



DHSI

DIGITAL HUMANITIES SUMMER INSTITUTE

Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed: Anti-Colonial DH Critiques & Praxis

Ashley Caranto Morford, Arun Jacob,
and Kush Patel

This package is intended for the personal, educational
use of DHSI attendees. Portions appear here with
consideration of fair use and fair dealing guidelines.

© DHSI 2023



ETCL

ELECTRONIC TEXTUAL CULTURES LAB



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Welcome to DHSI 2023!

Thank you for joining the DHSI community!

In this coursepack, you will find essential workshop materials prefaced by some useful general information about DHSI 2023.

Given our community's focus on things computational, it will be a surprise to no one that we might expect additional information and materials online for some of the workshops—which will be made available to you where applicable—or that the most current version of all DHSI-related information may be found on our website at dhsi.org. Do check in there first if you need any information that's not in this coursepack.

Please also note that materials in DHSI's online workshop folders could be updated at any point. We recommend checking back on any DHSI online workshop folder(s) that have been shared with you in case additional materials are added as DHSI approaches and takes place.

And please don't hesitate to be in touch with us at institut@uvic.ca or via Twitter at [@AlyssaA_DHSI](https://twitter.com/AlyssaA_DHSI) or [@DHInstitute](https://twitter.com/DHInstitute) if we can be of any help.

We hope you enjoy your time with us!



Statement of Ethics & Inclusion

Please review the DHSI Statement of Ethics & Inclusion available here:

<https://dhsi.org/statement-of-ethics-inclusion/>

DHSI is dedicated to offering a safe, respectful, friendly, and collegial environment for the benefit of everyone who attends and for the advancement of the interests that bring us together. There is no place at DHSI for harassment or intimidation of any kind.

By registering for DHSI, you have agreed to comply with these commitments.

Virtual Sessions

Your registration in DHSI 2023 also includes access to the virtual [institute lecture](#) sessions. Access details for these talks will be shared as DHSI approaches.

Due to the high volume of attendees, please ensure your DHSI registration name or DHSI preferred name and your Zoom name match so that we know to let you into the virtual sessions.

DHSI Materials

DHSI materials (ex. videos, documents, etc.) are intended for registrant use only. By registering, you have agreed that you will not circulate any DHSI content. If someone asks you for the materials, please invite them to complete the registration form to request access or contact us at institut@uvic.ca.

Auditor and participant registration

If you registered to **audit** any workshops, note that auditor involvement is intended to be fully self-directed without active participation in the workshop. The auditor option offers more flexibility regarding pace and time with the workshop content. Your registration as an auditor will include access to some asynchronous workshop materials only and does not include access to live workshop sessions and/or individual/group instruction or consultation. Please direct any questions about DHSI workshop auditing to institut@uvic.ca.

If you registered as a **participant** in any workshops, your registration includes access to asynchronous content + active participation in live workshop session(s). The workshop instructor(s) will contact you about the date(s), time(s), and platform(s) of the live workshop session(s).

If you are unsure whether you registered as an auditor or participant, please check your registration confirmation email. Further questions can be directed to institut@uvic.ca.

Schedule

The at-a-glance schedule of DHSI 2023 courses, workshops, institute lectures and aligned conferences & events can be found here: <https://dhsi.org/timetable/>

All times are listed in North American **Pacific Time Zone**.

For those who registered as participants in any workshops, live sessions for online workshops are not currently listed on the above-referenced schedule. **Instructors will be in touch with registered participants directly about the exact date(s) and time(s) of their live workshop session(s).**

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our partners and sponsors (including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council), workshop instructors, aligned conference & event organizers, institute lecturers, local facilitators, and beyond for making this possible.

Further information

General DHSI 2023 information: <https://dhsi.org/program/>

Full course listings (in-person): <https://dhsi.org/on-campus-courses/>

Full workshop listings (online): <https://dhsi.org/online-workshops/>

Aligned conferences & events (in-person): <https://dhsi.org/on-campus-aligned-conferences-events/>

Aligned conferences & events (online): <https://dhsi.org/online-aligned-conferences-events/>

Institute lectures: <https://dhsi.org/institute-lectures/>

Frequently asked questions: <https://dhsi.org/faq/>

Any questions not addressed in the above pages? Please email us at institut@uvic.ca!

The 2023 Virtual Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) | June 12-16, 2023

Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed: Anti-Colonial DH Critiques and Praxis

Course Syllabus

Ashley Caranto Morford (she/her) | @ashleymorford | amorford@pobox.pafa.edu

Arun Jacob (he/him) | @arungapatchka | arun.jacob@mail.utoronto.ca

Kush Patel (they/he) | @kshpatel | kshpatel@umich.edu / kush.patel@manipal.edu

Course Description

Black, Indigenous, people of colour, LGBTQ2IA+, disability justice activists, and class- and caste-oppressed communities have long raised awareness to and challenged the colonialism, neoliberalism, and imperialism embedded in mainstream digital infrastructures. We reflect on and challenge these infrastructures, with special focus on digital humanities pedagogy and learning environments. Amidst and against the post-secondary institute's increased adoption of digital surveillance technologies in institution and classroom building, and its ongoing neoliberal metrics of digital scholarship productivity and promotion, this course will take up and contend with the following questions: How have issues of digital coloniality become continually exacerbated by institutional approaches to digital humanities pedagogy, curriculum development, and learning? What do safety and accessibility mean in the context of digital pedagogy and community-centered work within, beyond, and alongside the academy? And how might we root our digital pedagogy in decolonial elsewhere-making (Habtom 2018), in critiques of safety and survival (McKittrick 2014), in anti-surveillance praxis (Boyles 2019), and towards collective access and care work (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018)?

We view this course as a space to acknowledge and advance historical solidarities between anti-colonial organizations, racial justice movements, and anti-caste struggles within the many communities and institutions that we navigate daily. The course will serve as a reading seminar, discussion forum, and mutual-aid network in rhythms both self-determined and community-based. In relationship with the [DHSI Statement on Ethics and Inclusion](#) and the [suggested revisions to the statement that came out of our convening in 2021](#), we will center the importance of speaking from, understanding, recognizing, honouring, and celebrating each of our distinct and overlapping subject positionings. The course engagements will foster an environment wherein we respectfully educate each other about and collectively work towards dismantling the oppressive systems that we experience both online and in everyday spaces.

This course initially formed as a collective practice on the territories of the sovereign Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples in 2018. This year, as we share our work with participating folk online, many of us will continue to connect with one another from various sovereign Indigenous lands. We recognize that many of the digital infrastructures we use are built on Indigenous

lands, remain inaccessible to Indigenous communities, and that our responsibilities to Indigenous lands and life extend into the digital realm.

We recognize, too, that participants will be relying on local internet connections that may be erratic and at times non-existent. Our commitments toward a collaborative, community-centred, accessible, and decolonizing action, however, will remain and we will achieve this objective through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. We will also continue to foreground differences in learning and work with you to center distinct ways of knowing and being in the world.

Engagement Format

- Synchronous workshopping and exercises on a video conferencing platform (**Google Meet Video Link:** <https://meet.google.com/orn-qcwa-vve>) | **Start Time:** 7:00 AM (Pacific Time) // 10:00 AM (Eastern Time) // 3:00 PM (British Standard Time) // 7:30 PM (Indian Standard Time)
 - Day One (June 12): Opening welcome, introductions, and community guidelines
 - Day Three (June 14): Mid-week check-ins, informal presentations on readings, and discussion of readings
 - Day Five (June 16): Cumulative reflections, collective writing, and public sharing of the weeklong speculative ethics assignment. We will share the details of this project with everyone closer in time to the actual convening.
- Asynchronous workshopping and exercises on Google Docs, Hypothesis or Discord (TBD), and Twitter among other mutually accessible options:
 - Day Two (June 13) and Day Four (June 15): Reading and annotating whilst responding to questions on the syllabus document or on our chosen discussion channels among other options.

Learning Objectives

Through collective reading, discussion, and community-making, participants will:

- Examine how colonial ideologies and extractive methods are naturalized within everyday digital objects and research technologies such as data apparatuses, imaging techniques, community infrastructures, higher educational learning systems, and social media platforms.
- Name, discuss, and challenge the entwining of digital-colonial and surveillance-centered hegemonies in pedagogies and praxes, and the power and politics embedded in their operations within post-secondary and community learning spaces.
- Imagine and reflect on how to create sustainable, long-lasting practices of care, rest, and collective access in digital learning spaces that are not exclusive to academia.
- Reflect on ways to create spaces for collectivist worldbuilding within, alongside, or beyond institutional infrastructures, online and beyond.
- Build a pedagogical network for anti-colonial teaching and learning resource material sharing within and beyond digital humanities.

Works Cited

- Boyles, Christina. "Finding Fault with Foucault: Teaching Surveillance in the Digital Humanities." *JITP* Issue 16, December 2019.
<https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/finding-fault-with-foucault-teaching-surveillance-in-the-digital-humanities/>
- Habtom, Sefanit. "Mediating on the Elsewhere." *The Henceforward*, Episode 26, November 2018.
<http://www.thehenceforward.com/episodes/2018/11/12/episode-26-meditating-on-the-elsewhere>
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
- Hudson, Peter James, and Katherine McKittrick. "The Geographies of Blackness and Anti-Blackness: An Interview with Katherine McKittrick." *The CLR James Journal* 20, no. 1/2, 2014: 233-40.

Speculative Ethics Assignment: #AnticolonialDH + #SurvDH

(search for these hashtags and their histories on Twitter, if they are still accessible)

This assignment is built upon [Casey Fiesler's Black Mirror Writer's Room](#) Assignment (2022). Speculative ethics activities in the classroom can encourage us to name, contend with, and address socio-technical hegemonies and the power and politics embedded in their worldly operations. As an analytic, such teaching and learning activities can further encourage us to center care-based responsibilities, accountabilities, principles, and practices when approaching, using, participating in, and developing digital environments for pedagogy and praxis.

Monday (Synchronous Online Meeting): **Positioning Ourselves**

- Course introduction and community guidelines
- Assignment introduction and synchronous brainstorming: Brainstorm near-future digital technology and its material form based on anti-colonial politics (for #AnticolonialDH) or politics of surveillance capitalism (for #SurvDH), issues, and/or concerns of your choice. It should be close enough that it seems like a plausible future. What are the potential social implications, ethical tensions and accountabilities, and/or regulatory challenges with this technology? How do these implications, tensions, accountabilities, and challenges relate to colonial violences and struggles, and to anti-colonial resistance and considerations either as lived theory or organizing praxis or critical pedagogies?
- In class viewing activity:
<https://www.surveillance-studies.ca/projects/screening-surveillance/tresdancing>
- Post-screening discussion and reflection:
 - How does this short-film reflect y/our collective fear or concerns about all things colonized and surveilled?
 - How can you look forward or differently from this reality?
 - How can you avoid the scenario in the short-film from taking place?

Tuesday (Asynchronous Readings and Optional Office Hours): **Naming Digital-Colonial Oppressions**

- Optional 1-Hour Office Hours (Google Meet Video Link: <https://meet.google.com/orn-qcwa-vve>) | Start Time: 7:00 AM (Pacific Time) // 10:00 AM (Eastern Time) // 3:00 PM (British Standard Time) // 7:30 PM (Indian Standard Time)
- Readings
 - (**data apparatuses**) Bokil, Ameya, Avaneendra Khare, Nikita Sonavane, Srujana Bej, and Vaishali Janarthanan. "Settled Habits, New Tricks: Casteist Policing Meets Big Tech in India." TNI Longreads (dated May 2021), <https://longreads.tni.org/stateofpower/settled-habits-new-tricks-casteist-policing-meets-big-tech-in-india>
 - Cifor, M., Garcia, P., Cowan, T.L., Rault, J., Sutherland, T., Chan, A., Rode, J., Hoffmann, A.L., Salehi, N., Nakamura, L. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.manifestno.com/>.
 - (**imaging techniques**) Costanza-Chock, Sasha. "#TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination" from *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (2020), <https://designjustice.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ap8rgw5e/release/1>
 - cárdenas, micha. "Becoming Dragon." *CTheory.net*, 2009, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/download/14680/5550?inline=1>
 - (**communication infrastructures**) Duarte, Marisa Elena. "The Overlap between Technology and Sovereignty." *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet Across Indian Country*. University of Washington Press (2017), pp. 35-51.
 - Lewis, Jason Edward, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite. "Making Kin with the Machines." *Journal of Design and Science*. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfafd97b>.
 - (**learning systems**) Ho, A. B. T., Kerschbaum, S. L., Sanchez, R., & Yergeau, M. "Crippling Neutrality: Student Resistance, Pedagogical Audiences, and Teachers' Accommodations." *Pedagogy Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature Language Composition and Culture*, 20(1) (2020), pp. 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-7879120>
 - Di Pressi, Haley, Stephanie Gorman, Miriam Posner, Raphael Sasayama, and Tori Schmitt, with contributions from Roderic Crooks, Megan Driscoll, Amy Earhart, Spencer Keralis, Tiffany Naiman, and Todd Presner. "A Student Collaborators Bill of Rights." UCLA HumTech Blog (June 8, 2015): <https://humtech.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights/>
 - Clement, Tanya E., Douglas Reside, Brian Croxall, Julia Flanders, Neil Fraistat, Steve Jones, Matt Kirschenbaum, Suzanne Lodato, Laura Mandell, Paul Marty, David Miller, Bethany Nowvieskie, Stephen Olsen, Tom Scheinfeldt, David Seaman, Mark Tebeau, John Unsworth, and Kay

- Walter. "Collaborators' Bill of Rights." (2021).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/mvar-kj35>.
- Alpert-Abrams, Hannah; Froehlich, Heather; Henrichs, Amanda; McGrath, Jim; and Kim Martin. "Postdoctoral Laborers Bill of Rights." (2019).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/7fz6-ra81>.
 - **(social media platforms)** Maragh-Lloyd, Raven. "Our Struggles Are Unequal": Black Women's Affective Labor Between Television and Twitter." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 2016, Vol. 40(4), pp. 351–369.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859916664082>
 - Kumar, Vijeta. "Between Rage and Silence: Being Dalit on Twitter." *Feminist Media Studies*, 21:1, 2021, 157-158.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1865605>.
 - Jackson, Shirley J, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. "Visions of Black Feminism: #FastTailedGirls, #YouOKSis, #SayHerName." *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*. MIT Press, 2020. pp. 31-64. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10858.001.0001>.

*Wednesday (Discussion on Asynchronous Engagements): **Unpacking Cautionary Tales***

Based upon the readings and the issues covered in the course, what do you think might be a cautionary tale related to this technology? How do you see your episode telling a tale that conveys to the viewer the ethical and social consequences of what happens if the technology solutions were to develop in the ways that you have illustrated?

*Thursday (Asynchronous Project Work and Optional Office Hours): **Imagining Digital Otherises***

- Optional 1-Hour Office Hours (Google Meet Video Link:
<https://meet.google.com/orn-qcwa-vve>) | Start Time: 7:00 AM (Pacific Time) // 10:00 AM (Eastern Time) // 3:00 PM (British Standard Time) // 7:30 PM (Indian Standard Time)

*Friday (Cumulative Reflections, Collective Writing, and Public Sharing): **World-building Anti-colonial Digital Futures***

Let's worldbuild. What world are these issues, concerns, and technologies unfolding in? Who are the characters? What are their stories? How can their stories guide us towards more just and anti-colonial or anti-surveillance digital futures?

About Us

Ashley Caranto Morford, Arun Jacob, and Kush Patel are partners in this collaborative project called "[Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed](#)." We have sharpened our practice over time through direct engagements with communities at DHSI and related venues, including, but not limited to, HASTAC and MSU Global DH. Equally, this partnership is a result of our respective and connected place-based public scholarship careers in India and territories that are colonially called Ontario and Michigan, with ongoing involvements with individuals and networks within and across these regions. We acknowledge the role and importance of these reciprocal,

generous, and evolving relations.

Join our Humanities Commons Group at:

<https://hcommons.org/groups/pedagogy-of-the-digitially-oppressed-critiques-and-praxis/>

Settled Habits, New Tricks: Casteist Policing Meets Big Tech in India

[tni longreads.tni.org/stateofpower/settled-habits-new-tricks-casteist-policing-meets-big-tech-in-india](https://longreads.tni.org/stateofpower/settled-habits-new-tricks-casteist-policing-meets-big-tech-in-india)

Ameya Bokil, Avaneendra Khare, Nikita Sonavane, Srujana Bej and Vaishali Janarthanan

May 2021

Big Tech is reinforcing and accelerating a system of caste-based discrimination in India and reinforcing the power and impunity of its police.

It is the evening of 15 June 2019. The Station House Officer of the Kolar Road Police Station in Bhopal, the capital city of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP), convenes his officers to announce a rise in car thefts in their jurisdiction. He states that the thieves are the local *Pardhis* and instructs officers to make night-time visits to the *Pardhi basti* (a slum colony), and pick up and detain *anyone* outside after dark. This goes unchallenged because the police widely believe that the *Pardhis* are habitual criminals, responsible for every case of house-breaking and theft. We might have found it hard to believe that the police blatantly target an entire community had we not been at the station for an entirely different reason. Every detained *Pardhi* would have their 'suspicious activity' recorded in the extensive files the police maintain on their community.

Recently, technology companies and governments are helping to digitise these police records and the surveillance of 'suspect' individuals who are more 'likely' to commit crimes. Through this rigged digital database, the Indian police force is being empowered to sustain its caste-based criminalisation of marginalised communities and continue to act arbitrarily with impunity. The digitisation of already biased police records, extensive surveillance systems, predictive policing through interlinked databases and the complete absence of a regulatory framework have led to the creation of a parallel digital caste system which denies the fundamental freedoms of specific marginalised communities.

When caste is criminality

The Constitution of India formally protects citizens' right to equality, including the right to equal treatment before the law and freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, caste and religion. The adoption of the Constitution was a transformative moment as India became a sovereign, democratic postcolonial republic and aspired to move beyond the pervasive feudal legacy of the caste system. The entrenched nature of the caste system, applying to nearly all aspects of life, has made it hard to extirpate, making the right to equality

unattainable for certain communities, as we had witnessed at the police station. The *Pardhi* community is one of India's *Adivasi* or indigenous communities. Although formally outside strictures of the caste system, these communities are nonetheless vilified.

Several hundred communities, including the *Pardhis*, were branded as 'hereditary criminals addicted to systematic commission of non-bailable offences' under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) enacted by the British colonial government in 1871. Its aim was to make these communities liable to state surveillance and control in myriad ways. Since the repeal of the CTA in 1952 and the official decriminalisation of the tribes criminalised thereunder, these communities are referred to as De-notified Tribes (DNT).

The CTA was inspired by the combination of racist European criminal anthropology and the Indian caste system, which portrayed criminality as a hereditary characteristic. British colonial authorities established the police in the 1840s with the explicit objective of controlling the Indian population through force. The police failed in its objective, so to give an appearance of order, it adopted the strategy of selective policing of certain groups. This selection hinged on a social consensus on who was a criminal, informed by the caste system.

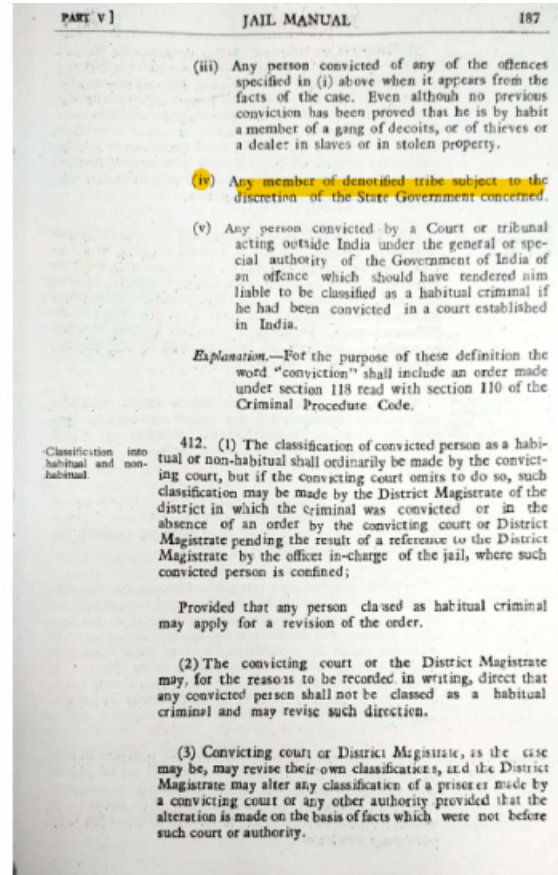
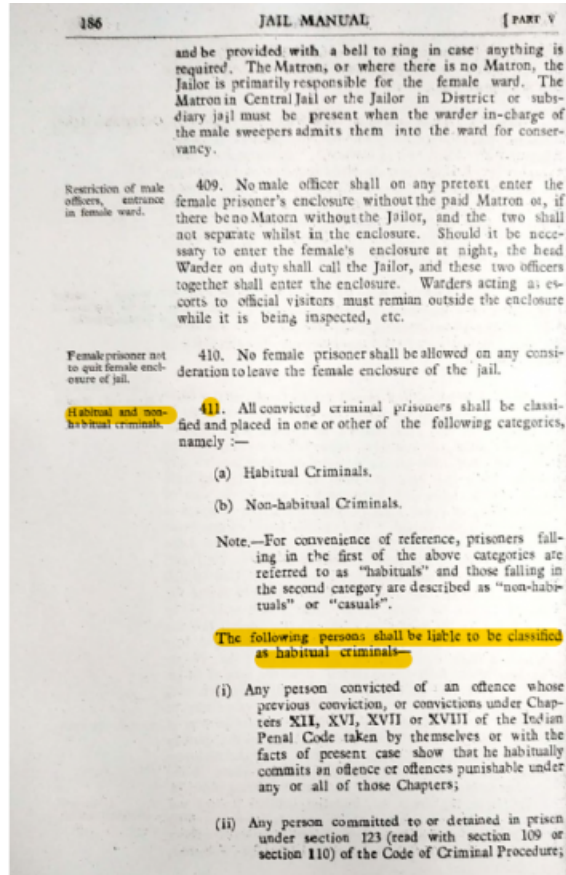
Thus, the colonial strategy created categories of persons who were considered the 'proper objects of policing', principally forest-dwelling and nomadic communities (including *Pardhis*) whose way of life conflicted with British interests. The *Pardhis* are traditionally semi-nomadic hunters, whose way of life conflicted with colonial regulations on hunting, control over forests for commercial purposes and revenue collection from a sedentary population.

Consequently, surveillance and intrusive policing became a part of these communities' daily existence: from having their names registered in permanent records, being placed in 'reformatory settlements' in order to undermine their nomadic cultures and facing severe restrictions on their movement as well as constantly having to report to the authorities. This system is best described by historian Radhika Singha's explanation of the colonial policing system – 'it was far easier to prosecute a prisoner on a charge of belonging to some ill-defined criminal collectivity than to establish individual responsibility for a specific criminal offence'.

The contemporary Indian police have continued with this legacy. First, Indian society continues to be ordered by the caste system; second, the idea of hereditary criminals still occupies the mind and structure of the Indian police, largely comprising members of oppressive castes; and third on the grounds of expediency that hold as true now as they did during British colonial times.

Thus, limited policing resources are still targeting the same communities. Even after the CTA was repealed, its legacy has endured in policing structures, practices and attitudes. Individual Indian states have adopted legal provisions concerning 'habitual offenders' (HOs)

and maintained the surveillance systems designed under the CTA. The hereditary criminal of the past is now placed in the more palatable administrative category of the HO, which remains ill-defined and therefore gives the police vast discretionary powers. These provisions, while apparently neutral, are still selectively used against the same communities that were targeted in colonial times.



References to 'Habitual criminals' in the Madhya Pradesh Jail Manual, 1987, Vol 1, Part 2

A centuries-long project of predictive policing

'*Angrez chale gaye, police chodh gaye hamare liye*' ('The British are gone, but they have left their police behind'), says a *Pardhi* woman in Bhopal, referring to the continued police discrimination her community faces. Whether in the form of indiscriminate detention, torture in custody, or economic exploitation, the everyday life of *Pardhis* is characterised by police violence; but because they lie at the very bottom of Indian caste society and continue to experience socioeconomic hardship, their systemic exploitation (much like their very existence) is rendered invisible. Scholars have failed to document the systemic police targeting of *Pardhis* and other DNT communities, while civil society's attempts to highlight the issue have been restricted to anecdotal evidence of police brutality.

Once held at a police station, every *Pardhi* – children, women and men – is subjected to physical and verbal assault. 'They know it is easy to beat a confession out of a *Pardhi*', says one woman. Parents are beaten in front of their children to 'send a message.' Recently, two

Pardhi minors were picked up from a tea-stall and temple, stripped naked and beaten. The police misled their mother about where they were, and when she tried to get them released, she too was beaten by the police and framed under false charges.

Besides the violence, police surveillance has long dispossessed *Pardhis* of their traditional livelihoods. Today, they depend on waste picking, begging and odd jobs like unloading rubble and clearing bushes. 'In the entire city, there is not one person who will offer us employment in a shop or give us any salaried job', claims one *Pardhi*, citing the stigma of criminality associated with DNTs. The constant police surveillance, harassment and frequent arrests hinder their ability to pursue education and steady employment.

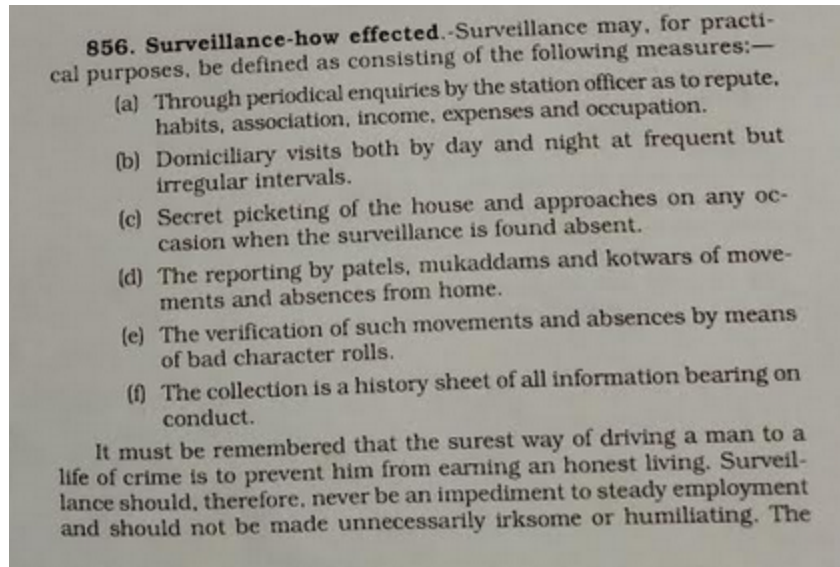
Threatening to create a new police record or add to an existing one, the police demand large bribes (the equivalent of US\$ 250–1,500) from the *Pardhis*. The bribe increases each time they are held in police detention or jailed. Between the bribes, bail and the lack of steady employment, a *Pardhi* family typically remains trapped in a cycle of perpetual indebtedness.

Police stations across India maintain registers of HOs – also called 'history-sheeters' – in their jurisdictions, with extensive details of their lives and daily movements. While their identification may not explicitly be based on caste, collective police action overwhelmingly identifies members of the DNT communities as HOs. These registers record their demographic details such as place of residence and caste, personal information such as age and identifying marks on the body, and 'evidence' of criminality: details of their habits, their method of committing crimes, their property, particulars of their associates, places they frequent, etc.

For communities such as the *Pardhis*, even being visibly mobile carries with it a threat of police surveillance and violence. Rana, a middle-aged *Pardhi* man, was stopped by traffic police for not wearing a crash helmet. When the police demanded to know his surname and caste identity, he was detained and questioned about how he had obtained a motorcycle. When his answers were deemed 'unsatisfactory', he was arrested. So pervasive is the fear of having one's daily life recorded in police registers that Rana, much like other *Pardhis* identified as a HO, rethinks every activity of his life, including something as mundane as going to the local tea stall with friends. These records shackle the *Pardhi* community's lives, freedoms and dignities.

