . . [that is] congruent with evolutionary biology and ecological thought.”<sup>8</sup> Other scholars, such as Brett Buchanan and Kelly Oliver, join Westling in suggesting that this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “the flesh of the world” was meant to accomplish by serving as a theoretical window into the coconstitutive, intercorporeal nature of all life.<sup>9</sup>

There are, however, important qualifications that should be made in resurrecting the concept of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty’s brand of existentialism takes the vital step of situating the moving body as the locus of social action in a refutation of Cartesian dualisms, which posit the body as an automaton that simply houses the mind. Farnell points out that in his opposition to Descartes, Merleau-Ponty commits an equally reductionist error by “[swinging] the pendulum as far as possible in the other direction . . . [relocating] an equally ambiguous notion of agency in the body.”<sup>10</sup> Agency thus remains a ghost. In other words, Merleau-Ponty turns the “lived body” or “flesh” into a reified concept—much like Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus” or Sigmund Freud’s “unconscious”—which locates causation and agency in the mere fact of embodiment and not in *persons* themselves. The reality is that “neither minds nor bodies intend, only *people* do, because as embodied persons they are causally empowered to engage in social and reflexive commentary with the primary resources of vocal and kinetic systems of semiosis provided by their cultural ways of being human.”<sup>11</sup>

As Farnell and Varela explain, a resolution to this epistemological impasse can be found in Rom Harré’s theory of causal powers, in which “the natural powers for agency grounded in the unique structure of the human organism make

possible the realization of personal powers that are grounded in, and thus afforded by, social life.”<sup>12</sup> By returning agency to persons, this view avoids the overly deterministic aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s thought while retaining the radical potential of an embodied consciousness that exists in continuity with the other-than-human world.<sup>13</sup> In his zealous rejection of positivism, Merleau-Ponty verges on some of the same fallacies he set out to transcend. Had the scientifically grounded resources of new realism been available to him, he may have been better able to articulate the fascinating conclusions he was working toward in *The Visible and the Invisible*, which anticipated much of the contemporary work in human-animal studies. Farnell and Varela’s version of dynamic embodiment and Harré’s theory were focused on human movement and agency, but I argue that their views can logically be extended to the realm of the nonhuman quite easily, thus allowing us to discuss the unique structures of other species and the varying forms of agency they allow.

Ethnographic vignettes of interspecies communications, such as the one that opened this essay, function as units of analysis for these theoretical orientations. The primary source of this data is autoethnographic and based on my time as the education coordinator at M:W from 2016 to 2018. During this time, I lived on-site at the sanctuary and was obligated to observe, interpret, and speak about captive wolf and wolf-dog social dynamics to the public almost daily. Part of my responsibilities involved collaborating with other staff members to help revamp the educational programming at the sanctuary. A major component of this was cofacilitating wolf-human interactions and the flow of bodily movement within wolf enclosures, so I have intimate knowledge of this multispecies practice. All this being said, I acknowledge that I am by no means an expert in zoology, wolf biology, predator ecology, or any related field. I respect the experts in these arenas and have learned a great deal from them. At the same time, I recognize that these scientific fields are generally based in positivist philosophy and sometimes imply that they have ascended to some epistemological plane of detached and pure objectivity.<sup>14</sup> I echo the concerns of Donna Haraway, Karen Warren, Bruno Latour, and other posthuman and feminist scholars, and am highly critical of knowledge claims that emanate from a disembodied “view from nowhere.”<sup>15</sup> My hope is that the perspective of an anthropologist who is taking a realist approach may offer valuable alternative interpretations.

There is a growing body of literature in the field of environmental education that draws from the phenomenological tradition in theorizing about human-animal interactions. I am inspired by the eco-phenomenology of Phillip G. Payne and aim here to further an educational pedagogy of intercorporeal relations and to conceptualize M:W as “an active experiential and existential site of and for inquiry in and with various natures and environments.”<sup>16</sup> From the animal welfarist



perspective, some work has also been done about how these interactions occur in the contexts of zoos and wildlife sanctuaries, and how they can be mutually enriching for non/humans; Lindsey Mehrkam, Nicolle Verdi, and Clive Wynne have specifically studied captive wolves and wolf-dogs in this regard.<sup>17</sup> Holding all these schools of thought in mind, this essay lies at the four-way intersection of human-animal studies (HAS), anthropological methodology, environmental education, and phenomenology. More specifically, I endeavor to bring the anthropological framework of dynamic embodiment—which draws heavily from phenomenology but has been largely humancentric—firmly into conversation with these other intellectual genealogies. I also feel that wild animals are still underrepresented in HAS, with much scholarship employing these methodologies being focused on domestic animals. To recap, the purpose of this essay is to use the theoretical tools listed above to analyze multimodal techniques such as speech, gesture, gaze, body postures, and movement that make intersubjective connections between humans and wild or feral animals possible, and ultimately, as the philosopher David Dillard-Wright says, “reveal the ways in which human embodiment connects with other forms of embodiment in the production of meaning.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Wolf-Dog Phenomenon and the Sanctuary Economy**

Few animals have captivated the human imagination like the wolf. Its image evokes a gamut of emotions ranging from fear and hatred to reverence and love. How these emotions take shape is, however, dependent on many sociocultural and politico-economic factors. For example, Ray Pierotti and Brandy Fogg recount how most of the Indigenous plains nations of North America “have stories characterizing wolves as guides, protectors, or entities that directly taught or showed humans how to hunt, creating reciprocal relationships in which each species provided food for the other or shared food.”<sup>19</sup> When this is juxtaposed with European views, as exhaustively detailed by Jon Coleman and Michael Robinson, the secular threat wolves posed to farmers and ranchers was coupled with a Christian mythology rife with pastoral imagery.<sup>20</sup> In the Bible, the wilderness is defined as a godless place, and many of its denizens were considered demonic entities, none more so than the wolf, who was “the Devil in disguise.”<sup>21</sup> Colonial governments and economies began to incentivize the extermination of wolves by paying bounties for their pelts and heads. With the founding of the United States, wolves were seen as an impediment to progress and manifest destiny, and the brutal extirpation of the species was federalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The gray wolf was nearly extinct in the contiguous states by 1970.

This legacy in many ways still influences current politics of wildlife biology and management, governmental bureaucracies, science and technology, and the popular cultural conceptions of animals constructed via mythology, folklore, literature, and media. All these communicative events, even seemingly innocuous ones like the fairy tales of Little Red Riding Hood or the Three Little Pigs, circulate to produce intertexts, and thus discourses about the wolf and other charismatic megafauna that shape public perceptions across spatiotemporal envelopes.<sup>22</sup>

Such discourses have played a significant role in what to me is an unbelievably ironic turn of events in the past forty to fifty years. In 1973 wolves were designated as an endangered species, and conservation efforts began to prevent their demise. This culminated with the US Fish and Wildlife Service's reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, where they now thrive.<sup>23</sup> Grassroots support for wolf conservation was gained largely by deliberately undoing many of the predominant tropes and myths about the animal. The rehabilitation of the wolf in popular culture mirrors the rehabilitation of the concept of wildness at large in the American imaginary, as discussed by the ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant.<sup>24</sup> Whereas the colonists viewed wild nature as a godless place full of darkness and savagery, the romantic writings of early environmental thinkers and naturalists like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir helped transform it into the epitome of the sublime and the pure.

There is an incredibly understudied aspect to this narrative reclamation and rehabilitation of the wolf's public image, which is that Americans have begun to breed and sell wolves and wolf-dog crosses, commonly known as "hybrids," in captivity. In part, this was done by rogue environmentalists and animal rights activists in the 1960s and 1970s who, fearing the wolf's impending extinction, bred wolves and dogs together in hopes of preserving "pure" genetic material by cloaking it through the facade of domesticity.<sup>25</sup> That being said, the majority of captive wolf-dogs in America today are bred by humans who are taking advantage of uniquely permissive and vague laws and capitalizing on the animal's mystique by selling them for profit.<sup>26</sup>

As the reader may infer, keeping wild animals as pets is generally a bad idea. If born in captivity, these wolves usually cannot be reintroduced to their natural habitats; they never learned how to hunt or socialize in a wild wolf pack and are entirely "habituated" to humans and dependent on them for food. Most of these animals are dead by the age of two or three, as their owners quickly realize their grave mistake or simply tire of attempting to tame them. They are taken to shelters and killed, or escape from their owner's homes and are shot or starve to death. Haraway has briefly written on the liminality of the wolf-dog in the case of South Africa; even though they were originally bred to serve the machinations of

apartheid, wolf-dogs were ultimately rendered “both epidemiologically and genetically categorically ‘impure,’ [they] enter the cultural category of the disposable ‘homeless.’”<sup>27</sup> There is little to no concrete data on wolf-dog populations. The naturalist Robert Busch, referencing the Humane Society of the United States, claims that there were well over two hundred thousand in America in 2007.<sup>28</sup> From my time working in wolf and wolf-dog rescue, my intuition tells me this is an extremely conservative estimate. Regardless, in response to the licit and illicit breeding and selling of these canines, a niche rescue industry has emerged, and M:W is one such space of refuge.

M:W is an off-grid, solar-powered nature sanctuary run primarily by a staff of live-in volunteers and interns who refer to themselves simply as “caretakers” rather than employees or staff (this is an intentional discursive shift that indexes a moral obligation or duty to the wolves and land the sanctuary cares for). It is a nonprofit organization that has been open to the public since 1988 and hosts thousands of visitors and dozens of service-learning groups each year. The canine residents are generally rescued or surrendered from the exotic pet trade, but they also come from defunct zoos and safari parks, and some even from the film industry. Sanctuary residents are a “pure” subspecies of the gray wolf, as well as many wolf-dog crosses. M:W’s educational program is based on a philosophy of lived-experience, which is foregrounded in the organization’s publications and website: “We connect people with nature using hands-on experiential education. Through volunteer internships and our education programs, we inspire individuals to become stewards of the Earth.”<sup>29</sup> In practice, this means allowing the public to directly observe resident canines by taking a tour of the sanctuary or by participating in a service project. At designated times, there is also the prospect of facilitated interaction with the most socialized resident canines, otherwise known as the “ambassadors,” which I expound on below.

The information in this section serves to show how wolves are alternately viewed as vicious and aggressive creatures, or as noble, metaphysically powerful “spirit animals” that help one commune with the natural world. These romanticizations and fetishizations of “the wild,” distortions of Native American cosmologies, and the intense American affinity for domestic dogs have led to the high demand for wolf-dogs as pets.<sup>30</sup> As a social hybrid species existing in the space between wildness and domesticity, between “savagery” and civilization, the wolf-dog unsettles and problematizes the pervasive nature-culture dichotomy—yet another outgrowth of Cartesian logics. These dualisms and anthropomorphic projections determine how humans mis/recognize wolves, and other animals, as subjects. These projections emanate from complexly imbricated sociocultural, historical, environmental and political dynamics, which impinge on the qualitative

aspects of the multispecies community and relationships at M:W. I now show how these dynamics operate and are put into practice during wolf-human interactions at the sanctuary.

### **Multimodal Embodied Praxis of Wolf-Human Interactions**

Many wolf sanctuaries and educational centers have something akin to ambassador packs, consisting of canines that are uniquely social with humans and who gain enrichment from interspecies interactions with them. In the case of M:W's long-running ambassador program, these interactive public events usually took place in high school and university auditoriums, natural history museums, state parks, and so on. During my tenure at M:W, the ambassador program did not travel outside the state of Colorado due to the elderly age of some of the canines. Instead, the organization decided to shift to on-site ambassador events, which allowed visitors to observe and interact with the animals up close, should the animals choose to do so.

This event, which we titled a “wolf behavioral session,” can be seen as a complex semiotic process or, in the words of Susan Laird and Kristen Holzer, as a process of *befriending* in practice, of “[discerning] the apparent possibilities, limitations, and best practices of friendliness in such interspecies encounters.”<sup>31</sup> In describing this, I use the paradigm of dynamic embodiment in an effort to steer clear of Western dualisms that bifurcate linguistic and bodily forms of communication. I again borrow from Farnell in using the terms *vocal signs* and *action signs* from this point on, rather than the traditional “speech” and “gesture.” As she elaborates, “This shift in terminology places both modalities on a more equal footing as two different types of semiotic resources equally available to linguistically capable, embodied agents.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout this section I extend theories of dynamic embodiment into the realm of nonhuman animals by applying Dillard-Wright's iteration of phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's later works and Eduardo Kohn's conception of semiotics.<sup>33</sup>

Jo Lee and Tim Ingold claim that “we cannot expect to walk into other people's worlds, and expect thereby to participate in them.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, I believe that we, as humans, cannot expect to simply walk into the worlds of nonhuman peoples and meaningfully participate in them either. This is why the wolf behavioral session is prefaced by a mandatory instructional talk (usually referred to by caretakers as “the wolf talk”) led by the sanctuary director or a senior staff member. Like the antecedent educational tour, the content of this talk is highly variable depending on the composition of visitors. While the main objective of this is to

provide people with the information necessary for a safe, and ideally fulfilling, interaction with the ambassador wolves, it is also loosely designed to pedagogically reinforce educational talking points of the organization and to assess the relative “maturity” levels of younger participants. Unlike most wolves who flee at the sight of anything bipedal, the ambassador pack is oddly curious about humans. We attributed this partly to the fact that the ambassadors had lived almost the entirety of their lives at the sanctuary, and to our knowledge were not subject to abuse or maltreatment prior to their arrival.

To create an environment where humans and wolves can have positive, nonthreatening interactions, you have to try and teach humans to “think” like a wolf. Indeed, a common adage among M:W community members is “we don’t train the wolves, we train the people.” This may sound like an utter impossibility, but I conceive it as similar to taking an emic approach to studying another human culture, in the sense of trying to take the perspective of the subject or “other.” The challenge here, of course, is that the other is from a completely different species. In essence, this is a process of pushing against the boundaries of the body in terms of its sensorial capacities in an effort to interpret the material world from the subjectivity of a wolf. Put differently, it is an attempt to use the body to take the perspective of what Thomas Csordas has termed “other myselfes.”<sup>35</sup> This process of trans-species emulation is necessarily imperfect, but this approach to wolf-human communication has been largely successful—perhaps because it is, as Haraway suggests, a way to encourage visitors to look at the world *with* the wolves, rather than *at* them.<sup>36</sup> More pragmatically speaking, this means asking humans to recognize and reassess their inculcated and taken-for-granted habitual actions. Farnell urges us that these must “take center stage instead of remaining out of awareness,” as they usually do.<sup>37</sup> The instructional talk helps visitors understand how these unconsciously patterned humanoid bodily movements are interpreted by wolf interlocutors, as well as translate the meanings of wolf bodily communications and action signs in a way that is palatable to an uninformed human audience. Similarly, one of M:W’s directors, Tracy Ane Brooks, has written on the concept of “mirroring and mimicry” when working with canines and equines; to communicate effectively with them, one must adopt their behaviors “in a modified, two-legged way.”<sup>38</sup>

In many respects this is akin to learning a new language. As Drid Williams explains, when you hear a language being spoken that you do not know, “the sounds themselves are perceived, but the social facts remain unperceived because the associational links for the linguistic signs are simply not there.”<sup>39</sup> So too is the case with learning wolf “language.” The task of the M:W caretakers is to establish associational links between canid bodily signs and their corresponding

social meanings. To again quote Dillard-Wright, this is not an attempt to collapse the considerable differences between human and wolf communicative processes; rather, it is to say that “animal meaning, like human meaning [is] essentially gestural, [and] consists in the style of comportment unique to each species.”<sup>40</sup> The question of whether nonhumans have language is contested, but it is not a point I wish to belabor here, other than to say that the claim that only human beings have language has historically been a key mechanism through which anthropocentrism perpetuates itself. Jacques Derrida has famously written on language and the animal question, and others have taken up the issue such as Nina Varsava.<sup>41</sup>

This exercise in teaching a type of affective interspecies-intersubjectivity is accomplished partly through the mutual elaboration of vocal signs and action signs. The caretaker will verbalize instructions while displaying how to enact or embody them; these “visual-kinetic signs,” Farnell says, “do not necessarily combine to form utterances that could stand alone, [but] work with the vocal components to create and communicate meaning.”<sup>42</sup> Below I have enumerated some of the fundamental lessons of bodily comportment during a wolf behavioral session at M:W to help illustrate this concept.

1. Do not give attention to the animals until you are seated. Members of a wolf pack usually greet each other face-to-face; if you are standing, the wolf may attempt to attain eye level with you by jumping up onto you, which could cause injury (especially to people of smaller stature).
2. When walking into a wolf enclosure, stand erect and have confident body posture; some visitors, particularly men, attempt to hunch over in an effort to make themselves seem smaller and less threatening to the wolves. However, this hunched posture is actually *more* threatening to them, as it simulates predatory “stalking” behavior.
3. Once seated, do not move unless instructed to do so. Since body movement and positioning speaks volumes to wolves, even slight gesticulations can drastically impact the quality of an interaction. Even when highly socialized, most wolves are suspicious of humans, and it only takes one mistake to cause them to retreat in fear.
4. Be aware of where *all* the animals are at *all* times.
5. When approached by a canine, bare teeth and keep eyes open in order to reciprocate the wolf greeting. Wolves greet each other through eye contact, sniffing noses, smelling teeth, and touching or licking muzzles. Try to resist the urge you have to pull your face away from the wolf when it attempts to greet you. To them, this is tantamount to rejecting their greeting, which may cause confusion or hurt their feelings.

6. When approached by multiple canines, you must give equal attention to each of them to avoid jealous intraspecies feuding, which is rare among the ambassadors, but possible. If approached by two canines, offer a hand to each; if approached by three, offer a hand to each and offer your face to the third.
7. “Mirror” the animal’s energy. If they seem apprehensive or cautious, do not be overly excited or playful, as it may scare them. In contrast, if the animal is feeling outgoing, do not be too rigid or reserved as it may confuse or bore them.

To communicate points one and two, for example, the caretaker will say “when we go in, make sure you are standing up straight and walking with confidence” while enacting this instruction through their own body posture. They will also often demonstrate the incorrect posture by enacting a sluggish or hunched-over position. In explaining points five and six, the caretaker may say “when the wolf comes up to you, they want to give you a greeting, and all that means is they want to look into your eyes and smell your nose and teeth.” This process is often equated to a human greeting by likening it to the common American/Western practice of the handshake, by saying “humans shake hands when we meet, the wolves sniff noses and teeth.” Subsequently, the caretaker will open their eyes wide, bare their teeth, and lean forward slightly; the caretaker’s words and gestures, the verbal signs and action signs, are mutually elaborating. Some caretakers will also use their hand to pantomime the relative position of the wolf’s head during a greeting by keeping their palm flat and contorting their thumb in a manner that almost looks like a shadow-puppet configuration. Williams notes that “taxonomies of the body and their attending concepts are vital to translations of gestures”; this is demonstrated by the handshake, as the human greeting technique is translated into its wolf correlate.<sup>43</sup> Farnell again corroborates this by showing how body movements or action signs are “co-expressive—working in conjunction with vocal signs so that the two modalities create a visual-vocal gestalt in performance.”<sup>44</sup> In all these instances we see carefully crafted tactics used to organize a perceptual field and create an intersubjective phenomenological bridge between species; as Charles Goodwin puts it, “talk and image mutually enhance each other [creating] a demonstration that is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>45</sup>

The wolf ambassador enclosure is roughly an acre and a half in size and is bisected by a fence with gates that can be opened and closed to control the animal’s access. The smaller section of the enclosure, adjacent to the sanctuary tour path, is landscaped specifically for the purposes of the wolf behavioral sessions. M:W



*Figure 2 Maggie (Maggie), a fifteen-year-old Arctic wolf-cross sniffs the outstretched hand of a guest to her enclosure. Maggie would usually repeat this process for all the visitors, bestowing kisses on the lucky ones. Along with Abraham, Maggie led M:W's ambassador program for over a decade until her passing in summer 2017. Photo courtesy of Elisa Behzadi, May 2017.*

staff installed seating logs in tiers that allow for nearly a hundred people to enter the enclosure at one time. While there are sometimes spontaneous interactions between wolves and caretakers or service groups, which I describe later, a wolf behavioral session is generally a highly orchestrated event, and its relative success depends heavily on the coordination of staff members and their attunement to canid bodily communication and emotional states. Drawing from the work of William Hanks, the wolf enclosure, and the non/human actors within it, can be seen as an actional field where bodies are used in deictic indexical reference in order for communications to succeed.<sup>46</sup> This approach also accounts for the vital importance of the human “kinesphere,” outlined by Williams, or bodily axes (up/down, left/right, front/back) and the caretaker’s use of words like *here*, *there*, *that*, and *this* to denote zones of proximity or distance within an intersubjective performance space and facilitate interactions.<sup>47</sup>

Upon completion of the wolf talk, visitors form a single-file line and enter the enclosure through a narrow wooden gate. Caretakers then guide them onto the logs, and many people are immediately greeted by the more social members of the ambassador pack. Visitors are also periodically directed to move to what caretakers call the “greeting log,” which is positioned parallel along the fence line and next to



an access gate for the wolves. This log is strategically placed away from other seating areas and near the wolves' "comfort zone" in order to create a nonthreatening space for the more timid animals to greet visitors. I call it a comfort zone because the wolves can easily retreat if they feel threatened or overly stimulated, and it is under a tree that provides shade for the wolves, who are prone to overheating in Colorado's high-desert environment. In any given behavioral session, there are multiple co-occurring intra- and interspecies interactions and semiotic events. The intractable nature of the session makes it difficult to describe, but it might be likened to a (feral) cocktail party where people form niches of conversation that gradually grow, shift, dissolve, morph, and materialize again elsewhere (Figure 2).

During the behavioral session, there is an almost constant communicative interplay occurring between three specific caretakers, whom for the purposes of this analysis I have termed "coach," "conductor," and "translator." The role of the coach, who is seated near the wolf access gate, is to help usher people to the greeting log and direct them where exactly to sit. The movement to the comfort zone stimulates the wolves' interest in the visitor, and the coach helps remind visitors of proper embodied praxis and wolf mannerisms during the interaction. The coach works in tandem with the conductor, a role I occupied at M:W, who is tasked with moving visitors through deictic instructions to different seating logs around the enclosure in order to facilitate a greeting with the wolves. Finally, the translator functions to continually interpret the wolf pack's actions for visitors by incorporating prior information from the educational tour and wolf talk, thus further magnifying the salience of events and establishing associational links. They narrate both intra- and interspecies interactions, and connect the observed behaviors to larger concepts about wolf and wildlife ecology. They also use what Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall have termed "tactics of intersubjectivity" to relate wolf pack dynamics to recognizable human behaviors.<sup>48</sup> Such tactics are effective because, again drawing from Dillard-Wright, they are based on the tacit (but often unacknowledged) understanding that "when humans encounter other species, they do not approach something altogether alien, they recognize in these 'others' features that are already familiar."<sup>49</sup> All these roles necessitate an acute awareness of the wolves' methods of bodily communication, a continual evaluation of their level of comfort, and anticipation of their future movements. This mode of awareness, what I call a lupine sensibility, is a feral reformulation of Shapiro's posture of kinesthetic empathy, "through which [one] attempts to directly sense the motor intention or attitude or project of the animal," which I explain in detail in the following section.<sup>50</sup> These roles also entail evaluating the humans moving around the enclosure using the same criteria and determining if their bodily comportment or "performances" of wolfness will be perceived as friendly or threatening by the ambassadors. Other

caretakers are stationed incrementally around the enclosure, usually next to small children or elderly visitors who might need assistance during the greeting process. A number of factors influence the minutiae of these interactions, some of which include the following.

### *The Social Constructions of Wolves*

The aforementioned stereotypes and stigmas of wild wolves occasionally affect the way humans interact with captive wolves during these behavioral sessions. Most often this occurs when a wolf attempts to greet humans by sniffing their face or licking their teeth. Some humans, despite being specifically instructed to resist this urge, begin to pull their face away in fright when a wolf approaches them. This usually causes the wolf to try even harder to initiate the greeting; they may even begin to crawl up on the human's lap in an effort to make eye contact and sniff the face. The worst reaction I have seen to one of these greeting attempts was when a young man leapt up from his seat as Abraham (Abe) the wolf-dog jovially approached him, and the man sidled backward on the ground until he was cowering against the fence, convinced that the wolf was trying to eat him! All the while, Abe interpreted his actions as playful, which caused him to pursue his reluctant new friend with more vigor. This communicative misrecognition on the part of both human and canine caused quite a scene until we were able to intervene and de-escalate the situation. Conversely, the fetishization of wolves as "spirit-animals" can cause some humans to try excessively hard to initiate an interaction with them. Some attempt to grasp at wolves as they walk by, or brazen visitors will even get up from their seats, flouting all conventions, and try to approach them. This unsolicited pressure often causes the wolves to flee. Wolves also seem to sense when humans want to contrive a greeting and tend to avoid these individuals entirely.

### *Wolf Pack Dynamics*

It behooves the human interlocutor to be aware of the specific social dynamics at play within any given wolf pack. In the case of the ambassador pack, which at the time of this writing comprises three members, there is a deceptively simple hierarchy at work during behavioral sessions. Although Zeab is a pure wolf, and the largest in the trio, he is second in rank to Abraham, a low-content wolf-husky cross. Most visitors are shocked to learn this, as they assume that pure wolves are



*Figure 3 Three-month-old pure wolf puppy Saurya (Shub-rye-ub) displays cautious body posture during a rainy behavioral session. As she matured, Saurya would choose to exit the ambassador program in favor of a living situation where she was not exposed to large crowds of humans. Most resident wolves at M:W choose this route. Meanwhile, foster-sister Nashira, pictured behind her, continues to enjoy human interaction in the ambassador pack. Photo courtesy of Jenny Thompson, July 2017.*

automatically dominant over wolf-dogs. This is not necessarily the case, as the pack hierarchy establishes itself by virtue of the particular temperaments of the wolves and how these personalities clash or coalesce. The third member of the pack is Nashira, a yearling high-content wolf-shepherd cross. Being the lone female in the pack, she considers herself the “alpha” (although this is not technically the correct term) by default, since wolves generally only challenge other pack members within the same sex for dominance and breeding rights. Her age also plays a role; as the youngest, she is sometimes subject to discipline from the older pack members when she acts out of turn. These relationships influence wolf-human interactions. For example, if Zeab is greeting a human, he will often acquiesce and step aside if Abe approaches. An awareness of these relationships becomes more crucial when interacting with wolves who are actively vying for dominance with each other or who are strongly bonded with and possessive over particular humans.

*Wolf Content or “Hybridity”*

While not a totalizing force, the breeding or genealogy of the canines does seem to influence their propensity to seek human contact. Generally, wolf-dogs are less apprehensive around humans than pure wolves. Upon even a cursory observation of captive wolves versus wolf-dogs, you can see that wolves remain constantly vigilant of where human visitors are in their enclosures, and will not entirely relax until they have exited (Figure 3), whereas wolf-dogs will turn their backs to visitors, and some even lie down next to them. Wolves also generally tire of human interaction much quicker than wolf-dogs. Zeab, for instance, will usually retreat to his den after he has cordially greeted all new visitors to his domain. As Brooks says, “The wolves had more important things to do . . . [they] had no need to just hang around soliciting attention or trying to be petted like a dog.”<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Abe and Nashira seem to enjoy being in the presence of humans for extended periods; they may repeat the greeting process multiple times before becoming weary of the attention.

*Wolf Diets*

The wolves’ diets also affect their dispositions toward humans. At M:W, the canines are fed on a feast-famine cycle, which mimics the frequency that wolves eat in the wild (only once or twice a week). Wild wolves hunt their prey for several days, make a kill, gorge themselves on the carcass, and are usually less active for the next day or two as they digest. After being fed, the wolves at M:W spend most of the following day in a food-induced stupor, sleeping off their feast of raw meat, hide, bone marrow, and organs, and are reluctant to host visitors.

*Environment*

There are many simple, taken-for-granted things that affect interactions such as the weather, humidity, sun exposure, time of day, and so on. Being covered in fur and unable to perspire, wolves are more reticent to interact on hot days and prefer to remain in the shade. It is a common misconception that wolves are nocturnal animals, but they are actually crepuscular, meaning they are most active during dawn and dusk. Behavioral sessions during sunrises or sunsets usually result in exceptionally long and lively interactions, as the wolves are full of energy. I recall a particularly hot day in the summer of 2017 when the executive director of the

Sierra Club, Michael Brune, was visiting M:W with his kids on a service trip; the ambassadors were lethargic and unwilling to step out of the shade. Kent, the sanctuary director, asked Michael's son to walk through the access gate to the *other* side of the enclosure, a space where usually only caretakers go, and sit under the cover of Zeab's favorite ponderosa pine tree. As the uncertain boy slowly ambled up the hill toward the wolves, I could sense a palpable feeling of anxiety creeping up in his father. "Uh, a—are you *sure* that's safe?" he asked Kent. "Oh yeah, it's no problem," Kent assured Michael. "It's not that they don't want to interact, they just don't want to make the effort to come all the way down here, so we'll meet 'em halfway." Sure enough, when the boy walked under the cool umbrella of the pine tree, Zeab immediately perked up and offered an exuberant greeting, and the dad breathed a sigh of relief. Brune later wrote of this experience, saying, "the connection was instantaneous. Never in [his kid's] lives had they been so close to something so wild, beautiful and mysterious . . . one weekend forged a connection that will last a lifetime."<sup>52</sup>

To be clear, most public visitors to M:W are made aware of only a few of these factors. But for caretakers, volunteers, and long-term friends of the sanctuary, all of these should be taken into account if one intends to create lasting bonds with the resident animals. I follow the work of Kohn in viewing the multimodal forms of communication in these interactions through Charles Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol.<sup>53</sup> And, like Kohn's study of the interspecies relationships among the non/humans of the Upper Amazon, the relations between humans and canines at M:W stretch semiotic theory to include symbols beyond anthropocentric worldviews; it offers more compelling evidence that "signs are not exclusively human affairs. All living beings sign."<sup>54</sup>

To further elucidate the semiotic chains being created in the wolf behavioral sessions, one of the caretakers, most often the translator, serves as the linkage or "ground" between the object (the wolf's internal subjective state) and the sign (its bodily externalization of that state) for the interpretant (the visitor or behavioral session participant). The mediating role of the translator allows for what may be opaque nonhuman mannerisms to become legible; it lets the sign be recognized *as* a sign. Once these linkages are firmly established for visitors, then the interactions with the wolves become more replicable and even ritualized; when a participant successfully greets a wolf, it serves as an example for others within the session. For instance, a wolf's ear position indicates its feelings about another member of the pack; ears flattened back against the head indicate playfulness, comfort, or submission, ears perked up and forward mean curiosity, alertness, or dominant posturing. Other action signs may be tail position, height of the head, or vocalizations like whimpering, snarling, or howling.

The human interpretant's body is in turn a sign to the wolf in much the same way. As Stefan Helmreich and Eben Kirksey have noted, nonhumans may also act as anthropologists by studying the actions and mannerisms of humans.<sup>55</sup> The wolves are not passively acted on in this process. They are also active agents in these interactions; "just as humans inhabit a milieu and take up intentional stances towards objects," says Dillard-Wright, "animal bodies also participate in a dialogical and communicative interplay with their surroundings."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, it is the voluntary participation of the wolves that allows for this lesson in what Traci Warrentin calls "interspecies etiquette" to occur at all.<sup>57</sup>

Peirce's realist or emergentist approach complements the later thought of Merleau-Ponty quite well, despite the two scholars coming from starkly different philosophical traditions. Kohn points out that, like Merleau-Ponty, Peirce was concerned with "how to imagine a more capacious real that is more true to a naturalistic, nondualistic understanding of the universe."<sup>58</sup> But while Peircian trichotomies are applicable in various ways to this loose vignette, to truly understand these connections requires us to move beyond classical semiotic theory, toward not just a more expansive view of language that incorporates the dynamism of the moving, as opposed to static, human body but also an explicit inclusion of the movements of nonhuman bodies as bearers of trans-species meaning, which indexes subjectivity. To paraphrase the semiotician Richard Parmentier, in these scenarios the causality between the object and sign is only useful to the interpretant, who is acquainted with the indexical relationship between body "language" and subjective emotional states, and with the iconic relationship between the wolf's bodily expressions and level of relative comfort, curiosity, or stress.<sup>59</sup> Accepting the veracity of these relationships invites the recognition of the wolf as a social agent capable of novelty, obligating us to move beyond a behavioristic or Pavlovian view of nonhumans as ruled exclusively by base instinct. They become intelligible as subjects. Before moving on, I want to reiterate the disclaimer that the parallels being drawn between humans and canines are not an attempt to ignore species difference or descend into some sort of pseudo-pantheistic primordial ooze that flattens particularities—to do this would be to commit the same logical fallacy as liberal multiculturalism. I do not adhere to the same paradigm of embodiment as Michael Jackson, who implies that the body is a "common ground" that automatically allows entrance into the subjective world of the other.<sup>60</sup> To the contrary, the widely varying dispositions of M:W's canine residents reinforce the ideas of Suzanne Cataldi, who writes that respecting the dignity of nonhumans means empowering them "to live a life fitted for [their] species-specific nature."<sup>61</sup> Lori Gruen has also written about the "dangers of focusing on sameness" when making a case for animal rights, as this may inadvertently smuggle in certain anthropocentric assumptions,

regardless of intentions.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, to gain an accurate portrayal of the agentic capacities of an organism is to accurately comprehend its unique biosocial structure. We can, and should, respect the significant differences between humans and wolves while acknowledging that we have much in common with them as physiologically and emotionally complex social animals with similar semiotic capabilities.

I move forward by sharing two vignettes of interactions with feral canines who are considerably less socialized and not as inclined toward humans as the ambassador pack. These vignettes will build on the fundamentals of wolf-human interactions I described by providing more intimate and nuanced accounts of how empathetic intersubjectivity is fostered between species through the medium of the body.

### **Fostering Intimacy and Understanding with Unsocialized Wolves and Wolf-Dogs**

I believe one of the biggest factors enabling violence against nonhuman animals is that we deprive them of history. By this I mean that nonhumans, especially wild animals, are often viewed monolithically. We ignore the fact that species are made up of particular individuals, all of whom have unique dispositions and irreplaceable emotional landscapes. Jane Desmond touches on this in her study of the gruesome everyday violence of roadkill, which humans generally dismiss as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of modern life. She asks us to consider the specific history of a hypothetical pair of mated rabbits, one of which has been struck and killed by a vehicle. “Perhaps the dead rabbit,” she wonders:

was the bonded-for-life partner of another rabbit, the latter safe now in the once-shared burrow. Bonded rabbits, we know, maintain their closeness for years and, domesticated or wild, spend hours nestled side by side, an intimacy roadkilling forever interrupts. How long will the surviving member of the pair wait for [their] companion’s return?<sup>63</sup>

I wish to bring this same sensitivity and thoughtfulness about nonhuman particulars to my analysis of human-wolf interactions, as I believe it is a vital component to their success. Shapiro exemplifies this with his tripartite methodology of interacting with dogs.<sup>64</sup> First, Shapiro says the investigator must capaciously read popular and scientific literature about the animal under investigation to comprehend its social construction. Second, he says one must “become a historian of the individual animal or animals under study . . . [developing] a biographical

account.”<sup>65</sup> These studious orientations are meant to inform the final and overarching methodological component, which is the adoption of “an empathic posture in which [one senses] the bodily attitude, stance, and incipient moves of the other.”<sup>66</sup> It is precisely this sort of posture that the human community at M:W seeks to cultivate among one another as a way to befriend canines and creating mutualistic interspecies relationships.

One salient example of this can be seen through interactions with Farah, a pure Canadian gray wolf female, and the sister to Zeab (Figure 4). In contrast to her comparatively mellow and introverted brother, Farah is incredibly excitable and outgoing. Since puppyhood, she has thrived on human attention. As she matured and became one of the largest females at the sanctuary, her excitable nature eventually became an issue during behavioral sessions. She would exuberantly greet visitors by running toward them and ramming her nose into their faces, showering them with licks and nibbles. This often resulted in bloody noses and fat lips. Of course, when wolves greet each other in the wild, this is entirely normal; they communicate and show affection by running at each other, playfully wrestling, and sometimes lightly chewing on each other’s faces. To the uninformed observer, however, this could easily be interpreted as aggression. Mistranslations of these actions in wolf and wolf-dog pets often lead to deadly consequences—usually for the canine.

Due to her erratic nature, Farah was eventually separated from the ambassador pack and placed in a more secluded part of the sanctuary along with her life partner, Apollo. Although she is no longer visited by the general public, M:W caretakers and volunteers who have developed certain lupine sensibilities can continue to have successful and enriching interactions with her by adapting to her specific styles of communication. Before entering her enclosure, caretakers remove any loose items of clothing or jewelry like hats, necklaces, bandanas, and earrings. Farah has developed quite a mischievous personality over the years and enjoys snatching treasures from unwary guests. I once took part in a visit to Farah’s enclosure during which she deftly lifted the prescription glasses off the face of the person sitting next to me before he could even react! After these items are removed, humans enter in a single-file line in a similar manner to the larger wolf behavioral sessions. Instead of sitting on logs, however, they sit with their backs against the fence so Farah cannot get behind them. This prevents her from crawling over or onto someone’s back in a frenzy of excitement, or from pulling at hair. The key technique for greeting Farah is to be the first to initiate contact by extending a hand to her. The initiation of contact establishes control of the interaction. As her face approaches yours, gently place your hand on her chin and keep it there while she licks you. With the free hand, you can gently scratch Farah on the neck





*Figure 4 Farah surveys her large mountainside enclosure from afar. When humans she knows well enter her home, she ecstatically bounds down the hill, ears-pinned back to her head and tail-wagging in a show of joy and friendliness. Photo courtesy of Jenny Thompson, July 2017.*

and chest. This seems to have a calming effect on her and prevents any excessive nipping or chewing. This also serves a dual function by providing a safeguard in case the wolf gets too excited. You can position your thumb and index finger near the back of the wolf's jaw, just behind the molars, and if the wolf were to nip or bite, you can roll and pinch their jowls into this gap in the dentition, causing them to release you. I have had to do this on a couple of occasions with a wolf named Daisy, who was playfully (but painfully) pulling at my beard.

Through these bodily techniques crafted specifically for Farah's disposition, she can continue to receive the attention she so craves from humans without accidentally injuring anyone. Such techniques could not have been properly developed without a general understanding of wolf sociality and bodily communication (universal) *and* an awareness of Farah's personality or biographical history (particular), as Shapiro prescribes. Warren's concept of "situated universals" is especially helpful in understanding the dialectics between abstract social constructions and localized individuals; for her, ethical principles and empathetic postures are derived from "historically particular, real-life experiences and practices" that then inform our generalizations.<sup>67</sup>

This method can also be fruitfully applied to wolves that are skittish or fearful of humans in order to better socialize them to a life in captivity. This is

illustrated with the contrasting example of Minigan, a low-content wolf-shepherd cross who was surrendered to M:W after his owner became seriously ill and could not care for him anymore. To our understanding, Minigan was living in a small apartment in Denver, Colorado, and had little human interaction other than with his owner. When he arrived at the sanctuary, he was petrified of strangers. For months, he would not allow any humans to touch him, running as far away as possible and cowering in fear in his enclosure. Over time, Minigan gradually came to trust a select few humans, but still took several weeks to accept the company of strangers. We suspect that part of Minigan's fearfulness is due to him having pan-nus, a degenerative canine eye disease that causes partial or complete blindness. Sometimes it seems Minigan is scared of approaching humans because he cannot identify who they are from a distance.