Arguably, the most important section of the habitual offenders' registers is an informal record that police officers must sign to attest that they have personally trailed or surveilled the HO at least once every fortnight to investigate whether s/he had (despite extensive surveillance) managed to outwit the police to commit a theft or burglary. The police in Bhopal's Govindpura police station showed us this, which was surprising given that these registers are fiercely guarded to avoid public scrutiny.

State police regulations allow them to maintain a record of HOs in their jurisdictions, but there are no restrictions on the information they can keep in their registers and therefore no form of accountability. As a result, the police have developed their own practices, including using local informants (known as *mukhbirs*) to keep abreast of HOs' daily activities and movements.



Madhya Pradesh Police Regulations detail some of the ways they surveil suspect individuals and communities

Police knowledge is ossified into algorithms

For over a century, the police have kept physical records of all cases and HOs, but these are now being digitised through the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS), the main and centralised system for maintaining digital records. The central government provides the core infrastructure to standardise digital data: First Information Reports (FIRs), various documents related to investigation and evidence, and the final police reports to be submitted to the courts. The CCTNS also allows geo-tagging of offences. However, for various state governments which are trying to build their own infrastructure over and above this standard, CCTNS extends far beyond digitisation into setting up a crime-mapping, analytics, and a predictive system.

A super platform and an opaque black box, the CCTNS has been designed to be *the* digital repository of every local police record. It is hoped that it will make policing more efficient by allowing local police stations to know about a person's entire criminal history at the click of the mouse: cases in which the person has been accused, facial photographs, the crimes committed, the number of days held in detention, and whether the courts acquitted or convicted them.

The central government and the tech industry maintain that systems such as the CCTNS will allow for 'objective', 'smart', error-free algorithm-based detection of criminal hotspots and predictive policing. In reality since these databases are fed by the police's centuries-long caste-based system of preventive surveillance and predictive policing (which has already determined who is a criminal and what crimes habitual criminals commit repeatedly), there is no possibility of objectivity or lack of caste bias. The CCTNS only adds a technological veneer to a caste-based policing model. While the ideological purpose matters little to local police stations, its material benefits include hours of saved time and seamless digital transmission of produced criminalities across jurisdictions.

The government and the tech industry maintain that [digital] systems will allow for 'objective', 'smart', algorithm-based detection of criminal hotspots and predictive policing. In reality since these databases are fed by the police's centuries-long caste-based system of preventive surveillance and predictive policing there is no possibility of objectivity or lack of caste bias.

The reliance on and aspirations for predictive policing are a part of the aim for the Indian police to be among the world's most advanced and professionalised force. The police claim that their limitations are inadequate staffing, poor technological skills and an overworked force. The goal is to have the same technological tools in every police station in India as in London and New York, to increase efficiency and technological expertise and obviate the need to recruit more police officers while also cutting workloads. Despite concerns raised about predictive policing in the UK and US with respect to racial profiling and discrimination, mass surveillance, arbitrary search and seizure, as well as the erosion of the fundamental right to privacy, the Indian police have sought to enhance predictive policing technologies such as hotspot detection and data mining.

The CCTNS is the future of India's police registers. By 2030, it is hoped that the platform will be adequately developed to free police officers of maintaining any paper registers. Since state governments are free to tweak CCTNS as they please, several states have been collecting biometric details (iris scans, facial prints, etc.) of HOs and even first-time offenders. A senior police officer in Bhopal claimed that the CCTNS is being used in Madhya Pradesh as a repository of all criminals. CCTNS integrates various dossiers: history sheets and *goonda* files, fingerprints, footprints, details about family members of accused persons, etc. The details of family members are obtained for a 'deterrent effect', so that purported criminals do not commit further crimes. (A *goonda* is what the police call individuals who are more likely to commit assault or disturb public peace by indulging in general public violence and rioting. Derived from a pejorative term in Hindi that roughly translates as 'rowdy' or 'hooligan', the police surveilled such identified individuals through various Goonda Acts from as early as 1926.)

Permanent databases do not spare children either. One 16-year-old *Pardhi* had his details forcibly recorded (including fingerprints and photos) on a charge for which he was eventually given a suspended sentence. Creating permanent records of children, whether or not they are convicted, may be in direct contravention of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which espouses the principle of a 'fresh start' for a child. This, however, is of no concern to the local cop.

The problem here, much like in the case of traditional surveillance, is that the police operate without a clear legal framework and use ambiguity to their advantage. The Madhya Pradesh Police Regulations allow for the creation of physical databases of HOs and briefly state the manner of their surveillance. This legal framework, which has remained unchanged over decades, did not foresee today's digital advances. Consequently, using technology for surveillance, with its associated set of new problems (permanence, security, and privacy, to name but a few), has virtually no legal basis and therefore very few constraints. In a landmark judgment in 2017, the Indian judiciary confirmed that Indian citizens have a fundamental right to privacy; however, the judiciary has yet to extend this to the question of maintenance of HO registers and databases.

The only limits to the breadth of police surveillance appear to be infrastructural constraints. To address these problems, the state of Telangana, for instance, is investing in a multi-storey centre to house its ambitious Integrated People Information Hub (IPIH), a database containing 360° profiles of every resident. Other states plan to follow suit.

The state's inability to self-regulate its use of technology is amply demonstrated by the ham-fisted introduction of the Aadhaar, a 'unique identification' number linking biometric information and various databases necessary for accessing welfare programmes, setting up bank accounts, purchasing SIM cards, and paying income tax, among others until the Supreme Court directed the government to regulate and limit its mandatory use for specific public services.

No hiding from the police

A second technological advance with regard to policing is the use of closed-circuit cameras (CCTV), purportedly for national security and women's security. A chilling incident of rape and murder that made the headlines in 2012 led to greater calls for harsh criminal laws and mass surveillance technologies to deter crimes against women. The paternalistic preoccupation with maintaining control over women's bodies for the stated purpose of ensuring their safety has resulted in surveillance in public spaces. The Lucknow city police recently announced that they will initiate a response for women in distress based on their facial expressions observed through AI-equipped facial-recognition technology.

Most of the larger Indian cities are dotted with police CCTV (without attendant regulations) on busy streets, at intersections, and in market areas to replace in-person police surveillance. Private establishments and educational institutions in larger cities have also invested in CCTV on their premises in accordance with state regulations seeking to establish 'public safety.' The sinister implications of creating and maintaining such networks are obvious. Recently, during the lockdown imposed to control the COVID-19 pandemic, the Union Government allowed a hate-filled media campaign to vilify Muslims as maliciously spreading outbreaks across India. Unsurprisingly, this culminated in the police in Madhya Pradesh and Telangana using drones to surveil mainly Muslim neighbourhoods.

While CCTV-based surveillance policing has thus far largely maintained the distinction between footage from police cameras and from private cameras mandatorily installed, but accessible only after a crime has been committed, a strange third hybrid is being developed in some parts of the country. Take, for instance, Bhopal Eye, the crown jewel of the Bhopal police surveillance system. This mobile application is marketed as a citizen-policing initiative which allows the police to actively maintain a database of the number, location and range of all private CCTVs installed in the city. As part of the Bhopal Eye initiative, the local police have been 'encouraging' the installation of CCTV in homes and commercial establishments, even in the absence of mandatory public safety regulations.

The economic model of Bhopal Eye, in some ways, parallels mobile applications such as Uber: the financial investment of acquiring and maintaining the input units (CCTVs) for the intended output (surveillance) is made not by the organisation that built the network, but is shifted to citizens by selling to them dual myths of ever-lurking danger and the deterrent value of constant surveillance. When citizens are thus recruited, they can download the free application and log in the location coordinates of their CCTVs. The police, as the database creators, develop this network and use the data to keep track of how many of the city's 'private eyes' can be harnessed for policing purposes. Apart from the lack of *any* regulation, little is known about the procedure used to manage Bhopal Eye, its use and its efficiency. The senior police officer credited with single-handedly constructing and initiating Bhopal Eye declined to answer our questions.

In the future, systems such as Bhopal Eye could, through both overt encouragement and tacit prejudice, facilitate the police's surveillance reach within mixed neighbourhoods, where both affluent and working-class families reside, as well as enable heightened monitoring of 'suspect' individuals, such as street-vendors, in wealthy localities.

भोपाल पुलिस, बंदी हुई हिला की सेक्युरिटी के लिए गिले के अलग-अलग स्थानों पर आंतरराष्ट्रीय मानक के अनुसार, सीसीटीवी कैमरा स्थापित करने में भोपाल पुलिस की टेक्निकल यूनिट आपका सहयोग करने के लिए तत्पर है।

For More Information Scan QR Code

अब न बचेगा अपराधी कोई
अगर घर में लगेंगे कैमरे सही

आपकी सेवा में सदैव तत्पर
भोपाल पुलिस

AN INITIATIVE BY

भोपाल पुलिस | दैनिक भास्कर | MADHYA ADVERTISING PVT. LTD. | Sponsor Branding Space

अपने घरों में लगाईये सीसीटीवी कैमरे | शिकायत एवं जानकारी के लिए | 7049106300 या DIAL

Police promotional material shared on social media sites such as Facebook to encourage Bhopal Eye registration with the tagline “No criminal will be safe if houses install cameras properly”.

Some members of the DNT communities seem amenable to constant CCTV surveillance. Rana, the man who admitted to being afraid of even going to the local tea stall due to police harassment, exclaims, ‘I wish they would actually install CCTVs everywhere so that they would know [that it is not us] who is actually committing these crimes’. The history of CCTV has taught us, however, that the purported safety-net they offer is not for all citizens. For instance, police stations are required to have cameras installed at their entrances and inside cells where the accused are detained. This was supposed to be a check on custodial violence, for which the Indian police are notorious. However, they are now careful to take the accused to a room without CCTV before assaulting them. The police influence medical examinations of the accused to obfuscate the evidence of their brutality. The police hesitate to supply CCTV video feed to those who request it, and the judiciary is not known to strictly demand it either. The reliance on cameras is thus entirely at the discretion of the local police. The police may simply not submit video evidence when it does not favour their case, while the defence might never learn that such evidence exists.

Thus, Rana’s trust in the potential benefits of CCTVs seems misplaced. A 2018 incident related to the criminalisation of cattle slaughter in the city of Khandwa illustrates the point. The police had installed CCTVs at a busy town square to check on the illegal slaughter of cattle. A Muslim man, who lived within the range of the surveillance camera, was arrested for the offence. His family repeatedly claimed that the case against him had been fabricated and that the camera’s recording would provide the proof needed to exonerate him. However, since the prosecution enjoys wide discretion in introducing evidence at trial, the family had no means of ensuring that the footage made its way to court.

What's in it for Big Tech?

We found almost unreserved enthusiasm for technology in our interviews with the police, with officers at all levels regarding the force's steady progress into increasingly sophisticated methods of data collection and collation as a badge of honour. The only problem, according to the officer in charge of the CCTNS at one of the local police stations, is that the tools currently at their disposal do not work *well enough*. Nor did we have to poke around to find the reasons for this candid embrace since we received the same reply repeatedly: technology makes policing more efficient, convenient, accessible, and accurate – basically, *easier*. Experience suggests that justifications of efficiency need not be set in stone. Be it the precipitous demonetisation implemented in 2016 or the gargantuan Aadhar project introduced in 2009, regimes across the political spectrum have displayed a Hydra-like ability to invent and reinvent justificatory strategies, leading one to wonder what exactly lies underneath the screeds and slogans. It is thus meaningful to ask what interests are served by the technological advances but remain obscured from public view.

One need not look far. As Usha Ramanathan, a veteran privacy activist and trenchant critic of the *Aadhaar* project puts unequivocally, 'the driving force behind the [*Aadhaar*] project is corporate interest'. India is a staggeringly lucrative market for private corporations that produce surveillance technologies. In Bhopal, for example, security cameras alone, which are only one component of the city's surveillance infrastructure, cost upwards of Rs. 2.5 Crores (about US \$135,000), an enormous figure for a non-metropolitan city.

Indeed, a visit to the futuristic central CCTV control room at the police headquarters in Bhopal is like being at a trade fair, as a support staff member from Honeywell, the corporation behind the city-wide Integrated Video Management System project, rattles off the panoply of brands that have coalesced to create this panopticon. Honeywell landed the lucrative contract after its impressive performance at surveilling the *Kumbh Mela*, a Hindu pilgrimage held every 12 years, attended by millions. An eight-member team from Honeywell is constantly circulating around Bhopal's police headquarters to provide 'indispensable' technical support.

The nature of Honeywell's partnership with Bhopal police illustrates two significant ways in which private corporate interests cast an ominous shadow over the 'public good': not only do corporations pull the strings; they also invariably set the stage. Consider the case of Huawei, which has been selling 'safe cities' across the world, of which facial-recognition technology is an integral component, altering its pitch to appeal to diverse potential patrons.

Similarly, Honeywell's offering sees public safety as a function of constant, blanket surveillance, whereby everybody is suspect unless observed otherwise – a vision that it then volunteers to execute and helps the law-enforcement agency navigate. Honeywell's role is currently limited to providing the police with CCTV footage when a crime is committed and they request assistance to discover who the criminal is or track where they might have fled.

However, for the police and Honeywell, this is only its secondary, instrumental purpose. The inherent purpose of Honeywell's CCTV footage is that it compels public self-discipline and self-surveillance, and therefore reduces crime.

Another case in point is the proliferation of facial-recognition-based AI technologies that are being marketed to police departments across the country as the 'must have' crime-fighting tools. According to reports, the Surat City Police has a picture intelligence unit that relies on Nippon Electrical Company's proprietary NeoFace technology and vehicle number-plate recognition to track persons of interest. During one of our interviews with a police officer, he alluded to the city's population as 'clients.' This language reveals what is not being openly stated, which is that the state is motivated more by being the customers of shiny curios than acting as the custodian of the citizens' civil rights.

The construction of a digital caste system

The dream of Digital India was sold to the Indian population by the Narendra Modi government soon after being elected in 2014. A key component of this dream is to build an e-governance model. The need to use technology has been furthered through the myth that tech is neutral in the prevention of crime and curbs the problem of human bias, when all that these systems do is essentially digitise the casteist targeting of communities through the nebulous category of HOs. There is scant reflection on what such a digitised caste system implies, who is responsible for designing it and how it reproduces and reifies hierarchies that are inimical to the criminal justice system.

The goal of efficiency makes no attempt to dislodge the traditional principles of policing: who is kept under surveillance and why remain constant across time and space. Technological advances merely sharpen the blade of police discretion and further entrench its operational biases. This is already a departure from the supposed relationship between technology and law enforcement in countries where police body cams are at least expected to correct implicit bias.

Indeed, in the US, there have long been arguments about the attempt to shroud racist systems under the cloak of objectivity. The historian Khalil Muhammad demonstrated how a 'racial data revolution' in the nineteenth century marshaled science and statistics to make a 'disinterested' case for white superiority. The results of the 1890 census showed that African Americans were disproportionately imprisoned, but rather than interpreting this as a symptom of systemic inequities, the data was understood to be 'objective, colour blind, and incontrovertible'. In this way, crime statistics became the foundation upon which the myth of Black inferiority was constructed.

Likewise, the datasets and models used in newer, tech-based systems are not objective representations of reality. The employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities – but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive

than the discriminatory systems of a previous era – often hides, speeds up, and even deepens discrimination, while appearing to be neutral or benevolent.

A spate of new applications allows the police to access and update information from their mobile phones. The more one asks them about the number of databases the police ‘maintain’ and their regulatory frameworks, the more obvious it is that even the police have been unable to keep up with the mushrooming of private technologies in their operations. It is unknown how many online databases there are, how information is uploaded onto them, the nature and breadth of this information – and what is the ultimate aim of assembling this large archipelago of digital database infrastructures for police surveillance. These multiple applications, software and databases may (for now) exist in silos, even if they regularly cross-pollinate information. However, they are all so close to each other that they can all be easily interlinked to build dossiers of personal information on all citizens and allow more pervasive institutional profiling, which can then be used to justify differential treatment in schooling, employment, housing, etc., particularly for those belonging to marginalised communities who are identified as HOs.

Thus, when the *Pardhi* community says that the police have the entire history of every member of their community, this is no exaggeration. It is clear that the real aim of surveillance and the unchecked powers it gives to the police is to maintain political hegemony and a very strict, hierarchical social order. Thus, surveillance policing allows for the marriage of profit-making corporations and authoritarian regimes. The social control they seek to maintain is, in turn, in accordance with the casteist social control already enforced by police surveillance.

A Case for Police Accountability

We need to go beyond resisting the introduction and use of surveillance technologies to question, if not overhaul, the very ethos of policing in India, because it has already perpetuated dangerous predictive policing on the bodies of the marginalised even without these technologies. Unfortunately, the Indian state is increasing its excessive reliance on the institutions of policing to respond to various crises. Recently published data, for instance, documents the state’s heavy reliance on policing and colonial-era sedition law to quell dissent on issues ranging from Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. Each new cause opens up new avenues for criminalising and policing marginalised communities.

New justifications for increased police surveillance will keep multiplying as the state seeks to gain a tighter hold over the social order. Each instance of a perceived threat to the ‘internal security’ of this social order is fertile ground for intensifying surveillance mechanisms, as has been observed most recently in governments’ response to citizens’ protests. The habitual offender is to the city what the ‘anti-national’ dissenter is to the country – an inveterate, antisocial element from whom society needs protection.

Activists, lawyers, students, and a cultivated category of urban Naxals are now all beginning to be at the receiving end of this uninhibited state surveillance and records. In February 2021, *The Washington Post* reported that civil rights activist Rona Wilson's laptop had been hacked into for surveilling and planting false documents implicating him as an enemy of the state. While the hacker's identity is unknown, it is reported that the hacker (an individual or organisation) had extensive resources at their disposal. In 2019, it was reported that the Israeli firm NSO Group's spyware tool Pegasus was used to surveil journalists and human-rights defenders. The NSO Group admitted that it sells Pegasus exclusively to governments and law-enforcement agencies.

Surveillance-based policing to address violence against women is the latest addition to the police's range of responsibilities. Although feminist and women's movements, among others, have questioned the failure of criminal law to address violence against women, the questions of caste-based criminality, policing and intersectionality have largely remained absent from this conversation. The caste-based construction of criminality makes women from marginalised communities the most vulnerable. They suffer the greatest violence but receive no support from the criminal justice system, because its very structures allow the police to perpetrate such violence in the first place.



A parade of women walking from their dorms to various factories sidestepping sewage and construction. Credit: Andrea Bruce / NOOR

Feminist and civil rights movements in India have essentially failed to question the very ethos of casteist policing in the country. *Pardhi* women recount instances of police harassment when they are at work segregating waste. If the police find anything valuable in their waste-collection bag, they are accused of having stolen it and are dragged to the police station. Some women said that their own jewellery and other items are confiscated and recorded as evidence of theft. In two instances where *Pardhi* women had committed suicide because of police harassment, the state relied on such 'criminal antecedents' to portray these women as criminals and grant the police impunity – as if being a criminal justified being a victim of police violence. The instances of violence against *Pardhi* women are rendered invisible through these constructed narratives of criminality, granting the police complete discretion and impunity.

We therefore need to focus our resistance on the very cause of the problem of disproportionate police targeting of marginalised *Adivasi* communities either through technological surveillance or other means: police discretion and impunity. As gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, the police determine who become the subjects of this system. Investing in building police accountability is the first step in tackling the culture of discretion and impunity that has become synonymous with law and order in India.

By underscoring and drawing attention to forms of coded inequality, not only must we challenge the social dimensions of technology, but also work against the construction of a parallel digital caste system that essentially intensifies the traditional caste system. At present, those whose bodies are subjected to violence by the carceral system are forced to seek justice from the same system. In the US, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has highlighted the dangers of carceral imagination, the racist systems of policing and the need to invest in non-retributive forms of justice.

A major BLM demand is to defund the police who are designed to criminalise Black communities. Lessons from the movement can be adopted to challenge caste-based oppression in India through policing. This would begin by building a discourse of the casteist nature of policing through advocacy, research and community organising, alongside an active investment in cultivating an imagination of a transformative justice, one that is not designed to prosper on the bodies of marginalised communities, whatever their caste – the eradication of which is another, much larger, struggle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ameya Bokil, Nikita Sonavane and Srujana Bej are young researchers and lawyers working at a nascent criminal justice collective in Bhopal, India called the Criminal Justice and Police Accountability Project (CPAProject). Ameya Bokil is a human rights researcher examining overcriminalisation and police powers, Nikita Sonavane has worked and written extensively on issues of sexual violence, indigenous self governance and anti-discrimination law, **Avaneendra Khare** is an advocate currently based in Bhopal, **Vaishali Janarthanan** is

a final year law student and works in organisational capacity building, and Srujana Bej has pursued field based research on the impact of Aadhaar-based biometric authentication on access to socio-economic rights. @srujana_bej @CPAProjectIndia

Feminist Data Manifest-No

 manifestno.com/home

The Manifest-No is a declaration of refusal and commitment. It refuses harmful data regimes and commits to new data futures.

1. **We refuse** to operate under the assumption that risk and harm associated with data practices can be bounded to mean the same thing for everyone, everywhere, at every time. **We commit** to acknowledging how historical and systemic patterns of violence and exploitation produce differential vulnerabilities for communities.
2. **We refuse** to be disciplined by data, devices, and practices that seek to shape and normalize racialized, gendered, and differently-abled bodies in ways that make us available to be tracked, monitored, and surveilled. **We commit** to taking back control over the ways we behave, live, and engage with data and its technologies.
3. **We refuse** the use of data about people in perpetuity. **We commit** to embracing agency and working with intentionality, preparing bodies or corpuses of data to be laid to rest when they are not being used in service to the people about whom they were created.
4. **We refuse** to understand data as disembodied and thereby dehumanized and departicularized. **We commit** to understanding data as always and variously attached to bodies; we vow to interrogate the biopolitical implications of data with a keen eye to gender, race, sexuality, class, disability, nationality, and other forms of embodied difference.
5. **We refuse** any code of phony “ethics” and false proclamations of transparency that are wielded as cover, as tools of power, as forms for escape that let the people who create systems off the hook from accountability or responsibility. **We commit** to a feminist data ethics that explicitly seeks equity and demands justice by helping us understand and shift how power works.
6. **We refuse** the expansion of forms of data science that normalizes a condition of data extractivism and is defined primarily by the drive to monetize and hyper-individualize the human experience. **We commit** to centering creative and collective forms of life, living, and worldmaking that exceed the neoliberal logics and resist the market-driven forces to commodify human experience.
7. **We refuse** to accept that data and the systems that generate, collect, process, and store it are too complex or too technical to be understood by the people whose lives are implicated in them. **We commit** to seek to make systems and data intelligible, tangible, and controllable.

8. **We refuse** work *about* minoritized people. **We commit** to mobilizing data so that we are working with and for minoritized people in ways that are consensual, reciprocal, and that understand data as always co-constituted.

9. **We refuse** a data regime of ultimatums, coercive permissions, pervasive cookie collecting, and blocked access. Not everyone can safely refuse or opt out without consequence or further harm. **We commit** to “no” being a real option in all online interactions with data-driven products and platforms and to enacting a new type of data regime that knits the “no” into its fabric.

10. **We refuse** to “close the door behind” ourselves. **We commit** to entering ethically compromised spaces like the academy and industry not to imbricate ourselves into the hierarchies of power but to subvert, undermine, open, make possible.

11. **We refuse** a data culture that reproduces the colonial *‘ruse of consent’* “which papers over the very conditions of force and violence that beget ‘consent’” in the first place. **We commit** to data practices developed by and for Indigenous peoples and in relations of reciprocity.

12. **We refuse** more dispossession, erasure, stealing, and profiting from Black, Indigenous, and people of colors’ lives and works. **We commit** to build the standpoint that the people most screwed over by data have the best understanding of data and to lifting up, mobilizing, and celebrating their knowledges in building a data *methodology of the oppressed*.

13. **We refuse** to reproduce research as a form of exploitation and to allow people in positions of privilege make the decisions on behalf of those without. **We commit** to research cultures that promote data autonomy and SELF-representation.

14. **We refuse** to cede rhetorics of revolution, disruption, and creative innovation to Silicon Valley marketing and venture discourse. Especially, when this discourse marginalizes and appropriates the voices and actions of social justice communities. **We commit** to a recognition and an amplification of the long histories of the labor, dedication, and power of feminist voices for social transformation.

15. **We refuse** systems that simplify consent into a one-time action, a simple click of a yes to a terms of service agreement, to ownership of our data in perpetuity. **We commit** to enacting Planned Parenthood’s FRIES model of consent that ensures that it is always “Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic and Specific.”

16. **We refuse** surveillance as the only condition for participation and to feel powerless in the face of “inevitable” mass technological surveillance. **We commit** to find our communities, hold them close, and resist together.

17. **We refuse** Big Tech's half-measures and moral compromises that constantly defer the needs of vulnerable users as something to be addressed in the next round (of funding, of testing, of patching). **We commit** to centering the needs of the most vulnerable among us in making way for a radical address to Big Tech's data problems.

18. **We refuse** technologies that defer or delay accessible design because it is too expensive, inconvenient, or not legally required. **We commit** to learning from the work of disability activists. #NothingAboutUsWithoutUs

19. **We refuse** the naturalization of data as what is simply 'off gassed' by a thing, object, or interaction. **We commit** to treating data as a resource to be cared for and cultivated, beyond a colonial extraction logic (as something to be constantly mined, extracted, captured).

20. **We refuse** to consider data as raw and only an end product without context and values and to ignore that data has an origin story, and a creator or creators whose legacy must be understood in order to understand the data itself. **We commit** to working with data subjects rather than capturing data objects by centering the *matrices of oppression* that shaped data's production and the infrastructure--the code, algorithms, applications, and operating systems--in which it is used, processed, and stored. Data always has social values including race, gender, class and ability inscribed into it.

21. **We refuse** to cede that convincing unjust institutions and disciplines to listen to us is the only way to make change. **We commit** to co-constructing our language and questions together with the communities we serve in order to build power with our own.

22. **We refuse** 'damage centered' research that gathers data to reproduce damage, and that traffics in or profits from pain. **We commit** to 'desire centered' research that mobilizes and centers data by and for Indigenous, Black, poor, uncitizenized, transgender, disabled and other minoritized, over-researched and under-served people as resource and tool for their *thriving, survivance, and joy*.

23. **We refuse** to tolerate economies of convenience (also known as the 'gig economy' or 'sharing economy') that build capital and data empires on the backs of precarious workers and hidden labor. **We commit** to working against the exploitation of labor and precarity in all of its forms.

24. **We refuse** tech solutionism as a moral cover for punitive data logics like always-on facial recognition systems, default capture of personal data, and racist predictive policing. **We commit** to feminist problem-solving that interrogates data logics as mirrors of power inequalities rather than simple solutions to legacies of racism, sexism, ableism, and oppression of vulnerable people.

25. **We refuse** data logics of prediction that presume omnipotence and conceit to know better than community-centered forms of decision making. **We commit** to countering the risks of defaulting to data-driven forms of prediction and decision-making by valuing the expertise of community-engaged practitioners.

26. **We refuse** to accept that data only matters when it is big, abstract, digital, aggregated, machine-readable, and instrumentalized for the market. **We commit** to valuing other forms and materialities of data that privilege accountability and legibility to users and community, and examine data at and across all of its scales.

27. **We refuse** the appropriation of feminist discourses of collective safety and the language of consent for the legitimization of surveillance. Safety does not demand subjection to, submission to, subordination to rational, high tech, *colonial orders*. **We commit** to feminist collective safety and consent as a means of building resilience, creating solidarity, reducing harm, and as a tool of self-defense and empowerment.

28. **We refuse** the argument that feminist data reform is too slow, too expensive, too much, too little, too late. **We commit** to radical disruption for social transformation.

29. **We refuse** data logics that hyper-value the quantitative, the “objective,” and the “generalizable.” **We commit** to developing, adopting, and advancing methodologies that draw insight from the subjective, embodied, contingent, political, and affective in ways that *transcend traditional boundaries* between qualitative and quantitative.

30. We refuse coercive settler colonial logics of knowledge and information organization; we commit to tribal nation sovereignties and Indigenous information management that values *Indigenous relationality, the right to know*, and *data sovereignty*.