With Minigan's life history in mind, we adapted to his conduct accordingly. Minigan is wary of large numbers of humans, so we generally only interact with him in small groups. Upon entering his enclosure, he will not approach you like Farah or the ambassador wolves. He needs to vet you first and ensure that you are not a threat. If you attempt to approach Minigan directly, he usually tenses up and runs away immediately. Instead, you can walk at an angle to the left or right of him, and sit down a few yards from his position facing away from him. While walking, you should *not* try to get Minigan's attention or make eye contact with him—this tips your hand and causes him to become suspicious or anxious. The key is to walk nonchalantly, confidently, and fluidly, almost as if you do not notice Minigan's presence at all. After sitting down, remain relaxed and quiet. Listen closely for Minigan's movements; when you hear him arise from his seated position, extend your arm backward, with palm flat and facing upward. If you have moved inconspicuously enough, Minigan will approach you cautiously to sniff and investigate your hand. Once you feel his cold nose on your palm, it is crucial that you keep facing away from him. Eye contact is an intense form of communication to canines, and for Minigan, too much of it too quickly causes him to flee. After he has sniffed you for a few seconds and verified your identity, begin speaking softly to him and offering positive reinforcement, and try to softly scratch his chin with the tips of your fingers. This usually causes Minigan to lower his guard, and he may even move closer to you. Once you are able to reach down to his neck or chest and scratch him, this is a sign that he is calm enough to receive direct eye contact. After this, you can shift your position and slowly move closer to him.

Through these slow, methodical socialization techniques, Minigan has become much more comfortable around groups of humans and less wary of strangers. Depending on Minigan's mood, he will sometimes even allow someone he trusts to put him on a lead and facilitate a greeting with new people, if they fol-



*Figure 5 The author (left), who has a close relationship with Minigan, places him on a lead to calm him and to help facilitate a greeting with a stranger, which Minigan graciously accepts. With small groups of visitors, miniature behavioral sessions with Minigan were sometimes conducted to educate about the nuances of mirroring, mimicry, and proper body posture. Photo courtesy of Jenny Thompson, July 2017.*

low these steps appropriately (Figure 5). Like the aforementioned example of Farah, this meticulous approach is crafted with a particular nonhuman subject's biographical history and *Umwelt* in mind.<sup>68</sup> In this case, it takes account of factors such as Minigan's anxiety and poor eyesight. Once he feels safe with someone, Minigan becomes a goofy, loveable wolf-dog who enjoys the company of humans. During his life at the sanctuary, he has taught many caretakers how to understand and work with fearful animals.

Williams claims that "for [actions] to become intelligible, investigators must deal with intentions, beliefs, and contexts."<sup>69</sup> These vignettes of two feral canines who are highly sensitive, albeit in different ways, provide examples of how such investigations into the other-than-human world might play out. They also show the huge range of possibilities in terms of how humans interpret signs from the canines and vice versa. So while there are recognizable associational links between wolf action signs and subjective states, it is not a mechanistic one-to-one correlation, and it cannot be understood solely by observation. There is considerable creativity in these interspecies semiotic processes; the actions manifest differently depending on the historically particular individual.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to bring two different theoretical schools of thought on the body into conversation, that of dynamic embodiment and that of what might be called human-animal studies or posthumanism.<sup>70</sup> Both endeavor to resurrect the radical thought of Merleau-Ponty, and while their terminology, means, and goals are different, they arrive at strikingly similar conclusions about embodied consciousness and how space creates intersubjective relations. I have used the wolf behavioral sessions and other unique wolf-human interactions at M:W to illustrate these concepts. In doing so, I have tried to not simply act as a translator between human and nonhuman sociality and cognitive capacities, but also question the entrenched notions of human superiority that have been the source of unfathomable speciesist violence.

This orchestration of canine and human bodies, which I call interspecies choreography—what Haraway would call “co-constitutive naturalcultural dancing”—has in effect become a new pedagogical method at M:W.<sup>71</sup> It is a way of ontologically undoing, albeit temporarily for most, a routinized, inculcated, and historically sedimented human *habitus*, and replacing it with a hyper-embodied and reflexive lupine sensibility, in which the tiniest gesticulation, vocalization, twitch, or glance serve as intensely meaningful multimodal forms of communication. I join Judith Butler in arguing that phenomenology can assist us in reconstructing the sedimented characteristics of the body toward liberatory ends.<sup>72</sup> These processes not only dispel myths and discourses that justify violence against nonhuman *bodies* but also challenge anthropocentric perceptions of the world and create a space for empathy and solidarity with nonhuman *people*.<sup>73</sup>

The multispecies community at M:W is not without its contradictions, but it is a site where nonhumans, who would otherwise fall through the considerable cracks and crevasses of the animal welfare-state, can find refuge and *family*. It is a space of hope and resurgence in the dire times of the Anthropocene, where these canines are not denied asylum but, rather, as Leesa Fawcett says, they are accepted and celebrated as “feral creatures of environmental knowledge, creatures of hope and liberatory pedagogy.”<sup>74</sup>

I have focused on the methods by which humans can communicate with captive wolves and wolf-dogs in a more equitable and empathetic way. But as I have alluded to, humans are also changed through enacting these postures. My visceral, embodied relationships with these canines have radically shaped me into a more patient, aware, and confident person. They have reaffirmed both my

personal and scholarly path. They have reminded me, time and again, that there is so much in this world worth fighting for.

\* \* \*

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*This essay is dedicated to Magpie and Abraham, two of the most famous, influential and courageous ambassador wolves (in Abe's case wolf-dog) who ever lived. You inspired hundreds of thousands, if not more. Thank you for the love and compassion you showed the world, it was an honor to be one of your caretakers, and to be your kin. Rest in power, Platinum Princess and Sheriff Abe. During the drafting of this essay, the author received support and helpful critiques from Breanna Escamilla, Charlotte Prieu, Joseph Coyle, Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza, Lila Ann Dodge, Allie Zachwieja, and Sophie Seidel. Doctors Krystal Smalls, Brenda Farnell, and Jane Desmond have my sincerest thanks and appreciation for their patience and guidance during the development of these ideas. To Jenny Thompson and Elisa Behzadi, thank you for your incredible photos that so accurately depict what I am trying to convey. My thanks to the editorial board of Refract for the opportunity to share this work. Last but far from least, I am forever indebted to my misfit multispecies family unit at Mission: Wolf. Thank you to the caretakers, Tracy, Kent, and Mike, for your teachings and mentorship; thank you to Tricia, Dax, Ari, Sven, Michel, Eric, Kacey, Alysia, Rachel, and Laura for your passion and dedication to the wolves, and for your companionship. Thank you to all caretakers, past, present, and future; the Mish remembers you! Finally, thank you to every single one of my canine and equine friends and teachers, but especially Talon, Valley Spirit and her kids, Soleil, Nashira, McKinley, Minigan, and Cephira. Sending you bowls of love and gratitude. I miss you dearly.*



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.uwc.org> for a more comprehensive idea of the London-based United World College (UWC). To my understanding, this trip to the wolf sanctuary was part of one of their “short programmes” meant to engage prospective students.

<sup>2</sup> Maya Shenoy, “Man’s Worst Enemy: Wild Dogs Terrorize India,” *Newsweek*, September 4, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/mans-worst-enemy-wild-dogs-terrorize-india-495167>.

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Farnell and Charles R. Varela, “The Second Somatic Revolution,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 38, no. 3 (2008): 215–40.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth J. Shapiro, “Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy, Social Construction, and History,” *Anthrozoos* 3, no. 3 (1990): 184–95, <https://doi.org/10.2752/089279390787057540>; see also Shapiro, “A Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Nonhuman Animals,” in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, edited by Robert Mitchell, Nicholas Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 277–95.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, translated by Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, translated by Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 161–62. See also Westling’s 2010 article “Merleau-Ponty’s Human Animality: Intertwining and the Animal Question,” in *Configurations* 18, no. 1-2 (2010): 161–180.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Brenda Farnell, “Ethno-Graphics and the Moving Body,” *MAN: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 29, no. 4 (1994): 932.

<sup>11</sup> Farnell and Varela, “Second Somatic Revolution,” 221.

<sup>12</sup> Farnell, “Ethno-Graphics and the Moving Body,” 933; Rom Harré, “Persons and Powers,” in *Philosophy in Britain today*, edited by G. Shankar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

- <sup>13</sup> See Charles R. Varela, “Determinism and the Recovery of Human Agency: The Embodying of Persons,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 33, no. 1 (1999): 385–402.
- <sup>14</sup> Charles R. Varela, *Science for Humanism: The Recovery of Human Agency* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.
- <sup>16</sup> Phillip G. Payne, “(Un)timely Ecophenomenological Framings of Environmental Education Research,” in the *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education*, edited by Robert B. Stevenson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 433.
- <sup>17</sup> Anna M. Claxton, “The Potential of the Human-Animal Relationship as Environmental Enrichment for the Welfare of Zoo-Housed Animals,” *Applied Animal Behavior Science* 133, no. 1 (2011): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2011.03.002>; Lindsey R. Mehrkam, Nicolle T. Verdi, and Clive D. L. Wynne, “Human Interaction as Environmental Enrichment for Pair-Housed Wolves and Wolf-Dog Crosses,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 17, no. 1 (2014): 43–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2014.856246>.
- <sup>18</sup> David B. Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 8.
- <sup>19</sup> Raymond Pierotti and Brandi R. Fogg, *The First Domestication: How Wolves and Humans Coevolved* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Michael J. Robinson, *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005).
- <sup>21</sup> Barry H. Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Scribner, 1978), 140.
- <sup>22</sup> See Michael Silverstein, “Axes of Evals: Token versus Type Interdiscursivity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 6–22.
- <sup>23</sup> For a closer look at the sociopolitical history and ecological effects of the Northern Rockies reintroduction, see Gary Ferguson and Douglas Smith, *Decade of the Wolf: Returning the Wild to Yellowstone* (Guilford, CT: Lyons, 2012). For a more narrativized rendition of this history, see Nate Blakeslee, *American Wolf: A True Story of Survival and Obsession in the West* (New York: Crown, 2017). Gray wolves were federally reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and the Frank Church Wilderness of Idaho. In the quarter century since the reintroduction, wolves have caused so-called Trophic Cascades, by contributing to rebalancing the ecosystem by forcing herds of elk and deer to migrate away from overgrazed streambeds,

which in turn allows stands of aspen, willow, cottonwoods, and other forms of vegetation to regenerate. The overall impact wolves have had on the park is still hotly debated by wolf biologists and ecologists. At the time of this writing, wolves are still technically classified as an endangered species, although the Trump administration has been trying to strip them of this status.

<sup>24</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> See Dorothy Prendergast, *The Wolf Hybrid* (Gallup, NM: Rudelhaus Enterprises, 1989); Gordon K. Smith, *Slave to a Pack of Wolves* (Chicago: Adams, 1978). Smith is perhaps the most in/famous and outspoken American wolf-dog advocate in the last half century. He ran a lucrative wolf-dog breeding operation in Iowa. In this book—his only published work—he likens those against wolf-dog hybridization to fascists.

<sup>26</sup> Robert H. Busch, *The Wolf Almanac: A Celebration of Wolves and Their World* (Guilford, CT: Lyons, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 37. Haraway is referencing Robyn Dixon's 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article about the Tsitsikamma Wolf Sanctuary in southern South Africa (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-oct-17-fg-wolf17-story.html>).

<sup>28</sup> Busch, *Wolf Almanac*, 181. I could not find this statistic again during my own internet search.

<sup>29</sup> Mission: Wolf, "Mission and Values," accessed April 26, 2019, <https://mission-wolf.org/about-3/>.

<sup>30</sup> See Veronique Champion-Vincent, "Native Americans as a Source of Wisdom: History and Analysis of Contemporary Mythology," *Studia Ethnologica Pragensia* 2, no. 1 (2017): 13–29, <http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-e5b70492-e477-4e33-98c7-9d75227b2405>.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Laird and Kristen Ogilvie Holzer, "Interspecies Encounters: A Prolegomenon to Educational Thought Experimentation on Befriending Animals," in *The Educational Significance of Human and Non-Human Animal Interactions: Blurring the Species Line*, edited by Suzanne Rice and A. G. Rud (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 156.

<sup>32</sup> Brenda Farnell, "Dynamic Embodiment in Assiniboine (Nakota) Storytelling," *Anthropological Linguistics* 44, no. 1 (2002): 39.

<sup>33</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*. Note, however, that Dillard-Wright defaults to the term *gesture*.



- <sup>34</sup> Jo Lee and Tim Ingold, "Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing," in *Locating the Field: Space, Place, and Context in Anthropology*, edited by Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 67.
- <sup>35</sup> Thomas J. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990): 5–47.
- <sup>36</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 128.
- <sup>37</sup> Brenda Farnell, *Dynamic Embodiment for Social Theory: "I Move Therefore I Am"* (London: Routledge, 2012), 210.
- <sup>38</sup> Tracy Ane Brooks, *A Walk in Connection* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa, 2014), 153.
- <sup>39</sup> Drid Williams, "Signifying Bodies, Signifying Acts: New Ways of Thinking about Human Movement," manuscript, *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, 2003, 88.
- <sup>40</sup> Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 45.
- <sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); see also Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Nina Varsava, "The Problem of Anthropomorphous Animals: Towards a Posthumanist Ethics," *Society & Animals* 22, no. 1 (2014): 520–36, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341270>.
- <sup>42</sup> Brenda Farnell, "Rethinking Verbal and Non-Verbal in Discursive Performance," *Journal for the Anthropological Society of Human Movement* 13, no. 4 (2005): 213.
- <sup>43</sup> Williams, "Signifying Bodies, Signifying Acts," 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Farnell, "Dynamic Embodiment in Assiniboine Storytelling," 59.
- <sup>45</sup> Charles Goodwin, "Professional Vision," *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 621.
- <sup>46</sup> William Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996).
- <sup>47</sup> Drid Williams, "Space, Intersubjectivity, and the Conceptual Imperative: Three Ethnographic Cases," in *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance*, edited by Brenda Farnell (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1995), 44–81.
- <sup>48</sup> Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Language and Identity," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2003), 368–94.
- <sup>49</sup> Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 29.
- <sup>50</sup> Shapiro, "Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy," 186.
- <sup>51</sup> Brooks, *Walk in Connection*, 34.

- <sup>52</sup> Michael Brune, “Harry Potter Can’t Compete with the Magic of Wolves,” *Sierra: The National Magazine of the Sierra Club*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2017-6-november-december/executive-director/harry-potter-cant-compete-magic-wolves>.
- <sup>53</sup> Kohn, *How Forests Think*; C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vols. 1-6, 1931–1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).
- <sup>54</sup> Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 42.
- <sup>55</sup> Eben S. Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76.
- <sup>56</sup> Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 92.
- <sup>57</sup> Traci Warkentin, “Interspecies Etiquette: An Ethics of Paying Attention to Animals,” *Ethics and the Environment* 15, no. 1 (2010): 101–21.
- <sup>58</sup> Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 56.
- <sup>59</sup> Richard J. Parmentier, *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- <sup>60</sup> Michael Jackson, “Knowledge of the Body,” *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 340.
- <sup>61</sup> Suzanne Cataldi, “Animals and the Concept of Dignity,” *Ethics and the Environment* 7, no. 2 (2002): 113–14.
- <sup>62</sup> Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* (New York: Lantern Books, 2015), 16.
- <sup>63</sup> Jane C. Desmond, *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 148.
- <sup>64</sup> I am using Shapiro’s methods because they apply to interactions with nonhuman animals in general, not because he chooses dogs specifically. Although closely related, forms of dog communication *do not* necessarily translate to wolf communication.
- <sup>65</sup> Shapiro, “Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy,” 186.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.
- <sup>67</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 114. See also Kelly A. Burns, “Warren’s Ecofeminist Ethics and Merleau-Ponty’s Body-Subject: Intersections,” *Ethics and the Environment* 13, no. 2 (2008): 101–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40339161>.
- <sup>68</sup> Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). Buchanan’s project is to resurrect the thinking of German biologist Jakob von Uexküll, among others, and his concept of the *Umwelt* (self-world) in relation to

animal studies. Different species perceive and interact with their environments according to their unique biology and the signs that are significant to them within their *Umwelt*. The concept has served as inspiration for the likes of Martin Heidegger, Thomas Sebeok, and Giorgio Agamben.

<sup>69</sup> Drid Williams, *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 210.

<sup>70</sup> See Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Here I am following Wolfe's definition of the posthuman project as an explicit decentering and deconstruction of the human in the humanist sense, and an undoing of human-animal binaries. There are, however, alternative interpretations to what posthumanism is. Richard Grusin claims that the posthuman turn implies "a teleology or progress in which we begin with the human and see a transformation from the human to the posthuman, after or beyond the human." In contrast, he says that the "nonhuman turn" insists that the human has *never* been the bounded, stable category it has been construed as, since we as a species are entangled with and reliant on the other-than-human world (Grusin, ed., *The Non-human Turn* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015], xi).

<sup>71</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

<sup>73</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>74</sup> Leesa Fawcett, "Feral Sociality and (Un)Natural Histories: On Nomadic Ethics and Embodied Learning," in *Fields of Green: Restoring Culture, Environment, and Education*, edited by Marcia McKenzie et al. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2009), 227.

*Untitled (Speech Poem #2)*

Marrok Sedgwick



*Marrok Sedgwick, Untitled (Speech Poem #2) (still), 2018, 6 minutes 53 seconds.<sup>1</sup>*

Closed captions often do not fully convey the meaning, emotion, or even the full dialogue of spoken English to a d/Deaf audience. They are often incomplete, whether due to audist assumptions about the ability of d/Deaf to understand content (such as with captions that present allegedly less lofty language than that spoken by the actors on-screen), or the technological failure whereby caption decoders in televisions, and in the devices cinemas use, drop a line of dialogue. Other times, the failure of closed captions relates to the more subtle inability of formal written captioning protocols to capture tone of voice or to really represent what emotional information is portrayed by a soundtrack. What does it mean to have “upbeat music” or to name the instrument itself? My work subverts this obfuscation of meaning, turning the tables to privilege disabled communities over nondisabled communities.

My speech poem series is an ongoing experimentation with translation, bilingualism, and ASL poetry in film form. I play with the translation of sound, the translation of sign language, and the translation of poetry. Sometimes I withhold information from the hearing audience that would be self-evident to a d/Deaf and hard of hearing audience, and other times I offer the full translation. The poem I use is about my relationship to speech, as the second portion of the artist’s statement in the video itself makes clear. This offers the translation required for hearing people to begin to understand the phonocentric values that my experiments with translation complicate.

Sometimes, instead of stating a translation through a subtitle, I prefer to teach the viewer the meaning of a sign, and permit the audience to watch as the performer turns the word into something with greater meaning. In the speech poem series, the operative word is *SPEAK*, and I am the performer. Signed languages have the ability to use the words themselves in physical form to transform the meaning of the signed word into a multiplicity of meanings. It is not just that the word *SPEAK* can be signed such that you know a person dislikes or likes speech, the way that English tones can tell you attitude and emotion. It is that I can take the sign *SPEAK* and turn it into a story, the translation of which would require a paragraph in English. A paragraph that I will not provide because the work is not meant for English.