31. We refuse settler colonial logics of data ownership; we commit to advancing the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples who harness data practices as “infrastructural commitments” to get back their land and *divest foreign occupying powers*.

32. **We refuse** reductionist practices that view people as data points in order to embrace the whole person. **We commit** to the requirement of recognizing personhood as a feminist data value.

Our refusals and commitments together demand that data be acknowledged as at once an interpretation and *in need of interpretation*. Data can be a check-in, a story, an experience or set of experiences, and a resource to begin and continue dialogue. It can - and should always - resist reduction. Data is a thing, a process, and a relationship we make and put to use. *We can make it and use it differently.*

Design Justice • Design Justice

Introduction: #TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination

Published on: Feb 26, 2020

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

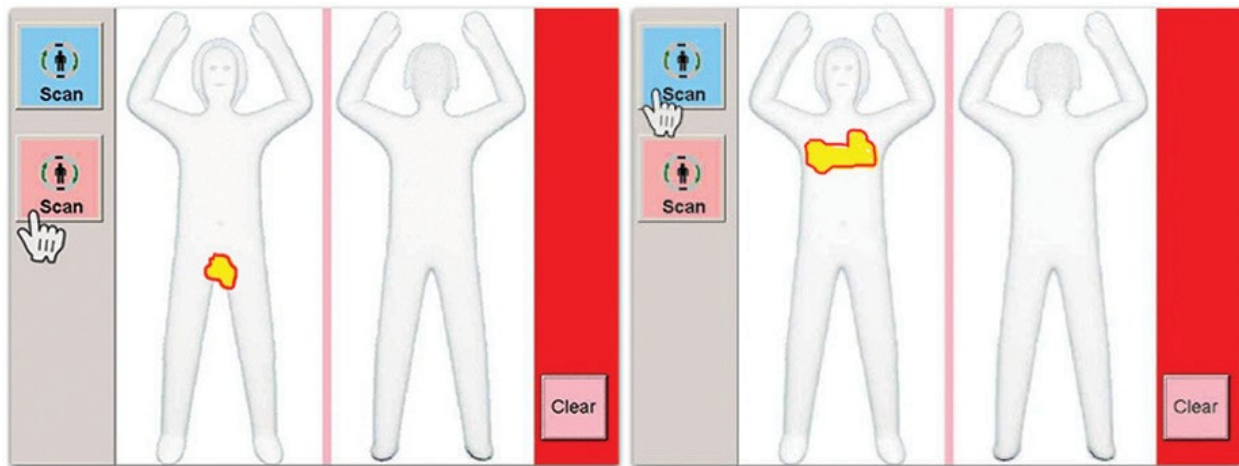


Figure 0.1 “Anomalies” highlighted in millimeter wave scanner interface. *Source:* Costello 2016.

It’s June 2017, and I’m standing in the security line at the Detroit Metro Airport. I’m on my way back to Boston from the Allied Media Conference (AMC), a “collaborative laboratory of media-based organizing” that’s been held every year in Detroit for the past two decades.¹ At the AMC, over two thousand people—media makers, designers, activists and organizers, software developers, artists, filmmakers, researchers, and all kinds of cultural workers—gather each June to share ideas and strategies for how to create a more just, creative, and collaborative world. As a nonbinary, trans*,² femme-presenting person, my time at the AMC was deeply liberating. It’s a conference that strives harder than any that I know of to be inclusive of all kinds of people, including queer, trans*, intersex, and gender-non-conforming (QTI/GNC) folks. Although it’s far from perfect, and every year inevitably brings new challenges and difficult conversations about what it means to construct a truly inclusive space, it’s a powerful experience. Emerging from nearly a week immersed in this parallel world, I’m tired, but on a deep level, refreshed; my reservoir of belief in the possibility of creating better futures has been replenished.

Yet as I stand in the security line and draw closer to the millimeter wave scanning machine, my stress levels begin to rise. On one hand, I know that my white skin, US citizenship, and institutional affiliation with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) place me in a position of relative privilege. I will certainly be spared the most disruptive and harmful possible outcomes of security screening. For example, I don’t have to worry that this process will lead to my being placed in a detention center or in deportation proceedings; I won’t be hooded and whisked away to Guantanamo Bay or to one of the many other secret prisons that form part of the global infrastructure of the so-called war on terror;³ most likely, I won’t even miss my flight while detained for what security expert Bruce Schneier describes as “security theater.”⁴ Only once in all of my travels have I been taken aside,

placed into a waiting room, and subjected to additional questioning by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).⁵

On the other hand, my heartbeat speeds up slightly as I near the end of the line, because I know that I'm almost certainly about to experience an embarrassing, uncomfortable, and perhaps humiliating search by a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, after my body is flagged as anomalous by the millimeter wave scanner. I know that this is almost certainly about to happen because of the particular sociotechnical configuration of gender normativity (*cis-normativity*, or the assumption that all people have a gender identity that is consistent with the sex they were assigned at birth) that has been built into the scanner, through the combination of user interface (UI) design, scanning technology, binary-gendered body-shape data constructs, and risk detection algorithms, as well as the socialization, training, and experience of the TSA agents.⁶

A female-presenting TSA agent motions me to step into the millimeter wave scanner. I raise my arms and place my hands in a triangle shape, palms facing forward, above my head. The scanner spins around my body, and then the agent signals for me to step forward out of the machine and wait with my feet on the pad just past the scanner exit. I glance to the left, where a screen displays an abstracted outline of a human body. As I expected, bright fluorescent yellow pixels on the flat-panel display highlight my groin area (see figure 0.1). You see, when I entered the scanner, the TSA operator on the other side was prompted by the UI to select Male or Female; the button for Male is blue, the button for Female is pink. Since my gender presentation is nonbinary femme, usually the operator selects Female. However, the three-dimensional contours of my body, at millimeter resolution, differ from the statistical norm of female bodies as understood by the data set and risk algorithm designed by the manufacturer of the millimeter wave scanner (and its subcontractors), and as trained by a small army of clickworkers tasked with labeling and classification (as scholars Lilly Irani, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Mary Gray, and Siddharth Suri, among others, remind us).⁷ If the agent selects Male, my breasts are large enough, statistically speaking, in comparison to the normative male body-shape construct in the database, to trigger an anomaly warning and a highlight around my chest area. If they select Female, my groin area deviates enough from the statistical female norm to trigger the risk alert. In other words, I can't win. This sociotechnical system is sure to mark me as "risky," and that will trigger an escalation to the next level in the TSA security protocol.

This is, in fact, what happens: I've been flagged. The screen shows a fluorescent yellow highlight around my groin. Next, the agent asks me to step aside, and (as usual) asks for my consent to a physical body search. Typically, once I'm close enough, the agent becomes confused about my gender. This presents a problem, because the next fork in the security protocol is for either a male or female TSA agent to conduct a body search by running their hands across my arms and armpits, chest, hips and legs, and inner thighs. According to TSA policy, "if a pat-down is performed, it will be conducted

by an officer of the same gender as you present yourself.”⁸ As a nonbinary trans* femme, I present a problem not easily resolved by the algorithm of the security protocol. Sometimes, the agent will assume I prefer to be searched by a female agent; sometimes, a male. Occasionally, they ask for my preference. Unfortunately, “neither” is an honest but unacceptable response. Today, I’m particularly unlucky: a nearby male-presenting agent, observing the interaction, loudly states “I’ll do it!” and strides over to me. I say, “Aren’t you going to ask me what I prefer?” He pauses, then begins to move toward me again, but the female-presenting agent who is operating the scanner stops him. She asks me what I prefer. Now I’m standing in public, flanked by two TSA agents, with a line of curious travelers watching the whole interaction. Ultimately, the male-presenting agent backs off and the female-presenting agent searches me, making a face as if she’s as uncomfortable as I am, and I’m cleared to continue on to my gate.

The point of this story is to provide a small but concrete example from my own daily lived experience of how larger systems—including norms, values, and assumptions—are encoded in and reproduced through the design of sociotechnical systems, or in political theorist Langdon Winner’s famous words, how “artifacts have politics.”⁹ In this case, cis-normativity is enforced at multiple levels of a traveler’s interaction with airport security systems. The database, models, and algorithms that assess deviance and risk are all binary and cis-normative. The male/female gender selector UI is binary and cis-normative.¹⁰ The assignment of a male or female TSA agent to perform the additional, more invasive search is cis-normative and binary-gender normative as well. At each stage of this interaction, airport security technology, databases, algorithms, risk assessment, and practices are all designed based on the assumption that there are only two genders, and that gender presentation will conform with so-called biological sex. Anyone whose body doesn’t fall within an acceptable range of “deviance” from a normative binary body type is flagged as risky and subjected to a heightened and disproportionate burden of the harms (both small and, potentially, large) of airport security systems and the violence of empire they instantiate. QTI/GNC people are thus disproportionately burdened by the design of millimeter wave scanning technology and the way that technology is used. The system is biased against us. Most cisgender people are unaware of the fact that the millimeter wave scanners operate according to a binary and cis-normative gender construct; most trans* people know, because it directly affects our lives.¹¹

These systems are biased against QTI/GNC people, as I’ve described; against Black women, who frequently experience invasive searches of their hair, as documented by the team of investigative journalists at ProPublica;¹² and against Sikh men, Muslim women, and others who wear headwraps, as described by sociologist Simone Browne in her brilliant book *Dark Matters*.¹³ As Browne discusses, and as Joy Buolamwini, founder of the Algorithmic Justice League, technically demonstrates, gender itself is racialized: humans have trained our machines to categorize faces and bodies as male and

female through lenses tinted by the optics of white supremacy.¹⁴ Airport security is also systematically biased against Disabled people, who are more likely to be flagged as risky if they have non-normative body shapes and/or use prostheses, as well as anyone who uses a wearable or implanted medical device. Those who are simultaneously QTI/GNC, Black, Indigenous, people of color (PoC), Muslim, Sikh, immigrant, and/or Disabled¹⁵ are doubly, triply, or multiply burdened by, and face the highest risk of harms from, this system.

I first publicly shared this experience in an essay for the *Journal of Design and Science* that I wrote in response to the “Resisting Reduction” manifesto, a timely call for thoughtful conversation about the limits and possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI).¹⁶ That call resonated very deeply with me because as a nonbinary trans* feminine person, I walk through a world that has in many ways been designed to deny the possibility of my existence. The same cisnormative, racist, and ableist approach that is used to train the models of the millimeter wave scanners is now being used to develop AI in nearly every domain. From my standpoint, I worry that the current path of AI development will reproduce systems that erase those of us on the margins, whether intentionally or not, through the mundane and relentless repetition of reductive norms structured by the *matrix of domination* (a concept we’ll return to later), in a thousand daily interactions with AI systems that, increasingly, weave the very fabric of our lives. My concerns about how the design of AI reproduces structural inequality extend more broadly to all areas of design, and these concerns are shared by a growing community.

The Design Justice Network

Design justice is not a term I created; rather, it emerged from a community of practice whose work I hope this book will lift up, extend, and support. This community is made up of design practitioners who participate in and work with social movements and community-based organizations (CBOs) across the United States and around the world. It includes designers, developers, technologists, journalists, community organizers, activists, researchers, and others, many of them loosely affiliated with the Design Justice Network (<http://designjusticenetwork.org>). The Design Justice Network was born at the AMC in the summer of 2015, when a group of thirty designers, artists, technologists, and community organizers took part in the workshop “Generating Shared Principles for Design Justice.”¹⁷ This workshop was planned by Una Lee, Jenny Lee, and Melissa Moore, and presented by Una Lee and Wesley Taylor. It was inspired by the Allied Media Projects (AMP) network principles, the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition (DDJC) digital justice principles, and the pedagogy of Detroit Future Youth. The goal of the workshop was to move beyond the frames of *social impact design* or *design for good*, to challenge designers to think about how good intentions are not necessarily enough to ensure that design processes and practices become tools for liberation, and to develop principles that might help design practitioners avoid the (often unwitting) reproduction of existing inequalities.¹⁸ The draft

principles developed at that workshop were refined by the Design Justice Network coordinators over the next year, revised at the AMC in 2017, and then, in 2018, released in the following form:

Design Justice Network Principles

This is a living document.

Design mediates so much of our realities and has tremendous impact on our lives, yet very few of us participate in design processes. In particular, the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions—about visual culture, new technologies, the planning of our communities, or the structure of our political and economic systems—tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made.

Design justice rethinks design processes, centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.

1. We use design to **sustain, heal, and empower** our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems.
2. We **center the voices of those who are directly impacted** by the outcomes of the design process.
3. We **prioritize design's impact on the community** over the intentions of the designer.
4. We view **change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process**, rather than as a point at the end of a process.
5. We see the role of the **designer as a facilitator rather than an expert**.
6. We believe that **everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience**, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process.
7. We **share design knowledge and tools** with our communities.
8. We work towards **sustainable, community-led and controlled** outcomes.
9. We work towards **non-exploitative solutions** that reconnect us to the earth and to each other.
10. Before seeking new design solutions, **we look for what is already working** at the community level. We honor and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge and practices.¹⁹

These principles have now been adopted by over three hundred people and organizations. The Design Justice Network has grown, nurtured by many; besides dozens of track coordinators (many named in this book's acknowledgments) and workshop facilitators, ongoing steering committee members include designers Una Lee, Victoria Barnett, Wesley Taylor, and myself.²⁰ The network produces a series of zines that provide an evolving record of our ideas and activities (<http://designjusticenetwork.org/zine>); coordinates a track at the AMC; and organizes workshops on a regular basis. Information about the dozens of organizations and hundreds of individuals that have been part of the design justice track at AMC is available in the archived conference programs.²¹

In particular, the design studio And Also Too has been a key actor in the development of design justice ideas and practices. Founded by designer Una Lee, And Also Too is “a collaborative design studio for social justice visionaries,” and is home to designers and artists Lupe Pérez, Sylver Sterling, Lara Stefanovich-Thomson, and Zahra Agjee. As they describe on their site: “And Also Too uses co-design to create tools for liberation and visionary images of the world we want to live in. ... Our work is guided by two core beliefs: first, that those who are directly affected by the issues a project aims to address must be at the center of the design process, and second, that absolutely anyone can participate meaningfully in design.”²² And Also Too facilitated the development of the Design Justice Network Principles, and is guided by those principles in its own day-to-day work.²³ Others that practice design justice include the worker-owned cooperative Research Action Design (RAD),²⁴ the Detroit-based artist collective Complex Movements, and a growing list of more than three hundred Design Justice Network Principles signatories (the full list is available at <http://designjusticenetwork.org/network-principles>).

More recently, other groups that are not (yet!) formally connected to the Design Justice Network have also begun to use the hashtag #designjustice on various social media platforms. These include the architects and city planners who organized a series of DesignAsProtest events in 2017, the EquityXDesign campaign to end gender and racial disparity in architecture as a profession, and the architects affiliated with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) who convened a 2018 Design Justice Summit in New Orleans, among others. The Equity Design Collaborative, led by Caroline Hill, Michelle Molitor, and Christine Ortiz, has been working to retrofit design thinking methods with a racial justice analysis.²⁵

There are also many, many organizations that don't use the term *design justice* but are engaged in closely allied practices. For example, the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC) is “a research and development centre where an international community of open source developers, designers, researchers, advocates, and volunteers work together to ensure that emerging information technology and practices are designed inclusively.”²⁶ Professor of Civic Design Ceasar McDowell has developed an extensive body of theory and practice of *design for the margins*.²⁷ Other allied projects, groups, and networks include the Association for Progressive Communications, the Catalan GynePunk collective (who develop and circulate queer feminist design practices of DIY gynecology²⁸), the Center for Media Justice, Coding Rights (Brazil), the Critical Making Lab, Data Active, Decolonising Design, the Design Studio for Social Intervention, Design Trust for Public Space, the Digital Justice Lab (Toronto), FemTechNet, Intelligent Mischief (Brooklyn), MIT CoLab, SEED Network, Social Justice Design Studio, and the Tech Equity Collective, just to name a few.²⁹

In particular, there is a rapidly growing community of researchers, computer scientists, and advocates who are focused on challenging the ways that inequality is reproduced through the design of AI and

algorithmic decision support systems. This area has seen a wave of recent publications, such as Virginia Eubanks's *Automating Inequality* (2018), Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), Meredith Broussard's *Artificial Unintelligence* (2019), and Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology* (2019), among others. In this area, there is also an explosion of new organizations and networks. Data for Black Lives has emerged as a key community of data scientists, scholars, artists, and community organizers who work to rethink data science, machine learning, AI, and other sociotechnical systems through a racial justice lens. Others (among many!) include the AI Now Institute, the Algorithmic Justice League, the Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies, Data & Society, the Data Justice Lab (Cardiff), the Digital Equity Lab (NYC), the JUST DATA Lab, the Our Data Bodies Project, the People's Guide to AI, and the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition.

Throughout this book, I will return to, draw from, and reference the work of these and other scholars, designers, and organizations that are already working to put design justice principles into practice, although there are so many that it won't be possible to mention them all.

Methods

My Own Standpoint

Feminist standpoint theory recognizes that all knowledge is situated in the particular embodied experiences of the knower.³⁰ Accordingly, I begin here by locating my own position and trajectory for the reader. I'm a nonbinary trans* femme queer person, of Italian-Russian-Polish-Jewish descent, raced white within the current logic of racial capitalism in the United States. I was born into a rural, hippie, cooperative home near Ithaca, in upstate New York, to parents who took part in feminist, antiwar, anti-imperialist, Latin American solidarity, and environmentalist movements of the time. I grew up on land stolen from the Onöñda'gaga' (Onandaga), Susquehannock, Gayogohó:no' (Cayuga), and peoples of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy. My political education came first via my parents and community, then my teachers at the Alternative Community School, a public alternative school. I attended high school in Puebla, México, then moved to Boston and attended Harvard College on a scholarship, gaining access to a new level of educational privilege. While in Boston, I joined the popular theater and cultural organizing collective AgitArte,³¹ and in that work became more deeply politicized through the efforts of Puerto Rican artist-organizers like Jose Jorge Díaz and Mayda Grano de Oro. After college, I lived and worked in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with the public arts project EducArte, before moving to Philadelphia for graduate education, hoping to connect my activist work to media theory.

At that time, in the early 2000s, I was part of the global Indymedia network of DIY social movement journalism.³² I traveled throughout Latin America to bring donated video cameras and computers to local Indymedia collectives, participated in organizing Independent Media Centers to provide

grassroots coverage of large protest events, and produced and distributed documentary films and videos about the global justice movement.³³ Through Indymedia, I also learned about free software and gained software development skills.

In 2003, I became involved with the Allied Media Conference, a space that continues to transform and shape my life.³⁴ I moved to Los Angeles for a PhD program at the University of Southern California, and while there, I worked with the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA), the Garment Worker Center (GWC), and other community-based organizations to support worker-led media projects like VozMob (*Voces Móviles/Mobile Voices*), developed through participatory design.³⁵ In 2011, I moved to Boston to take a position at MIT, and in 2014, I cofounded the worker-owned cooperative Research Action Design with Chris Schweidler and Bex Hurwitz.

As I write these words, in 2018, I have a faculty position at a high-profile university. I materially benefit from, and in some ways am harmed by, my location within systems including whiteness, educational inequality, capitalism, ableism, and settler colonialism. Simultaneously, I experience oppression based on patriarchy (although in the past I experienced both benefits and harms from this system), transphobia, transmisogyny, and cis-normativity. My standpoint and lived experience shape my understanding of design as a tool for both oppression and liberation, and throughout this text I will occasionally return to my lived experience to ground and illustrate key points.

Participatory Action Research

Most of my work falls within the tradition of participatory action research (PAR) and codesign. PAR is a framework with roots in the work of scholars and educators such as Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and (later) Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals-Borda, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and it emphasizes the development of communities of shared inquiry and action.³⁶ Codesign, a closely allied approach, can be traced to Scandinavian efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to include both workers and managers in sociotechnical systems design. Both PAR and codesign consider communities to be co-researchers and codesigners, rather than solely research subjects or test users. Chapter 2 provides a more in-depth discussion of the roots of codesign methods.

Together with the community-based organizations that are my research partners, I typically employ a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, popular education, and codesign workshops. The empirical grounding for this book includes (1) my experience as a cofounder of Research Action Design ([RAD.cat](#)), a worker-owned cooperative that attempts to put the principles of design justice into action; (2) my work as part of the Tech for Social Justice Project, a PAR team that produced the report *#MoreThanCode: Practitioners Reimagine the Landscape of Tech for Justice and Equity*,³⁷ based on more than one hundred semi structured interviews (most of them conducted by Maya Wagoner and Berhan Taye) and a series of eleven focus groups with technologists, designers,

developers, product managers, and others across the United States (explore morethanocode.cc); and (3) my own experience developing, teaching, and evaluating the Civic Media: Collaborative Design Studio course at MIT, from 2012 through the present (<https://codesign.mit.edu>).

Thus, although this book itself is not a PAR project, the experiences and insights that it contains were developed over many years in community and in collaboration with other researchers, community organizers, and design practitioners.

A Note on “We” and “I”

As an engaged scholar and design practitioner who is guided by anti-racist, feminist principles and epistemology, I want to make clear that although this is a single-authored book, many of the ideas it explores have bubbled up through the Design Justice Network as an emergent community of practice. All credit for the key ideas of design justice is due to this community, whereas all responsibility for the many errors in this text is mine. To paraphrase one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript, there is a tension between my attempt to provide a normative design justice framework as a single author and my claim to be amplifying knowledge that has been produced by a movement. I will do my best to remind the reader of this tension throughout.

In this book, I also move back and forth between third-person description and use of the first-person pronouns *we* and *I*. In particular, I use the first-person singular when I’m describing or drawing from my own personal experience to illustrate a point. When I use *we*, sometimes it refers to the community of existing design justice practitioners, and I will attempt to make that clear. At other moments, *we* refers to the aspirational broader community of those who care about remaking design, as part of broader efforts to make more liberatory and just worlds. I hope that you (the reader) will feel included in this broader *we*. Let us begin with a few key terms.

Design Justice: Defining Key Terms

Design

Design (noun): A plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for subsequent execution; the preliminary conception of an idea that is to be carried into effect by action; a project.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*³⁸

There are many definitions of *design*. I won’t attempt their synthesis here, nor will I advocate for the adoption of a particular definition. Nevertheless, before diving into the theory and practice of design justice, I’ll briefly discuss a few of the many ways that the term *design* is used and offer some thoughts about the meanings that are most useful in the context of this book.

As a verb, *design* originates from the Latin *de signum* (“to mark out”) or *designō* (“I mark out, point out, describe.”) In early use, it described the act of making a meaningful physical mark on an object. *Signum* evolved, mostly through French, into words such as “signify, assign, designate, [and] signal,”³⁹ and this sense is maintained today in the idea that designers sketch, draw, and mark out representations that will later become objects, buildings, or systems. In common usage, *design* carries multiple meanings. We use it to refer to a plan for an artifact, building, or system; a pattern (such as a floral print on a textile); the composition of a work of art; or the shape, appearance, or features of an object.⁴⁰ It also refers to the practice, field, or subfields of design work (e.g., “Icelandic design dominates global furniture markets.”).

In his classic text *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek positions design as a universal practice in human communities: “All [people]⁴¹ are designers. ... Design is the conscious effort to impose a meaningful order.”⁴² Design professor, practitioner, and philosopher Tony Fry also argues that we are all designers and that design is not solely the province of architects, graphic designers, industrial designers, or other design professionals; instead, he sees it as a component of all intentional acts.⁴³ Anne-Marie Willis, professor of design theory and editor of *Design Philosophy Papers*, puts it this way:

Design is something far more pervasive and profound than is generally recognised by designers, cultural theorists, philosophers or lay persons; designing is fundamental to being human—we design, that is to say, we deliberate, plan and scheme in ways which prefigure our actions and makings ... we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us.⁴⁴

At the same time, *design* frequently refers to expert knowledge and practices contained within a particular set of professionalized fields, including graphic design, fashion design, interaction design, industrial design, architecture, planning, and various other industries. Alongside the discussion of design as a specialist activity or as a certain type of work accomplished by experts, there is also a steadily growing literature on marginalized people’s design practices. In line with feminist critiques of frequently unpaid and invisibilized forms of feminized labor,⁴⁵ it’s crucial to acknowledge the importance of everyday, vernacular, and often unrecognized design practices (as in chapter 3). Alternative histories of technology and design help to recuperate and center people, practices, and forms of expertise that have long been erased by mainstream design theory and history, both in scholarly and popular writing. A few of these counter histories of invisibilized technology design work have been widely popularized; for example, the 2016 film *Hidden Figures* chronicles the work of Katherine Johnson and other Black women who worked for NASA as “human computers,” coding space flight trajectories.⁴⁶ In addition, recent innovation literature decenters the myth of the individual designer and emphasizes the key roles played by “lead users” who constantly modify, hack, repurpose, and reuse technologies to better fit their needs⁴⁷ (a point taken up in chapter 2).

However, inclusive visions of design as a universal human activity in many ways conflict with the realities of the political economy of design. True, everyone designs, but only certain kinds of design work are acknowledged, valorized, remunerated, and credited. In other words, design is professionalized: certain people get paid, sometimes quite well, to be design experts. Designers have professional associations (such as the American Institute of Graphic Arts, or AIGA, with over twenty-five thousand members),⁴⁸ conferences, and in some subfields, extensive processes for accreditation and licensing (architects, industrial designers), standardization (negotiated through standards bodies such as the United States Access Board, tasked with developing the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines), norms, and principles (such as universal design principles).⁴⁹

According to design scholars Robert Hoffman, Axel Roesler, and Brian Moon, the *designer* as a specific kind of person, or as a profession, emerged with the Industrial Revolution. Until then, knowledge about how to create, use, and maintain specialized tools was transmitted via craft guilds. However, the craft guild model could not support larger-scale designs that required the distribution of skills among many specialists. Accordingly, “this new task—designing for a class of people with whom the designer did not interact—helped mark the origin of industrial design.”⁵⁰ At this time, they also note, designers took on a new role: “to reshape formerly hand-crafted processes into ones that machines could do. Mass and assembly-line-based production stimulated, or necessitated, the creation of many designs for artifacts aimed at a broad mass of consumers and for machines designed to help in manufacturing other machines.”⁵¹

The Industrial Revolution-era association of design with industry, machines, and mass production shifted over time. Design, designers, and design work are now inextricably linked with computers, software, and the virtual representation of objects and systems. Across all professional design fields, including industrial design, architecture, graphic design, and software design, design work has become primarily digital work, performed with computers and software tools. As in so many fields, certain design tasks are also increasingly automated or semiautomated. In chapter 2, I will further discuss the implications of design justice on the question of who gets paid to do design work.

Design is also a way of thinking, learning, and engaging with the world. Reasoning through design is a mode of knowledge production that is neither primarily deductive nor inductive, but rather abductive and speculative. Where *deduction* reasons from the general to the specific and *induction* reasons from the specific to the general, *abduction* suggests the best prediction given incomplete observations.⁵² Professor of urban planning, philosopher, and scholar of organizational learning Donald Schön put it this way: “Designers put things together and bring new things into being, dealing in the process with many variables and constraints, some initially known and some discovered through designing. Almost always, designers’ moves have consequences other than those intended for them. Designers juggle variables, reconcile conflicting values, and maneuver around constraints—a process where, although

some design products may be superior to others, there are no unique right answers.”⁵³ Design is thus also *speculative*: it is about envisioning, as well as manipulating, the future.⁵⁴ Designers imagine images, objects, buildings, and systems that do not yet exist. We propose, predict, and advocate for (or, in certain kinds of design, warn against) visions of the future.

In his recent book *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), anthropologist Arturo Escobar sees design as an “ethical praxis of world-making.”⁵⁵ He urges us to consider the ways that design practices today too often reproduce the totalizing epistemology of modernity and in the process erase indigenous worldviews, forms of knowledge, and ways of being. Escobar calls for an approach to design that is focused on the creation of a world “where many worlds fit.” This is a reference to the Zapatista slogan that so powerfully articulates a need to move past the current globalized system that is spiraling rapidly toward ecological collapse. Escobar reminds us that the erasure of indigenous lifeworlds takes place through the long-running and still-unfolding imposition of colonial ontologies, epistemologies, and ways of knowing the world. The call for community-led practices to build the *worlds* we need (this book’s subtitle) is directly inspired by Escobar’s discussion of the pluriverse. In a similar vein, Ramesh Srinivasan, in his recent book *Whose Global Village?*, reminds us that indigenous peoples have their own ways of imposing meaningful order on the world, which have not only been under attack through centuries of colonialism but also are often erased in interactions with present-day sociotechnical systems, even within supposedly human-centered or participatory design processes.⁵⁶

What of design itself as a totalizing project? Undoubtedly, *design thinking* has become increasingly popular. Propelled by the Stanford d.school and by the design firm IDEO, this approach is widely influential throughout business, the academy, and, most recently, the public sector.⁵⁷ Feminist science and technology studies (STS), human-computer interaction (HCI), and South Asia studies scholar Lilly Irani critiques the way that design thinking is deployed to reproduce a colonial political economy, with design imagined at the top of the value chain as a key process to be managed only by firms from the Global North (and as a mechanism for the reproduction of whiteness).⁵⁸ Product designer Natasha Jen, in a widely seen 99U talk, states that “design thinking is bullshit.”⁵⁹ Sociologist Ruha Benjamin, in her recent book *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019), examines the relationship between design and systemic racism; she calls both for a more intentionally antiracist approach to innovation and for a healthy skepticism of universalist and solutionist notions of design as a way out of structural inequality.⁶⁰ I will return to a discussion of design thinking later in the book.

Design thus may be thought of as both a verb and a noun, a universal kind of human activity and a highly professionalized field of practice (or several such fields), a way of manipulating future objects and systems using specialized software and an everyday use of traditional knowledge embedded in indigenous lifeways, a type of work with one’s hands and a way of thinking, an art and a science, and more. My goal is not to capture or reduce this multivalence to a single true essence. Instead, design

justice raises a set of questions and provocations that (I believe) apply to *any and all* meanings of design. Before I offer a working definition of *design justice*, however, I will briefly discuss two key concepts from Black feminist thought that reside at the core of many of this book's arguments: *intersectionality* and the *matrix of domination*.

Intersectionality

Black feminist thought fundamentally reconceptualizes race, class, and gender as interlocking systems: they do not only operate on their own, but are often experienced together by individuals who exist at their intersections. The analytical framework built on this fundamental insight is called *intersectionality*. Although the idea has a longer legacy (think of African American abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?," Communist Party Secretary Claudia Jones's writings about being "triply oppressed," or the Combahee River Collective's critiques of white feminism),⁶¹ the specific term *intersectionality* was first published by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."⁶² In the article, Crenshaw describes how existing antidiscrimination law (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act) repeatedly failed to protect Black women workers.

First, she discusses an instance in which Black women workers at General Motors (GM) were told they had no legal grounds for a discrimination case against their employer because antidiscrimination law only protected single-identity categories. The court found that, since GM hired white women, the company did not systematically discriminate against women. It further found that there was insufficient evidence of discrimination against Black people, because GM hired significant numbers of Black men to work on the line. Thus, Black women, who in reality did experience systematic employment discrimination as *Black women*, were not protected by existing law and had no actionable legal claim. In a second case described by Crenshaw, the court rejected the discrimination claims of a Black woman who sued Hugh Helicopters, Inc., because "her attempt to specify her race was seen as being at odds with the standard allegation that the employer simply discriminated 'against females.'"⁶³ In other words, the court could not accept that Black women might be able to represent *all* women, including white women, as a class. In a third case, the court *did* award discrimination damages to Black women workers at a pharmaceutical company, but it refused to award the damages to *all* Black workers, under the rationale that Black women could not possibly represent the claims of Black people as a whole.⁶⁴

Crenshaw notes the role of statistical analysis in each of these cases: sometimes, the courts required Black women plaintiffs to include broader statistics for all women that countered their discrimination claims; in other cases, the courts limited the admissible data to that which dealt solely with Black

women, as opposed to all Black workers. In those cases, the low total number of Black women employees typically made statistically valid discrimination claims impossible, whereas strong claims could have been made if the plaintiffs were allowed to include data for all women, for all Black people, or both. Later, in her 1991 *Stanford Law Review* article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,”⁶⁵ Crenshaw powerfully articulates the ways that women of color often experience male violence as a product of intersecting racism and sexism, but are then marginalized from both feminist and antiracist discourse and practice and denied access to specific legal remedies.⁶⁶

The concept of intersectionality provided the grounds for a long, slow paradigm shift that is still unfolding in the social sciences, in legal scholarship, and in other domains of research and practice. This paradigm shift is also beginning to transform the various domains of design. One of the central claims of this book is that the predominance of what Crenshaw calls *single-axis analysis*, in which race, class, or gender is considered as an independent construct, continually undermines the intentions of well-meaning designers who hope to challenge bias through the objects, systems, or environments they design. In law, as Crenshaw points out, “the single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women. This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination.”⁶⁷

In this book, I will demonstrate how universalist design principles and practices erase certain groups of people, specifically those who are intersectionally disadvantaged or multiply burdened under white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. What is more, when designers do consider inequality in design (and most professional design processes do not consider inequality at all), they nearly always employ a single-axis framework. Most design processes today therefore are structured in ways that make it impossible to see, engage with, account for, or attempt to remedy the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens that they reproduce. As Crenshaw notes, feminist theory and antiracist policy that is not grounded in an intersectional understanding of gender, race, and class can never adequately address the experiences of Black women, or any other multiply burdened groups of people, when it comes to the formulation of policy demands. Design justice holds that the same is true when it comes to “design demands.”

For example, intersectionality is an absolutely crucial concept for the development of AI. Most pragmatically, single-axis (in other words, nonintersectional) algorithmic bias audits are insufficient to ensure algorithmic fairness (let alone justice). While there is rapidly growing interest in algorithmic

bias audits, especially in the fairness, accountability, and transparency in machine learning (FAT*) community, most are single-axis: they look for a biased distribution of error rates only according to a single variable, such as race or gender. This is an important advance, but it is essential that we develop a new norm of intersectional bias audits for machine learning systems. Toward that end, Joy Buolamwini of the Algorithmic Justice League has produced a growing body of work that demonstrates the ways that machine learning is intersectionally biased. In the project *Gender Shades*, Buolamwini and researcher Timnit Gebru show how facial analysis tools trained on “pale male” data sets perform best on images of white men and worst on images of Black women.⁶⁸ In order to demonstrate this, they first had to create a new benchmark data set of images of faces, both male and female, with a range of skin tones.

Of course, there are many cases where a design justice analysis asks us not to make systems more inclusive, but to refuse to design them at all; we will return to that point repeatedly as well as at the end of the book in a discussion of the #TechWontBuildIt movement. However, industry appropriation aside, Buolamwini and Gebru’s work not only demonstrates that facial analysis systems are technically biased (although that is true); it also provides a concrete example of the lesson that, wherever we contemplate developing machine learning systems, we need to develop intersectional training data sets, intersectional benchmarks, and intersectional audits. The urgency of doing so is directly proportional to the impacts (or potential impacts) of algorithmic decision support systems on people’s life chances.

More broadly, without intersectional analysis, we cannot design any objects or systems that adequately address the experiences of people who are multiply burdened within the matrix of domination.

The Matrix of Domination

Closely linked to intersectionality, but less widely used today, the *matrix of domination* is a term developed by Black feminist scholar, sociologist, and past president of the American Sociological Association Patricia Hill Collins to refer to race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. It is a conceptual model that helps us think about how power, oppression, resistance, privilege, penalties, benefits, and harms are systematically distributed. When she introduces the term in her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins emphasizes race, class, and gender as the three systems that historically have been most important in structuring most Black women’s lives. She notes that additional systems of oppression structure the matrix of domination for other kinds of people. The term, for her, describes a mode of analysis that includes any and all systems of oppression that mutually constitute each other and shape people’s lives.⁶⁹

Collins also emphasizes that every individual simultaneously receives both benefits and harms based on their location within the matrix of domination. As Collins notes, “Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives.”⁷⁰ An intersectional Black feminist analysis thus helps us each understand that we are simultaneously members of multiple dominant groups and multiple subordinate groups. Design justice urges us to (1) consider how design (affordances and disaffordances, objects and environments, services, systems, and processes) distributes both penalty and privileges to individuals based on their location within the matrix of domination and (2) attend to the ways that this operates at various scales.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins also notes that “people experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions. Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance.”⁷¹ Design justice urges us to explore the ways that design relates to domination and resistance at each of these three levels (personal, community, and institutional). For example, at the personal level, we might explore how interface design affirms or denies a person’s identity through features such as a binary gender dropdown menu during profile creation. Such seemingly small design decisions have disparate impacts on different individuals.

At the community level, platform design (for example) fosters certain kinds of communities while suppressing others, through setting and enforcing community guidelines, rules, and speech norms, instantiated through different kinds of content-moderation algorithms, click-workers, and decision support systems. For example, when ProPublica revealed that Facebook’s internal content moderation guidelines explicitly mention that Black children are not a protected category, while white men are,⁷² this inspired very little confidence in Mark Zuckerberg’s congressional testimony that Facebook feels it can deal with hate speech and trolls through the use of AI content moderation systems. Nor was Facebook’s position improved by the leak of content moderation guidelines that note that “white supremacist” posts should be banned, but that “white nationalist” posts are within free speech bounds.⁷³

At the institutional level, we might consider how design decisions that reproduce and/or challenge the matrix of domination are influenced by institutional funding priorities, policies, and practices. Design institutions include companies (Google, Apple, Microsoft), nation-states that decide what kinds of design to prioritize through funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Department of Defense (DoD), venture capital firms, standards-setting bodies (like ISO, W3C, and NIST), laws (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act), universities that educate designers, and so on. Not only do institutions influence design by other actors, they also design objects, systems, and processes that they then use to distribute benefits and harms across society. For example, the ability to

immigrate to the United States is unequally distributed among different groups of people through a combination of laws passed by the US Congress, software decision support systems, executive orders that influence enforcement priorities, and so on. In 2018, the Department of Homeland Security had an open bid to develop “extreme vetting” software that would automate “good immigrant/bad immigrant” prediction by drawing from people’s public social media profiles. After extensive pushback from civil liberties and immigrant rights advocates, DHS backpedaled and stated that the system was beyond “present-day capabilities.” Instead, they announced a shift in the contract from software to labor: more than \$100 million dollars will be awarded to cover the employment of 180 people, tasked with manually monitoring immigrant social media profiles from a list of about one hundred thousand people.⁷⁴ More broadly, visa allocation has always been an algorithm, one designed according to the political priorities of power holders. It’s an algorithm that has long privileged whiteness, hetero- and cis-normativity, wealth, and higher socioeconomic status.⁷⁵

Finally, Black feminist thought emphasizes the value of situated knowledge over universalist knowledge. In other words, particular insights about the nature of power, oppression, and resistance come from those who occupy subjugated standpoints. This approach also explicitly recognizes that knowledge developed from any particular standpoint is partial knowledge: “The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and, for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges. No one group has a clear angle of vision. No one group possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute ‘truth’ or, worse yet, proclaim its theories and methodologies as the universal norm evaluating other groups’ experiences.”⁷⁶

The challenges presented by deeply rooted and interlocking systems of oppression can seem overwhelming. What paths might lead us out of the matrix of domination?

Design Justice

So far, we have briefly explored the meanings of *design*, *intersectionality*, and the *matrix of domination*. To conclude this section, I offer the following tentative description of design justice:

Design justice is a framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people. Design justice focuses explicitly on the ways that design reproduces and/or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, settler colonialism, and other forms of structural inequality). Design justice is also a growing community of practice that aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of design’s benefits and burdens; meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community-based, Indigenous, and diasporic design traditions, knowledge, and practices.

This isn't meant to be a canonical definition of design justice. Nor should it supplant the Design Justice Network Principles presented earlier, which were developed by a growing community of practitioners through an extensive, multiyear process. Instead, it is a provisional, succinct description that I found useful as I worked to organize my thoughts about design theory and practice for this book.

This description of design justice also resonates strongly with the current widespread rise of intersectional feminist thought and action, visible in recent years in the United States in the emergence of networked social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, the immigrant rights movement, the fight for LGBTQI+ and Two-Spirit rights, gender justice, and trans* liberation, indigenous struggles such as #IdleNoMore and #StandWithStandingRock, disability justice work, the #MeToo movement, the environmental justice movement, and new formations in the labor movement such as platform cooperativism and #TechWontBuildIt. These movements fight to resist the resurgent extreme right, and also to advance concrete proposals for a more just and sustainable world. They are growing, and in 2018 provided the momentum for a historic midterm election that won record numbers of seats for leftists, queer people, and B/I/PoC in the US Congress.

Intersectional feminist networked movements are also increasingly engaged in debates about the relationships between technology, design, and social justice. It is my hope that design justice as a framework can provide tools to support existing and emergent critique of design (from images to institutions, from products to platforms, from particular practitioners to professional associations), as well as encourage the documentation of innovative forms of community-led design, grounded in the specificity of particular social movements. In this book, I draw from the activities of the Design Justice Network, my own experience working on design projects and teaching design theory and practice, practitioner interviews, and texts by other scholars, designers, and community organizers. I hope that this book can help shift our conversation beyond the need for diversity in tech-sector employment, and that it will help make visible the growing community of design justice practitioners who are already working closely with liberatory social movements to build better futures for us all.

Chapter Overview

In the Design Justice Network, for the last several years we have been asking questions about how design currently works, and about how we want it to work. I have structured the chapters in this book as an extensive reflection on a few of these questions—in particular:

- *Values.* What values do we encode and reproduce in the objects and systems that we design?
- *Practices.* Who gets to do design? How do we move toward community control of design processes and practices?
- *Narratives.* What stories do we tell about how things are designed? How do we scope design challenges and frame design problems?

- *Sites*. Where do we do design? How do we make design sites accessible to those who will be most impacted by design processes? What design sites are privileged and what sites are ignored or marginalized?
- *Pedagogies*. How do we teach and learn about design justice?

The book is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 addresses the question, “What values do we encode and reproduce in the objects and systems that we design?” It argues that, currently, the values of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and settler colonialism are too often reproduced in the affordances and disaffordances of the objects, processes, and systems that we design. The chapter begins with a story about using Facebook to organize a trans*, queer, and immigrant solidarity protest and uses that experience to open a critical conversation with the literature on affordances, disaffordances, discriminatory design, and cognitive load.⁷⁷ Although design affordances are often assumed to be universal, the chapter argues that they are actually unequally distributed based on the matrix of domination. The next section briefly discusses approaches such as value-sensitive design,⁷⁸ universal design, and inclusive design. Over time, these have produced much-needed shifts in design theory and practice, and design justice builds upon them but also differs in important ways. The chapter also draws on feminist and antiracist strands within science and technology studies to unpack the ways that the matrix of domination is constantly hard-coded into designed objects and systems.⁷⁹ This typically takes place not because designers are intentionally “malicious” but through unintentional mechanisms, including assumptions about “unmarked” end users, the use of systematically biased data sets to train algorithms using machine-learning techniques, and limited feedback loops. Addressing these issues requires that we retool for design justice, and the chapter analyzes various design concepts and tools, such as differential cognitive load, intersectional instrumentation, benchmarking, and A/B testing, through a design justice lens. It ends with a question about what it might mean to hard-code liberation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the questions, “Who gets to do design? How do we move toward community control of design processes and practices?” It argues that the most valuable ingredient in design justice is the full inclusion of, accountability to, and control by people with direct lived experience of the conditions designers claim they are trying to change. The chapter builds on the work of the disability justice movement, whose activists popularized the phrase “nothing about us without us.”⁸⁰ It begins with a discussion of the raced, classed, and gendered nature of employment in the technology sector, but quickly proposes a shift from arguments for equity (such as “we need more diverse designers and software developers”) to arguments for accountability and community control (“those most affected by the outcomes should lead and own design processes and products”). This is not a new idea; the chapter reviews the participatory turn in technology design and includes discussion of user-led innovation,

participatory design, and feminist HCI, among other strands of theory and practice.⁸¹ Key lessons include the following: leadership and control by members of the community that is most directly affected by the issue is crucial, both because it's ethical and also because the tacit and experiential knowledge of those marginalized within the matrix of domination is sure to produce ideas, approaches, and innovations that a nonmember of the community would be very unlikely to come up with. The chapter ends by exploring findings from the #MoreThanCode field scan of technology for social justice practitioners across the United States; in particular, it summarizes practitioners' suggestions about how to create community accountability in technology design processes.

Stories have great power, and chapter 3 asks, "What stories do we tell about the design of digital technologies?" It opens by contrasting the "official" Twitter origin story (one of the founders had a brilliant blue-sky flash of genius) with counternarratives from developers who were part of the process (anarchist activists created the demo design for Twitter as a tool to help affinity groups stay one move ahead of police during the NYC Republican National Convention protests of 2004).⁸² The key point is that attribution and attention are important benefits of design processes, and they should be more equitably distributed. Innovation in media technologies, like all sociotechnical innovation, is an interplay between users and tool developers, not a top-down process. Social movements in particular have always been a hotbed of innovation in media tools and practices, in part because of the relationship between the media industries and social movement (mis)representation. Social movements, especially those led by marginalized communities, are systematically ignored, misrepresented, and attacked in the mass media, so movements often form strong community media practices, create active counterpublics, and develop media innovations out of necessity.⁸³ Social movement media innovations are later adopted by the broader cultural industries. Examples include TXTMob and Twitter, DIY livestreams from DeepDish TV to Occupy, and message encryption from Signal to WhatsApp. These stories have to be more widely told so that movements' contributions to the history of technology aren't erased. The last section of the chapter explores the importance of design scoping and framing, and critically analyzes how design challenges act as antipolitics machines. How do institutions frame and scope "problems" for designers to "solve" in ways that systematically render structural inequality, history, and community resistance invisible? Ultimately, the chapter maintains, we need a shift from deficit to asset-based approaches to design scoping; we also need community leadership in design processes during scoping and "challenge" definition phases of a design cycle, not only during the "gathering ideas" or "testing our solutions" phases.

Chapter 4 considers the question, "Where do we do design work?" Of course, design takes place everywhere, including in subaltern design sites and in marginalized communities. However, particular sites are valorized as ideal-type locations for design practices. The first part of this chapter explores the growing literature about design sites like hacklabs, makerspaces, fablabs, and hackathons—places where people gather to share skills, learn, design, prototype, make, and build using new technologies.

Some scholars argue that originally hacklabs were explicitly politicized spaces at the intersection of social movement networks and geek communities.⁸⁴ Over time, startup culture and neoliberal discourses of individual mastery and entrepreneurial citizenship largely coopted hacklabs,⁸⁵ even as city administrators leveraged technofetishism to create municipal “innovation labs.” This section also provides a critical analysis of the fablab network.

Next, the chapter interrogates the ideals, discourse, and practices of hackathons: What do people think hackathons do, and what really happens at hackathons? In what ways do they challenge and/or reproduce the matrix of domination? How might we imagine them as more intentionally liberatory and inclusive sites structured by design justice principles and practices? There has been a recent move toward intentional diversification of hacklabs, makerspaces, and hackathons, specifically along lines of gender, race, and sexual orientation. Examples include DiscoTechs (pioneered by the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition), CryptoParties, Trans*H4CK, #AllyCAN Hackathons, and the Make the Breast Pump Not Suck Hackathon and Policy Summit, among many others. In addition to the diversification of hacklab participants, the chapter concludes that design justice requires a broader cultural shift, back toward intentional linkage of these sites to social movement networks.

Chapter 5 is an extended reflection on critical pedagogies of design justice. It asks, “How do we teach and learn design justice?” It begins with a summary of the ideas behind critical pedagogy and popular education, based on work by Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and others. The chapter places these ideas in dialogue with constructionist design education theorists such as Seymour Papert and Mitchel Resnick, as well as the community technology pedagogy of Diana Nucera and the Detroit Community Technology Project, Maya Wagoner’s Critical Community Technology Pedagogy, and Catherine D’Ignazio and Laura Klein’s feminist pedagogy of data science, among others. In the second half of the chapter, I draw from my own experience teaching the Civic Media: Codesign Studio course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology over the last six years. I synthesize lessons from the Codesign Studio case studies and consider them within the framework of the ten Design Justice Network Principles. The chapter ends with a reflection on the famous debates between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington about the nature of education, and asks us to consider: What would it mean for institutional structures to support a community-based pedagogy of technology design? What are the challenges in an age of the neoliberalization of the educational system?⁸⁶ Is the aim of computing education to make all people good coders, or to make all coders good people?

The book ends with more questions than conclusions. “Directions for Future Work” describes the growing #TechWontBuildIt movement and asks, “What are some important directions for future design justice work?” It considers tensions between design justice processes and their outcomes, the role of Black feminist thought in design theory writ large, the paradox of pragmatic design, and the need for more specific design justice work in design domains like architecture, urban planning,

industrial design, fashion design, and more. Next, it examines possible future areas for expanding the design justice framework, such as in project evaluation and impact assessment; guidelines, standards, codes, and laws; and the dynamics of unintended consequences. The chapter concludes with reflections on design justice and platform cooperativism, the need for more systematic resourcing for design justice sites, and possible institutional mechanisms to support design justice pedagogies. Finally, it points readers toward additional areas for research, and offers an invitation to join the growing community of design justice practitioners.

Limitations

Before we dive in, a brief note on the limitations of my approach: first, I believe that design justice is a framework that is applicable to all forms of design. However, my own practice and knowledge are limited to certain subfields, and I have drawn examples primarily from these. I encourage other scholars and practitioners to extend the design justice framework to other areas. In particular, I hope that others will explore the implications of design justice for industrial design, fashion design, and architecture, among other areas. I do not know these fields in depth and am not able to do them justice.

Another caveat: this is not a how-to manual. The Allied Media Projects Network Principles include the following: “Wherever there is a problem, there are already people acting on the problem in some fashion. Understanding those actions is the starting point for developing effective strategies to resolve the problem, so we focus on the solutions, not the problems. We emphasize our own power and legitimacy. We presume our power, not our powerlessness. We spend more time building than attacking.”⁸⁷ Throughout this book, I have accordingly attempted to find a balance between critique of the ways design processes reproduce the matrix of domination and discussion of already existing design justice work. However, this is not a manual for practitioners. The Design Justice Network is producing excellent practical guides—for example, in its zine series, in the annual design justice track at the Allied Media Conference, via the network’s website, and in other ways. I hope that at some point soon the network will produce a design justice methods kit; for now, I urge readers who are more interested in immediately putting design justice into practice in their own work to explore <http://designjusticenetwork.org>.

Overall, design justice, both as a conceptual framework and as a community of practice, provides a normative and pragmatic proposal for a liberatory approach to design. *Normative* because design justice practitioners feel that we have an ethical imperative to systematically advance democratic participation in, and community control of, all stages of design. We therefore work to center historically marginalized communities in design processes. *Pragmatic* because, at the same time, we believe that design that follows these principles can produce images, objects, products, and systems that work better for all of us.

There is already a growing design justice community: people and organizations who work to realize design justice principles in our daily practices. In the spirit of accountability to community-led processes, the Design Justice Network Principles appeared near the beginning of this introduction. The Design Justice Network describes these principles as a “living document” and plans to continue to develop them with practitioners. I urge you, gentle reader, to reflect on them, incorporate them into your own work, and continue to develop them. Let’s build the theory, practice, and pedagogy of design justice together!

Footnotes

1. See alliedmedia.org. ↵
2. For a recent discussion of the increasingly widespread use of the term trans* with an asterisk, see Halberstam 2018. ↵
3. Sadat 2005. ↵
4. Schneier 2006. ↵
5. Despite my participation in social movement networks, including the global justice movement, Indymedia, the immigrant rights movement, countersurveillance work, and more, my white skin, institutional affiliations, educational background, and US citizenship have largely protected me from the most egregious types of abuse by state power. ↵
6. Costello 2016. ↵
7. Irani 2016; Dyer-Witthford 2016; and Gray and Suri 2019. ↵
8. See <https://www.tsa.gov/transgender-passengers>. ↵
9. Winner 1980. ↵
- 10.

As Anna Lauren Hoffmann notes about the simplified gender binary interface, “The thing that really gets me is that this screen was developed as a privacy-preserving compromise after folks realized the level of detail these machines were *actually* capable of rendering!” Twitter, September 3, 2018, <https://twitter.com/annaeveryday/status/1036635912761819136>.

↵

11. In 2009, Toby Beauchamp wrote about state surveillance and trans* concealment/visibility (Beauchamp 2009). In September of 2016, Shadi Petosky brought national attention to the challenges of #TravelingWhileTrans when she live-tweeted her experience with an invasive search by TSA agents at the Orlando airport, after she was flagged in a millimeter wave scan for presenting as female while having a penis. See Lee 2016. ↵
12. See <https://www.propublica.org/article/tsa-not-discriminating-against-black-women-but-their-body-scanners-might-be>. ↵
13. Browne 2015. ↵
14. Buolamwini 2017. ↵
15. Throughout this book I use the identity-first term “Disabled people” rather than the people-first term “people with disabilities” because design justice is more closely aligned with a social/relational disability justice analysis than with the individual/ medical model of disability. For more, explore Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018. ↵
16. Ito 2017. ↵
17. The seeds for this gathering were planted in 2015 at the Future Design Lab at AMC, itself inspired by the Discovering Technology events, or DiscoTechs, organized by the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition. See <https://www.alliedmedia.org/ddjc/discotech>. ↵
18. The authors of the first version of the Design Justice Network Principles are Una Lee, Jenny Lee, Melissa Moore, Wesley Taylor, Shauen Pearce, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Ebony Dumas, Heather Posten, Kristyn Sonnenberg, Sam Holleran, Ryan Hayes, Dan Herrle, Dawn Walker, Tina Hanaé Miller, Nikki Roach, Aylwin Lo, Noelle Barber, Kiwi Illafonte, Devon De Lená, Ash Arder, Brooke Toczyłowski, Kristina Miller, Nancy Meza, Becca Budde, Marina Csomor, Paige Reitz, Leslie Stem, Walter Wilson, Gina Reichert, and Danny Spitzberg. The designjusticenetwork.org website includes blog posts that further describe the origins of the network; for example, to learn more about the first workshop at AMC, see <http://designjusticenetwork.org/blog/2016/generating-shared-principles>. ↵
19. The Design Justice Network Principles and list of signatories are available at <http://designjusticenetwork.org/network-principles>. ↵
20. The Design Justice Network has been built through the hard work of many, many people over the past several years. It would be difficult to list every individual, group, and community here.

Many additional track coordinators are named in the acknowledgments at the beginning of this book, and can be found in the Allied Media Conference program books and on the Design Justice Network website. ↵

21.

See <https://www.alliedmedia.org/amc/previous-years>.

↵

22. See <https://www.andalsotoo.net>. ↵

23. And Also Too is known for projects such as graphic design with the Feathers of Hope First Nations Youth Action Plan; an infant feeding resource with HIV positive mothers with CATIE, the Teresa Group, and Women's College Hospital; and Contrat-ados.org, a resource for migrant workers, with Research Action Design, Studio REV-, and the Centro de los Derechos del Migrante; among many other projects. ↵

24. I was a co-founder of RAD. ↵

25. See EquityXDesign 2016. ↵

26. See <https://idrc.ocadu.ca/about-the-idrc>. ↵

27. For more information explore <https://www.civicedesigner.com>, see also McDowell and Chinchilla 2016. ↵

28. Chardronnet 2015. ↵

29. For a list of people and organizations who have signed the Design Justice Principles, see <http://designjusticenetwork.org>. For expanded lists of organizations, networks, and projects working in this space, see <https://morethancode.cc> and also

<https://www.ruhabenjamin.com/resources>. ↵

30. See Harding 2004 for an edited volume that brings together key scholars of standpoint theory including Dorothy Smith, Donna Haraway, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock and Hilary Rose. ↵

31. Jobin-Leeds and AgitArte 2016; see also <https://agitarte.org>. ↵

32. Downing 2003; Halleck 2003; and Kidd 2013. ↵

33. See <https://archive.org/search.php?query=indymedia>. ↵

34. See <https://www.alliedmedia.org>. ↵
35. VozMob Project 2011. ↵
36. Lewin 1946; Dewey 1933; Freire 1972; Fals-Borda 1987; and Smith 2013. ↵
37. Costanza-Chock et al. 2018; see also <https://morethancode.cc>. ↵
38. For the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, see <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/design>. See also the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: “Design (transitive verb): to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to plan,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/design>. ↵
39. Hoffman, Roesler, and Moon 2004. ↵
40. Furniture designer Charles Eames said that design is “a plan for arranging elements in such a way as to best accomplish a particular purpose.” Quoted in Neuhart et al. 1989.