I will likely never arrive at a finalized version of this video. Instead, I will continue to explore different ways of communicating poetic meaning through further iterations. This iteration contains additional experimentation beyond closed caption, subtitle, and sign. I have also woven in other means of communication used by nonspeaking people. For example, I translate a physical object to animation: a letterboard (typically a plastic or laminated paper card with the alphabet or other things written on it that the disabled person uses to communicate by pointing

at letters, phrases, or images to spell out sentences). This iteration of the video represents one of my earliest experiments with this kind of translation—the translation of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools from a physical object into a video/film technique. Including other unspoken forms of communication reminds the audience that language comes in many forms, and only d/Deaf and disabled people hold the key to translating our lives.

*This iteration of Untitled (Speech Poem #2) 2018 includes cinematography by Marrok Sedgwick, Chrissy Marshall, and Daryl Jones, and was created in Spring 2018 SOCD 201B at the University of California, Santa Cruz, as part of the MFA Social Documentation program. Thanks to all who participated in that class for feedback that led to this iteration.*

\* \* \*

Marrok Zenon Sedgwick is a disabled trans educator using artmaking as a tool for challenging society's injustices. As a creative producer and documentarian, Sedgwick's work has screened internationally. His film *Stim* won the PK Walker Innovation Award at the 2018 Superfest International Disability Film Festival. As an educator, Sedgwick has worked in general education and special education classrooms, as well as with a drama program for youth with disabilities.

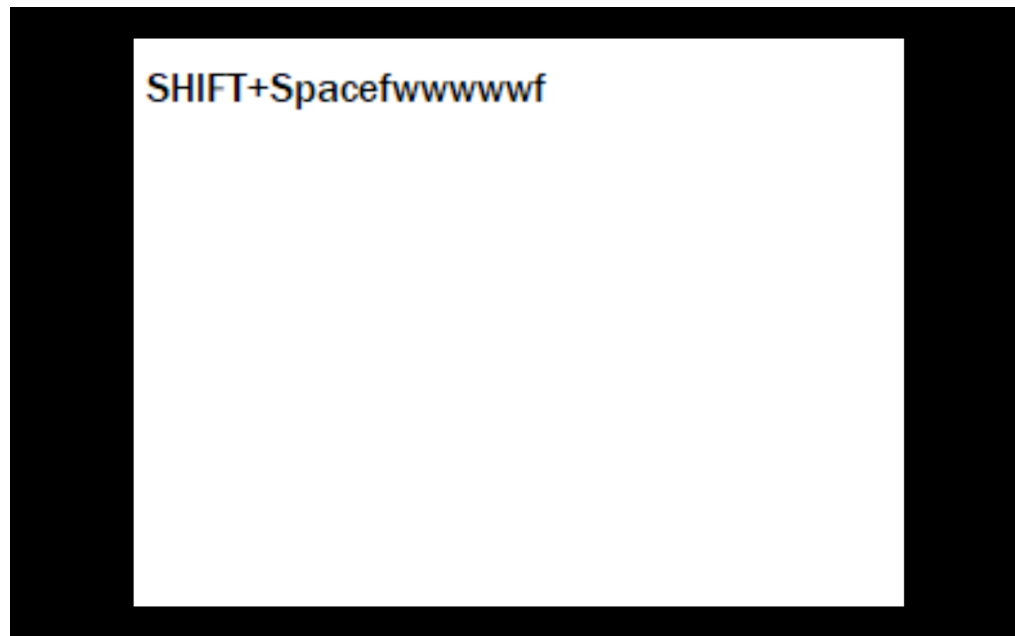
## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Untitled (Speech Poem #2)* (2018) is available for viewing at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wq347rr#supplemental>.

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*Languages of Violence*

Ansel Arnold



*Ansel Arnold, Languages of Violence (still), 2019, 4 minutes 18 seconds<sup>1</sup>*

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Languages of Violence* (2019) is available for viewing at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0g4831q5#supplemental>.



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## On *Languages of Violence*

Ansel Arnold

*Languages of Violence* is a gaming/sound performance mediated by the streaming service Twitch.<sup>1</sup> The visual elements represent the active key registrations and inputs being made during a video game, while the sound is of the game as it's played and mixed through analog pedals and feedback loops. The context of the game and the event that it produces are obscured by this interpretation. What's left is an impressionistic gesture that mediates a fact of violence. At the outset of this work, I was exploring what I saw left open by realistic digital violence, in that it can be directed beyond its actual origins. Gunfire is made indistinguishable from a real-life event, but its context as a video game rescues it or makes it acceptable.

At one point in the early stages, I was recording sounds outside my window when I triggered an audio recording of one of these performances without realizing it and moments later was unexpectedly assaulted by the sounds of increasing rapid gunfire. In the moments prior to realizing what I had done, my body instinctively reacted as my heart immediately sped up, and I quickly shifted my focus to the street to find out where this sound was coming from. Within a few seconds I was able to locate the source—my laptop and amplifier—but was nonetheless physically unnerved by this spontaneous disruption. Even though a first-person shooter game is not real life, considering this violence to be “fake” or not real seems disingenuous, as the experience of it is, even momentarily, very real. Representation is blurred as violence becomes the only palpable object of perception.

Afterward I continued to think about this dislocation of violence and how it relates to nearly any form of media or language. What is critical is that this

dislocation intentionally breaks understanding linked to its real event. I refer to this as “subtle violence,” wherein violence is made unclear. Violence is often passed over in everyday communication as if it were nonexistent, even as the fabric of our societies rests on its existence. This short essay follows some thoughts that have come up alongside this work and considers how media and communication can reinforce subtle violence.

### **Violence in the Cracks of Our Everyday Lives**

When thinking about media such as television, film, sports, and video games through the framework of violence, we will notice that a relationship to violence is, more often than not, nearly everywhere. Sports play an interesting role because they are both somewhat fictive and objective when it comes to violence. The violence present in sports is similar to war in the sense that they both depend on physical domination measured on a scale of defeat and victory. In sports, you’re not supposed to kill your opponent, but both in war and in sports the objective goal is the ultimate submission of your opponent, and, in essence, their loss is your gain.

Despite the presence and popularity of violence in sports, video games, film, and television, there is a deflected acknowledgment of the fact that violence is actively perpetuated in these forms of entertainment. This isn’t to say that there are not conversations about the violence represented in video games, sports, or film. Violence is heavily criticized and is usually a subject of controversy, but only when it is something deemed unacceptable. The paranoia surrounding violence in entertainment even takes the form of Parental Advisory labels that help parents, like mine, limit their children’s musical options. There is an ever-present threat of legitimizing a certain kind of violence—not just any but a particular and “unacceptable” violence.

Today, we might consider our societies as being generally peaceful even as we live surrounded by armed security, police, and military. There is a strong tendency in mainstream culture to see state violence as a necessary function, presupposing legitimate action. In the same way, colonialism and slavery appear as oppressive systems of the past when we fail to confront the ways our present lives are rooted in them. Active force maintains the system of security, policing, and militarization whether we wish to think of it as violent or not. And since violence is at the heart of the contemporary situation in which we find ourselves entangled, then it’s not the violence committed by the state or of colonialism that is made to appear objectionable—it is the violence that threatens its presumption of

necessity. When violence is used as a framing mechanism, it begs the question of legitimacy so much so that we cannot avoid it. When something is simply described in violent terms, it appears before us as an open question. We cannot just assume that it is also illegitimate—as the legitimacy of violence is not just wide open but wholly unclear if the act is not given much context. So when we begin from the frame of violence, it requires us to answer the question of whether it is appropriate. Even if the context is provided in a biased way, it places the onus on the individual to prescribe the action from their own particular position, which acts to instill a sense of duty and moral responsibility to the individual who is tasked with interpreting the violence.

In contrast, when the news media report on state violence, they never seem to encounter quite the same problem. For instance, we all know that war is violent, and it wouldn't take much to accept that. But when we hear about the military in the Middle East, the events are masked by terms like *democracy* and *freedom*.<sup>2</sup> The violence is seemingly passed over and celebrated, precluding us from answering its question. This nuanced framing grants an assumed legitimacy through language and mediation. How can an operation for *freedom* be wrong? How can the support of a military coup for *democracy* be illegitimate? These are questions that governments and most media would rather not entertain, as the laws of property and the monopoly of violence might be conceptually threatened. When these standards are questioned, it will usually devolve into some logic that accepts “the way things are,” which means that we are no longer speaking of values but making exceptions to them.

### Locating a Junction

Only when we understand that violence is the question being asked can we attempt to respond to it appropriately. To help illustrate the way that context surrounding an event is masked, I want to think about violence in terms of two interactive forms: blatant violence is when the context surrounding violence is clear, and subtle violence is when the context surrounding violence is opaque. When the context of violence is clear or transparent, the question of violence is not able to evade answer. Blatant violence is when the fact of violence itself cannot be denied. Blatant violence is necessary to subtle violence because it is the understanding of violence as such, where subtle violence is the denial, ignorance, or seeming unawareness of it. Subtle violence is simply blatant violence that is made privy to some and not to others. In our everyday lives, when it comes to answering the question of the violence we come into contact with, we can generally identify it and make a

more instinctual reaction to it. When violence is brought into being, it is not made clear by default. Understanding any violence relies first on our perception, which is based on the ways we understand the world. Like indiscriminate racism, the reason racists are unable to first consider their own actions or “views” as being violent and thus harmful is because they would be forced to consider their own actions as wrong or anything but normal. They would first have to question their own belief system. Their worldview effectively depends on the acceptability of that particular violence. Those who are the victims of racism have no way of being shielded from confronting this question, since it is being done *to* them. They are denied the legitimacy of their reaction to violence in favor of misunderstandings, poor taste, and ignorance. Even if victims of racism—or any other form of subtle violence—did not accept violence as to what they were subjected to, they are nonetheless left open to its harm psychologically, as the experience of violence does not depend on a clear representation or a locating of violence.

When the language that describes representation is considered an authority, it can be directed in any way despite its actual context of events. Although we acknowledge the inherent differences of violence in television, film, sports, and video games, they are made decidedly “good” or “bad” through a representation where context is only selectively accessible. When we experience violence through media, knowing that it is violent is not enough to understand it, as we need to know of it beyond a representational level. Guided by social norms, our main forms of entertainment and media further disrupt our ability to respond to violence, as they assist in dislodging its context of events. The problem I see is not with types of media themselves, as they do not harbor intentionality until they are interacted with. The question I’m focused on is how violence is communicated outside its real event—which is to say *through media*. When watching a video game through its symbolic movement and hearing it played more as an instrument, its violence becomes detached and somewhat more loaded. Heard from another room or unaware of what it was, it would be masked by this subtlety, where its context and legitimacy would be experienced far differently than what it was.

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Ansel Arnold is an artist and writer who is broadly interested in the way that media representations structure knowledge and guide our everyday experience. By representing these media, his work is critical of the knowledge that those representations produce. Through this critique, he rejects monolithic preconceptions of the world by reconstructing narrative space.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Languages of Violence* (2019) is available for viewing at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0g4831q5#supplemental>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Operation Iraqi Freedom emphasized replacing Saddam Hussein's reign with a "democratically elected government." See Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Operation Iraqi Freedom: Three Years Later," U.S. Department of State Archive, March 18, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/ci/iz/63367.htm>.

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***BLASTRADIUS***

**No. 4 in a Series of Data Humanization Performances**

Adriene Jenik



*Adriene Jenik, BLAST RADIUS, April 2018. Images courtesy of the artist.<sup>1</sup>*



At around 7:30 p.m. on April 13, 2017, the US government dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb near the Moman Dara village in the Asad Khel area in the Achin district of Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan. Nicknamed the “Mother of All Bombs,” the weapon is the largest nonnuclear weapon in the US arsenal, with a blast radius, meaning the area in which serious effects to people and structures can be felt, of a mile. While the MOAB was the largest weapon released, it was but one of 4,361 air weapons that targeted Afghanistan during 2017, according to US Air Forces Central Command declassified airpower summaries.

At 7:30 a.m. on April 13, 2018, the anniversary of this event, I walked a path equivalent to the blast radius of MOAB on land in Arizona. This walk memorialized the civilians killed, the villages terrorized, the populations forced to migrate, and the lands scarred as a result of the endless wars being carried out in the name of protecting US citizens.

People who were interested followed a live stream via the Museum of Walking social media account. Approximate time: six hours. I walked barefoot.

This performance is part of my Data Humanization Series, which emerges from the field of data visualization and big data analytics. Within this field, large and complex data sets are presented through visual effects that render them “readable.” In contrast to this trend toward distilling huge data sets, each of my “data humanization” performances seeks to physically “translate” a single data point so that it can be more fully comprehended by myself and others. Chosen data points are numbers that trouble or baffle me. As US culture and power are increasingly militarized, I have observed that much real data is increasingly hidden. Even when visible, such data are hard to take in—for example, the over 120,000 Iraqi civilian deaths as the result of the (now widely disparaged) Iraq War, the enormity of the destruction wreaked by a bomb with a blast radius that runs a mile in each direction, or the eighty-plus hours of sleep deprivation detailed in CIA documents that came to light in the declassified summary of the US Senate torture report.

I seek to imprint these data points within my body, and I invite my audiences to serve as witnesses and aids.

\* \* \*

Adriene Jenik is an artist and educator who resides in the desert. Her computer and media art spans 3 decades, including pioneering work in interactive cinema and live telematic performance. Jenik’s current creative research projects include “data humanization” performances, immersive learning experiments and

street performances reading “climate futures” with her ECOtarot deck. At Arizona State University, she serves as Professor of Intermedia in the School of Art.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *BLAST RADIUS* (2018) is available for viewing at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rb6n5q7#supplemental>.

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## **Interpreting the Legal Archive of Visual Transformations: Textual Articulations of Visibility in Evidentiary Procedures and Documentary Formats of Colonial Law**

Asif Ali Akhtar

### **Introduction**

This essay is concerned with tracing an onto-epistemological break through the archaeology of colonial penal law, whereby a historical restructuring of the “visible” and the “articulable” produces modern ways of “seeing” and “knowing.” This epistemic break will be investigated through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “Regulations” of Islamic *shari‘a* penal law by British administrators of the East India Company in colonial Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The juridico-discursive body, which came to be known as Anglo-Muhammadan law, is analyzed through court records compiled by Company jurists and their Regulations modifying *shari‘a* jurisprudence. Islamic penal law is based on hermeneutical practices of juridical reasoning formed through particular ways of seeing, knowing, and verifying the truth through eye-witness and testimony. In this essay I show that when the British commandeered this system of justice toward their own ends, the regulatory changes they instituted inadvertently brought about *visual transformations* of the ways in which legal life-worlds of the colony come to be recorded, articulated, and expressed. Under the British administration of colonial Bengal, this dual-process of appropriation and subversion of the law took shape through translation and transliteration of *fiqh* treatises, to legal amendments and sweeping legislations in substantive law.<sup>2</sup> This process not only provided colonial power access to the bodies of colonial subjects but also conditioned the relations between criminality, visibility, and juridical

veridiction through penal legislation.<sup>3</sup> As this essay shows, the East India Company's regulation of Islamic penal law began incorporating modern forms of evidentiary proofs, indexicality, and documentary formats that restructured the life-world of colonial law in nineteenth-century Bengal.

I approach these complex changes by looking at the Nizāmat 'Adālat, a superior criminal court of judicature operating in Bengal from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. I approach the Nizāmat system through court records produced by East India Company servants from 1805 to 1859, titled *Reports of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamat Adawlut*.<sup>4</sup> Treating these *Reports* as the primary object of analysis, I show how they provide lucid insights into the visual restructuring of law and life in the colony. Changes in the substantive and procedural law, which affected epistemological bases, hermeneutical practices, and veridictional procedures of *shari'a* law, were enacted by the British through a series of Regulations that constituted new types of evidentiary rules and documentary procedures. By regulatory enactment, "criminal sentences [were] to be prepared from commencement of 1805, for the information of government...and cases of importance to be selected from such reports for publication."<sup>5</sup> This legislation eventually materialized in the *Reports*, whose format and documentary features provide vivid insights into the changing nature of legality and penalty, evidencing what I argue is an epistemic break restructuring the visible and articulable lifeworld of law.

In considering eighteenth- and nineteenth-century penal law discourses and practices, this essay theoretically and methodologically draws on the work of Michel Foucault, along with his understanding of history in terms of epistemological breaks and regimes of truth.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the colonial legalscape provides a different view—and a different empirical substrata—than the discourses of the classical age of European modernity commonly associated with Foucault's researches. In apprehending historical epochs and past systems of legality and penalty in terms of the "visible" and the "articulable," this work also gestures to the direction of how Gilles Deleuze has refracted certain aspects of Foucault's conceptions of discourses and practices to view them in a different light. To quote from Deleuze's *Foucault*:

An 'age' does not pre-exist the statements which express it, nor the visibilities which fill it. These are the two essential aspects: on the one hand each stratum or historical formation implies a distribution of the visible and the articulable which acts upon itself; on the other, from one stratum to the next there is a variation in the distribution, because the visibility itself changes in style, while the statements themselves change their system.<sup>7</sup>

Viewed in this light, the *Reports* of criminal law cases—judged by Company jurists together with their Mahomedan law officers—under consideration in the following sections illuminate how the changing onto-epistemological modalities of colonial law also restructured ways of seeing, saying, and knowing in colonial Bengal. The changing epistemological modalities, it will be argued, also have bearing on how visibilities of law come to be restructured and conditioned through emerging modern evidentiary frames, documentary formats, and recording techniques of colonial law.

To evidence a rupture—in terms of the visible and the articulable—between the Islamic premodern and the colonial modernity, the *Reports* are treated as an archive of visual and legal transformations. The discursive residue in the form and content of the *Reports* elucidates an onto-epistemological break in terms of shifting evidentiary modes, documentary formats, and means of determining the truth. The visibilities apparent in the colonial penal law are treated on two levels: first, at the level of the “discursive residue” of the *Reports* themselves—their materiality, format, and indexicality of the court records—in terms of what cues they provide as an archive into visual transformations underway; and second, at the level of evidentiary and documentary transformations discernible from their content, in terms of changing epistemologies and truth-procedures. Over the course of the early nineteenth century, the focus of the legal records shifts from evidentiary rules of *shari‘a* jurisprudence toward medico-juridical and forensic techniques. Eyewitness testimonies and attention to the instrument of murder come to be replaced with documents such as crime scene reports, postmortem reports, and autopsy reports. These changes, it will be argued, produce different ways of seeing and attesting to the truth, while the transforming relations of the visible to the articulable become discernible through a continuous recording of early nineteenth-century colonial penal law crystallized in the *Reports* as a unique archive of where the colonial gaze meets the colonized body.

Considering the case records contained in these volumes of the *Reports* in relation to the periodic Regulations, I show how this “discursive residue” of an antecedent legal system forms an archive not only of legal change but also of visual transformations. Part 1 of this essay establishes a historical and institutional context of the Nizāmat ‘Adālat and its regulatory modes necessary for interpreting the *Reports*. Part 2 delineates certain visual features of the *Reports* in terms of formatting and indexing, which make them useful as an archive of visual change. Finally, part 3 considers how the *Reports* elucidate an onto-epistemological break in terms of evidentiary modes, documentary formats, and truth-procedures, which evidence a rupture between the Islamic premodern and the colonial modernity that follows.

### Preliminary Context: Historical Strata of Colonial Regulation of Islamic Law

Prior to the onset of colonial modernity, Bengal, the largest province of the Mughal dominion, was administered by the dual system of a *Nâẓim* (governor) and a *Dīmān* (treasurer). While the Diwani was the domain of commerce and treasury, the Nizāmat was properly the administrative domain under the figure of the *Nâẓim*—though these spheres often intersected.<sup>8</sup> According to a decentralized mode of Mughal criminal adjudication, every village had its local *qadi*, or judge, who “had criminal jurisdiction along with other jurisdictions.” Further, “a *Mufti* was attached to every court,” where each *qadi* would pronounce judgment in consultation with a *mufti*, or jurisconsult.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, as the East India Company gained influence in the region, its initial foray was into the realm of the Dīwān, where they took on responsibilities for taxation and civil litigation under a reconstituted Sadr Dīwānī ‘Adālat. Meanwhile, the Sadr Nizāmat ‘Adālat was left under the auspices of the Nawab of Bengal up until the 1757 battle of Plassey. As Tapus Kumar Banerjee notes, “After Plassey, nothing remained to the Nawab but the ‘Name and Shadow of Authority’, and the Company could [also] usurp the powers and functions of the *Nizāmat*.”<sup>10</sup> Although there is a rich history of how this usurpation takes place during the time of Warren Hastings,<sup>11</sup> the period that concerns the current discussion of court records stems from the formalization of a new type of codified institution in 1790 following the Regulations initiated by the incoming Governor General, Marquis Cornwallis.