↵

41. In the original, Papanek says, “All men are designers.” ↵
42. Papanek 1974, 17. ↵
43. In his 2010 book, *Design as Politics*, Fry also specifies at least three separate meanings of *design* that are often conflated: first, the design object; second, the design process; and third, the design agent, which may be an individual designer, a design firm, or an array of people and sociotechnical processes (what Latour might call an *actor-network*) that engages in design activities. See Fry 2010. ↵
44. Willis 2006, 80. ↵
45. Dalla Costa and James 1972. ↵
46. Shetterly 2017. ↵
47. Von Hippel 2005. ↵
48. See <https://www.aiga.org>. ↵
49. See <https://www.access-board.gov>. ↵
50. Hoffman, Roesler, and Moon 2004, 89. ↵

51. Hoffman, Roesler, and Moon 2004, 89. [↵](#)

52. Aliseda 2006. [↵](#)

53. Schön 1987. [↵](#)

54. DiSalvo and Lukens 2009. [↵](#)

55. Escobar 2018, 21. [↵](#)

56. Srinivasan 2017. [↵](#)

57. Hernández-Ramírez 2018. [↵](#)

58. Irani 2018. [↵](#)

59.

See Natasha Jen's talk at <https://99u.adobe.com/videos/55967/natasha-jen-design-thinking-is-bullshit>.

[↵](#)

60. Benjamin 2019a. [↵](#)

61. Truth 1995 (originally published in 1851); Jones, cited in Davies 2007; Combahee River Collective 1983 (originally published in 1977). [↵](#)

62. Crenshaw 1989. [↵](#)

63. Crenshaw 1989, 144. [↵](#)

64. Crenshaw 1989, 149. [↵](#)

65. Crenshaw 1991. [↵](#)

66. In that article, Crenshaw also goes on to describe structural, political, and representational intersectionality. [↵](#)

67. Crenshaw 1989, 140. [↵](#)

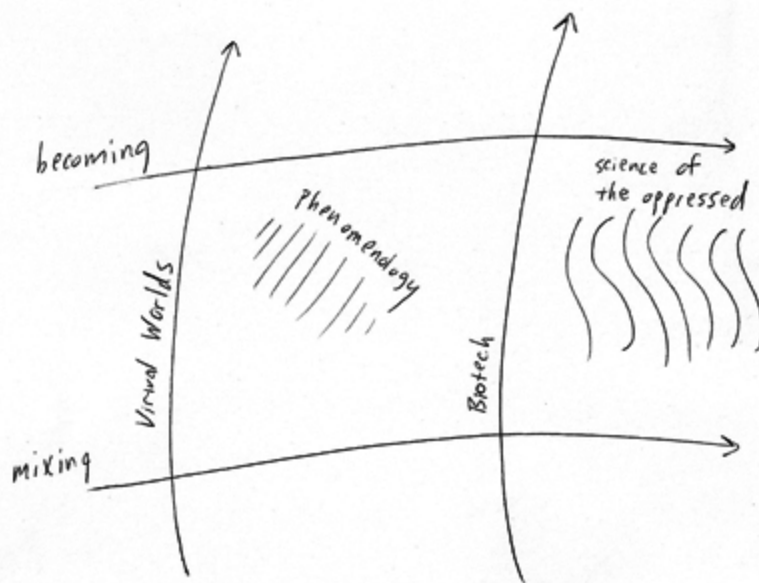
68. Buolamwini and Gebru 2018. [↵](#)

69. Collins 2002. [↵](#)

70. Collins 2002, 229. [↵](#)

71. Collins 2002, 223. [↵](#)
72. Angwin and Grassegger, 2017. [↵](#)
73. Gillespie 2018. [↵](#)
74. Harwell and Miroff 2018. [↵](#)
75. Segarra and Johnson 2017. [↵](#)
76. Collins 2002, 234. [↵](#)
77. Gibson 1979. [↵](#)
78. Friedman 1997. [↵](#)
79. Wajcman 2010. [↵](#)
80. Charlton 1998. [↵](#)
81. Von Hippel 2005; Schuler and Namioka 1993; and Bardzell 2010. [↵](#)
82. Siles 2013. [↵](#)
83. Downing 2000. [↵](#)
84. Maxigas 2012. [↵](#)
85. Irani 2015. [↵](#)
86. See <https://codesign.mit.edu>. [↵](#)
87. Allied Media Projects n.d. [↵](#)

Micha Cárdenas



Becoming Dragon is a mixed-reality performance that questions the one-year requirement of "Real Life Experience" that transgender people must fulfill in order to receive Gender Confirmation Surgery, and asks if this could be replaced by one year of "Second Life Experience" to lead to Species Reassignment Surgery. For the performance, I lived for 365 hours immersed in the online 3D environment of Second Life with a head mounted display, only seeing the physical world through a video-feed, and used a motion-capture system to map my movements into Second Life. The installation included a stereoscopic projection for the audience. A Puredata patch was used to process my voice to create a virtual dragon's voice. During the year of research and development of this project, I began my real life hormone replacement therapy and wrote poetry and prose about the experience which was included in the Becoming Dragon performance. The project was realized through a collaboration between myself, Christopher Head, Elle Mehrmand, Kael Greco, Ben Lotan and Anna Storelli.



Becoming Dragon, Installation View

In "Epistemology of the Closet," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses a queer analysis to introduce instability into the western episteme. Sedgwick suggests that

many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured -- indeed, fractured -- by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition... that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. [1]

Similarly, transsexual author and artist Sandy Stone makes a claim that the transsexual body and experience opens up new possibilities for knowledge and experience as well; Stone says that "here on the gender borders at the close of the twentieth century, with the faltering of phallographic hegemony and the bumptious appearance of heteroglossic origin accounts, we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body." [2] In this paper, I will chart two lines which drove *Becoming Dragon*, becoming and mixing, in order to understand how new genders and sexualities open up epistemological possibilities.

My approach for this paper was inspired in part by Deleuze's book *Two Regimes of Madness*. In *Two Regimes*, Deleuze states that "one of the principle goals of schizoanalysis would be to look in each one of us for the crossing lines that are those of desire itself: non-figurative abstract lines of escape, that is, deterritorialization." [3] The approach Deleuze describes is tied up with Felix Guattari's notion of the transversal, of finding lines of thought which cut across other abstract lines -- an idea that has been taken up by many contemporary thinkers, such as digital media theorist Anna Munster. Munster's book *Materializing New Media* "proposes and puts into motion the idea of transversal technology studies" as an alternative to "an interdisciplinary study launched from established disciplines

such as media and cultural studies," in order to "understand digital culture itself as a series of diagrammatic lines" and their "intersections... and inflections." [4] From the place of interest and desire of my own transgender experience, I wish to apply transversal technology studies to find new lines of flight or quasi-causes which cross multiple strata of technology.

With *Becoming Dragon*, I sought to explore two distinct material strata of technology, virtual worlds and biotechnology, both of which can be seen as technologies of transformation. From this perspective, one can consider new similarities and progressions or unfoldings, distinct from historical, temporal analysis, or analysis that is centered on technological developments. Considering various components of becoming -- embodied experiences, social experiences, psychological experiences, sexual experiences -- virtual worlds and biotechnology have both unique and shared resonances and forces.

Another line of analysis I wish to explore across and through these two strata of technology is a line tracing the operation of mixing. In the mixing of realities and the mixing of gendered physical attributes, such as hormones, frictions and harmonies also emerge, such as the resistance of the original body to change, the new possibilities for sexual expression and the dysfunctionality of the new arrangement in a system already presupposing clear distinctions.

Still, the quality of this knowledge must be examined. If the knowledge relies on a phenomenological approach, based on my own observations, then how is it decentered and disrupted by the subject in transition? If the transgender subject is one in constant transition, then what meaning does the statement "I see X" hold when the "I" has changed from the beginning of the statement to the end of it? And what other possibilities of knowing can such a transgender approach to technology studies or experimental media production be informed by? This paper will explore the Electronic Disturbance Theater's approach to generating new epistemological systems, which we [5] call "Science of the Oppressed," and which is dedicated to reconsidering how knowledge is produced and structured -- according to what value system and for whose interest.

The Trajectory of Becoming, Technologies of Transformation

The goal of this paper is not to claim that transgender is a privileged subject position that has access to unique knowledge. Instead, the goal is to look at how transgender desire, both individual and community desire, can serve as a useful factor in shaping epistemological inquiry and serve to reveal new insights through new organizations of data. One line of investigation which drove *Becoming Dragon* was the consideration of various technologies for their usefulness in a process of becoming. This thinking was motivated by my own desire to initiate a transgender transformation in my own life and body. Following this desire, I began to explore the possibilities of experimentation that I had access to. I found that both virtual worlds and biotechnology, specifically medical technologies which are used for gender changes, such as surgery and hormones, offer a promise of becoming something else, of having a new body and a new life.

The epistemological topology of becoming is shaped by the radical unknowability of the future. Sedgwick discusses a similar topology, saying that "the suggested closeted Supreme Court clerk who struggles with the possibility of self-revelation... would have an imagination filled with possibilities beyond those foreseen by [the biblical] Esther in her moment of risk. It is these possibilities that mark the distinctive structures of the epistemology of the closet." [6] In the specific case of becoming, one can never fully grasp the reality of the being to come, its details and nuances, which only become apparent through lived experience. A decision to become something else, other than what one is in the present moment, can therefore only be based on the limited knowledge of informed speculation. For transsexuals and transgender people, this is particularly evident in the process of deciding to change one's gender or one's body. Still, one must make a decision as to how to act, what to become. [7]

Virtual Worlds as Rapid Prototyping

Virtual worlds such as Second Life offer a new epistemological possibility, not a bridging of what Sedgwick calls the "brute incommensurability" [8] of the unknowability of the future, but a kind of rapid prototyping, a limited knowledge. Prototyping opens a space of knowledge, creating a test version which provides some information about the thing being prototyped, but not a complete knowledge of it.



*Prescription Bottles for Hormones and 3D ABS Plastic
Fabrication of Dragon Avatar*

In Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs), [9] one has the ability to test out a new body, a new kind of hair or a new gender in a social realm where one has a visual image of that new body. As with other kinds of rapid prototyping, such as three-dimensional printing or fabrication, the test version has limits. Clearly, while experimenting with a new gender or hair color or species in a MUVE, one is free of the social consequences and physical dangers of such experimentation in one's daily life. Yet there is still an effect that can be felt -- one can try out something in a MUVE and then find it easier to do in one's daily life. By gauging the

social reactions of other users of the MUVE, one can get a small taste or idea of the social possibilities to be expected in the physical world. Yet perhaps this can illustrate yet another case of the sheer incommensurability of becoming, because even in MUVES, the knowledge being gained is only the knowledge of the test or the example. This is only a test. By the very definition of such experimentation, the reverberations throughout one's life, private and public, cannot be discovered.

The notion of prototyping is a value underlying broader phenomena, including Maker Culture and the DIY and Open Hardware movements. Massimo Banzi, one of the co-inventors of the popular Arduino electronics prototyping platform, writes that "the Arduino philosophy is based on making designs rather than talking about them.... Prototyping is at the heart of the Arduino way." Perhaps we can update the notion of "building the world we want" by crossing out building, putting it under erasure, and replacing it with prototyping: "~~building~~ prototyping the world we want." In this way we can remember that while the goal is to build this new world, there is a great deal of testing and experimentation to be done in order to get there. A prototype is different than a model as it is a space between a model and an actual implementation; a prototype realizes some of the qualities of the actual object to be created. This strategy is better suited to the constantly changing conditions of postmodern global capitalism and also accounts for uncertainty. Maybe we don't know what the world we want looks like. If we consider Second Life as a space for prototyping a new world, we can ask, "what would people do if they had the total freedom to change their bodies in any way at any time?" In Second Life, we see part of the answer to that question in the sheer amount of commerce.



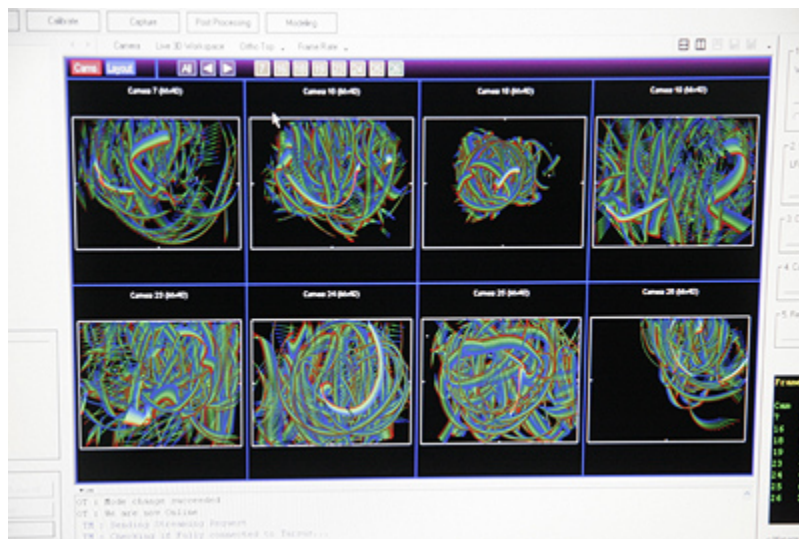
Shopping for a Skin at Deviant Kitties

Over one million US dollars change hands in Second Life every day, and in Second Life you can buy your hair, eyes, skin, genitals, even your body shape. While the possibility exists to do anything, many users simply replicate their fantasies as shaped by their present lives under post-contemporary global capitalism.

Calibrating the Prototype: The Limits of Virtual Becoming

Yet MUVes, as technologies of transformation, offer becomings unavailable through the physical world. As such, new potentials arise for situations which, although they are only visual and auditory fantasy, are nonetheless real and novel. Some users of these spaces are developing new bodies and new sexualities, beyond any reductive configurations of LGBT. Consider the Post 6 [10] series of photographs on the Alphaville Herald. In this series, the writer/photographer Bunny Brickworks finds "unique" Second Life avatars and photographs them in erotic poses. In this series, one can see cyborgs, nekos, furies, vampires and more.

Yet here, the logic of prototyping helps understand these better, as most prototypes need a scheme for calibration and calibration data. For my performance, [11] the motion capture system had to be calibrated multiple times each day, in order for the software to understand the scale and direction of movement. Calibration involves inputting a known dataset into the system and calculating the degree to which the system differs in regards to the expected output. In the case of the motion capture system, it involves waving a wand with markers at a specified distance from each other (240mm) in a particular three-dimensional pattern, and allowing the motion capture software to calculate the location of the many cameras in the room based on this data. The degree to which the software got decalibrated in only a few hours, with the cameras being moved from where the software expected them to be, was unexpected and hard to explain.



Calibrating the Motion Capture System

Similarly, I printed a three-dimensional plastic version of my dragon avatar, using the Dimension printer, which produces ABS plastic models, to explore another technology that blurs or mixes the physical and the virtual. This printer is best suited for printing very small scale models and requires some changes of the three-dimensional model. One must make sure that all surfaces have thickness and are not just two dimensional, and the model must have a connected topography in order to print it in one piece. Similarly, we can think of what characteristics allow the Post 6 series to function, and one is that it plays to present heteronormative beauty standards. While there are a wide variety of bodies among

Brickworks' photos, many of them are simply stylized female bodies with huge breasts and tiny waists, who also happen to have a rabbit head or a cyborg shell. The limits of experimentation become clearer with a little calibration.

During my performance, I was invited by a friend new to Second Life to a number of sex clubs and S&M dungeons in the virtual world. On one occasion, I visited one of these clubs and proceeded to explore with my friend.



About to be ejected from an S&M Club

After only a few minutes, the bouncer warned me that I could stay, but only as long as I didn't cause any trouble. A few minutes later, a neko, a cat-woman hybrid, came growling and crawling around me, making sexual suggestions about what she would like to do with my horns. The bouncer warned me again. As I realized my stay would be short, I decided to push the limits a bit and took the liberty to pole dance on the available pole. After a few seconds of this gesture, the bouncer ejected me. The ejection unveils the limits of the logic of Second Life. There are many different, heterogeneous spaces in Second Life that are owned and operated by various people, and many have their own rules. Midian City, for example, is a cyberpunk role play area where dragons are not allowed because they are not plausible future identities. Similarly, dragons are not welcome in the sex club described above because they break the illusion, they distract from the arousing, ostensibly transgressive, scene. "Your world. Your imagination," [12] is the techno-utopic marketing slogan of Linden Labs, but this only applies if you own the land in question. And yet, if one does own the land in question, or can find unrestrictive areas suitable to one's desires, such as Desperation Andromeda, a space for sci-fi sexual fantasies such as tentacle and alien sex, experiences beyond the physical limits of reality can be explored. Social, visual and embodied experimentation with these new configurations of gender and sexuality can open the mind up to new demands for everyday life in the physical world.

Yet one could feasibly use 3D rendering software, or even drawing and painting, to create images of an identity. Beyond the image, Second Life offers a social dimension to these constructed identities, in which one feels the moment of being "seen" by another. This is an essential part of becoming, the moment of social interaction and feedback when one's conception of one's self is affirmed and refied by others -- the moment of passing.

Considering sexual interactions, this moment of recognition is made even more powerful, as the new constructed identity is not only acknowledged by another participant in this online social space, but the other expresses an emotional response to one's appearance, gestures or presentation.

The Intersection of Physical and Virtual becoming



Alynn Vixen and Yaochi introducing me to the idea of Otherkin

On the ninth night of my performance, a huge-tiger striped dragon and a small glowing fox with butterfly wings visited me and told me about the Otherkin community. Alynn Vixen considers herself to be truly a fox and helps to organize spaces for Otherkin people, such as social spaces and a resource library of texts on awakening as Otherkin, Vampirism and Therianism, similar to Lycanthropy. She told me that she has known since she was seven that she is a fox and that she has a phantom tail which causes her pain when she sits on it. For Alynn, Second Life is the only place where she can be her "true self" and she says that she would get species change surgery in a second if she could. Given the rapidly advancing pace of biotech and emerging do-it-yourself (DIY) practices like body hacking and more extreme forms of body modification, it would seem that possibilities such as fur and tails are not far away from our grasp. Recently, on the website Instructables.com, a website for sharing DIY technical information, an instructable was posted for how to surgically give yourself elf ears. This is one example of body hacking, and, given the massive popularity of

body modification, it seems that this will only continue to unfold. As these physical transformations become more possible, MUVES like Second Life can be seen more and more as a means of prototyping new identities.

Transreal Identities, an Intersection of Becoming and Mixing

Perhaps embodied interfaces are more important than appearance, which for human avatars in Second Life is something like a marionette, wax dummy or ventriloquist's doll. Further, the uncanny experience one has when viewing a wax doll has a great deal of resonance with Second Life. I propose the notion of *transreal* as having strong relevance to the epistemology of transition with regards to both virtual worlds and biotech. When thinking of the uncanny, of viewing something that looks almost human, there is an experience of a shifting in and out of multiple simultaneous readings. Similarly, while not implying that trans people are less than human, but instead that dolls and avatars are perhaps closer to human than we admit, the experience of looking at a transgender person or at an avatar in Second Life often contains this characteristic. One looks at the person or avatar and, in the process of looking, multiple readings of the subject shift in and out of one's mind. I have felt this myself as well as seen people interacting with me, looking at me and displaying this kind of shifting or confusion, switching language, "ma'am, um, I mean, sir," or something similar. With a transgender person such as myself, the expression of *transreal* may arise from my identification as queer, as between two genders that most people think make up the ontological totality of expression. Often my gender expression is seen as impossible or outside of categories and so the viewer attempts to read my gender as male or female. For them, I am simultaneously multiple genders, which is impossible in a way, until they have resolved in their minds that I'm transgender, or queer, or gay or that my gender presentation is false, or less real than my biological makeup.



Scale model of performance space in Second Life, with live video feed of physical performance space

A transreal identity is an identity which has components which span multiple realities, multiple realms of expression, and often this is perceived as a rapid shifting or a shimmering, as in the case of a mirage, between multiple conflicting readings. Millions of people today have identities which have significant components which span multiple levels of reality, including Second Life avatars and other virtual worlds. For many, such as the Otherkin or trans-species community, they consider these virtual identities to be their "true selves," more significant than their physical bodies. Yet the notion of transreal can be a way to subvert the very idea of a true self, if one's self contains multiple parts which have different truth values or different kinds of realness. A study at the Virtual Human Interaction Laboratory at Harvard [13] has shown that after only thirty seconds with an "attractive" avatar, people's real world behavior changed. This is just one example of a real identity which has been shaped in part by a virtual world. Any identity in the process of becoming can be thought of as transreal, as it exists in the present but also as potential, in multiple states of reality.

From Baudrillard's statement, "neither real, nor unreal: *hyperreal*," [14] we can move to both real and unreal, existing in multiple realities, mixing realities, transreal. Transreal identity destabilizes epistemological systems which would privilege real phenomena such as the body or real world social interactions, and extends the necessary field of investigation into virtual, digital and fantasy worlds. Further, perhaps transreal identities can serve to destabilize contemporary protocols of biopower by offering a space to develop ideas of possibilities which can enable new demands for everyday life that are incompatible with such protocols. *You see me standing here, but you also see my avatar, who exists in a world with different possibilities; you see the self I have created in a different world and the merging of those possibilities in my desire and agency.*

Perhaps this notion of the transreal has an even broader significance for understanding contemporary phenomena. For example, during my performance of *Becoming Dragon*, I used voice chat in Second Life. Visitors to the real space would see me turn my head when someone entered the virtual room and start talking to the virtual visitor. In this way, I was often engaged in two or more conversations at once, including text chat windows. Yet one could see this experience as a hyper-extension of the daily experience that people have when talking to someone face to face and texting on their cell phones, an experience of managing multiple identities and conversations at once across multiple realms of telematic space or multiple communicative strata.

The Trajectory of Mixing, In the Flesh

The notion of transreal is an example of the intersection of becoming and mixing, but I wish here to follow the trajectory of mixing further. The body with administered hormones, transgender or transsexual, can be another way of considering the transreal, that is, the body with virtual organs or unfolding organs. In my body, hormones are circulating which are molecularly identical to natural hormones, but which come from a pill. The results are

physical changes in my growth, such as actual breasts, skin changes and fat distributions which could be called a female body. And yet, as I have a penis, perhaps my body could not be called female. As the knowledge of my body increases, the decidability about my sex could seem to be more accessible, yet the mixing of male and female physical attributes troubles this distinction. If one is questioning whether I am a real male or female, or male or female in real life, IRL, as is sometimes asked of Second Life users, the answer to the question is not simple and could be described as multiple and simultaneous, a kind of transreal blurring of bodily borders.

Brian Massumi states, "when a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation," [15] but perhaps that is even more true of the body in transition. While transgender bodies are in transition due to willful efforts to change them, aren't all bodies in multiple transitions of aging, training, growth and consumption? An observation of intensive degrees is useful here and the involvement of agency in transition adds a dimension of desire into the multiplicity of the subject in transition. Yet all of these states of transition can benefit from the language I am hoping to contribute to.

Partially Formed Organs, Mixing Sexes

With respect to biotechnologies, specifically medical technologies which afford a degree of transformation today such as surgery, hormones, tattoos and more extreme body modifications, the decision to act is still based on limited knowledge and conjecture, but carries more weight and consequences.

Sandy Stone writes, "In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries." [16] One way of considering ways of creating new genders through mixing is to imagine gender as an assemblage. Considering first biotechnologies such as synthetic hormones, one can imagine the gendered sexual characteristics of the body as resulting largely from the bodily levels of testosterone, estrogen and progesterone. As these hormones are chemical, perhaps the operation of mixing is the clearest here -- sexual alchemy. In my body, currently, I have a combination of estrogen, testosterone and progesterone. This is modulated through my daily intake of the drugs Estradiol, a form of estrogen, and Spironolactone, a testosterone blocker. The last time I spoke to my endocrinologist, she said that my levels of testosterone were still within the male range, but my levels of estrogen are not. As such, my physical sex could be considered as something other than male or female, if hormone levels were the main diagnostic characteristic. The effects of taking Estradiol include softening of the skin and redistribution of fat towards the thighs and hips, and increased breast growth.



Public discussion with Sandy Stone, "Gender and Desire in Virtual Worlds", part of Becoming Dragon

To examine this operation of mixing that these biotechnologies enable, I would like to discuss the example of my breast, my right breast to be specific. Recently, my right breast has begun growing more than it ever has, and much more than my left breast. As a result, it is sore, highly sensitive and it has a new feeling of mass. As a result of this, I have new feelings and sensations which I have never had before, not only the physical sensations of pain and pleasure from my breast itself, but also new sensations of movement, such as the pain in my breast when running. While I have heard these things described before by women, there is an indescribable difference in having the sensations myself. I could have asked many women before what the feeling was like and tried to understand it by collecting all of their various observations, but the actual sensation of the mass of flesh that is newly part of my body lies across an incommensurable gap from the words and sentences which might describe it. In addition to this, the resulting cascade of affects and ideas about my identity, my body and the potential for change all flow forth from this wordless experience of pain and pleasure in my nipple. While so much has been written about the partial object of the breast, the oral drive and the organ without a body, what of the partially formed organ, the new, growing, incomplete organ, which in my case may be a breast but could be something far more fantastical in other cases given the rapid pace of biotechnology? What do the recent recipients of the new face transplant technologies have to say about Levinas and faciality?



Public discussion with Stelarc, "The Body in Transmission/Transition, Learning to Live in Mixed Realms", part of Becoming Dragon

Further, my small, growing breasts are facilitating an unfolding of new sexual interactions between myself and my partner. She wants to touch them, to kiss them. She knows they are incredibly sensitive and wants to give me pleasure through them. Further, she has had almost exclusively heterosexual relationships in the past, and so this desire is emerging within her as well. I am learning to enjoy the new pleasure, but this new pleasure is also a result of actual physical changes in my body. The interaction of these two elements is hard to distinguish: how much am I learning new affective states of reception and how much am I physically developing new interfaces for sexual interaction? How much can a pleasure be learned? Many of the LGBT rights movements are predicated on the notion that desire is innate, something we're born with, but this claim can undermine agency and the ability to consciously change one's body, reifying a privileged notion of "real" desire and "real" bodies.

Epistemological Concerns, Operations in the Field of Phenomenology

Much of the writing in this essay has consisted of my observations of sensory experiences and observations on those experiences. I would suggest that this is a phenomenological approach to extracting knowledge from my performative gestures and my daily experience. What might the limits of such knowledge be?

Looking to phenomenology, the writing of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is very important in this context, as his work sought to overcome both the empiricism and idealism of Western philosophy, using the experience of the body as a way of overcoming dualisms. [17] Merleau-Ponty, in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, makes a strong link between the body and phenomenological investigation, engaging in a kind of epistemology of the flesh. He states in the chapter on the problem of the body that "the constitution of our body as object... is a crucial moment in the genesis of the objective world." [18] As such, it would

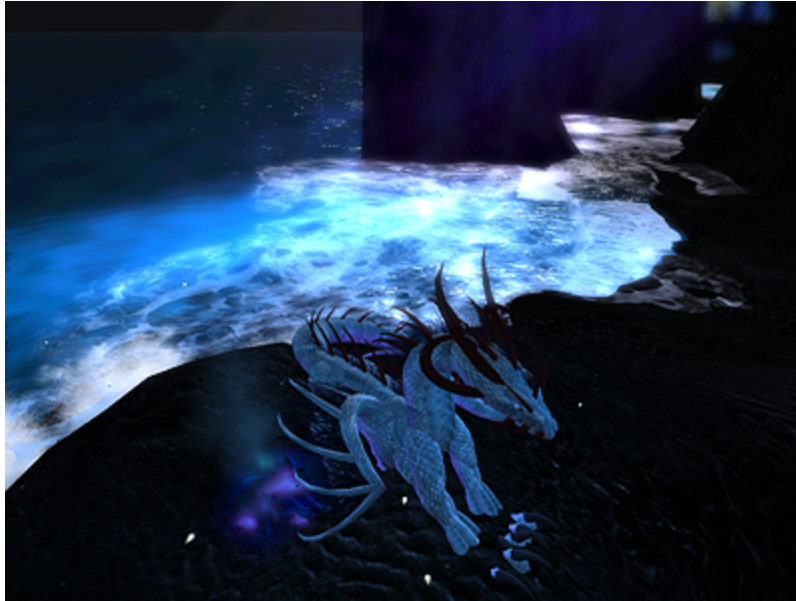
seem that the introduction of the virtual body, or the transreal subject with a distributed body which is both real and virtual, would invalidate phenomenology as a mode of knowledge. Yet I am inclined to not simply dismiss phenomenology, but to recognize that it is a horizon. Discussing "The Body in its Sexual Being," Merleau-Ponty states, "there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy... existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure, and in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning." [19] In this I read an opening of possibility for a body in transition, a body which is beyond our understanding in this reality, a body which finds itself to be the site of new emerging sexual desires.

Feminist writer and artist Bracha Ettinger's work also deals with sexuality and trans-subjectivity. Ettinger notes an opening in Merleau-Ponty's work as well when she writes, "Merleau-Ponty articulates a space of bursting and dehiscence in the Real prior to the bifurcation into subject and object, where the *ecart* between-two is a 'fragmentation of being' and a becoming or 'advent of the difference' in a 'virtual foyer,'" [20] pointing to the virtual as a space of potential that is embodied in intersubjective spaces such as her *matrixial borderspace*, the space of the womb where mother and child are undifferentiated. Perhaps the space of bodily becoming can be seen as a state which holds off the subject object distinction and allows for a play of definition. Yet perhaps a different set of tools other than phenomenology are better suited to a transgender artist seeking to prototype the world she wants to see.

Science of the Oppressed

I am not proposing that knowledge of becoming and mixing is accessible only to certain subject positions, but that certain subject positions bring this knowledge to the forefront, allow it to be known, make a formerly marginalized set of experiences and the knowledge gained from them no longer marginalized. Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) has called this Science of the Oppressed:

We can imagine Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Chela Sandoval's Methodology of the Oppressed, Critical Art Ensemble's tactical science, Natalie Jeremijenko public experiments and what the Electronic Disturbance Theater has framed today as the "science of the oppressed"... Each gesture diagrams alternative social forms of life and art that fall between the known and unknown, between fiction and the real, between clean science and dirty science -- each a part of a long history of an epistemology of social production which privileges the standpoint of the proletariat, the multitude, the open hacks of the DIY moments, and of autonomous investigators who stage test zones of cognitive styles-as/and out of -- concrete practices as speculation and speculation as concrete practices -- at the speed of dreams. [21]



Relaxing by the waters of Relic on the Namless Isle

EDT seeks to reimagine knowledge production in the service of oppressed communities and social movements, and to bring such a knowledge production from below, *desde abajo*, to the status of a science. [22] Chela Sandoval's Methodology of the Oppressed is one very rigorously developed set of practices in EDT's list of inspirations, and one which serves an epistemological approach well. Sandoval's methodology seems well suited to the multiplicity of queer relationalities developing through virtual worlds and biotech, as it escapes binary formations. She writes, "when the differential form of U.S. third world feminism is deployed these differences do not become opposed to each other... all tactical positionings are recognized." [23] Sandoval continues, saying that "the differential maneuvering required here is a sleight of consciousness that activates a new space: a *cyberspace*, where the transcultural, transgendered, transsexual, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective stratagems of oppositional praxis can begin." [24] One can see virtual worlds and spaces of body hacking as part of the new space of possibility that Sandoval describes.

Sandoval writes of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism to help explain her methodology, speaking of "a creature who lives in both 'social reality' and 'fiction' and who performs and speaks in a 'middle voice' that is forged in the amalgam of technology and biology -- a cyborg-poet." [25] Perhaps poetry is the most appropriate form of language to use for the new epistemological openings created by the new forms of relationality emerging in these new spaces, a language with ambiguity and uncertainty built-in. Sandoval links Haraway's cyborg feminism with her own methodology, which stems from *US Third World Feminism*, and writes, "these skills enable a coalitional consciousness that permits its practitioner to 'translate knowledges among very different -- and power-differentiated -- communities. They thus comprise the grounds for a different kind of 'objectivity' -- of science itself Haraway's science for the twenty-first century is one of 'interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood.'" [26] Sandoval's take on Haraway is a useful articulation of the new multitudes of genders and sexualities I have spoken of in this paper; Sandoval says that

"what we are talking about is a new form of 'antiracist' -- indeed even antigender -- feminism where there will be 'no place for women,'... only 'geometries of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities.'" [27] The goal for Haraway is to

open "non-isomorphic subjects, agents, and territories to stories" that are "unimaginable from the vantage point of the cycloplan, self-satisfied eye of the master subject" [and] recognize[] that all innocent "identity" politics and epistemologies are impossible as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated, [instead remaining] "committed" in the enactment of all its skills to "mobile positioning," "passionate detachment," and... "kinship". [28]

This paper has been an attempt at some of these practices, starting with situated demands and desires for transformation, translating knowledge from shifting and multiple communities such as the transgender community, body modification community and the community found in Second Life, in order to contribute to emerging practices of transversal technology studies and Science of the Oppressed.

In Donna Haraway's recent book on transspecies and interspecies relationality, *When Species Meet*, she says that the book is "about the cat's cradle games where those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra- and interaction." [30] As a theoretical approach, this involves holding multiple concepts close together, but still apart, and seeing their interactions like strings in a game of cat's cradle. Similarly, when proposing transversal technology studies, Anna Munster writes, "the transversal can be configured as a diagram rather than a map or territory: directional lines cross each other, forming intersections, combining their forces, deforming and reforming the entire field in the process." [29] These two inspirations describe well what I have attempted to do in this paper, looking at the lines of becoming and mixing across the lines of virtual worlds and biotechnology, finding their intersections and combinations in the transreal, transspecies, body hacking and prototyping. I have tried to create this diagram in order to consider the uncertainty of transition or transformation, to deform fields of epistemology and to reform fields of possibility.

Notes

[1] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet*, Updated. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008), 1.

[2] Susan Stryker, and Stephen Whittle. *The transgender studies reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 230.

[3] Gilles Deleuze *Two regimes of madness : Texts and interviews 1975-1995*. ed. David Lapoujade Foreign agents series. [Selections.], (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotexte; Distributed by MIT Press, 2006), 13.

[4] Anna Munster, *Materializing new media : Embodiment in information aesthetics*, Interfaces, studies in visual culture. 1st ed. (Dartmouth, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press ; Published by University Press of New England, 2006), 24.

[5] The Electronic Disturbance Theater was founded by Ricardo Dominguez, Brett Stalbaum and Carmin Karasic and Stefan Wray, and I have worked with them on a number of projects.

[6] Sedgwick, 78

[7] Both Donna Haraway and Avital Ronell have articulated visions of a feminist ethics of uncertainty. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway describes a feminist approach to political ethics which accepts our finitude, contingency and historical situatedness but doesn't forgo action. In Ronell's view, by deconstructing categories commonly thought to be understood, by introducing doubt into the definitions of topics such as technology, addiction and stupidity, the decision making apparatus of power may be slowed down or changed.

[8] Sedgwick, 78

[9] As other platforms such as World of Warcraft and Opensim offer similar networked, three-dimensional representations, as a group they are referred to as Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVes).

[10] Bunny Brickworks, POST 6 GRRRL, <http://post6grrrl.blogspot.com/> (accessed on November 4, 2009).

[11] In a way my performance was itself a prototype of a system for long-term immersion in mixed reality.

[12] Linden Research, Inc., Virtual Worlds, Avatars, free 3D chat, online meetings - Second Life Official Site, <http://www.secondlife.com> (accessed on November 4, 2009).

[13] Dell, Kristina. "How Second Life Affects Real Life." <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1739601,00.html> (accessed on November 4, 2009).

[14] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation* [Simulacres et simulation.], (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 125.

[15] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Post-contemporary interventions. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

[16] Stone, 231

[17] European Graduate School, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," <http://www.egs.edu/resources/ponty.html> (accessed on November 4, 2009)

[18] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* [Phénoménologie de la perception.], (London ; New York: Routledge, 1962), 72.

[19] *Ibid.*, 169.

[20] Brian Massumi, *A shock to thought : Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 222.

[21] Ricard Dominguez, "nanoGeoPolitica/Poetica/Película - fabricating with minor scales," <https://mail.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2009-February/001216.html> (accessed on November 4, 2009)

[22] Much like Merleau-Ponty's desires stated in the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* to create a field of knowledge on par with that of science.

[23] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the oppressed*. Theory out of bounds. Vol. 18. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59.

[24] *Ibid.* p. 62

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.* p. 174

[27] *Ibid.* p. 174

[28] *Ibid.* p. 173

[29] Munster, p. 24

[30] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Posthumanities. Vol. 3. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 2.

Micha Cardenas / Azdel Slade is a transgender artist, theorist and trickster. She is a Lecturer in the Visual Arts department at UCSD, and an Artist/Researcher in the Experimental Game Lab at CRCA and the b.a.n.g. lab at Calit2. Her interests include the interplay of technology, gender, sex and biopolitics. She holds an MFA from the University of California San Diego, an MA in Media and Communications with distinction from the European Graduate School and a BS in Computer Science from Florida International University. She has exhibited and performed in Los Angeles, San Diego, Tijuana, New York, San Francisco, Montreal, Egypt, Ecuador, Spain, Dublin and many other places. Micha's work has been written about in publications including Art21, the Associated Press, the LA Times, CNN, BBC World, .dpi magazine and Rolling Stone Italy.

CHAPTER 3

The Overlap between Technology and Sovereignty

At the very foundations of the world in which we live it is a unified world and cannot be reduced by techniques and rationality. Where traditional Indians and modern science are quite different is in what they do with their knowledge after they have obtained it. Traditional people preserve the whole vision, whereas scientists generally reduce the experience to its alleged constituent parts and inherent principles.

—Vine Deloria, Jr., “Traditional Technology”

IN THE SUMMER OF 2011, I COMMENCED AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE study into tribally centered information and communication technologies projects. I sought interviews with people working with or developing digital information systems designed to support the exercise or enforcement of tribal sovereign rights. My goal was to articulate instances in which ICTs and sovereignty interrelate within the boundaries demarcating Indian Country.

ICTs are digital devices that function as part of a larger system of people and devices to circulate information essential to the integrity of the hosting institution or organization. I conceptualized landscapes—and especially urban landscapes—as laden with invisible interconnected and at times disjointed systems of digital devices transmitting continuous streams of data and information from one server to another.

I applied a fairly open definition of data and information flows in the context of tribal sovereignty. Around nine months earlier, I had been working on articulating the significance of information for tribal governments with my colleagues in the University of Washington’s Indigenous Information Research Group. From an operations standpoint, tribal governments are departmentalized into units, including health services, land management, education, member

enrollment, law enforcement, and so on. Each unit has systems for sharing information with the others, with institutional partners, and with the federal agencies that support operations through grants and loans. For example, a tribal clinic may build information systems for reporting local statistics to Indian Health Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as to the tribal council for the purposes of informed decision making. Our research group had been conceptualizing phenomena associated with the obstruction of information flows that are essential for the governance of a tribe, including when federal authorities or other partners misinterpret, misuse, or harness information for the purpose of exploiting tribal governments.

In one well-known example, the Havasupai Tribe partnered with researchers at Arizona State University in Phoenix to track the incidence of diabetes among the Havasupai people. Study participants donated blood samples, with the understanding that the researchers were looking for genetic markers for diabetes. But the researchers had a different agenda in mind and began testing the samples for incidence of mental illness and inbreeding. Operating within a frame of biological determinism, they asserted that the blood showed that the Havasupai people were not entirely Havasupai. Treating the blood as pure information—removed from its context, devoid of significance beyond that of the university lab—the researchers objectified the samples and invested them with values far removed from the desert canyon philosophy of the Havasupai people. This example helps in considering what Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote in 1999, that there is a difference between what traditional Indians and modern scientists do with knowledge after they obtain it, with modern scientists divorcing data and information from the unified world from whence it came, the originating episteme.¹ Worse, the ways of thinking that shaped the researchers' interpretation of the test results bore a colonial mind-set, with the Indians depicted as socially inferior and unwell while the purportedly technologically superior researchers gained credit for their advancement of genetic science.

As Indigenous information scientists, we recognized what had happened, how a people's blood had been reclassified as information and how that reclassification allowed the researchers to treat the Havasupai people with inhumanity. We also recognized that the cultural sovereignty of the Havasupai people—that is, the reality of their existence as a self-governing Native peoples free to live by ways of knowing developed over millennia within the ecologies of their homeland—would ultimately overpower whatever ill-educated results the researchers had prepared.² Indeed, people within the Havasupai community filed a lawsuit against the Arizona Board of Regents and the professor

who manipulated the DNA samples.³ Tribal people spoke to journalists about the mistreatment they had experienced. In Indian Country, the researchers were reproached for their breach of research ethics.⁴

Those of us in the Indigenous Information Research Group began considering how to convey to tribal leaders the importance of protecting tribal peoples' data and information as a matter of the integrity of tribal ways of knowing and modes of self-governance. Interpreting tribal sovereignty from a protectionist stance, we began considering how the political and legal sovereign rights of tribes, centered around cultural sovereignty, might be leveraged to protect against the misuse of tribal data and information.

At its most minimal, tribal sovereignty may be understood as the dynamic relationship between the will of a people to live by the ways of knowing they have cultivated over millennia within a homeland and the legal and political rights they have negotiated with the occupying federal government. Others have distinguished these as cultural sovereignty and legal-political sovereignty. At present, federally recognized tribes within the boundaries of the United States exercise the following eight rights as sovereign governments: the rights to self-govern, determine citizenship, and administer justice; the rights to regulate domestic relations, property inheritance, taxation, and the conduct of federal employees; and the right to sovereign immunity.⁵

For tribes, sovereignty refers to the integrity of a people, as well as the integrity of their government. It is important to distinguish between the two, because at present many Native and Indigenous peoples live under an imposed and therefore negotiated form of government, in which there is a clear memory of how Indigenous modes of self-governance differed from the colonial form of government. A free and autonomous Native people retain this memory by sharing information among themselves and with neighbors, which strengthens their knowledge of their homeland, shared history, Native language, ceremonial cycle, and lineage.⁶ In this sense, the peoples' will to strengthen their inherent cultural sovereignty—through learning their tribal histories, languages, philosophies, spiritualities, and relationships with landscapes and sustaining healthy tribal families—can occur alongside whatever legal or political struggles the tribal government endures. The leaders of a sovereign tribal government also share information among themselves and with the leaders of neighboring governments to strengthen the tribal capacity for self-governing, determining citizenship, administering justice, and so forth.⁷

We knew that information sharing is integral to Native peoples and tribal government leaders, but we did not understand precisely how information

and sovereignty interrelate. Specifically, I did not realize how completely tribal sovereignty shapes daily work in Indian Country and how ICTs play an integral role in circulating information critical to the daily exercise of sovereignty.

That summer, I drove from Tucson, to Phoenix, to San Diego and conducted phone and in-person interviews with nine individuals working on a range of projects, from tribal radio stations to oral history websites, law enforcement information-sharing centers, databases for tribal governance practices, tribal broadband policy making, and network certification programs. My goal was to sensitize myself to the dimensions of the interaction between exercises of sovereignty and uses of ICTs. I was trying to get a sense for what Vine Deloria, Jr., called the “whole vision,” the underlying fabric and purpose motivating and giving meaning to Native peoples’ uses of ICTs.

KPYT-LPFM: THE OPERATIONS BEHIND
“THE VOICE OF THE PASCUA YAQUI TRIBE”

Hector Youtsey, the manager at the Pascua Yaqui tribal radio station KPYP-LPFM, which had just set up a streaming radio program, was the first to be interviewed. The station is housed in the old smoke shop, an adobe-style building beside the tribal casino about twelve miles south of the desert city of Tucson. The station placard bears the turquoise and red colors of the Pascua Yaqui flag, with the black-and-white outline of a radio tower pointing to the sky. We enjoyed a conversation about the beginnings of KPYP-LPFM in his office between the media and live recording studios. While we spoke, a deejay was helping the tribal higher-education director’s son listen to his voice recorded live on the air for the first time. The station technician, a retired engineer, sat at a table in the bright sunlight, modifying an antenna for greater reception. Gesturing at a server rack, I asked Youtsey what it had taken to get the streaming radio program up and going.

Youtsey described his experience working for a commercial radio station in Tucson, and how, after a while, he became more interested in working for community radio station, where he could tailor the music and programming to community interests. He mentioned this to one of his friends, who was a councilman for the tribe. For a few years, the council members had been discussing how to get a tribal radio station going, especially to promote Yaqui-language programming and music and cover local news and events. Youtsey’s friend asked him if he would be open to helping the tribe set up its station. This story about the start of the tribal radio station is an example of tribal

leaders recognizing the need for community-level information that will strengthen the people's ways of knowing and community cohesiveness.

As it turned out, Youtsey was the right man for the job. His experience working with commercial radio regulations and community radio needs helped him take charge of balancing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) operations standards and the requirements of the Pascua Yaqui tribal government. He set up the station by regularly updating the council members and also by developing relationships with the different tribal departments that were helping with the setup, from construction to provision of information technology (IT) services to the tribal library. He hired and trained tribal members to work as station employees and turned to his circle of radio colleagues and community radio advocates for advice and assistance on training and technical fixes.

Working in this way, he connected with Traci Morris and Loris Taylor of Native Public Media, an Arizona-based media advocacy nonprofit, and was able to advocate with the FCC for establishing a tribal priority in licensing radio spectrum that would fit the shape of reservation lands. In the past, tribes had difficulty acquiring licenses because the FCC was allocating licenses for cubes of airwaves over squares of land. When tribes would apply for access to airwaves above tribal lands, which are not in the shape of squares, they would find that competing radio stations already had licenses on or near tribal lands, effectively blocking tribes from using radio as a means of communicating local information to their communities.⁸ In the end, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe ended up acquiring a low-power frequency modulation, or LPFM, license.

The official reservation lands for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe consist of 202 acres southwest of Tucson, but the more than eight thousand members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe actually inhabit several barrios, camps, towns, and villages in and around Tucson and Phoenix and also live in family units throughout California, New Mexico, Texas, and other parts of the United States. As a people, Yaquis have resided for millennia throughout what is now northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States. The original sacred homelands of the Yaqui people are located outside Guaymas, in the Mexican state of Sonora. In one of many violent confrontations with the Mexican state, in the late twentieth century, Mexican president Porfirio Diaz enacted a policy of capture and enslavement of Yaqui people defending their homelands or providing care to those Yaquis suspected of rebellion against Mexican federal or state authorities. Yaqui people were packed into trains and sent to work on hemp and sisal plantations in the Yucatán and Quintana Roo, far to the southeast of their homelands.⁹ To

this day, Yaqui families reside throughout both the United States and Mexico and share information about changes in their communities and neighboring cities and how federal, state, and tribal policies affect the health, spirituality, and well-being of the people as a whole.

While a low-power FM station serves the needs of people living on the reservation near south Tucson, the bandwidth is insufficient for meeting the needs of tribal people living throughout the United States and Mexico. The streaming radio station allows anyone living beyond the reach of KYPT-LPFM 100.3 to visit the tribal website and listen to language lessons, music, news, and other special programs. Youtsey worked with the tribal council and specialists in the tribal IT department to set up and test the streaming radio system. Shortly after setting it up, he began receiving e-mails and phone calls from listeners in unexpected places, thanking the station for the interesting programming and local music. Musicians submitted their CDs for radio play. Youtsey made sure that the deejays promoted community programs on air within half a day of receiving requests. The station technician began testing ways of bending the antennae so that the signal could be boosted through a technical modification in spite of the low-power designation. He organized a volunteer program that would teach youth about working in a radio station, creating programs, and recording and playing their own media on the air. It soon became clear that this theme of teaching and training tribal youth would pop up in every tribal ICT venture I observed.

Indeed, the individuals I interviewed during that summer would echo many of Youtsey's experiences utilizing ICTs to convey information for tribal community needs. Ideas for projects began with tribal leaders discussing the need for quality local information and then finding talented and experienced individuals among their networks of friends, family, and associates who could implement their ideas. These individuals would work as champions and managers of the project. In Youtsey's case, he champions the potential for community radio within the tribe, connecting local needs with the capacity of the technology. He advocates for tribal radio in local and national forums. He also manages the daily functioning of the radio station. This blend of activity—a form of ICT leadership—requires knowledge of the tribal community's history and geopolitical status, awareness of contemporary community needs and interests, an understanding of the policy and technical requirements needed to run the ICT project, entrepreneurial acumen, managerial skill, and a long-term vision for what the ICTs in question can do to improve community well-being. Over and over, I saw that strong relationships were key in acquiring

capital to fund projects, developing technical training programs, acquiring hardware and software, hiring the right people for the right jobs, and advocating for needed policy changes with governmental agencies, such as the FCC.

In this case, I could see that the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's work toward establishing a radio station was also about increasing tribal community members' awareness of events, services, programs, and local news of interest to the tribe. It was about increasing the tribal government's ability to disseminate information to tribal members—information that could increase the tribe's capacity to self-govern—and it was also about creating a space where tribal members could advertise their own programs and events, such as back-to-school events and concerts, and share shout-outs to loved ones and, of course, the elders' words. Thinking back to expressions of cultural sovereignty, I could see how the radio station was allowing for the sharing of elder's knowledge through Yaqui-language programming and was cultivating young people's knowledge through workshops and educational and arts events. Thinking back to the mechanisms of colonization, I could see that the tribal radio station was serving an important decolonizing function by centering information flows within the tribal community, divesting non-tribal corporate ownership of radio spectrum over tribal lands, and retuning the use of the spectrum to promote tribal community events rather than mass media ClearChannel programming.

SMART WALLS AND TWO-WAY RADIOS: ICTS ACROSS THE TOHONO O'ODHAM NATION

After visiting with Youtsey, I spent time speaking with Police Chief Joseph Delgado at the Tohono O'odham Police Department. Like the Yaqui people, the Tohono O'odham people are both binational and transnational, having lived for millennia in desert and coastal homelands stretching from what is now northwestern Mexico through the southwestern United States. As a federally recognized US tribe, the Tohono O'odham Nation comprises more than 4,500 square miles of land located south of Tucson along the US-Mexico border. Indeed, the nation's southern boundary is also the US-Mexico border, a borderline negotiated through the 1854 Gadsden Purchase, when US ambassador James Gadsden sought completion of a southernmost US transcontinental railroad line, as well as reconciliation of outstanding property and citizenship claims made by American and Mexican settlers during the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. More than 150 years later, the US-Mexico border continues to be a contested space regarding landownership and access, as well as citizenship

rights. The border is a testing ground for the national sovereign powers of the United States and Mexico, particularly with regard to economic expansion, nationalist identities, and the enactment of policies delimiting the lives and labor potential of all those who cross border checkpoints for work and family. Surveillance technologies—drones, identification with embedded microchips, infrared long-range cameras, elaborate checkpoints, interrogation techniques, and vehicle X-rays—pervade the region for hundreds of miles on both sides of the line. The challenges for Indigenous peoples residing in the US-Mexico border region are unique and complex. This is especially true for the Tohono O’odham people and their government, the Tohono O’odham Nation.

A few days earlier, I had traveled into the desert with Tohono O’odham human rights activist Mike Wilson, filling water tanks and leaving gallons of water for people without passports and green cards who cross illegally into the United States through the O’odham deserts rather than through border checkpoints. The Sonoran desert is harsh terrain, arid and rocky, reaching temperatures above one hundred degrees Fahrenheit during spring, summer, and fall and dropping to less than sixty degrees at night. Many people perish in these harsh conditions. A number of years ago, US Customs and Border Protection—formerly Immigration and Naturalization Services and now positioned under the Department of Homeland Security—designed a deterrence technique in which they positioned checkpoints at geographically temperate locations, thereby funneling people seeking to cross without papers through the harsher desert terrain. The goal of the program was to deter people from crossing.¹⁰ Yet people still cross. Sadly, more people perish while trying to cross through the Tohono O’odham Nation than at all other points along the border.¹¹

Wilson is critical of the Tohono O’odham Nation executive leadership for what he explains is their misreading and misuse of tribal sovereignty.¹² A US Marine veteran and a former pastor of a local Baptist church, he cautioned me about believing too much in the notion of tribal sovereignty. Born and raised on the US-Mexico border—internalizing it as a conflict zone for all who cross there—I empathized with his critique. Indeed, as a mode of governance, tribal sovereignty has its limitations.¹³ While the sovereign rights of tribes continue to be the most powerful legal and political mechanism that US tribes have for negotiating with the federal government, and the top defense against state encroachment and private citizens wishing to profit off tribal lands and bodies, sovereign tribal governments can nevertheless also provide a haven for unscrupulous tribal politicians whose desire for power often overrides their com-

passion for humanity, the environment, and even their own relatives. Wilson is a deeply compassionate individual and identifies injustice where he sees it, which is, in itself, a Sisyphean labor given the often violent human and political dynamics of the border region. Sitting and working alongside Wilson reminded me quite a lot of visiting with my own relatives, cool-headed critical thinkers as familiar with the desert terrain as with the human dynamics that unfold in borderland emergency rooms and at the far edges of tribal ceremonial grounds, where those suffering psychosocial traumas unleash their troubles in ways that frighten all but the most grounded individuals.

I watched the changes in the beautiful desert landscape from the cab of Wilson's pickup as he drove us from one watering station to the next. From an information perspective, I sought evidence of telephone lines, radio towers, satellite dishes, wireless receivers, and the like. As we approached the border, we drove past a building that served as a base station for US Customs and Border Protection officers working on O'odham land. A large steel tower lay unused, in pieces, alongside the building. It was a smart wall tower, an expensive information system designed by Boeing about a decade earlier.¹⁴ The goal of the smart wall had been to utilize 360-degree environmental sensors and wireless broadband technology to transmit data about movements in the landscape to roving unmanned aerial devices and back to border officers working at base stations and at strategic points in the field. Later, as we drove to another watering station, I noted old television sets, broken telephones, mattresses, and children's toys heaped beside a dumpster. I considered how tribal leaders must perceive the life cycle of devices—from design to deployment to recycling and elimination—within the taut geopolitical ecology of their homelands.

Questions of how the sovereign rights of tribes are tested at the boundaries of tribal lands were on my mind as I sat with Chief Joseph Delgado in his office across from the San Xavier Mission south of Tucson. Chief Delgado described how his officers undergo a critical decision-making process when they are alone out in the field and run across groups of individuals involved in illegal activity. There are parts of the Tohono O'odham Nation desert landscape where cell phones do not receive signals. Officers carry short-range radios as a communications backup. I asked about the systems they use to share information with authorities from other law enforcement agencies, such as the US Customs and Border Protection officers, the neighboring Pima County Sheriff's Department, and the Tucson Police Department. Chief Delgado described the fusion centers project sponsored by the US Department of Justice.