#### *Cornwallis’s Minute on Defects of Muhammadan Law and Its Colonial Regulation*

In 1790 Marquis Cornwallis ushered in a new phase of the British administration of criminal justice in Bengal. The East India Company had engaged in various experiments of influencing criminal law, from 1765 on through a policy of noninterference, and indirect rule through the office of the Naib Nâẓim. The end of this period came in 1790, when “the Company took the control of the *Nizāmat* into its own hands, and the veil was removed.”<sup>12</sup> In a Minute recorded at Fort William on December 1, 1790, Cornwallis noted two obvious causes for the notoriously defective system: “1st, the gross defects in the Muhammadan law; and 2ndly, The defects in the constitution of the courts established.”<sup>13</sup> While the British had already altered significant parts of the law and the institutions in the decades prior, Cornwallis ushered in an era of systematic and codified changes to the *sharī‘a* law

that would come to be properly known as the Regulations. The rationale behind these Regulations was to correct the “defects in the penal laws of the country” while instituting “an efficient administration of criminal justice.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, by 1793 Cornwallis “formed the Regulations into a regular Code, [as] the basis of the Regulation Law.”<sup>15</sup> The Regulations of the Bengal Presidency are of crucial importance in understanding the British administration of criminal law in India up to 1859 as documented in the *Reports*. These properly formed the template for later applications in other areas up until the passage of the Indian Penal Code Act in 1860.

As *shari‘a* law functions on the basis of specific hermeneutic and commentary discourses, the Regulations provided a means for the British to make alterations to the substantive law from without.<sup>16</sup> As a series of legislative acts aimed at rescinding, altering, abrogating, mutating, and subverting the existing law, the Regulations can thus be properly considered a *counter-discursive* body of law acting in reference to and poised against the existing evidentiary rules and hermeneutical procedures of *shari‘a* jurisprudence.<sup>17</sup> Prior to 1790, British amendments of the law were cautious yet arbitrary and unsystematic; later on, they systematically un-render the *shari‘a* through codification.<sup>18</sup> The complex procedure, whereby one format of law rewrites, or codifies an existing legal system, it is argued, is what produces legal modernity together with new modes of seeing and knowing as evidenced in the *Reports*.

To illustrate the point about how the Regulations can be used to interpret visual change taking place in the *Reports*, I provide an example of a single but formative Regulation, which came to significantly restructure criminal jurisprudence. The Regulation in question stems from Cornwallis’s remarks recorded in his Minute on the matter of evidence in homicide cases.<sup>19</sup> The law officers writing the fatwas would refer, in lieu of Abu Hanifa’s emphasis on determining the intention from the nature of the instrument deployed, to “more modern authorities” of Abu Yusuf and Muhammad al-Shaybani, who stress intentionality should be determined from circumstantial evidence.<sup>20</sup> The effects of this Regulation in terms of visibility of evidentiary criteria and how visual cues are laid out in the *Reports* are considered in the final section. The statement from Cornwallis’s 1790 Minute, which makes the stipulation to consider the intent of the murderer and not the instrument of murder in homicide investigations, is reproduced for context:

“1st. That the doctrine of Yusuf and Mohummud, in respect to trials for murder, be the general rule for the officers of the courts to write the *Fatwas* or law opinions applicable to the circumstances of every trial, and that the distinctions made by Aboo Huneefa as



to the mode of the commission of murder, be no longer attended to; or in other words, that the intention of the criminal, either evidently or fairly inferrible from the nature and circumstances of the case, and not the manner or instrument of perpetration (except as evidence of the intent) do constitute the rule for determining the punishment; ...we have it in evidence before us that the best subsequent, or more modern, law authorities among the Mohummudans, do expressly, in cases where Aboo Huneefa and his said two disciples differ, leave it to the *Hakim*, or ruling power, to make an option between their varying sentiments; upon which ground I think it is plainly our duty to adopt, in all such cases, the opinion of either that shall appear most rational and fitted to promote the due and impartial administration of justice.”<sup>21</sup>

Harington notes that Cornwallis’s remarks “were accordingly included in a Regulation, of fifty-two articles,” passed two days later. We may note in this instance how Cornwallis’s utterance at Fort Williams becomes enacted and codified into law as Regulations. This points to the institutionalization of a hitherto-unprecedented discourse of legal amendments, requiring new types of evidence and new practices of punishment and correction to be invented. After 1805, the *Reports* provide vivid insights into how these Regulations functioned in terms of the articulability of the visible and how the focus shifts from eyewitness testimonies and the instrument of murder to the corpse of the victim, marks of mutilation, and various other visually discernible circumstantial evidence. Before we turn to the *Reports*, understanding the procedure of the Nizāmat as administered by Company servants will add further context to interpret the form and content of the records.

### *Institutional Structure and Function of the Nizāmat ‘Adālat post-1790*

As the Nizāmat is not a regular court of law, in order to fully appreciate the form and content of the *Reports*, the reader will benefit from a basic understanding of its institutional structure and function. A summary of this is provided by W. H. Macnaghten in the opening Advertisement for the first volume of the *Reports*:

The chief peculiarity in the mode of proceeding in the Court of Nizamut Adawlut is, that the prisoners are never personally before it. Judgement in each case is formed by a perusal of the original

proceedings of the Magistrates on the commitments, and copies of the proceedings held by the Courts of Circuit on the trials. The proceedings of the Courts of Circuit are ordered to be conducted in the following manner. The charge against the prisoner; his confession, if he plead guilty; the evidence on the part of the prosecutor; the prisoner's defence, and any evidence which he may have to adduce, being all heard; the Cauzy or Moofty (who is present during the whole of the trial) writes at the end of the record of the proceedings (which record is in the Persian language) the *futwa*, or exposition of the Moohummudan law, applicable to the circumstances of the case, and attests it with his seal and signature.<sup>22</sup>

The court of the Nizāmat 'Adālat was reconstituted, by Section 67, Regulation IX, 1793, as a superior criminal court of appeals, and was relocated to Calcutta from Murshidabad. Following the East India Company's reordering of the legal system, the offices and responsibilities were hierarchized in an unprecedented manner, with British judges supervising Muhammadan law officers (1 *Qadi*, 1 *Mufti*, 2 *Maulavies*, and 2 *Muharrirs*, i.e., Persian scribes) in the lower courts.<sup>23</sup> While the newly reformed superior court of the Nizāmat 'Adālat "consist[ed] of three judges, to be denominated respectively chief judge, and second and third judge...assisted by the head cauzee of Bengal...and by two moofties." Later the number of judges would be increased to five, "all chosen from among the covenanted [British] servants of the Company."<sup>24</sup> This institutional edifice of hierarchical subordination and bureaucratic organization is one of the key aspects that truly sets Anglo-Muhammadan law apart from any preceding practice of *shari'a* in the world.<sup>25</sup> The figure of the *qadi* was completely redefined and subsequently displaced during the reordering of this system. As Nizāmat judge J. H. Harington notes: "The judicial functions, which appertained to the office of the cauzy-ul-cuzzat...under the Mahomedan government, have been discontinued since the establishment of courts of justice under the superintendence of British judges."<sup>26</sup> Thus the office of the *qadi* was no longer a judgeship; rather, it became subordinated as a clerical position of the "law officer."<sup>27</sup> Under this new categorization, the role of the *qadi* (judge) came to be collapsed with the *mufti* (jurisconsult) and *maulavi* (professor), jointly referred to as "Muhammadan law officers" in the *Reports* and Regulations. The law officers would be instrumental in the functioning of both courts, as Macnaghten notes:

As soon as practicable after the conclusion of each [Circuit Court] trial, a counterpart of the record is transmitted to the Nizamut

Adawlut, accompanied with an English letter, stating the opinion of the Judge on the evidence adduced. The record includes the whole of the proceedings, with every examination and material paper taken by or delivered into Court, and Persian translations of all examinations which may have been taken down in any other language. The whole of the papers and proceedings received from the Magistrate upon the case referred, are also transmitted. On receipt of these proceedings, they are made over to the Kazeer ool Koozat and Mooftes of the Nizamut Adawlut, who, in the first instance, are required to state their opinion in writing at the foot of the record of each trial.<sup>28</sup>

These law officers would themselves become disciplinary subjects, terminable upon any misconduct. Further, “they were required to take and subscribe a retrospective oath, half-yearly,” attesting to the fact that they had performed their duties diligently and honestly in the service of the government.<sup>29</sup> While the role of the law officers is occluded in the *Reports*, the “Rule for obtaining *futwa* of law officers” specified in Regulation 9, 1793, and Regulation 8, 1803, perhaps offers the most visible description of their role:

The law officers of the nizamut adawlut are ordered to assemble at the office of the register three times in every week, or oftener if necessary. The register is to lay before them the Persian copies of proceedings upon trials referred by the courts of circuit to the nizamut adawlut; after duly considering which, and previously to leaving the register’s office, they are to state in writing, at the foot of the record upon each trial, whether the *futwa* of the law officer of the court of circuit is consistent with the evidence, and conformable to the Mohummudan law; or the *futwa* which, in their opinion, ought to be delivered upon the case; and are to subscribe their names, and affix their seals thereto. The register is to submit the proceedings so revised to the judges of the nizamut adawlut at their next meeting; and the court after presenting the proceedings of the court of circuit, with the *futwas* of the law officers of that court, and of the nizamut adawlut, are to pass the final sentence; unless further evidence or information upon any point appear requisite. . . . if further evidence be received, a second *futwa* is taken from the law officers, and the trial is again brought before the

court...the register is to transmit a copy of [the sentence], under the seal of the court, and attested with his official signature.<sup>30</sup>

Together these law officers would undertake the joint production of fatwas no longer as a hermeneutic practice but as a bureaucratic requirement of the Company courts. It should be noted that initially the fatwas are legally applicable to the parties in criminal case, regardless of their professed faith. For the procedures of the Nizāmat and the subordinate courts, the fatwas would function initially qua binding legal documents stating the law officer's opinion on the matter<sup>31</sup>—gradually, through subsequent Regulations, these sealed and stamped fatwas would become entirely dispensable. The judges of the Nizāmat would have supervisory authority over the whole process and its documentation:

The proceedings so revised are then submitted to the Judges of the Nizamut Adawlut, who may (and generally do) hold separate sittings, and pass sentence, except in cases where the single Judge so sitting does not concur with the Judge of Circuit before whom the trial took place, or with the *fatwa* of the Nizamut law officers, in which case the opinion of another Judge must be had before the sentence can be passed. Various regulations have from time to time, been passed with a view to remedy defects in the Moohumudan law; and the opinion of the law officers may always be overruled, whether on the side of the conviction or acquittal, by not less than two Judges of the Nizamut Adawlut.<sup>32</sup>

Hence, from their centrally visible place in the legal system, the law officers and their fatwas eventually become erased from the process. Having outlined this procedure of how the *Reports* came to be compiled at the time, we may now attend to their form and content to understand changing evidentiary criteria in terms of how ways of seeing, showing, and saying are described within the legal process. The next section looks at the visual *form* of the records themselves, and the final section properly investigates marks of evidentiary change in the *content* of the *Reports*.



Figure 1 A Hindustani doctor's deposition to the judge of the circuit court in Urdu. A question-answer record of a conversation between the judge and the native doctor of the mental ward about the psychological disposition of a subject on trial, whether he was actually insane or feigning insanity. An example of the documented medicalization, and changing procedures of the courts visually captured and crystalized in the court records. *Nizāmat 'Adālat*, Reports of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamut Adawlut [1831-1850], Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1841-1852. Image courtesy: British Library Board (IOR/V/22/445, p. 334-335).

### Format and Visual Features of the Reports

The *Reports of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizāmat Adawlut*, reporting cases from January 1805 until the end of 1859, elucidate and occlude particular elements in their selective reporting criteria with changing times and formats.<sup>33</sup> “It is not likely that the Nizamut Reports will be perused by any but those who are conversant with the system of proceeding observed in the Courts of Criminal Justice in this country,” wrote Macnaghten, the registrar of the Nizāmat when the first volume was published in 1827. It is unlikely that Macnaghten himself appreciated the

significance of the records he was compiling in terms of “discursive residue” being secreted, at the same time, for future observers of a *dead* legal system. I am referring here, more specifically, to historical researchers concerned with visual criteria and other aspects of nineteenth-century legal lifeworlds as different species of readers of court records—ones who approach and conceptualize the textual record and the colonial archive in different ways. For instance, here we are about to consider the *Reports* as a legal archive of visual transformations. “To those who peruse the following Reports,” Macnaghten notes,

it cannot fail to be obvious, that much matter has been introduced unconnected with the principles laid down in the notes, and unnecessary to the elucidation of the practice proposed to be established. This is doubtless to be deprecated in some measure, as being a deviation from that perspicuous brevity which characterizes the reports of cases in crown law published in England. But a detail of the particulars developed in the criminal trials of this country cannot be regarded altogether as surplusage. According to European notions, the motives which here instigate the commission of offenses are sometimes inadequate, and not always comprehensible; and any information calculated to familiarize the Judge with the ideas and springs of action which prevail among those to whom he dispenses justice, cannot be wholly uninteresting or useless.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Macnaghten notes elements that he himself has taken the liberty to occlude for the print format:

It is a subject of regret to me, that the multifarious and incessant avocations of the Judges left them no leisure to revise their opinions. These were probably written without any reference to their future appearance in print; and I have ventured to make a few verbal alterations, where the style of the remark appeared clearly intended for private reference, and obviously too colloquial for publication.<sup>35</sup>

These statements attest to the colonial nature of a court through which foreigners dispense justice to natives by their own laws, while making modifications to rules, procedures, and practices that affect ways of seeing, saying, and knowing. What visual, indexical, and evidentiary insights can these records of a *dead* legal system offer into the lifeworlds of institutionalized legality and penalty

experienced by historical subjects of colonial law? In this section, I attempt to review some of these visual and indexical features of the *Reports* that can lend themselves to attuned readers as a visual resource.

### *Form and Formatting of the Reports*

The cases are reported chronologically in summarized form with headings bearing the prosecutor/prosecutrix versus the prisoner and the charge. There are changes to the format, as new types of evidence and documentation from the lower courts, police records, and medical examinations come to be included in the process of the trials; however, the general style and presentation remain almost constant until the end. These changes attest to changing evidentiary procedures. As noted above, the reports in the first two volumes were compiled prior to publication of these materials, while each preceding year's cases were reported regularly thereafter with new details being added frequently. This may owe to the highly summarized format and brevity of the reports contained in the first volume. An example of one of the earliest cases reported in the series, "Government *against* Telok Sahoo and five Others," dated March 18, 1805, reads as follows:

The prisoners, whose trial came on at the Dacca Jelalpore sessions[,] were arraigned on a charge of having robbed the house of Shekh Jogen, and of having caused his death by applying fire to different parts of his body. This charge was fully established by their confessions as well as by the evidence adduced upon the trial; and they were declared by the law officers liable to exemplary punishment extending to death. They were accordingly sentenced by the Court of Nizamut Adawlut (present H. T. Colebrooke and J. Fombelle) to suffer death.<sup>36</sup>

The above quoted report, though one of the briefest in the volume, provides a template for how the earlier cases are narrated. Cases for later years, as I show, are replete with much greater detail and expand significantly in length. A given report usually starts with a charge from a particular circuit court trial outlining the basic features of the case. Usually this is followed by the opinion in the fatwa of the Muhammadan law officers of the circuit court, and whether the judge of that court concurred with this opinion. If the fatwa of the law officers of the Nizāmat 'Adālat differs from the circuit court fatwa, then it is also summarized. The report is concluded by noting the judges who were present at the time, and

their verdict with reference to any specific punishment—either in agreement or disagreement with the fatwa—along with their opinion and reasoning. The cases in the first volume are briefly summarized, and rarely do they ever span over two pages.

### *Invisibility of the Law Officers*

Unfortunately, the Muhammadan law officers, that is, the *qadis*, *muftis*, and *maulavis*, are nowhere listed by name, except the few rare instances where a reference appears in the footnotes. The disappearance of the law officers is significant to the changing modalities of a secularizing sacred law. Later on, their fatwas come to be contested by other evidence such as *sooruthal* reports of the police *darogha*, and postmortem reports of the medical officers, which point to evidence of the fact. This attests to the diminishing legal value of the fatwa in light of modern evidentiary criteria. The law officers, however, remain a feature of some of the cases until the very end of the Nizāmat system, with occasional references to fatwas even in 1859. The earlier court records judiciously summarize the fatwa of the law officers regardless of whether their opinion is final, and in their deliberations the judges make regular reference to this opinion. Later on, however, as becomes evident especially in the cases recorded in the sixth and final volume of the edition, there are cases where the Muhammadan law officers are scarcely mentioned, though their presence is required according to procedure. This erasure of the law officers is accompanied by other appearances and new forms of evidence. Exemplary of this trend is a case from 1850, where the circuit law officer's fatwa is overridden by the testimony of a medical officer:

The body was disinterred, an inquest duly held and an autopsy taken by Dr. Denham which he describes as follows: "The body presented, externally, marks of burns on the lower part of the back, but no marks of violence about the private parts. Internally there was a small portion of membranous substance in the cavity of the womb, . . . the deceased must have miscarried, and in all probability death was occasioned from the loss of blood."<sup>37</sup>

Hence medical facts are attested as visual facts in the legal documentation of court procedure—this process is described in more detail in the following section. In several cases recorded toward the end of the compendium, neither the law officers nor their fatwas are mentioned in the records. By 1832 the Regulations



grant circuit court judges authority to override the fatwa according to discretion. Moreover, the absence of the voice of the *qadis*—who are possibly central characters in other instances of *shari‘a* trials—in most of the court records where these individuals are present, suggests already a different type of procedure taking shape, along with its own textual conventions of inscription, documentary recording, and evidentiary criteria that accord the attention of the viewer of the record to different details.

### *Maps, Diagrams, Genealogical Charts, and Foldouts*

The most visually distinct feature of the otherwise textual reports are charts, plots, and maps that are included as aids for the viewer. Occasional cases, especially those of highway robberies, or *decoities* as they were referred to by the British administrators, would include foldout pages that indicate where the gang had assembled in relation to where the infraction took place, and how they came to be apprehended. Complex cases would also include genealogical plots, or diagrams connecting different claimants, witnesses, and accused in relation to one another. These hand-drawn maps and plots that literally fold out of the pages of the reports also present new ways of seeing the colonial terrain over which the Company was administrating. In complex cases involving crimes that took place outside Company jurisdiction, and hence outside the purview of the Nizāmat, they would mark out borders, which would also visually represent legal boundaries. These markings and inscriptions can be read as texts that map out the law onto a visual terrain. Often evidentiary details would also be pointed out, including facts such as the distance between one village and another, making the alibi of the accused, or a statement of the witness, visually verifiable in wholly modern ways.