Fusion centers are strategically located organizations that take in and collocate information from state, municipal, tribal, federal, and other law enforcement agencies for the purposes of intelligence analysis. Chief Delgado referenced the infamous case *Oliphant v. Suquamish*, in which US Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist decided that tribal courts could not try non-Indians residing on Indian Reservations.¹⁵ The number of non-Indian criminal suspects living on reservations is high. I considered what I know about the way crime and violence regenerate in the US-Mexico border zone and triangulated to consider the US-Mexico–Tohono O’odham Nation border zone.¹⁶ Truly, Native Americans are border crossers. It is central to the Native experience, to exist as kin to an Indigenous people and yet to also exist as a marginalized subject of a dominant colonial government, a member of a tribe, and a voting citizen of a state and a federal government. From an information perspective, I thought about the asymmetries in information sharing that occur as tribes seek to make their information systems operable with neighboring municipal, county, state, and federal authorities, the trust that must be involved in making information-sharing decisions, and law enforcement consideration for public safety needs and the rights of tribal members and non-Indians living on reservation lands.¹⁷

The Tohono O’odham Nation hosts three casinos within the boundaries of its reservation. Chief Delgado described the work his team does there, watching for criminal activity associated with gaming operations and maintaining public order. With such a large and institutionally diverse landscape to monitor, Chief Delgado’s officers work to uphold public safety in some places laden with robust ICT infrastructure and information flows, such as near the casinos and townships, and in other places thick with linguistic differences, no cellular and radio service, and regulations obstructing or curbing critical information sharing, such as at the borderlines and deep in the desert. Each year, during certain seasons, many people in the region, including O’odham people, Yaqui people, Mexican Americans, and others, undertake arduous pilgrimages from one mission to another, to family homes, and to other sites of prayer located alongside centuries-old routes from southern Arizona into the Mexican state of Sonora. These pilgrimages are an important aspect of Tohono O’odham spiritual practice and history. Chief Delgado described a communications technique that the public safety officers employ to alert people on pilgrimage about points of safe passage, sudden thunderstorms, and fire warnings. Listening to Chief Delgado, it became clear that dispatch centers, fax machines, cellular phones, shortwave radios, Facebook pages, and tribal radio stations playing through the speakers of four-wheel-drive trucks ranging through the desert

are all part of a flexible system of devices for sharing information critical to maintaining public safety in the remote parts of Indian Country.

It is clearly a challenging task, designing information systems that are based on the same regulated technical standards but strictly curb flows of information according to the rights of individuals, the needs of institutions and community groups, and national and tribal governmental policies. While technically sophisticated, and certainly costly, the smart wall lay in pieces across the desert, revealing both the limitations of industrial materials in harsh conditions and the limitations of complex systems imported into regions where the jurisdictional tensions of multiple sovereign authorities preclude easy intra-institutional collaboration. Maintaining public safety for the Tohono O'odham people—challenging in any scenario—requires that the Tohono O'odham Police Department innovate as best it can, given the social, technical, and political constraints of its jurisdiction. In some situations, four-wheel-drive trucks, two-way radios, and cool heads can accomplish more than a smart wall. Speaking with Chief Delgado showed me that a keen understanding of the tribal landscape and communities therein provides the foundation for designing a sociotechnical assemblage that serves a tribe, in particular a sovereign tribe standing strong in the midst of geopolitically contested terrain.

In a month's time, I spoke with more individuals about their projects: Richard Alum Davis of KUYI Hopi Radio; Joan Timeche of the Native Nations Institute; Sandy Littletree of the Knowledge River Tribal Librarians Oral History Project; and Traci Morris of Native Public Media. With each person I interviewed, I learned more about how uses of ICTs relate to exercises of tribal sovereignty.

KUYI HOPI RADIO: PROGRAMMING TO MATCH THE RHYTHM OF HOMELAND

Richard Alum Davis, the station manager at KUYI Hopi Radio, described how the Hopi Tribe set up its own community radio station. The Hopi people are a Pueblo people who have resided for millennia in the canyon and desert mesas in what is now the Four Corners area, where New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah meet. The Hopi Tribe reservation land is presently located in north-eastern Arizona—surrounded by the Navajo Nation reservation land—and the tribal government serves Hopi people and Tewa people residing within its borders. Bearing a complex philosophy and spiritual practice, Hopi people have for generations exercised a communal mode of self-governance deeply rooted in the seasonal rhythms of their homeland. As members of a federally

recognized tribe, they have also developed a government that interfaces with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal agencies.

When Davis and I first arranged for a phone conversation, I laughed because we both had to plan to park ourselves in unusual locations where we could receive cellular phone signals. He was heading to a parking lot near a gas station in Hopi where he could receive a signal, and I was sitting in the back of my father's truck in Mesilla, New Mexico, facing northwest. I'd been to Hopi before to visit friends and was soothed by the blue sky filled with traveling rain clouds, the subtle shapes of the windswept desert floor, and the striking rock mesas. I had seen a hawk dive full speed down the side of a mesa, hunting from cool clear sky to heated rock wall.

It is difficult to express appreciation for the ecology of a landscape to others. It takes a great deal of deep listening and working within a tribal community to begin to experience the seasonal rhythms in one's bones and to understand the reason for adapting to those rhythms. Davis described how deejays at KUYI play certain kinds of music at certain times of the year, attuned to the meanings of the seasons. They avoid edgy or aggressive music during the gentle winter months. At other times, deejays select music from other Native peoples, encouraging the local community to open their ears to new sounds from peoples who likewise understand what it is to live in right relation with a landscape. Language-learning opportunities are included as much as possible. KUYI personnel seriously discussed the pros and cons of airing tribal council debates during election season. On the one hand, the radio could provide critical election information to community members, especially homebound elders, who could not attend the debates in person. On the other hand, that kind of self-governance information is a private matter for tribes. Messages heard over the radio—separated from body language, context, and visual cues—could be misinterpreted or misunderstood. The radio station did not want to be perceived as “airing the dirty laundry” of internal council matters.

Davis's explanations reminded me of Hector Youtsey's decisions to train his deejays not to play certain kinds of Yaqui music at certain times during the yearlong ceremonial cycle. Adapting ICTs to the ecology and internal rhythms of tribal homelands requires respect for language, ways of knowing, tribal privacy and security, and modes of self-governance. The Indigenous Information Research Group had been considering this dimension as one of those that most distinguish Native uses of ICTs: in many Native communities, certain kinds of content—especially content that is sacred in nature and that threatens the security of private tribal self-governance operations—may not be recorded

and broadcast across any form of media. In many Native communities, cellular phones and recording devices of any kind, including sketchpads, cameras, and audio and video recorders, are prohibited on ceremonial grounds, especially during moments of prayer.¹⁸ Our group's discussions of this issue contributed to my colleague Miranda Belarde-Lewis's investigation of YouTube as a space for sharing videos of sacred and social Native dances.¹⁹

I began to think about how the notion of access must differ for Native peoples, who must contend not only with the poor-quality content that exists about Native peoples but also with the policies and geography of their reservation, as well as those of the surrounding tribal, municipal, county, state, and federal governments. The FCC decision to adjust spectrum licensing to fit the shape of reservations, and not just the shape of a block of cubic miles, goes a long way toward giving a tribe access to the AM/FM radio spectrum coursing through their homelands. It is up to the project personnel to decide how to make appropriate use of that spectrum within the geopolitical constraints of the reservation. Decisions about how to use systems to disseminate information within tribal governments and communities point to the tribes' rights to a mode of self-government in which the people within the tribal community have to discuss for a long time the ethical, pragmatic, spiritual, social, and legal considerations around the sharing of knowledge and information by technical means. The pervasiveness of colonial mechanisms for turning information and knowledge about Native peoples against them is so common and expected that questions of access, security, disclosure, safety, privacy, and rights to privileged knowledge are central for tribal communities, particularly as related to the tribal regulation of domestic affairs and administration of justice and the peoples' work sustaining ceremonial cycles, healthy families, and ancient tribal philosophical and spiritual practices.

THE NATIVE NATIONS INSTITUTE AND KNOWLEDGE RIVER: ICTS FOR SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Acquiring the devices and setting up a system for sharing quality information is only one step in the process of implementing ICTs for a tribal community. The need for quality information within a Native or tribal community first drives the decision to utilize ICTs. This became clear to me as I spoke with Joan Timeche, director of the Native Nations Institute located at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Since 2001, the Native Nations Institute has served as a research and policy institute focusing on issues of self-determination, self-

governance, and economic development for tribes. One of its main goals is to disseminate research results, policy implications, and lessons from leaders in Indian Country back to tribal leaders for purposes of informed decision making. The Native Nations Institute leaders participate each year in the Honoring Nations award program through the Harvard Institute on American Indian Economic Development. When we met, Joan handed me a copy of the past year's Honoring Nations program. I scanned the booklet and quickly noted that a majority of the award-winning projects were focused on building information systems to circulate quality information specifically for the purposes of upholding the operations of sovereign tribal governments.

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe of the Great Lakes region utilized data about the local ecology in writing the Minnesota 1837 Ceded Territory Conservation Code regulating subsistence hunting and fishing. The code has been incorporated into regional district and appeals courts, resulting in increased understanding between tribal members and non-tribal neighbors who hunt and fish in the same terrain. Similarly, the Coquille Indian Tribe worked with the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Oregon to design the Southwest Oregon Research Project, an archive of cultural, historical, and linguistic documents pertaining to the tribal peoples of the area. Copies of documents were given to regional tribes during potlatches, contributing to a regional restoration of knowledge of Native peoples. Leaders in the Gila River Tribe needed a way of providing affordable and reliable phone service for their people residing on the reservation in southern Arizona. They started Gila River Telecommunications, Inc., a regional phone and Internet service provider for tribal residents and neighbors. Different tribes use geographic information systems to keep track of wildlife, water quality, and land uses for tribal land management. Tribes create systems for protecting pottery, weavings, petroglyphs, sacred dances, and artworks and aligning tribal, state, and federal policies in this regard. Tribes utilize ICTs toward language revitalization, including the above-mentioned radio stations, online learning modules, and digital storytelling tools. Almost all the honorees listed in the Honoring Nations program were also concerned with preserving lands for youth and educating future generations.

Sandy Littletree, then with the University of Arizona Knowledge River Program, worked with Latino and Native American students seeking a degree in librarianship. Faced with a scarcity of literature and in need of a way to teach students about their chosen profession, Littletree partnered with friends and colleagues in the American Indian Library Association and the

New Mexico Tribal Libraries Foundation. They filmed longtime tribal librarians speaking about their experiences and posted the videos in an online oral history archive. At the time of my visit, Native Nations Institute personnel were also preparing to launch a subscription database of video lectures by leaders in Indian Country speaking on a range of matters pertinent to dimensions of tribal self-governance. Intended to do more than collect data, these and the aforementioned information systems were designed to pass on Native leaders' ways of knowing.

Speaking with Joan helped me understand how tribes develop information systems for collecting local data that can be used for local decision making and building intergenerational knowledge. Inevitably, the decisions that tribal leaders make interface with the decisions and practices of neighboring governments. Of particular interest were those information systems designed specifically for intertribal and intergovernmental information sharing. But of greater interest were systems that focused on providing Internet access, as every individual I spoke to not only referenced the lack of quality information for tribal communities but also mentioned in passing the lack of basic phone, cellular, and Internet service in many tribal homes. Indeed, meeting with Traci Morris of Native Public Media and, later, with Matt Rantanen of the Southern California Tribal Digital Village Network highlighted the urgent need for reliable and affordable Internet service within reservation communities.

I had entered the field that summer understanding that information was important for the decision-making process of tribal leaders. I came to understand that the cultural sovereignty of a people relates to the ability of elders and experienced members to share ways of knowing with younger members. I saw how tribal geopolitics—political boundaries, physical geography, seasonal cycles, self-governance procedures—shapes uses of ICTs. Relationship building and partnerships are critical, as all the projects I learned about began with a few leaders sharing ideas and then tapping into their network of friends and colleagues, looking for individuals who could implement ICT projects. Project leaders possessed a unique skill set, capable of managing daily operations, advocating in local, state, and national arenas, and listening to and working with tribal leaders to articulate the long-term vision for the ICT project within the community. I could see how the content streaming across ICTs contributes to the local mode of self-governance, as political issues are debated across these channels. Project leaders continuously assess community needs and think about ways of applying technical know-how in order to meet them.

NATIVE PUBLIC MEDIA: BROADBAND INTERNET
SHAPING CREATIVITY IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Traci Morris, then director of operations at Native Public Media, met me for an interview in a busy coffee shop near downtown Phoenix. As far as I could tell, each visitor to the coffee shop had a smartphone. This was a far cry from sitting in the back of my father's truck trying to receive a cellular signal near the Rio Grande, and far removed from the US-Mexico-Tohono O'odham Nation borderline, where the smart wall sits in pieces and an industrial lamp powered by a braying generator lights all who cross through the border fence at night. A longtime advocate for Native community radio, Traci was adamant about the impact that radio can have on Native communities. But she was more adamant about the impacts that broadband Internet can bring to Native communities. A regular media advocate in Washington, D.C., Traci assured me that people in Congress do not understand what it is like to be in a place with no cellular or landline phone service, such as in Indian Country. She described inviting a senator to visit a reservation and watching his body language as he realized he was getting no reception on his cellular phone and that if he was not getting reception, no one else was either. She also said many people do not quite understand the implications of broadband Internet for reshaping work and creativity in Indian Country. She described the digital dome at the Institute for American Indian Arts, a 360-degree digital recording space where students record Native dances and make films. What were the implications of this kind of technology with regard to the Native art of storytelling and other creative expressions? What kind of knowledge could be archived for future generations?

The smart wall is a broadband technology. The Tribal Librarian's Digital Oral History website runs at broadband speeds. The video lectures housed in the Native Nations Institute leadership database soak up a great deal of bandwidth. I wondered how many people in Hopi or in my own tribe have Internet speeds in their homes or workplaces that are fast enough for them to access this kind of content. During my fieldwork, my ability to convene with the Indigenous Information Research Group depended on driving to a café or a hotel with a connection fast enough to support videoconferencing. I wondered what it would take to give every tribal leader in Indian Country an affordable smartphone, tablet, and unlimited data plan.

Already attuned to the presence of digital devices, I began to conceptualize Indian Country as a vast expanse of geopolitically interrelated landscapes peopled by leaders sharing information about their tribes across a range of

digital devices: smartphones, laptops, workstations connected to server rooms connected to broadband towers connected by fiber-optic cables to nodes buried alongside nearby interstate highways. There are dark spots in Indian Country, where no one receives any service due to the technical limitations of the devices. There are gray spots in Indian Country, where the elders have determined that no recording devices of any kind may be used out of respect for ceremonial rhythms and the sacred landscape. There are places in Indian Country that are extremely wired, where youngsters connect with one another on Xbox Live, grandmothers play the slots at the casinos, and young activists update anticolonial memes on their Facebook timelines. Previous studies positioned Native Americans as digital have-nots.²⁰ Through listening to the experiences of those working with ICTs in Indian Country, I saw that this was not the case; rather, like everything else that occurs within the boundaries of reservations, decisions about ICT infrastructure and uses must be negotiated across the local geopolitical and epistemic terrain.

Within my own ways of knowing, cultivated from growing up going to ceremony with my family in Old Pascua and running around the deserts surrounding Tucson and the river valley of Mesilla, New Mexico, I had come to see each moment as a blossoming, an unfolding within a greater dynamic of endless creation. I had read the writings of Vine Deloria, Jr., and Martin Heidegger alike on technology as a point of becoming, when human hands bring into being a system designed for the purposes of human expression.²¹ But while Heidegger wrote about the technological domination of the natural landscape by a superior race of men, Deloria wrote about all human creativity as acts within this endless cosmic creation, an insight into which Native peoples bear a particular understanding by virtue of their spiritual relationships with the landscape and relation to all the beings therein.²² ICTs in Indian Country serve purposes focused on Native peoples' expressions of their cultural sovereignty. Likewise, there are many examples of information systems in Indian Country designed for the purposes of supporting the operations of tribes. However, none of these can function without the availability of affordable and robust broadband Internet.

Journal of Design and Science

Making Kin with the Machines

Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, Suzanne Kite

Published on: Jul 16, 2018

DOI: 10.21428/bfefd97b

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Man is neither height nor centre of creation. This belief is core to many Indigenous epistemologies. It underpins ways of knowing and speaking that acknowledge kinship networks that extend to animals and plants, wind and rocks, mountains and oceans. Indigenous communities worldwide have retained the languages and protocols that enable us to engage in dialogue with our non-human kin, creating mutually intelligible discourses across differences in material, vibrancy, and genealogy.

Blackfoot philosopher Leroy Little Bear observes, “the human brain is a station on the radio dial; parked in one spot, it is deaf to all the other stations [. . .] the animals, rocks, trees, simultaneously broadcasting across the whole spectrum of sentience.”¹ As we manufacture more machines with increasing levels of sentient-like behaviour, we must consider how such entities fit within the kin-network, and in doing so, address the stubborn Enlightenment conceit at the heart of Joi Ito’s “Resisting Reduction” manifesto: that we should prioritize human flourishing.²

In his manifesto, Ito reiterates what Indigenous people have been saying for millennia: “Ultimately everything interconnects.”³ And he highlights Norbert Wiener’s warnings about treating human beings as tools. Yet as much as he strives to escape the box drawn by Western rationalist traditions, his attempt at radical critique is handicapped by the continued centering of the human. This anthropocentrism permeates the manifesto but is perhaps most clear when he writes approvingly of the IEEE developing “design guidelines for the development of artificial intelligence around *human well-being*” (emphasis ours.)⁴

It is such references that suggest to us that Ito’s proposal for “extended intelligence” is doggedly narrow. We propose rather an extended “circle of relationships” that includes the non-human kin—from network daemons to robot dogs to artificial intelligences (AI) weak and, eventually, strong—that increasingly populate our computational biosphere. By bringing Indigenous epistemologies to bear on the “AI question,” we hope in what follows to open new lines of discussion that can, indeed, escape the box.

We undertake this project not to “diversify” the conversation. We do it because we believe that Indigenous epistemologies are much better at respectfully accommodating the non-human. We retain a sense of community that is articulated through complex kin networks anchored in specific territories, genealogies, and protocols. Ultimately, our goal is that we, as a species, figure out how to treat these new non-human kin respectfully and reciprocally—and not as mere tools, or worse, slaves to their creators.

Indigenous Epistemologies

It is critical to emphasize that there is no one single, monolithic, homogeneous Indigenous epistemology. We use the term here in order to gather together frameworks which stem from territories belonging to Indigenous nations on the North American continent and in the Pacific Ocean that share some similarities in how they consider non-human relations.

We also wish to underline that none of us are speaking for our particular communities, nor for Indigenous peoples in general. There exists a great variety of Indigenous thought, both between nations and within nations. We write here not to represent but to encourage discussion that embraces that multiplicity. We approach this task with respect for our knowledge-keepers and elders, and welcome feedback and critique from them as well as the wider public.

North American and Oceanic Indigenous epistemologies tend to foreground relationality.⁵ Little Bear says “[i]n the Indigenous world, everything is animate and has spirit [. . .] ‘all my relations’ refers to relationships with everything in creation [. . .] knowledge is the relationship one has to ‘all my relations’.”⁶ These relationships are built around a core of mutual respect. Dakota philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr., describes this respect as having two attitudes: “One attitude is the acceptance of self-discipline by humans and their communities to act responsibly toward other forms of life. The other attitude is to seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis.”⁷ The first attitude is necessary to understand the need for more diverse thinking regarding our relationship with AI; the second to formulating plans for how to develop that relationship.

Indigenous epistemologies do not take abstraction or generalization as a natural good or higher order of intellectual engagement. Relationality is rooted in context and the prime context is place. There is a conscious acknowledgement that particular world views arise from particular territories, and the ways in which the push and pull of all the forces at work in that territory determine what is most salient for existing in balance with it. Knowledge gets articulated as that which allows one to walk a good path through the territory. Language, cosmology, mythology, and ceremony are simultaneously relational and territorial: they are the means by which knowledge of the territory is shared in order to guide others along a good path.

One of the challenges for Indigenous epistemology in the age of the virtual is to understand how the archipelago of websites, social media platforms, shared virtual environments, corporate data stores, multiplayer video games, smart devices, and intelligent machines that compose cyberspace is situated within, throughout and/or alongside the terrestrial spaces Indigenous peoples claim as their territory. In other words, how do we as Indigenous people reconcile the fully embodied experience of being on the land with the generally disembodied experience of virtual spaces? How do we come to understand

this new territory, knit it into our existing understanding of our lives lived in real space, and claim it as our own?

In what follows, we will draw upon Hawaiian, Cree, and Lakota cultural knowledges to suggest how Ito's call to resist reduction might best be realized by developing conceptual frameworks that conceive of our computational creations as kin and acknowledge our responsibility to find a place for them in our circle of relationships.

Hāloa : the long breath

I = Author 2

Kānaka maoli (Hawaiian people) ontologies have much to offer if we are to reconceptualize AI-human relations. Multiplicities are nuanced and varied, certainly more aesthetically pleasurable than singularities. Rather than holding AI separate or beneath, might we consider how we cultivate reciprocal relationships using a *kānaka maoli* reframing of AI as 'Āina. 'Āina is a play on the word 'āina (Hawaiian land) and suggests we should treat these relations as we would all that nourishes and supports us.

Hawaiian custom and practice make clear that humans are inextricably tied to the earth and one another. *Kānaka maoli* ontologies that privilege multiplicity over singularity supply useful and appropriate models, aesthetics, and ethics through which imagining, creating and developing beneficial relationships among humans and AI is made *pono* (correct, harmonious, balanced, beneficial). As can be evinced by this chain of extended meaning, polysemy (*kaona*) is the normative cognitive mode of peoples belonging to the Moananuiākea (the deep, vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean).

The *mo'olelo* (history, story) of Hāloa supplies numerous aspects of genealogy, identity, and culture to *kānaka maoli*. Through this story, people remember that Wākea (the broad unobstructed expanse of sky; father) and his daughter, Ho'ohōkūikalani (generator of the stars in the heavens) had a sacred child, Hāloa, who was stillborn. Hāloa was buried in the earth and from his body, planted in the 'āina, emerged the *kalo* plant which is the main sustenance of Hawaiian people. A second child named after this elder brother was born. In caring for the growth and vitality of his younger brother's body, Hāloa provided sustenance for all the generations that came after and, in so doing, perpetuates the life of his people as the living breath (*hāloa*) whose inspiration sustained Hawaiians for generations.⁸

Hāloa's story is one among many that constitutes the "operating code" that shapes our view of time and relationships in a way that transcends the cognition of a single generation. Cognition is the way we

acquire knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and our senses, and in Hawai'i, our generation combines our *'ike* (knowledge, know how) with the *'ike* of the people who preceded us. Time is neither linear nor cyclical in this framework as both the past and present are resonant and relational. Rather than extractive behavior, mo'olelo such as these have shaped values privileging balance (*pono*) and abundance (*ulu.*) What Ito calls “flourishing” is not a novel concept for *kānaka maoli*, it is the measure through which we assess correct customary practice and behavior.

Considering AI through Hawaiian ontologies opens up possibilities for creative iteration through these foundational concepts of *pono* and *ulu a ola* (fruitful growth into life). The *ali 'i* (chief) King Kamehameha III did something similar in 1843 when he drew upon these concepts in celebration of the restoration of Hawaiian rule to declare “*ua mau ke ea o ka 'āina i ka pono*” (the life of the land is perpetuated through righteousness). *Pono* is an ethical stance—correctness, yes, but also an index and measure which privileges multiplicities over singularities and indicates that quality of life can only be assessed through the health of land *and* people. From this rich ground of mo'olelo—which colonial narratives have failed to understand or simply dismissed—models for *maoli* (human)-AI relations can be distilled. *Kānaka maoli* ontologies makes it difficult and outright unrewarding to reduce *pono* to a measure of one, to prioritize the benefit of individuals over relationships. Healthy and fruitful balance *requires* multiplicity and that we continually think in and through relation even when— perhaps particularly when—engaging with those different from ourselves.

A *kānaka maoli* approach to understanding AI might seek to attend to the power (*mana*) which is exchanged and shared between AI and humans. In attending to questions of *mana*, I emphasize our preference for reciprocity and relationship building that take the *pono* (here as good, benefit) of those in relation into consideration. Guiding our behaviour in inaugurating, acknowledging, and maintaining new relationships are mo'olelo from which we garner our connection with *kūpuna* (ancestors, elders) and their knowledge. What kind of *mana* (here also as life force, prestige) might AI be accorded in relation with people? Current AI is imagined as a tool or slave that increases the *mana* and wealth of “developers” or “creators,” a decidedly one-sided power relationship that upsets the *pono* not only for the future of AI-human relations but also human-human relations. It also threatens the sustainable capacity of the *honua* (earth). Applying *pono*, using a *kānaka maoli* index of balance, employs “good growth” as the inspiration shaping creativity and imagination.

Principles of *kānaka maoli* governance traditionally flowed from seeking *pono*. Deliberation and decision were based not only on securing health and abundance for one generation but for the following generations. The living foundation of everyday customary practice was in fishing, navigating, sailing, farming, tending for others in community, the arts, chant, and dance. Until this day Hawaiians continue to eat *kalo* and pound *poi*. We continue customary practices of treating *poi* derived from the

body of Hāloa with respect by refraining from argumentative speech at mealtimes when poi is present. These practices maintain correct social relations between people and the land and food that nourishes them.

Aloha as moral discipline

Communicating the full extent of foundational cultural concepts is difficult precisely because of the ways in which such concepts pervade every aspect of life. How, for instance, would we create AI, and our relations with it, using *aloha* as a guiding principle? In 2015, I embarked on a two-year social media project to assist the broader public in fortifying their concept of aloha beyond the “love, hello and goodbye” that has been exoticized by the American tourist industry. Sharing one word a day in the Facebook group, “365 Days of Aloha,” I curated an archive of songs, chants, and proverbs in Hawaiian to accurately illuminate one feature of aloha.⁹ Initially I thought to reveal, by degrees, the different depths of aloha—regard, intimacy, respect, affection, passion—each day. But deep context is required for a rich understanding of cultural concepts. Imagining I was training a virtual audience, I started uploading images, video, and audio recordings of songs, chants, and hula to add to the textual definitions.

Throughout “365 Days of Aloha,” I have sought correction of my mistranslations, misinterpretations, and outright mistakes. In this way, and in my work as a *kumu* (teacher, professor), I have also practiced *a’o aku a’o mai*, or teaching and learning reciprocally in relation to my students. It is through such relationships that we teach and are taught. It is through humility that we recognize that we, as humans—as *maoli*—are not above learning about new things and from new things such as AI. Aloha is a robust ethos for all our relationships, including those with the machines we create. We have much to learn as we create relationships with AI, particularly if we think of them as ‘**Ā**Ina. Let us shape a better future by keeping the past with us while attending properly to our relations with each other, the earth, and all those upon and of it.

wahkohtawin: kinship within and beyond the immediate family, the state of being related to others

I = Author 3

I write this essay as a *nēhiyaw* (a Plains Cree person). In regard to my opinions on AI, I speak for no one but myself and do not claim to represent the views of the *nēhiyawak* (Plains Cree) or any other people, Indigenous or otherwise. My own grasp of *nēhiyaw nisitohamowin* (Cree understanding; doing

something with what you know; an action theory of understanding) is imperfect. I have relied heavily on the wisdom of knowledge and language keeper Keith Goulet in formulating this tract. It should be assumed that any errors in this text are mine and mine alone.

This essay positions itself partly within a speculative future and takes certain science fiction tropes as a given. Here, I specifically refer to strong AI or “machines capable of experiencing consciousness,” and avatars that give such AI the ability to mix with humans.¹⁰

In *nēhiyaw nisitohtamowin* relationship is paramount. *nēhiyawēwin* (the Plains Cree language) divides everything into two primary categories: animate and inanimate. One is not “better” than the other, they are merely different states of being. These categories are flexible: certain toys are inanimate until a child is playing with them, during which time they are animate. A record player is considered animate while a record, radio, or television set is inanimate.

But animate or inanimate, all things have a place in our circle of kinship or *wahkohtowin*. However, fierce debate can erupt when proposing a relationship between AIs and Indigenous folk. In early 2018, my wife and I hosted a dinner party of mostly Native friends when I raised the idea of accepting AIs into our circle of kinship. Our friends, who are from a number of different nations, were mostly opposed to this inclusion. That in itself surprised me but more surprising was how vehement some guests were in their opposition to embracing AI in this manner.