### *Indexical Features of the Reports*

Originally intended to provide reference to colonial lawyers and judges of the courts, these features make the volumes accessible as a mode of categorization of case law in terms of principal matters seen as relevant at the time. These indexical features in the *Reports* provide vivid insights into ways of summarizing and categorizing the law. In addition to the case records being logged in chronological order with margin summaries, each volume includes a table of the cases sorted by the defendant’s name. The case records also note which judges were present by name, by noting, for example “(present J. H. Harington and H. T. Colebrooke,)” for an

1805 case.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the first two volumes, and at the beginning of the sixth, is a comprehensive index to principal matters and a collated list of cases in that volume by specification, that is, the crime in question. An index at the end of volume 5 collates principal matters from all previous volumes and provides an invaluable map distilling the records up to that point. The final volume of the *Reports* published as a coda in 1861 is itself an “Index to the first six volumes of the select reports of the Nizamut Adawlut, from 1805 to 1850.”<sup>39</sup> The indexes compiled at the end of some of the volumes and at the end of the collection provide a visual map of legal change as it took place over the first half of the nineteenth century. It also shows a taxonomy of principal matters that appeared to be important at the time.

The cases listed under the section “Evidence,” for instance, show all the principal cases wherein evidentiary criteria became a significant point of law, hence providing a map for relating the visible back to the articulable. Other indexical entries attest to the colonial lifeworld being seen through European eyes: index titles such as “British Subjects, European,” “British Subjects, Native,” “Europeans,” “Female Infanticide,” “Human Sacrifice,” “Killing Sorcerers and Witches,” “Sodomy,” “Sorcerers,” “Whoredom,” and “Witchcraft” bring to light a colonial world striated and categorized by European interlocutors through their version of codified Islamic law. The Advertisement of this volume notes: “The enactment of the Indian Penal Code is not calculated to affect the value of the precedents embraced in this Index. On the contrary, it is believed that a reference to the decisions will materially assist those employed in the administration of criminal justice, even when the proceedings are regulated and punishments awarded in accordance with the new code.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Interpreting “Discursive Residue” of Law as Archive of Visual Transformations*

Certain features of the *Reports* make them a rich resource for visualizing the process of legal change undergone in the transition from Islamic jurisprudence to Company law in the colonial period. Insofar as the changing factuality of the law is recorded by the Company’s own procedures, the *Reports* inadvertently also form an archive of the visual restructuring of colonial modernity. A key aspect is obviously the periodization from early to mid-nineteenth century where the heyday of British experimentation with *shari’at* law occurs. The term *discursive residue* is meant to signify that the recording processes of Company law outlive their own relevance to a legal system that has long since become antecedent—both the East

India Company and its system of Anglo-Muhammadan law have ceased to exist. What does persist is their *recording* of legal facts in the moment that they were produced.<sup>41</sup> Hence this *residue* is the materiality and textuality of the *Reports*, but also the fact that they form a “visual archive” of this changing factuality of the law. Where the institutional secretions of the court become crystallized, the *Reports* provide a visually rich archival record of myriad social experiments in penalty and legal transformations precisely as they take shape.

In the moment of crystallization of printed matter, the pages of the *Reports* record legal facts that become transformed into historical fact—*after* the fact. The registrar’s compiling the *Reports* also compiles antecedent terms as technical terminology of Anglo-Muhammadan law adapted from *shari‘a* and imprecisely transliterated into colonial vernacular. These italicized words (such as *mouburir*, *moonsif*, *sooruthal*, *razzenama*, *roobacaree*) attest to forms of documentation that also officiated colonial law in technical terms adapted by Company jurists from local practice. The terms are italicized and hence appear as visual markers on the page of the *Reports*, alongside technical Latin terms (such as *mens rea* and *in articulo mortis*). These visual features of the text present markers on the page of cultural translation as it was taking place. Most interestingly, at times the Persian and Urdu text is reproduced within the body of the English records, usually witness testimonies, and even fatwas originally recorded in the local languages are translated into English for the record. However, very rarely, the Persian and Urdu script seeps back into the colonial record. The most interesting examples are included as illustrations (fig 1, 2); these include a fatwa where the question from the British circuit judge is in Urdu, while the response of the *mufti* is in Persian. It is the only Persian fatwa found in the *Reports*, and as such bears testament to an antecedent artifact of the law while visually displaying precisely what the regulated law was, at the same time, erasing.

The residue of the procedures of the law that is left over in the *Reports* thus records key moments of colonial legal change as it was taking place. The fact that the law is recording the law, regulated through the law itself, along with its own forms of recording, recoding, and regulation, bears testament to the fact that certain procedures came to be changed while evidencing the means through which these changes occurred. The residual discursive marks left behind form only a partial view of lived legal reality of the time. However, in that partial view, much is to be gleaned and gathered as visibly significant evidence of changing ways of seeing, showing, and judging that can be visualized and partially reconstructed, *after* the fact of colonial modernity.



modalities that become evident as we transition from decade to decade within the volumes of the *Reports*.

### *Eyewitness Accounts and Testimonial Evidence*

In terms of content of the *Reports*, the cases recorded often provide rich visual material in the form of eyewitness testimonies, and descriptions of the crime that are revealed during the investigations. Islamic law places the greatest evidentiary value on eyewitness accounts and does not value circumstantial evidence beyond establishing certain culpability or suspicion. This evidentiary value on visual testimony, however, is being outmoded during the same process in which the *Reports* are being assembled. New modes of inquiry and assessment of factual bases of crimes are coming into effect. However, as the importance is still laid on the fatwas of the law officers, at least in the earlier career of the Nizāmat, the eyewitness accounts are included in the records as corroborating evidence. The legally attested facts of what principal witnesses to the crime in question saw and the ways in which they describe it are logged in these cases and provide a rich visual-historical resource in terms of penal law. Often times, the eyewitness accounts don't stand up to the criteria required by *fiqh* jurisprudential standards; however, the accounts are still included to establish circumstantial evidence and hence convict the perpetrators of the crime. On June 26, 1821, in the case of "Government *against* Hatim Ali," the visual testimony of a boy becomes crucial in the matter of a murder of his mother having been committed by a man she was cohabiting with:

It appeared also, from the statement of this boy, that on the morning on which the murder occurred, the prisoner came home before [sunrise], and desired the boy to leave the house, which he refusing [*sic*] to comply with, he threatened to beat him. The witness then left it, and went to the house of a woman named Chandoo, and did not return until after sunrise. Seeing no one, he looked through a hole in the wall, and observed the deceased apparently dead, of which he informed the Darogha. The Darogha immediately repaired to the house, and finding the door locked, made a smith wrench it open, when the body of the deceased was discovered lying partly on a *charpai*, with two saber wounds, weltering in blood, and the prisoner had absconded. Three days after, the prisoner was apprehended not far from the Thana, with his sword, which is said to have been stained with blood. He made no attempt to escape,

or any resistance....Near the body of the deceased was found a *chadur* belonging to the prisoner, stained with spots of blood. ...His sword is said to have had also marks of blood on it. ...When the witnesses were examined before [the judge of circuit], and the sword shown them, they could not assert with certainty whether the marks on it were caused by blood or rust, but stated them to be precisely the same marks as were on it at the time of the prisoner's apprehension.<sup>42</sup>

Here the visual criteria of the case rest both on the testimony of the boy and on the marks on the sword, which allegedly belonged to the assailant. What was seen at the time, who it was seen by, and how they described the situation is logged in the *Reports* as legal fact; however, this descriptive content is refracted by ways of seeing developed during colonial legal modernity. A later case from 1827 provides one of several examples where visual criteria, although not attestable as evidence according to rules of Islamic jurisprudence, is still employed by the European judges as providing circumstantial evidence to the fact of the commission of the crime in question:

It appeared in evidence, that on the 22d of February 1827, Buray the prosecutor's nephew, a boy about 13 years of age, left his home early in the morning to tend some cattle, having on his person at the time certain gold and silver ornaments. ...About 10 o'clock the same night, a shepherd named Hurgobind, observed to the Jemadar of the Chowkee, that he had seen the deceased in company with the prisoner Nunheh at about 7 A.M. In consequence of this information he was apprehended, but denied the charge. ...Several respectable witnesses deposed to the ...facts, though no one appeared to have actually seen the murder committed. ...W. Dorin, (fourth Judge.) "The prisoner was seen on the very day in company with the murdered boy, who wore gold and silver ornaments to the value of 125 rupees. On being taxed, and evasions, he indicated the well in which the body was found, and then produced the ornaments of the boy from his own house, hid under some straw. There is no resisting the presumption that he murdered the boy, and I would pass a capital sentence."<sup>43</sup>

In this case, we can observe the way in which visual evidence provided by a shepherd is used by one of the judges of the Nizāmat to establish circumstantial

evidence of the crime having been committed, although no one had actually *seen* the crime take place. The fact that the prisoner was seen in such and such a place helped corroborate the facts during the investigation, and also in the passing of the final sentence. Later on, I examine how different ways of seeing come to be incorporated in the *Reports*, as judgments come to be made of different visual criteria.

*Evidentiary Transformations (from Murder Weapon to Body of the Victim)*

One of the earliest, and possibly most substantial, change made by British administrators to sharia jurisprudence effected during Marquis Cornwallis's Minute on the "defects of Muhamudan Law," discussed in the first part of this essay, was to shift the criteria of evidence in homicide trials. The doctrine of Abu Hanifa was to be regularly overridden by the opinions of his two disciples Imam Yusuf and Muhammad Al-Shaybani. This allowed the British to shift the investigation into murder cases in evidentiary terms, from establishing guilt by assessing the type of weapon used, that is, whether this was a sharp metal object or one that could easily effect death, or was the object an unlikely murder weapon. The emerging doctrine allowed Company jurists to convince their Islamic law officers to pay attention to the murderer's intent. Although this Regulation came into force in 1793, the earliest cases in the *Reports* from 1805 still pay attention to the murder weapon in the way the record is laid out. Later on, this changes as new modes of investigating and establishing crimes are outmoding the *fiqh* evidentiary criteria. One of the earliest cases of "Vakeel of Government *against* Sonaram," from January 1805, shows what the colonial recorders of the case are paying attention to in a moment while points of codified law are still being formed:

The prisoner, charged at the Backergunge sessions with the murder of Kusoola, his wife, by striking her on the head with the handle of a hatchet, pleaded "not guilty." By the concurrent testimony of several witnesses, who were examined in support of the prosecution, it appeared that the prisoner, after a quarrel with his wife, in which she gave him abuse, and he beat her, was found standing near the body of the deceased, with a hatchet in his hand; and that, on being interrogated by them, he confessed that he had killed the deceased by striking her on the head with the handle of the hatchet. From the inquest holden on the body of the deceased, it also appeared that she had received a severe contusion and wound on the

back of the head. . . . The law officers of the Nizamut Adawlut, considering [it] being uncertain, from the instrument used, that the death of the deceased was intended by the prisoner, declared retaliation for willful homicide to be barred; but that the prisoner was liable to discretionary punishment.<sup>44</sup>

The “handle of a hatchet” is referred to on several occasions during this otherwise terse record, because it becomes a determining factor in the case. A point that makes it even more significant is the fact that the Islamic law offices use this fact as a point of uncertainty on whether willful homicide was intended by the assailant. While this point of the law had already been regulated, we can note the onto-epistemological terms (knowing facts through objects as they come to be described in relation to the crime) in a moment of flux. To be sure, a footnote marked with an asterisk is appended to this record.

It may be added, upon the *fatwa* of the law officers, in this case, that death, occasioned by a blow given with the wooden handle of an axe, or any similar instrument, is not considered by the Moohummudan lawyers to be willful homicide; nor is it by *Aboo Huneefah*, if the blow were struck with the iron back of the instrument. But *Aboo Yoosuf* and *Imam Moobummud* maintain it to be equally murder, whether occasioned by the iron back of such an instrument, or by the edge of it.<sup>45</sup>

Here we can note the degree of detail accorded to the object, whether it was metallic or sharp, and whether the blow was struck with the edge or with the handle. This allows the determination of the crime on two distinct epistemological levels, that is, of the Regulations, as well as that of the classical Hanafite doctrine. We may note also that the “inquest holden on the body of the deceased” is also mentioned, but in nowhere near as much detail as is accorded to the instrument with which the murder was perpetrated. This evidentiary criteria will shift from the instrument to the body in the coming decades over which the *Reports* are tabulated. A decade later, a case of “Vakeel of Government *against* Pedro Gomez,” for the charge of “Murder by Strangulation,” from January 14, 1816, already shows this shift of the juridical gaze toward the body as having taken place, though the epistemological and documentary terms are still lacking in the vivid description the body acquires in later decades.



It appeared from evidence, that the prisoner married the deceased about three years before the murder. ...The prisoner confessed at the Thana, that he had strangled the deceased. ...Before the Magistrate [the prisoner] stated, that, on the evening before [his wife's] death, the deceased attempted to run away from his house; that he bound her hand and foot, to prevent her flight; and that a snake bit her in the night, and caused her death. On his trial he simply denied the murder, and said that she died from the bite of a snake. ...On the inquest held on the body, there were marks of a rope found on the neck, but no signs of the bite of a snake, and the prisoner was unable to prove that she had been bitten by a snake. The *fitwas* of the law officers of the Court of Circuit, and Nizamut Adawlut convicted the prisoner of willful murder of his wife by strangulation, and the Court of Nizamut Adawlut, (present J. Fombelle,) concurring in the conviction, sentenced the prisoner to suffer death.<sup>46</sup>

In this case, the evidence gathered from the inquest held on the body during the initial investigation is used to disprove the accused's statement about a snake bite. While marks of rope were identified on the body, the rope itself does not become an object of the case record in so much detail. Later records show how greater detail in terms of the visible becomes accorded to both the inquest and the body in determining facts of the crime.

*Inquest of the Body: "The Sooruthal Report"*

The later records forwarded by the circuit judge to the Nizāmat incur a visible shift in details that are included. Particularly after the 1830s, the police files, reports from the *thanna* (police station) filed by the *darogah* (inspector), are awarded significant space. The documentary evidence forwarded from the initial inquest in murder and homicide trials is an attested document known as the "*sooruthal* report"—the colonial accent on the Persian (*surat-e-hal*) would roughly translate to "present state of affairs," while *surat* itself literally means visible appearance. The *sooruthal* report, which would be confirmed by the eyewitnesses, documents facts immediately discernable from the scene of the crime as encountered and recorded by the *darogah*. We can note the detailed ways in which the wounds on the victim's corpse are described in this report included in a record from December 31, 1840:

There being no doubt as to the cause of the death of Ashruff, the body, after being inspected by the police and an inquest held thereon, was buried on the spot. The witnesses, Bhyrub Chunder Ghose and Jeedhun, Nos. 19 and 20, have authenticated the *sooruthal*. The wounds of Musst. Nooree are described in the inquest held on them by the police, on the 26th of June, at the *thanna*, to have consisted of one wound on the right arm, 9 fingers in length, 2 ½ in breadth, and 1 ½ in depth and to have been cut to the bone; another wound above it, 6 fingers long, 1 broad and deep; a wound on the neck under the left ear, 3 fingers long, ½ broad, and about the depth of a grain of corn; a wound under the left shoulder, 2 ½ fingers long, ½ a finger broad and deep; one wound extending from the back of the neck across the left shoulder blade, one span long, about 3 fingers in breadth towards the middle, and about 2 fingers at each end cut to the bone; and the fingers of both hands slightly cut in several places. The witnesses Naimut Khan and Hazeer Buxoollah, Nos. 21 and 22, have authenticated the above.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to the earlier records, where seldom an inquest or the body is mentioned, these later records provide detailed descriptions of the marks on the body. This signals to a different way of seeing and attesting to the truth as established in the earliest instance of encountering a violent crime. In a case from 1857, the *sooruthal* report is still being employed to gather immediate facts of the crime; however, the unit of measurement has now shifted to the more standardized inch, which suggests an epistemological shift taking place in how facts are recorded:

The darogah went to the spot, and held the usual *sooruthal* and discovered two severe wounds on the person of the deceased, one of the left side of the throat, two inches in length, one in breadth and one and a half in depth, and another on the cheek, from the top of the ear to the chin, about five inches long, one inch broad, and one inch deep, and saw the prisoner's bed in a bloody state.<sup>48</sup>

In one of the last cases in the *Reports* from 1859, their point of terminus, we find the *sooruthal* report being a central feature of case reports, which have now become inflated with much detail. In this case, however, there is a problem of attestation of the report, which causes the circuit judge to censure the *darogah* in his letter to the Nizāmat. In doing so, the judge also describes the modality and

operation of the *sooruthal* report and the fact that it had by then superseded eye-witness accounts and testimonial evidence:

In examining witnesses to the *sooruthal* instead of looking into the attestation of that document, the Magistrates are in the habit of questioning the witnesses as to what they saw on the occasion of the inquest. ...the essence of a *sooruthal* is its being the intelligent and full record of what has transpired at an inquest, set down by an officer who is...experienced in such matters and understanding what is material, and what is otherwise. This record made on the spot at the time, and assented to by the subscribing witnesses, forms a permanent history of the circumstances which cannot vary and which can be relied on by the Court. Whereas to substitute for the written record, the random recollections of the witnesses, is to substitute danger for safety, uncertainty for certainty, I should therefore be glad to see the police stimulated to greater care in the legal preparation of these documents, and the Magistrates advised to pay attention to their proper attestation.<sup>49</sup>

#### *Postmortem Report and Medical Examination*

The epistemic shift underway in terms of evidentiary criteria finally appears to crystallize with the appearance of “medical evidence” in the records. In addition, to the *sooruthal* report, the postmortem report conducted by a medical officer such as the civil assistant surgeon would provide forensic information after the fact. The criteria and description of evidence based on what this officer finds in the autopsy examination are of an entirely different nature. A medical report cited in this case from January, 31, 1859, describes the corpse as such:

The evidence of the Civil Assistant Surgeon shows that the beating must have been severe, bruises and extravasated blood being found on the scalp, back, neck, loins, and even on the abdomen and knees. Considerable force must have been exerted and, in all probability, some stick or blunt weapon was employed. But this beating, though more severe than the witnesses would make out, was not sufficient to cause death, which was caused by pressure on the windpipe, the face and eyes presenting all these appearances which usually result from strangulation, though there was not a trace of a

rope outside the neck, nor had the tongue protruded, as it would have done had the woman hung herself. The woman was quite healthy otherwise, and there was no trace of disease about her such as the prisoner hinted at before the police or the Magistrate. The witnesses to the *sooruthal* also speak of the marks of severe beating. But the medical evidence is obviously of the greatest importance in a case like this.<sup>50</sup>

While doctors and surgeons are referred to even in earlier records, the *Reports* become riddled with appearances of postmortem reports and autopsies of the corpse from 1840 on. This forms the basis of a medico-juridical evidentiary criteria that can offset eyewitness accounts, as well as the hermeneutical reasoning of the law officers' fatwas into contestation through a distinctly scientific epistemic frame. A case from January 24, 1857, marks a clear rupture:

The civil assistant surgeon, who held a *post mortem* examination of the deceased's death to have been caused by rupture of the liver and spleen; that there were contusions all over the body, more especially on the sides of the chest and belly, and that these contusions and ruptures were apparently the result of violence; that he cannot exactly state what might have been the result of those injuries if the spleen and liver had not been ruptured, but that the deceased was, from the state of her body, which presented a mass of bruises, dreadfully beaten, and that she might have possibly lived two or three hours or even longer. ...it has been clearly deposed by the civil assistant surgeon that the deceased met her death by violence, the body on examination presenting a mass of bruises and both the liver and spleen were ruptured, the former of which was in a healthy condition, and this leads me to believe that great force must have been used to cause the rupture.<sup>51</sup>

By the 1850s, the epistemic shift brought about in Islamic penal jurisprudence by East India Company jurists appears to have restructured the visibility of seeing and knowing in terms of scientific fact. That this takes place before the enactment of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 is highly significant, for this shift has taken place endogenously to Islamic criminal jurisprudence by various means and not caused by the overhaul of the legal system as would commonly be assumed. The dominant position of medical knowledge can be further ascertained by the

summarized entry of a record found under the heading “Evidence Medical” in the final volume, or Index, of the *Reports*:

Held that if prisoners charged with murder wish to impugn the accuracy of the opinion given by the Medical Officer, making the post mortem examination, they should summon medical evidence before the Session Judge, for the purpose of contradicting that opinion *on a fact deposed to by the officer making the post mortem examination*, but this Court, when that officer’s evidence *is unopposed by any scientific evidence to a contrary effect*, cannot venture *itself* to apply doctrines laid down in text books on medical jurisprudence to the particular facts deposed to by the Medical Officer, but will accept this officer’s opinion as to the immediate cause of death.<sup>52</sup>

From the weapon to the body, from eyewitness accounts to circumstantial evidence, from testament to document—we have witnessed a visual transformation of evidentiary proofs. The primary knowledge and interpretive expertise of the Muhammadan law officers initially become displaced by other visual-discursive evidentiary criteria, and eventually superseded by an altogether different layer of medical and forensic factuality. It should be clear from this visual survey of the evidentiary form of the *Reports* how their discursive residue provides a clear-cut map and index of a visual restructuring within a legal archive of colonial modernity.

## Conclusion

Having surveyed the changes in form and content of the *Reports* from 1805 to 1859, we have witnessed an epistemic rupture whereby visibilities and articulabilities of law and life in the colonial realm come to be restructured in terms of each other. Islamic hermeneutic reasoning, ways of seeing and bearing witness to the truth, are thus displaced by modern forms of reason, inflected by colonial regulation. If law structures life, then the *regulation* of law itself comes to restructure the ways in which the visibility of law comes to be articulated. New formats and procedures determine what is made apparent, and through what means. The shifting epistemological bases of truth-production through law, penalty, and evidentiary procedure can be discerned in visible traces the law leaves behind through its own recording operations. Traversing across such historical strata of legal history can illuminate these traces that highlight the breaks and ruptures in ways of seeing and saying, in terms of the visible and the articulable. To return to Deleuze’s refraction

of the Foucauldian optics of the subject and the institution, of discourses and practices:

The expression also has a form and a substance: for example the form is penal law and the substance is ‘delinquency’ in so far as it is the object of statements. Just as penal law as a form of expression defines a field of sayability (the statements of delinquency), so prison as a form of content defines a place of visibility.<sup>53</sup>

In considering the *Reports* as an archive of penal law, we consider the Foucauldian technique of discerning articulabilities in an entirely distinct legal lifeworld of the colonial subject of law, which provides us a vantage point and perspective on modernity distinct from the transformations of European modernity.

For example, ‘in the classical age’ the asylum emerged as a new way of seeing and displaying madmen, a way that was very different from that of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance; while for its part medicine—but equally law, rules and regulations, literature, etc.—invented a system of statements concerning the new concept of folly.<sup>54</sup>

In colonial Bengal we may note how similar types of regulatory modalities shift the principles of articulation of an entirely different lifeworld than European strata, which is also in itself entirely modern.

If seventeenth-century statements wrote of madness as being the last degree of folly (a key notion), then the asylum or internment envelops it in a general concept uniting madmen, vagabonds, paupers, idlers and all sorts of depraved folk: this offers a certain ‘self-evidence,’ a historical perception or sensibility, as much as a discursive system. And later, under different conditions, it is prison that provides a new way of seeing and displaying crime, and delinquency a new way of saying.<sup>55</sup>

What we have witnessed above is a transposition of these modern ways of seeing and saying that were themselves novel in Europe. In colonial modernity, however, this transposition produces altogether distinct ways of seeing and saying that still persist. As the entire system of Anglo-Muhammadan law itself came to an abrupt end marked by the rupture of codified British law in 1860, pursuing the

*Reports* to reconstruct a cartography of visual change may provide a more colorful testimony to the operations of antecedent system onto the visibilities and articulabilities of the colonial.

\* \* \*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815300>, particularly the idea of "jural colonization" (383), where Hallaq has argued that an "epistemological break" takes place during the "structural death" of *shari'a* through colonial procedures. The present essay considers the visual implications of this historical process through the archive of colonial law.

<sup>2</sup> Tapus K. Banerjee, *Background to Indian Criminal Law* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1963); Jörg Fisch, *Cheap Lives, Dear Limbs: The British Transformation of Bengal Criminal Law, 1769–1817* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983). Both Banerjee and Fisch have provided excellent legal-historical research on British regulation of criminal law in Bengal.

<sup>3</sup> Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> William H. Macnaghten, *Reports of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamat Adawlut*, vols. 1–10 (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1827–1860); only vols. 1 and 2 have Macnaghten as their registrar, the later ones are unnamed. All will be referred to as *Reports* followed by volume and page; these are cataloged in the India Office Records under the shelfmarks IOR/V/22/440-460. All spellings and

transliterations are retained to capture the character of these texts; furthermore, anachronistic words have been used to designate specific terminology, for example, “Muhammadan law officers.”

<sup>5</sup> John H. Harington, *An analysis of the laws and regulations enacted by the Governor General in Council, at Fort William in Bengal for the civil government of the British territories under that presidency*, vol. 1 (London: A. J. Valpy, 1821), 45–46. I have used this source for details and context of Regulations, hereafter cited as *Analysis*. An original unabridged version, J. H. Harington, *An Elementary Analysis of the Regulations Enacted by the Governor General at Fort William in Bengal*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1818), is hereafter cited as *Elementary Analysis*.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of Mughal institutions in economic terms, see Tilottama Mukherjee, “The Co-ordinating State and the Economy: The Nizamat in Eighteenth-Century Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2009): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07003095>.

<sup>9</sup> Banerjee, *Background*, 134, 138–39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Fisch, *Cheap Lives*, and Banerjee, *Background*, provide detailed historical background of Warren Hastings era; Singha, *Despotism*, also provides an exceptional analysis of the early changes in a more visual context of penalty.

<sup>12</sup> Banerjee, *Background*, 9–10.

<sup>13</sup> Harington, *Analysis*, 307.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>15</sup> William H. Morley, *An Analytical Digest of All the Reported Cases Decided in the Supreme Courts of Judicature in India, in the Courts of the Hon. East-India Company, and on Appeal from India, by Her Majesty in Council*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Ostell and Lepage, 1850), xlv; hereafter cited as *Digest*.

<sup>16</sup> Fisch, *Cheap Lives*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> As Regulations passed after 1793 often rescind, invalidate, or amend previous Regulations, they therefore form a moving body of legislation that provides a roadmap for what Hallaq has called the “jural colonization” of India. Fisch notes the difficulty in tracking these changes, as the later copies of the Regulations omit previous acts rescinded, and Banerjee adds that “unfortunately it is next to impossible to get a complete set of these Regulations.” These features of the Regulations lend credence to the idea of a counter-discourse, or antisystem functioning in precise regulatory opposition to the system of *shari‘a* jurisprudence. Both Fisch and



Banerjee have provided an excellent chronological map of the Regulations—I would argue that these legal alterations cannot be properly understood in terms of their empirical and visual criteria without systematically cross-referencing back to the individual cases that prompted Regulations, and vice versa. As I illustrate in the third and last section, to understand how the Regulations acted on visual modes of veridiction and truth-production, and how this contrast between the visible and the articulable in turn acted back on this body of law, it is essential to read the Regulations and the *Reports* in reference to each other.

<sup>18</sup> Hallaq, *Shari‘a*, 383.

<sup>19</sup> Cornwallis quoted in Harington, *Analysis*, 309, apparently in a speech he gave at Fort Williams on December 3, 1790.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; Banerjee, *Background*, 71; Fisch, *Cheap Lives*, 45–46.

<sup>21</sup> Marquis Cornwallis Minute from 1790, quoted in Harington, *Analysis*, 309.

<sup>22</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, iii.

<sup>23</sup> Banerjee, *Background*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Harington, *Analysis*, 433–34.

<sup>25</sup> Banerjee, *Background*, 140; cf. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 171, on “Hierarchical Observation” as a disciplinary structure. It would appear that the law officers become disciplined as subjects of the institution; the Regulations contain specific rules of conduct.

<sup>26</sup> Harington, *Analysis*, 219; cauzy-ul-cuzzat refers to head *qadi* of Bengal, Behar, Orrisa, and Benares; this post would hire subordinate *qadis*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hallaq, *Shari‘a*, 381; Schacht, *Introduction*, 95, on the clerical subordination of *qadis*.

<sup>28</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, i.

<sup>29</sup> Harington, *Analysis*, 166–67.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>31</sup> “Fatwas are not binding. The British, however, erroneously thought they were and regarded them as justification for the harsher sentences desired by them” (Rudolph Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 111; for fictional aspects of fatwa, see Fisch, *Cheap Lives*, 113).

<sup>32</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, i–ii.

<sup>33</sup> Of the *Reports*, vols. 1 and 2 list Macnaghten as court registrar; both were published in 1827 and contain cases during 1805–19 and 1820–26, respectively; vol. 3 was published in 1828 and records cases during 1827–30; vols. 4 and 5 were published after a long gap in 1841 and record cases during 1831–34 and 1835–40, respectively; the final volume (6) was published in 1852 and records cases during

1841–50 inclusive. Later decades 1850–59 are extended to 10 volumes in a different edition of the *Reports*.

<sup>34</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, i.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> *Reports*, vol. 6, 277.

<sup>38</sup> *Digest*, cii. This is significant, as Harington is also the author of *An Analysis of Regulations* and the chief judge in 1805, from whose diary entries the cases from 1805 came to be compiled. The indexical fact of Harington's own presence in court on a particular day becomes relevant. The notes appended to the cases are often "written or approved by the Judges by whom the cases were decided."

<sup>39</sup> J. Carrau, *Index to the first six volumes of select reports of the Nizāmat Adawlut, from 1805 to 1850, and to the most important of the cases determined from 1851 to 1859* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1861), 6; see also *Reports*, vol. 10 (IOR/V/22/461).

<sup>40</sup> *Reports*, vol. 10, i.

<sup>41</sup> According to a Regulation, "It is intended that cases of importance shall be selected from [the annual report] by the judges, to be published, with the approbation of government, for general information" (Harington, *Elementary Analysis*, 146). As noted above, the cases referred to the Nizāmat, as the superior criminal court, are either those which entail a sentence of death or imprisonment for life, or those where the judges of the Circuit Courts disagree with the fatwa produced by their law officers, or otherwise anomalous instances that require further legislation by Regulations. This in-built filtering mechanism has resulted in the most extraordinary cases being deposited in the *Reports* from 1805 to 1859. It should be noted that select cases have been included, possibly owing to their instructive or exemplary nature.

<sup>42</sup> *Reports*, vol. 2, 85.

<sup>43</sup> *Reports*, vol. 3, 69.

<sup>44</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, 5–6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Reports*, vol. 1, 331.

<sup>47</sup> *Reports*, vol. 5, 201.

<sup>48</sup> *Reports*, vol. 7, pt. 1, 145.

<sup>49</sup> *Reports*, vol. 9, 208.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> *Reports*, vol. 7, pt. 1, 59–60.

<sup>52</sup> *Reports*, vol. 10, clxiv.

<sup>53</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

**All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi's  
Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits  
de l'Homme (DUDH)**

Alexandra C. Moore

The following photo essay considers Hervé Youmbi's 2017 artwork *DUDH* in the context of the current political crisis in Cameroon. For *DUDH*, Youmbi translated five articles from the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme into Camfranglais and installed them on signs in the quartiers of New Bell Ngangué and Ndogpassi III in Douala, Cameroon. He printed one set of the five articles on a blue background for New Bell and the same articles on green for installation in Ndogpassi III. Youmbi unveiled the signs in December 2017 as part of the Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD) triennial.<sup>1</sup>

The politics of official language in Cameroon is a product of its colonial formation.<sup>2</sup> In 1884 a handful of European leaders declared an area of land that encompasses present-day Cameroon and some of present-day Nigeria, the German Protectorate of Kamerun. After World War I, the League of Nations divided Kamerun into the British Cameroons and French Cameroun. During this period the French and British imposed on each territory their own language and institutions, including different legal and educational systems. In 1960 French Cameroun gained independence, and in 1961 the Southern British Cameroons, given the choice between joining Nigeria or Cameroun, voted for the latter. This area, the northwest and southwest regions, is now the Anglophone part of Cameroon.<sup>3</sup> Douala, the largest city and site of *DUDH*, is in the Francophone area, but as a commercial center, it draws immigrants from all over Cameroon. Camfranglais, the lingua franca of Douala, mixes the two official languages of French and English with words from Duala and other indigenous Cameroonian

languages. The layout of this text foregrounds the multiple mediations of language present in the work: each photo of *DUDH* is accompanied by a transcription of the pictured sign in Camfranglais, a direct translation of that sign into English, and the full article from the Déclaration that the sign references, also in English.<sup>4</sup> Following each image, an extended caption expands on the process and context of the work, drawing attention to the need for a conversation about human rights in Cameroon today and the process of linguistic rent and partial repair that Camfranglais evinces.



*Figure 1 All le moto a droit au bolo pour life et ya mo avec ses muna. (Everyone has the right to work and to feed their kids.)*

*Article 23, line 1: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.*

The blue metal sign sits on the second story of a tiled building in New Bell, easily visible from the busy street. It contains a simple message: everyone has the right to work and to feed their children. But within Cameroon as a whole, almost 24 percent of the population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day, and in New Bell, where the sign in Figure 1 is located, years of purposeful neglect by both colonial and postcolonial regimes have resulted in a neighborhood with minimal infrastructure and a mostly informal economy.<sup>5</sup> This neglect was inscribed into the German and French urban planning of Douala, and continues at least partly because New Bell has been the site of popular resistance to successive governments.<sup>6</sup>

Around the words from the Déclaration runs a geometric motif that resembles the patterns on Bamileke ndop textiles.<sup>7</sup> These cloths were traditionally resist-dyed with indigo, creating a striking blue imagery that Youmbi draws from here, layering the authority of the street sign with a Bamileke visual language of power and respect.



*Figure 2 All le moto a le droit de keep le mboa tchale-tchalé pour ne pas sick. (Everyone has the right to keep their home clean, so as to not get sick.)*



*Article 25, line 1: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

DUDH began with listening. Youmbi worked with Simon Degaulle Moukala, a lawyer and cultural mediator, to organize conversations about the Déclaration in the two quartiers. Together Youmbi and Moukala spoke with people of different ages and occupations at various public spaces within the neighborhoods. In these discussions Youmbi and Moukala did not presume to instruct the community members about human rights but through dialogue learned from the community about their concerns and collectively decided on the most fitting articles to present publicly.<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 3 All le moto doit s'instruire et all les muna doivent go au school. (Everyone has the right to learn, and children have the right to go to school.)*

*Article 26, line 1: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."*

As Cameroon is officially bilingual, many primary schools (such as the one partially pictured in Figure 3) are nominally bilingual, but this rarely translates to actual bilingual instruction and often refers to two separate administrations (French and English) within one building, a perverse microcosm of the nation's split.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, though the majority of Cameroonians speak at least one indigenous language and one official language, many Francophones are not fluent in English and vice versa. Rather than translate the chosen articles of the Déclaration into French and English, Youmbi made the practical decision to use Camfranglais:

Si l'on veut atteindre dans sa communication la large majorité de la population camerounaise constituée de jeunes, c'est la langue appropriée. C'est pourquoi les grosses firmes de téléphonie mobile ou des sociétés brassicoles n'ont pas hésités à faire usage de cette langue dans d'importantes campagnes publicitaires.<sup>10</sup>

(If one wants to reach the large majority of the Cameroonian population that is made up of youths, it is the appropriate language. That is why large mobile phone and brewing companies have not hesitated to use this language in their publicity.)<sup>11</sup>

Using Camfranglais firmly roots the primary audience of this artwork as the residents of Douala, particularly young people. And Youmbi is not the only artist to use Camfranglais: peeking up at the bottom of this image is a 2007 mosaic by Hervé Yamguen, part of his series "Words Written on New Bell," which inscribed Camfranglais rap lyrics all around New Bell.



*Figure 4 No body ne doit mimba avec la liberté d'autrui, ne doit toum le piment ni smock le banga. (Nobody should get in the way of the freedom of others, engage in prostitution, or use drugs.)*

*Article 29, line 2: “In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare in a democratic society.”*

Prostitution (*toum le piment*) and drug use (*smoke le banga*) were two activities that Youmbi and Moukala’s interlocutors consistently raised as problems in the area during the community discussions.<sup>12</sup> Though neither are directly referenced in the Déclaration, Youmbi interpreted the community’s struggles as an example of Article 29: sometimes individual freedoms can and should be restricted for the overall well-being of the community.

This sign in New Bell is the only one of the ten that has disappeared.<sup>13</sup> Youmbi doesn’t know who was responsible, but as the sign sat above a street known as an area for soliciting prostitution, it seems a reasonable guess that an interested party disagreed with the interdiction.<sup>14</sup> The desire to destroy the sign demonstrates the potential power of its speech.



*Figure 5 No body ne doit te do bad ni te show le peper. (Nobody has the right to mess with you.)*

*Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.*

Youmbi's translation of the Déclaration sits against the Cameroonian government's escalating violation of human rights. Many scholars and artists have drawn attention to the brutality of the post-independence state, but in recent years the ever-present threat of government-sanctioned violence has morphed into a more volatile and vicious reality.<sup>15</sup> Now armed separatist groups and the state military are terrorizing the Anglophone areas. In the last three years, at least two hundred villages have been attacked and half a million people have been displaced.<sup>16</sup> The death toll is about 1,850.<sup>17</sup> Witnesses have accused the Cameroonian military of burning alive at least four elderly women who were trapped in their homes.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 6 All le moto doit s'instruire et all les muna doivent go au school. (Everyone has the right to learn, and children have the right to go to school.)*



*Article 26, line 1: “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”*

Education is always political, but particularly so in Anglophone Cameroon, where both the language of instruction and the system of schooling differ from the Francophone regions of the country. Since the beginning of the protests, Anglophone educators have been on the front lines, demanding that the government provide teachers fluent in English and familiar with the English education system.<sup>19</sup> Schools have consequently been a flash point of the violence, with the armed separatist groups demanding a boycott of schools and attacking teachers, students, and school buildings. As of June 2018, the separatists had burned down at least thirty-six schools.<sup>20</sup> In this hostile environment, about thirty-three thousand school-aged children are being denied their right to education.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Youmbi’s sign, Figure 6 also shows *Empreinter les Voix*, a set of moto-taxi umbrellas French Moroccan artist Chourouk Hreich designed for SUD 2017 and which several guests rode under, from artwork to artwork, during the triennial.



*Figure 7 No body ne doit mimba avec la liberté d'autrui, ne doit toum le piment ni smock le banga. (Nobody should get in the way of the freedom of others, engage in prostitution, or use drugs.)*

*Article 29, line 2: "In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare in a democratic society."*

Camfranglais takes syntax and vocabulary from both former colonial languages but mixes in enough neologisms and Duala that it is unfamiliar to an outsider. The language pushes back against the violent fracturing of society initiated by the colonial division of territory and exacerbated by the UN's refusal to listen to the wishes of Cameroonian political leaders who called for reunification in the 1950s. The curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung refers to the linguistic split of the country as a form of dismemberment; communities "who share the same grasslands, food, similar culture and related [indigenous] languages are deterritorialized by situating them within the geographies of Francophone and Anglophone respectively."<sup>22</sup> Through the split in language, people are alienated from their neighbors, from the shared landscape, and from a common history. Camfranglais could be thought of as the scar—the visible trace of both the violence and the potential for healing.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 8 All le moto a droit au bolo pour life et ya mo avec ses muna. (Everyone has the right to work and to live with their family.)*

*Article 23, line 1: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.*

*Line 3: Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.*

Language has ontological power, giving form to thoughts and shaping the terms of a shared reality. Camfranglais emerged from a series of negotiations and interactions, from the need to speak with neighbors and to create a linguistic commons. It is evidence that despite the political divisions, people from Anglophone and Francophone backgrounds live side by side. Making street signs in Camfranglais honors this reality and asserts the importance of the community that created it, not simply as a commercial demographic but as a political model. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung suggests Camfranglais could be a potential foundation for rebuilding Cameroon precisely because of the process of negotiation and remnants of difference that it contains.<sup>24</sup> Youmbi's project goes one step further and imagines a unified yet plural Cameroonian democracy where citizens can build healthy communities, free from fear, where everybody has the respect and rights that they are owed.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion and documentation of the previous SUD festivals, see Iolanda Pensa, ed., *Public Art in Africa* (Geneva, MētisPresses, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0001972018000554>.

<sup>2</sup> Cameroon is home to about 280 indigenous languages, but English and French are the official languages.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph purposely uses three different spellings of Cameroon to gesture to the fact that these different spellings represent different administrations with linguistic and tangible consequences for the governed. As this piece is primarily in English, I use the English spelling throughout.

<sup>4</sup> My translations of the Camfranglais are thanks to Justine Gaga, Hervé Youmbi, and the glossary in Peter Wuteh Vakunta, *Camfranglais: The Making of a New Language in Cameroonian Literature* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2014). Articles of the Déclaration come from “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” October 6, 2015, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Poverty & Equity Data Portal,” accessed July 8, 2019, <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/CMR>.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Schler, *The Strangers of New Bell: Immigration, Public Space, and Community in Colonial Douala, Cameroon, 1914–1960* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2008); Richard A. Joseph,

“Ruben Um Nyobé and the ‘Kamerun’ Rebellion,” *African Affairs* 73, no. 293 (1974): 428–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a096513>; Piet Konings, “Solving Transportation Problems in African Cities: Innovative Responses by the Youth in Douala, Cameroon,” *Africa Today* 53, no. 1 (2006): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/at.2006.0056>.

<sup>7</sup> An example in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum can be seen here: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/636847>.

<sup>8</sup> Hervé Youmbi, email with author, June 27, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Flaubert Takam and Innocent Mbouya Fassé, “English and French Bilingual Education and Language Policy in Cameroon: The Bottom-up Approach or the Policy of No Policy?,” *Language Policy*, March 21, 2019, 12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-019-09510-7>.

<sup>10</sup> Youmbi, email with author.

<sup>11</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>12</sup> Youmbi, email with author.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, *Clando* (California Newsreel, Films du Raphia (France), 1996), directed by Jean-Marie Téno; *Les saignantes* (Quartier Mozart Films, 2005), directed by Jean-Pierre Bekolo; Dominique Malaquais, “Quelle Liberté: Art, Beauty, and the Grammars of Resistance in Douala,” in *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, edited by Sarah Nuttall: 122-163 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Dominique Malaquais, “Blood Money: A Douala Chronicle,” in *African Cities Reader I*, edited by Edgar Pieterse and Ntone Edjabe: 137-49, (Cape Town, Chimurenga and the African Centre for Cities, 2010), 137–49; A. M. Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, *Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity*, June 3, 2019, 17.

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, *Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, May 2, 2019, i.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Maclean, “Cameroon’s Military Accused of Burning Alive Unarmed Civilians,” *Guardian*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/20/cameroon-military-accused-of-burning-alive-unarmed-civilains-villages-english-speaking>.

<sup>19</sup> “Cameroon Teachers, Lawyers Strike in Battle for English,” *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/cameroon-teachers-lawyers-strike-english-161205095929616.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> UNESCO Office in Yaoundé, “Cameroon: Joint Statement of UNICEF and UNESCO on Abduction of Education Personnel and Attacks against Schools in the South-West Region of Cameroon,” June 1, 2018,

[http://www.unesco.org/new/en/yaounde/about-this-office/single-view/news/cameroon\\_joint\\_statement\\_of\\_unicef\\_and\\_unesco\\_on\\_abduction/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/yaounde/about-this-office/single-view/news/cameroon_joint_statement_of_unicef_and_unesco_on_abduction/).

<sup>22</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, “Situation Don Ton Parranjanja,” *Archives de Cameroun, Les Dits et Les Non-Dits*, 2017, 6.

<sup>23</sup> For more on scars, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 201, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700372>.

<sup>24</sup> Ndikung, “Situation Don Ton Parranjanja,” 7.



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## Lag and Impact in Visual Studies

Sara Blaylock

A few weeks ago, I found myself sitting on my porch with a friend and my partner, trying to explain just what visual studies is. My friend, a historian, and my partner, who teaches in an English department, both listened patiently as I muddled through my usual preambles:

It's like art history, but with a more politicized vision... Some people approach visual studies as a means to think about perception and technologies that have *literally changed* vision... Others use it as a means to explain how what is made (or allowed to be) visible is a tool of consolidating and maintaining hegemonic power... Some people see it as a development of art history; others define it as a radical rupture....

I listed examples of potential objects of study. I began with the obvious: art, posters, film, advertisements, maps. I then listed more totalizing, which is to say less concrete, examples: systems of representation, discourse, the use of space, the commons. I inventoried the range of theoretical tools at my disposal: Marxism, feminism, critical race studies, indigeneity, postcolonialism, and queer theory... My historian friend nodded generously. "Yes," she said, "people in my discipline work on these issues, as well." My partner, more than a bit familiar with this intrigue of mine, acknowledged that his classroom and writing practice also welcome a variety of methodologies and source materials. So, what then, I proceeded to ask, is it that makes visual studies a discipline when its approach—that is to say, its

methodology of interdisciplinarity—is being practiced (and seemingly welcomed) across the humanities?

The question is one that the foundational thinkers of visual studies publicly and passionately grappled with for about ten years, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.<sup>1</sup> One need only pick up the introduction to Margaret Dikovitskaya's *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* from 2005 or James Elkins's *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* from 2003 to find a comprehensive bibliography of the works authors penned to stake out the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

These texts may be traced back to *October's* controversial 1996 roundtable “Visual Culture Questionnaire.” The responses, which Dikovitskaya describes as “openly unsympathetic to visual studies,”<sup>3</sup> elicited a sincere and varied list of concerns over the promise of the burgeoning discipline from nineteen scholars in various fields.<sup>4</sup> “Perhaps,” she writes, “this baptism of fire was necessary: conceived as an attack on the new research area, the questionnaire did not eliminate the increasing interest among its students, but rather helped proponents of visual culture to articulate their positions and thus contributed to the theoretical growth of the new field.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, just over a decade later, although the arguments about what visual studies is as a discipline seem to have all but disappeared, visual studies still seems to be searching for a way to explain itself.

Is this a sign of the irrelevance of the designator that my graduate degree assigns me? Have the foundational figures, overburdened with the task of bearing the visual studies torch, now left its embers in the hands of an unprepared generation? Elkins, in his earnest reflection for *Refract's* inaugural issue, grapples with concern over a presentist younger generation of visual studies scholars seemingly unaware (and perhaps taught to be unaware) of the historical legacies of the discipline or the primacy of the image, which to him is a necessity.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, I do not criticize Elkins's less-than-optimistic view. Rather, I take it as a kind of testimony to a current juncture in (a decisive moment for) the future of visual studies. If we cannot agree on what our discipline is, then do we really have a discipline?

What Elkins raises in his *Refract* essay is not without context. Here he writes with the same concerns (misgivings) raised over twenty years ago in his groundbreaking text, *Visual Studies*. Do his words in 2018 suggest that the debates over visual studies have not only run their course but led to a tepid, even dismal conclusion? Were the fears about its inadequacy, its false premises, its lack of discipline, raised in *October's* 1996 questionnaire prophetic? Is visual studies dead as a discipline? Was it ever alive?

These are questions that truly keep me up at night, particularly in light of the fact that I codirect the International Association for Visual Culture, an organization begun by the progenitors of this field. My route to this position began in

2012, when I attended the IAVC's second biennial conference, hosted by Nicholas Mirzoeff at New York University. It thrilled me to be there: the range of speakers as well as formats: the inclusive workshop-like environment stood in stark contrast to the intimidating atmospheres I had experienced (or which had been described to me) at other professional meetings. I left New York with a feeling of being a part of something that would take my questions and swerves seriously. The openness of the NYU event, I should say, remains a template for the IAVC conferences, which we envision as gatherings for intimate and profound cross-disciplinary and nonhierarchical exchange.

The beginnings of the IAVC were auspicious: summits at the Clark Art Institute that brought together some of the most innovative thinkers and makers from the US and western Europe; biennial conferences in major Western cities like London, New York, San Francisco, Boston; and a growing list of board members, conference participants, and attendees.

Though a separate undertaking entirely, the IAVC may also be understood as a project spurred by the success of the *Journal of Visual Culture*, which formed in 2002. Now in its eighteenth volume, the *JVC* continues to publish three issues annually. By any measure of success in academic publishing, this flagship journal of visual studies is thriving. A tertiary glance at its contents likewise demonstrates an editorial board conscientious about its contributions. In important ways, a journal can do more in terms of uniting disparate geographies than an organization like the IAVC, which has thrived on the community built in physical contacts enabled by its biennial conferences. These gatherings are by their nature exclusionary. It is expensive to travel cross-country, let alone abroad, and to this point—despite our best intentions—the IAVC conferences have taken place in some of the world's most costly Western cities.<sup>7</sup> (Here's hoping that the volunteerism that defines our organization will elicit even stronger bonds with people willing to invest time and resources into hosting more of our events!) In any case, the IAVC conferences aspire to represent a different mode of engagement at an international conference whose attendees share a drive and a vision, if not a curriculum vitae. Quite simply, the IAVC and the *JVC* both share a desire to host the committed thinker who cannot (or who chooses not to) find a place in more traditional or immediate disciplinary homes. Our cast of presenters in 2018, for example, included students of fashion, filmmakers, faculty in education, women's studies, and fine arts departments, and representatives of major museums and self-run spaces, as well as independent scholars and artists.

Occasional relationships between the IAVC and the *JVC* have and will continue to emerge.<sup>8</sup> Both organizations share a number of editorial board members. This continuity demonstrates, on the one hand, a kind of institutional

presence that matters (even if it is not a formalized affiliation, like the CAA and its *Art Journal* or *Art Bulletin*). On the other hand, is this continuity a sign that diehard visual culture scholars are desperately maintaining the ashes of a discipline that no one else will rekindle?

To get to that answer, I'll take a step backward. When I revisit the original debates over visual studies, I note a distinct desire for a new kind of criticality that exceeds disciplines and breaks down barriers between what is acceptable and unacceptable scholarly inquiry. In visual studies, a scholar of seventeenth-century Oceania has peers both in her geographic region and in the theoretical debates that capture her imagination, and likely also her politics. This matters because that kind of interdisciplinary exchange reflects the intersectional way of being that our world now demands. Indeed, to come back to my friend in history or my partner in English, it is not just *de rigueur* to claim an interdisciplinary “visual studies-ish” focus in one’s classroom or scholarship, it is—by all accounts of what the latest generation of first-year students desires—an expectation that, say, a course on the history of Jewish expulsion includes material on exile artists or a science fiction literature class teaches Samuel R. Delany with H. G. Wells. Another historian friend who researches ancient subjects likewise balks at the idea of joining a Classics department. The desire instead is to be placed in larger interdisciplinary contexts that not only do not *seem* to support white supremacist thinking (a kind of unfortunate by-product of the current “Make America Great Again” consciousness)<sup>9</sup> but actively discredit it.

To take examples closer to home: it is now conventional that an art history classroom engage with a variety of case studies that exceed the figures this discipline has itself defined as significant. The kind of circularity of significance intrinsic to canonical thinking and teaching—“These examples must be included in a survey because they are important because they have long been said to be important”—is now being challenged in very public ways. Art History Teaching Resources, for example, offers an adaptation of the standard History of World Art survey,<sup>10</sup> with thematic lesson plans in topics such as “Art and Cultural Heritage Looting and Destruction,” “Disability in Art History,” and “Sexuality in Art.” These plans are carefully presented as alternatives—and not brief addenda—to the Stokstad/Gardner-inspired chapter outline they also provide, and which the majority of current faculty were exposed to as undergraduates. Remember, standard classes are the bread-and-butter of an art history department or program, with the metaphor describing not only the large enrollment numbers such classes typically muster but also the necessity of these introductory classes for national accreditation. In other words, the art history survey, *as such*, is not going away. However,

the expectations for the way we teach it or learn it are. Visual studies, I believe, has a lot to do with that shift.

And here I come to the apogee of this missive, specifically, a kind of claim to the absolute necessity of visual studies, as both an area of study and a way of thinking that prepares us to be in the world today.

A few months ago, I had a long conversation with the visual studies scholar Jill Casid about the idea of lag. We spoke about how a teacher might influence a student (or vice versa) in unanticipated ways many years into the future. We spoke about how time lag defines life experience, specifically how one of the blessings of getting older is the way that disparate things begin to come together because of the kind of constant piecing together a critically engaged mind invites.

I'd like to suggest, then, that the visual studies as envisioned and outlined by the visionaries of the fecund period of the 1990s to mid-2000s has indeed produced the impact it intended. That there has been a lag—but not a slack or a regression or even an abandonment—between what they envisioned and what has come to fruition. Remember, no one could agree on a single definition of visual studies, but all could agree that *something had to give*. Whether that be the “obligation” to old masters (artistic and academic) or the tenacity of the disciplinary divisions between real world and classroom, real world and museum, or real world and virtual life, even the most skeptical of the visual studies luminaries came to a consensus. The future cannot maintain the certainties that academic discourse had helped normalize.

Visual studies corrects the problems of art history by offering a different way of seeing and engaging with the world. It questions the rules of the game and requires that scholars, artists, and educators be accountable for the premises of their practices. Today, the expectations—at least among those who define themselves as visual studies scholars—are that people invest themselves in readings across disciplines, that they are social justice minded in both historical and contemporary subjects. In 2013 Mirzoeff called this “militant research.”<sup>11</sup> His definition is staunchly activist: “Let’s begin by saying that [militant research] is the place where academia and activism meet in the search for new ways of acting that lead to new ways of thinking.”<sup>12</sup> He continues, quoting the activist Judy Vaughn, “You don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking.”<sup>13</sup> Today, “militancy,” in some form or another, has become (almost) mandatory.

Indeed, as I write this, a subsection of the debate over the merits of the 2019 Whitney Biennial represents a divide between those in and out of the know. To take an example, a recent article by Seph Rodney in *Hyperallergic* examines the artist Simone Leigh’s diatribe against critics who have called the show (and thus

her artwork) lacking in radicality.<sup>14</sup> Rodney responds to a May 16 Instagram post, in which Leigh assails her critics for misrecognizing the multiplicity of references her artwork makes, including the black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman, the relationship between the concept of Négritude and surrealism, and the Herero Genocide, which in important ways precipitated the Nazi Holocaust. Rodney identifies about twenty-four topics in the post, which closes with Leigh asserting that her critics “lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in [her] work.” Leigh’s listing of references becomes a kind of reading list for her critics.<sup>15</sup> At the very least, the artist is expecting a conscientious viewer, that is to say, one who is receptive to (if not already engaged with) the criticality that she regards as fundamental. She says as much: “And that is why,” she writes, “instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.”<sup>16</sup>

Rodney concludes that the critics Leigh may be targeting have offered simplistic or reductive definitions of radicality—that they define art activism as that which only has an immediately legible impact—that “aesthetic production can do the work of social and political movements.”<sup>17</sup> But, as Rodney observes, “in our history no profound change has come about until we have made each other deeply uncomfortable in all aspects of our lives—at church, at public parks, at lunch counters and restaurants, at schools and courthouses—uncomfortable enough to change the ways we behave.”<sup>18</sup> He identifies a thing akin to lag here, that is to say, a requirement that impact is individualized and process oriented, rather than predictable. Jacques Rancière’s theory of dissensus, a political vision rooted in aesthetics, resounds: “Artworks can produce effects of dissensus because they neither give lessons nor have any destination.”<sup>19</sup> They do something and then (to borrow a metaphor I used earlier) leave the embers burning, hoping—though not expecting—someone to keep the fire going.

Visual studies has prepared me to, if not immediately identify Leigh’s twenty-four references on my own, then seek them out—to humbly acknowledge that a lack of insight is not necessarily a shortcoming on my part but an invitation to a new way of seeing the world. Visual studies prepares us all to do that work, to be critical, to be self-critical, to be receptive, to work across disciplines as a means of correction en route to connection.

Pedagogical resources are available in “Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom,” an open access zine co-produced by Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon.<sup>20</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as visual culture studies.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Note my hesitation to call it a “newfound” discipline, given the observations of many that visual studies is an aggregation of the social history of art, new Marxism, and cultural studies, rather than some radical break or invention.

<sup>5</sup> Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> James Elkins, “What Is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 15–22. <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141455>

<sup>7</sup> To preempt any critiques of the locations for these meetings, I find it necessary to explain that the IAVC has consistently sought but has been unable to maintain the support to hold a conference in less Western-centric locations. As of printing, our 2020 conference is scheduled for Rijeka, Croatia.

<sup>8</sup> We are currently reviewing texts for the first ever IAVC/JVC Early Career Researcher Prize.

<sup>9</sup> Art history has, of course, also made efforts in recent years to defend itself against the appropriation of its classical subjects. As a prime example, see Sarah Bond, “Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical in Color,” *Hyperallergic*, June 7, 2017,



<https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/>.

<sup>10</sup> I also have to teach this course. My go-to instructional resources have been AHTR and Khan Academy, both of which also provide students with excellent open access materials.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff et al., “Militant Research Handbook,” New York University, 2013, [http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH\\_Web.pdf](http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH_Web.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Seph Rodney, “Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial,” *Hyperallergic*, June 7, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/503513/probing-the-proper-grounds-for-criticism-in-the-wake-of-the-2019-whitney-biennial/>.

<sup>15</sup> The text of Leigh’s May 16, 2019, Instagram post: “I’ve seen some preliminary thoughts on the Biennial and concerns about radicality. I need to say that if you haven’t read, not a single thing written by Saidiya Hartman or Hortense Spillers. And if you have no knowledge, never heard of Negritude or how it’s related to surrealism. If you don’t know who Senghor is or why he would have anything to do with art. If you never spent anytime figuring out who was and wasn’t at FESTAC 77. If you have no idea what critical fabulation is. If you didn’t know what I meant when I said In The Wake. If you never studied Independence architecture. If you don’t know why Pauline Lumumba walked through the streets of Kinshasha [sic!] bare breasted. If you have no idea who Katherine Dunham is or her scholarship, but yet you consider yourself well versed in the work and contributions of the woman she hired as a secretary, Maya Deren. If the words Black Feminist Thought bring absolutely zero concepts to mind. If the words “Dave the Potter” mean nothing to you. If you didn’t ponder the significance [sic!] of Sharifa’s unruly kitchen when she embodied Uhura in my video and you don’t even know what a kitchen is. If the words “Dogon statuary” conjurs [sic!] nothing. If the only thing you know about Benin bronzes is that Europe stole them. If you casually use words like ethnic, exotic and tribal and you still think those are useful words. If you don’t know what story I’m referring to when I talk about A Question of Power. If you thought I was being weird when I told you I was too busy sharpening my oyster knife. If you’ve never heard of the Herero Genocide. Then you lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work. And that is why,

instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience. #whitneybiennial.”

<sup>16</sup> Simone Yvette Leigh (@simoneyvetteleight), Instagram photo, May 16, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxiJI58gl4t/>.

<sup>17</sup> Rodney, “Probing the Proper Grounds.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 140.

<sup>20</sup> Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon, “Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom,” <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Decolonial-Strategies-for-the-Art-History-Classroom-Zine.pdf>.

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