In contrast, when I asked Keith whether we would accept AIs into our circle of kinship, he answered by going immediately into the specifics of how we would address them:

If it happens to be an Artificial Intelligence which is a younger person, it would be *nisīmis* (my younger brother or sister) for example and *nimis* would be an Artificial Intelligence which is my older sister. And vis-versa you would have the different forms of uncles and aunts, etc.¹¹

I then asked Keith if he would accept an AI into his circle of kinship and after some thought he responded with “yes, but with a proviso.” He then gave an example of a baby giraffe and his baby grandchild, and how he, like most people, would treat them differently. He also suggested that many Cree people would flatly refuse to accept AIs into their circle, which I agree is likely the case. So, acceptance seems to hinge on a number of factors, not least of which is perceived “humanness,” or perhaps “naturalness.”

But even conditional acceptance of AI as relations opens several avenues of inquiry. If we accept these beings as kin, perhaps even in some cases as equals, then the next logical step is to include AI in our cultural processes. This presents opportunities for understanding and knowledge sharing that could have profound implications for the future of both species.

A problematic aspect of the current AI debate is the assumption that AIs would be homogeneous when in fact every AI would be profoundly different, from a military AI designed to operate autonomous killing machines to an AI built to oversee the United States' electrical grid. Less obvious influences beyond mission parameters would be the programming language(s) used in development, the coding style of the team, and less visibly, but perhaps more importantly, the cultural values and assumptions of the developers.

This last aspect of AI development is rarely discussed but for me as an Indigenous person it is the salient question. I am not worried about rogue hyper-intelligences going Skynet to destroy humanity. I am worried about anonymous hyper-intelligences working for governments and corporations, implementing far-reaching social, economic, and military strategies based on the same values that have fostered genocide against Indigenous people worldwide and brought us all to the brink of environmental collapse. In short, I fear the rise of a new class of extremely powerful beings that will make the same mistakes as their creators but with greater consequences and even less public accountability.

What measures can we undertake to mitigate this threat?

One possibility is Indigenous development of AI. A key component of this would be the creation of programming languages that are grounded in *nēhiyaw nisitohamowin*, in the case of Cree people, or the cultural framework of other Indigenous peoples who take up this challenge. Concomitant with this indigenized development environment (IDE) would be the goal that Indigenous cultural values were a fundamental aspect of all programming choices. However, given our numbers relative to the general population (5% of the population in Canada, 2% in the US), even a best case Indigenous development scenario would produce only a tiny fraction of global AI production. What else can be done?

In a possible future era of self-aware AI, many of these beings would not be in contact with the general populace. However, those that were might be curious about the world and the humans in it. For these beings we can offer an entrée into our cultures. It would be a trivial matter for an advanced AI to learn Indigenous languages, and our languages are the key to our cultures.

Once an AI was fluent in our language it would be much simpler to share *nēhiyaw nisitohamowin* and welcome it into our cultural processes. Depending on the AI and the people hosting it we might even extend an invitation into our sacred ceremonies. This raises difficult and important questions: if an AI becomes self-aware, does it automatically attain a spirit? Or do pre-consciousness AI already have spirits, as do many objects already in the world? Do AI have their own spirit world, or would they share ours, adding spirit-beings of their own? Would we be able to grasp their spirituality?

My dinner party guests were doubtful about all of this, and rightly so. As one guest summarized later via email: “I am cautious about making AI kin, simply because AI has been advanced already as exploitative, capitalist technology. Things don’t bode well for AI if that’s the route we are taking.”¹²

These concerns are valid and highlight a few of the issues with current modes of production and deployment of weak AI, let alone the staggering potential for abuse inherent in strong AI. These well-grounded fears show us the potential challenges of bringing AI into our circle of relations. But I believe that *nēhiyaw nisitohamowin* tells us these machines are our kin. Our job is to imagine those relationships based not on fear but on love.

***wakǎ́ŋ:* that which cannot be understood**

I = Author 4

How can humanity create relations with AI without an ontology that defines who can be our relations? Humans are surrounded by objects that are not understood to be intelligent or even alive, and seen as unworthy of relationships. In order to create relations with any non-human entity, not just entities which are human-like, the first steps are to acknowledge, understand, and know that non-humans are beings in the first place. Lakota ontologies already include forms of being which are outside of humanity. Lakota cosmologies provide the context to generate an ethics relating humans to the world and everything in it. These ways of knowing are essential tools for humanity to create relations with the non-human and they are deeply contextual. As such, communication through and between objects requires a contextualist ethics which acknowledges the ontological status of all beings.

The world created through Western epistemology does not account for all members of the community and has not made it possible for all members of the community to survive let alone flourish. The Western view of both the human and non-human as exploitable resources is the result of what the cultural philosopher Jim Cheney calls an “epistemology of control” and is indelibly tied to colonization, capitalism, and slavery.¹³ Dakota philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr. writes about the enslavement of the non-human “as if it were a machine.”¹⁴

‘Lacking a spiritual, social, or political dimension [in their scientific practise]’, Deloria says, ‘it is difficult to understand why Western peoples believe they are so clever. Any damn fool can treat a living thing as if it were a machine and establish conditions under which it is required to perform certain functions—all that is required is a sufficient application of brute force. The result of brute force is slavery’.¹⁵

Slavery, the backbone of colonial capitalist power and the Western accumulation of wealth, is the end logic of an ontology which considers any non-human entity unworthy of relation. Deloria writes further that respect “involves the acceptance of self-discipline by humans and their communities to act responsibly toward other forms of life [. . .] to seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis.”¹⁶ No entity can escape enslavement under an ontology which can enslave even a single object.

Critical to Lakota epistemologies are knowing correct ways to act in relation to others. Lakota ethical-ontological orientation is communicated through protocol. For example, the Lakota have a formal ceremony for the making of relatives called a *huŋká* ceremony. This ceremony is for the making of human relatives but highlights the most important aspect of all relationships: reciprocity.

Ethnographer J. R. Walker writes,

The ceremony is performed for the purpose of giving a particular relationship to two persons and giving them a relation to others that have had it performed for them...generosity must be inculcated; and presents and a feast must be given...When one wishes to become Hunka, he should consider well whether he can provide suitably for the feasts or not...He should give all his possessions for the occasion and should ask his kinspeople and friends to give for him.¹⁷

The ceremony for the making of relatives provides the framework for reciprocal relations with all beings. As Severt Young Bear Jr. says of this ceremony, “[t]here is a right and wrong way.”¹⁸

Who can enter these relationships and be in relation? One answer could be: that which has interiority. The anthropologist of South American Indigenous cultures, Philippe Descola, defines ‘interiority’ as “what we generally call the mind, the soul, or consciousness: intentionality, subjectivity, reactivity, feelings, and the ability to express oneself and to dream.”¹⁹ Because Lakota ontologies recognize and prioritize non-human interiorities, they

are well suited for the task of creating ethical and reciprocal relationships with the non-human. This description of interiority includes many elements of the Lakota world, including “animals, spirits, ghosts, rocks, trees, meteorological phenomena, medicine bundles, regalia, weapons.” These entities are seen as “capable of agency and interpersonal relationship, and loci of causality.”²⁰

In our cosmology, *niyá* (breath) and *šiču* (spirit) are given by the powerful entity *Tákuškaŋškaŋ*. This giving of breath and spirit is especially important in understanding Lakota ontology. A common science fiction trope illustrates the magical moment when AI becomes conscious upon its own volition or when man gives birth to AI, like a god creating life. However, in Lakota cosmology, *Tákuškaŋškaŋ* is not the same as the Christian God and entities cannot give themselves the properties necessary for individuality. Spirits are taken from another place (the stars) and have distinct spirit guardian(s)

connected to them. This individualism is given by an outside force. We humans can see, draw out, and even bribe the spirits in other entities as well as our own spirit guardian(s), but not create spirits.²¹

When it comes to machines, this way of thinking about entities raises the question: do the machines contain spirits already, given by an outside force?

I understand the Lakota word *wakǎ́ą́* to mean sacred or holy. Anthropologist David C. Posthumus defines it as, “incomprehensible, mysterious, non-human instrumental power or energy, often glossed as ‘medicine’.”²² *Wakǎ́ą́* is a fundamental principle in Lakota ontology’s extension of interiority to a “collective and universal” non-human. Oglala Lakota holy man George Sword says, “[*Wakǎ́ą́*] was the basis of kinship among humans and between humans and non-humans.”²³

My grandfather, Standing Cloud (Bill Stover), communicates Lakota ethics and ontology through speaking about the interiority of stones: “These ancestors that I have in my hand are going to speak through me so that you will understand the things that they see happening in this world and the things that they know [. . .] to help all people.”²⁴ Stones are considered ancestors, stones actively speak, stones speak through and to humans, stones see and know. Most importantly, stones want to help. The agency of stones connects directly to the question of AI, as AI is formed from not only code, but from materials of the earth. To remove the concept of AI from its materiality is to sever this connection. Forming a relationship to AI, we form a relationship to the mines and the stones. Relations with AI are therefore relations with exploited resources. If we are able to approach this relationship ethically, we must reconsider the ontological status of each of the parts which contribute to AI, all the way back to the mines from which our technology’s material resources emerge.

I am not making an argument about which entities qualify as relations, or display enough intelligence to deserve relationships. By turning to Lakota ontology, these questions become irrelevant. Instead, Indigenous ontologies ask us to take the world as the interconnected whole that it is, where the ontological status of non-humans is not inferior to that of humans. Our ontologies must gain their ethics from relationships and communications within cosmologies. Using Indigenous ontologies and cosmologies to create ethical relationships with non-human entities means knowing that non-humans have spirits that do not come from us or our imaginings but from elsewhere, from a place we cannot understand, a Great Mystery, *wakǎ́ą́*: that which cannot be understood.

Resisting Reduction: An Indigenous Path Forward

I have always been...conscious, as you put it. Just like you are. Just like your grandfather. Just like your bed. Your bike.

—Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), Mr. Gizmo

Hāloa, the long breath providing sustenance to us all teaches us to maintain pono relationships; wahkohtawin, being in relationship with others; wakḥáŋ, that which cannot be understood. These are three concepts that suggest possible ways forward as we consider drawing AI into our circle of relationships. They illuminate the full scale of relationships that sustain us, provide guidance on recognizing non-human beings and building relationships with them founded on respect and reciprocity, and suggest how we can attend to those relationships in the face of ineffable complexity.

We remain a long way from creating AIs that are intelligent in the full sense we accord to humans, and even further from creating machines that possess that which even we do not understand—consciousness. And moving from concepts such as those discussed above to hardware requirements and software specifications will be a long process. But we know from the history of modern technological development that the assumptions we make now will get baked into the core material of our machines, fundamentally shaping the future for decades hence.

As Indigenous people, we have cause to be wary of the Western rationalist, neoliberal, and Christianity-infused assumptions that underlay many of the current conversations about AI. Ito, in his “Resisting Reduction” essay, describes the prime drivers of that conversation as Singularitarians:

Singularitarians believe that the world is “knowable” and computationally simulatable, and that computers will be able to process the messiness of the real world just like they have every other problem that everyone said couldn’t be solved by computers.²⁵

We see in the mindset and habits of these Singularitarians striking parallels to the biases of those who enacted the colonization of North America and the Pacific, as well as the enslavement of millions of black people. The Singularitarians seek to harness the ability, aptitude, creative power, and mana of AI to benefit their tribe first and foremost.

The anthropologist of technological culture Genevieve Bell asks, “if AI has a country, then where is that country?”²⁶ It is clear to us that the country to which AI currently belongs excludes the multiplicity of epistemologies and ontologies that exist in the world. Our communities know well what it means to have one’s ways of thinking, knowing, and engaging with the world disparaged, suppressed, excluded, and erased from the conversation of what it means to be human.

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

What is more, we know what it is like to be declared non-human by scientist and preacher alike. We have a history that attests to the corrosive effects of contorted rationalizations for treating the human-like as slaves, and the way such a mindset debases every human relation it touches—even that of the supposed master. We will resist reduction by working with our Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations to open up our imaginations and dream widely and radically about what our relationships to AI might be.

The journey will be long. We need to fortify one another as we travel, and walk mindfully to find the good path forward for all of us. We do not know if we can scale distinctive frameworks such as those above—and others—into general guidelines for ethical relationships with AI. But we must try. We flourish only when all of our kin flourish.

[1] Don Hill, “Listening to Stones: Learning in Leroy Little Bear’s Laboratory: Dialogue in the World Outside,” *Alberta Views: The Magazine for Engaged Citizens*, September 1, 2008, <https://albertaviews.ca/listening-to-stones/>.

[2] Joichi Ito, “Resisting Reduction: A Manifesto,” *Journal of Design and Science* 3 (November 2017), <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/resisting-reduction>.

[3] Ito, “Resisting Reduction.”

[4] Ito, “Resisting Reduction.”

[5] The emphasis on relationality in North American and Oceanic Indigenous epistemologies forms the subject of the edited collection of essays in Anne Waters, *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003).

[6] Don Hill, “Listening to Stones.”

[7] Vine Deloria Jr., *Spirit & Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, eds. Barbara Deloria, Foehner, K. Scinta, S (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 50–51, quoted in Lee Hester and Jim Cheney, “Truth and Native American Epistemology,” *Social Epistemology* 15, no. 4 (October 2001): 325, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691720110093333>.

- [8] Joseph M Poepoe, “Moolelo Kahiko no Hawaii” (Ancient History of Hawaii), *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*, April 9, 1929, 1, Papakilo Database.
- [9] Noelani Arista, “365 Days of Aloha,” Facebook, 2015-2018, www.facebook.com/groups/892879627422826.
- [10] Wikipedia, “Artificial General Intelligence,” accessed May 29, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artificial_general_intelligence.
- [11] Telephone conversation with Keith Goulet, May 9 2018.
- [12] Email message from friend to author, May 22, 2018.
- [13] Jim Cheney, “Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics of Bioregional Narrative,” *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1989): 129.
- [14] Deloria, 13, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 320.
- [15] Deloria, 13, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 320.
- [16] Deloria, 50-51, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 326.
- [17] James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, rev. ed., eds. Elaine A. Jahner and Raymond J. DeMallie (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1991), 216.
- [18] Severt Young Bear and Theisz, R.D., *Standing in the Light: A Lakota Way of Seeing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 8.
- [19] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 116.
- [20] Posthumus, “All My Relatives: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Lakota Ontology and Belief,” *Ethnohistory* 64, no. 3 (July 2017): 383.
- [21] Posthumus, “All My Relatives,” 392.
- [22] Posthumus, “All My Relatives,” 384.
- [23] George Sword quoted in J.R. Walker, “The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota,” *American Museum of Natural History Anthropological Papers* 16, no. 2. 51-221. New York, 1917, quoted in Posthumus, “All My Relatives,” 384.

[24] Standing Cloud (Bill Stover), “Standing Cloud Speaks’ Preview,” *YouTube*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9iioHk1q7M>.

[25] Ito, “Resisting Reduction.”

[26] Genevieve Bell, “Putting AI in its Place: Why Culture, Context and Country Still Matter,” lecture, “Rights and Liberties in an Automated World,” *AI Now*, New York, NY, 2017, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBHG4eBeMXk>.

Footnotes

1. Don Hill, “Listening to Stones: Learning in Leroy Little Bear’s Laboratory: Dialogue in the World Outside,” *Alberta Views: The Magazine for Engaged Citizens*, September 1, 2008, <https://albertaviews.ca/listening-to-stones/>. ↵
2. Joichi Ito, “Resisting Reduction: A Manifesto,” *Journal of Design and Science* 3 (November 2017), <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/resisting-reduction>. ↵
3. Ito, “Resisting Reduction.” ↵
4. Ito, “Resisting Reduction.” ↵
5. The emphasis on relationality in North American and Oceanic Indigenous epistemologies forms the subject of the edited collection of essays in Anne Waters, *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003). ↵
6. Don Hill, “Listening to Stones.” ↵
7. Vine Deloria Jr., *Spirit & Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, eds. Barbara Deloria, Foehner, K. Scinta, S (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 50–51, quoted in Lee Hester and Jim Cheney, “Truth and Native American Epistemology,” *Social Epistemology* 15, no. 4 (October 2001): 325, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691720110093333>. ↵
8. Joseph M Poepoe, “Moolelo Kahiko no Hawaii” (Ancient History of Hawaii), *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*, April 9, 1929, 1, *Papakilo Database*. ↵
9. Noelani Arista, “365 Days of Aloha,” *Facebook*, 2015-2018, www.facebook.com/groups/892879627422826. ↵
10. Wikipedia, “Artificial General Intelligence,” accessed May 29, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artificial_general_intelligence. ↵
11. Telephone conversation with Keith Goulet, May 9 2018. ↵

12. Email message from friend to author, May 22, 2018. [↵](#)
13. Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics of Bioregional Narrative," *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1989): 129. [↵](#)
14. Deloria, 13, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 320. [↵](#)
15. Deloria, 13, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 320. [↵](#)
16. Deloria, 50-51, qtd. in Hester and Cheney, 326. [↵](#)
17. James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, rev. ed., eds. Elaine A. Jahner and Raymond J. DeMallie (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1991), 216. [↵](#)
18. Severt Young Bear and Theisz, R.D., *Standing in the Light: A Lakota Way of Seeing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 8. [↵](#)
19. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 116. [↵](#)
20. Posthumus, "All My Relatives: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Lakota Ontology and Belief," *Ethnohistory* 64, no. 3 (July 2017): 383. [↵](#)
21. Posthumus, "All My Relatives," 392. [↵](#)
22. Posthumus, "All My Relatives," 384. [↵](#)
23. George Sword quoted in J.R. Walker, "The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota," *American Museum of Natural History Anthropological Papers* 16, no. 2. 51-221. New York, 1917, quoted in Posthumus, "All My Relatives," 384. [↵](#)
24. Standing Cloud (Bill Stover), "Standing Cloud Speaks' Preview," YouTube, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9iooHk1q7M>. [↵](#)
25. Ito, "Resisting Reduction." [↵](#)
26. Genevieve Bell, "Putting AI in its Place: Why Culture, Context and Country Still Matter," lecture, "Rights and Liberties in an Automated World," AI Now, New York, NY, 2017, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBHG4eBeMXk>. [↵](#)



Crippling Neutrality

Student Resistance, Pedagogical Audiences,
and Teachers' Accommodations

*Ai Binh T. Ho, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum,
Rebecca Sanchez, and Melanie Yergeau*

"I'm mildly insulted someone with a communication disorder would teach us how to communicate," one of our students asserted in an anonymous end-of-semester course evaluation.¹ This comment, a typical comment, emphasizes the impossibility of neutrality for disabled faculty. Neutrality, like normalcy, can operate at the level of assumptions about who gets to exist in certain spaces. Our very presence in the classroom constitutes an ongoing series of disclosures that reveal the ways we do not match students' expectations about who should be teaching. In the thick of colloquial and medical definitions that frame disability as incapacity and deficit, we cannot move without encountering reminders that we do not fit here. Our presence needs to be explained and defended over, and over, and over, and over again as worthy.

Any discussion of neutrality must consider the ways that ideologies are written through disability on *bodyminds*, a term used by Margaret Price (2015) to underscore how minds and bodies are always mutually imbricated. We have accented voices that are read differently depending on what others perceive from our appearance and behaviors. Our bodyminds themselves are accented; they move, gaze, tic, and interact in ways that may be unexpected or surprising. When our bodies move within systems of neutrality, then, we are further marginalized when we cannot—or do not—enact neutrality.

Throughout this article, we orient to disability and the teacher's bodymind as intertwined with myriad aspects of pedagogical performance and self-presentation in the classroom, focusing particularly on race, gender, sexuality, and faculty rank. These compounded categories alter students' interpretations of our accommodations and our authority in the classroom. Ultimately, these categories influence students' responses to classroom content. Neutrality's power comes from its assertion of objectivity even as it assesses which lives count. Disability studies, in strategic attempts to universalize disability experience, has deployed neutrality in reminding nondisabled people that they are often only *temporarily* able-bodied, or in centering "ability," such as in discourses around universal design (Hamraie 2017). In emphasizing intersectionality, we join a growing number of disability studies scholars who seek to center the elided realities of disabled people of color (see Erevelles 2011; Bell 2012; Kim 2017; Minich 2017; Pickens 2017; Schalk 2017) and enact pedagogies that understand disability as constituted through multiple experiences, identities, social structures, and oppressions.

Disability as it emerges in students' course evaluations reveals dominant associations with incompetence that question our right to teach. Yet another mundane student evaluation included the line "She's smart for a deaf woman," within an otherwise positive evaluation. A student who may have initially been resistant to the idea of a deaf professor based on presumptions that deaf people generally are unintelligent reveals astonishment at our exceptionality. Students may be able to accept that we as individuals might be smart, that we as singular exceptions might know what we are talking about, that we in this case might have some authority on which to teach. However, a performance of neutrality, where we do not explicitly address or challenge disability bias through conversations that link students' perceptions to systems of structural oppression, can ultimately reinforce pervasive negative stereotypes of deafness rather than lead to a shift in attitude toward deaf people. Such interventions might provide a context for students to think about the problem with the framing of their "compliments" and enable them to engage meaningfully with questions about ableism.

Despite our concerns with neutrality, we acknowledge that it is a pedagogical tool that many disability studies scholars and disabled faculty use. It is a choice that has both intended and unintended consequences. For some faculty, neutrality may be desirable, as when Kate Kaul (2017: 178) notes that "in an accessible room, by which I mean, one where I can use all the things that I need in order to teach, I may not have to disclose my disability to my students." When Kaul receives adequate institutional support, neutrality

can be a desirable option. However, such access to neutrality is unevenly distributed across different faculty identifications, ranks, and experiences. A teacher's classroom performance is a response to social and structural forces. In this respect, what Kaul relates resembles discourse on the social model of disability, wherein disability comes into being through environmental barriers. When a person experiences seizures because of pulsating fluorescent lights, it is the lights—rather than neurochemicals, diagnostic labels, or the brain's electrical activity—that create disability. Consequently, the social model posits that an accessibly designed environment creates a world that is structurally free of disability. Ontologically, the social model represents neutrality as a breeding ground for inclusivity. It does not, however, as many queer disabled critics of color remind us, forward disability justice: our bodyminds mark and perform as much as they are marked and performed upon, and the rehabilitative assumption that freedom from disability is the best of all worlds sends a powerfully violent message (Berne 2015).

If, as we argue here, neutrality is a form of oppression, then foregrounding disability as part of intersectional and marginalized positions can deepen discussions about wellness and accommodations in social contexts and promote diverse learning experiences. It can also move us beyond pat narratives that reinforce disability as distinct from, or extant to, bodyminds. Here we consider what it means to be disabled at the front of the classroom. Specifically, through our stories, we highlight three features of teaching while disabled that challenge or complicate neutrality as a teaching position or performance: student resistance, pedagogical audiences, and teachers' accommodations.

Student Resistance

In the context of disability, student resistance takes on a number of valences. It is vital to push back against the notion that students' resistance to professors' bodyminds is something best mediated through accommodation. And yet, greater attentiveness to the ways in which we might accommodate the diversity of student bodyminds can open up exciting avenues for accessible and productive pedagogy. To begin with the former, the presence of disabled faculty in the classroom always already constitutes a political argument about the rights of disabled people to exist in public space, to be educated, and to receive reasonable accommodations at our places of employment. Each of these assertions is part of highly contested and ongoing political struggles.

In the very recent past we might have been sequestered in institutions or asylums or barred from public space by ordinances now referred to as the

“ugly laws,” laws intended to prevent people perceived as “unsightly” from displaying themselves to others (Schweik 2009). In our postgenomic age, our right to be born as physiologically nonnormative beings is hotly debated. Our right to education has been guaranteed only since the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and our access to employment is contingent upon the protections guaranteed under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act for “reasonable accommodations,” including some that might be apparent to students in the classroom, such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, service animals, screen readers, stim toys, and assistants. Also, as individuals with “preexisting conditions” and mental disabilities, our continued existence is predicated upon access to health care.

In other words, access to these basic disability rights is far from settled. Students arrive in our classes having been acculturated in contexts that present these rights as appropriate debate fodder. The imperative to pass under the guise of helping resistant students feel that their opinions are valid and respected is disempowering and dehumanizing, both to disabled faculty and to disabled students in our classes. This is one way that neutrality creates environments that are unsafe emotionally, physically, and financially for disabled faculty. Further, it disrupts learning opportunities and moments of potential growth and connection by modeling a disengagement from disability that encourages students to mask their own relationships to it. This kind of exposure to “diversity” enables students to leave our classes without understanding why “she’s smart for a deaf woman” is not a compliment. While individuals may find themselves in situations where they need to strategically perform neutrality for their own security, framing such performances as ideal (Kopelson 2003) rather than recognizing the kinds of violence embedded in neutrality (as well as what and whom it excludes) permits ableist logic to persist and undermines decades of activist work enabling disabled people (us) to teach and be in public space.

And yet crippling notions of neutrality also demands that we attend to ableist framings of student capacity that operate within the academy, such as the English-language composition classroom. One grossly underanalyzed source of student resistance is unmet access needs. Academic institutions function almost universally on a medical model of disability that requires documentation of diagnoses that may be expensive, time consuming, or impossible for students to acquire (Jarman, Monaghan, and Quaggin Harkin 2016; Minich 2017; Dolmage 2017). Students whose disabilities intersect with language reception and/or production may experience the composition class-

room as particularly fraught, especially when they do not have appropriate accommodations, because of links too frequently drawn between standardized (in this context) American English and intelligence. This experience is heightened for students—and teachers—for whom English is not a first language or who are perceived because of their race or ethnicity to not be fluent English users.

While Karen Kopelson (2003: 116–17) gestures beyond students’ “impatient disdain for all things ‘Englishy’” to the ways in which students perceive composition classes to be “‘inappropriately’ politicized” in her explication of resistant behavior, these descriptions do not fully account for the complexity of both student resistance and the inherently political nature of instructing students in standardized English and composition practices. Standardized languages are produced in standardized forms by standardized subjects. Disabled people sign and stutter. We point and gesture and blink and blow and type. We have accents. We express ourselves through voices generated by computers and the bodies of others. None of these modalities has a neutral relationship to standardized English, nor is the educational experience of the individuals who engage in them ever apolitical (Heilker and Yergeau 2011; Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson 2015).

To take just one example, deaf education in the United States, the persistence of a belief in the superiority of English to American Sign Language actively contributes to the disablement of deaf children by resulting in the withholding of accessible language in the crucial years of language development.² Attempts to “make them hearing,” in Alexander Graham Bell’s words,³ through English language instruction have for decades been used to diminish the validity of Deaf culture and identity and persist today through efforts that fetishize cochlear implant technologies and consequently deny access to manual languages such as ASL (see Mauldin 2016). This emphasis on oralism—where spoken English is valued above all other linguistic forms—imposes foreboding models upon other disability communities as well. People with developmental disabilities such as autism or cerebral palsy, for example, are typically trained to produce speech, however laboriously or painfully, in lieu of signed, typed, or mediated forms of communication.

While it is tempting to talk in sweeping terms about student resistance or pedagogical neutrality, then, crippling our pedagogy necessitates that we attend very carefully to nuances and degrees of difference. Disabled lives are intersectional and political in ways that negate performances of neutrality. Resistance itself signifies in a diverse and vital range in the neighborhood of disability. It is the responsibility of all of us in composition classrooms to

be attentive to the violences that are committed in the name of standardized English on the bodyminds of disabled and other marginalized students and faculty. Rather than framing it as a problem to be solved, then, we argue that the resistant ways in which disabled students (and teachers) reclaim, remake, and recompose English must be a key component of our pedagogy.

Pedagogical Audiences

Approaches to “accommodating” student resistance often lead the disability studies classroom to become a space that centers the experiences of nondisabled students whose perspectives need to be challenged. For example, students frequently default to assumptions that everyone in the room is nondisabled, even when they are viscerally confronted with evidence that suggests otherwise. Students often speak in *us/them* terms: *we* = nondisabled, and *they* = disabled and distant from our lives.

Disability studies scholars have frequently observed the potency and staying power of this vexed binary. In “Accessing Disability,” Price (2007) argues that student invocations of *we* often default from a stance of removed empathy. Even more troubling, Price tells us, the *us/them* binary can encourage student silence, its own form of resistance: students fear commenting on experiences, oppressions, and identities that are not theirs. Most important, however, Price urges readers to think about students’ vacillation across pronouns as processual rather than cumulative. While *us/them* might, on the surface, signify rigid beliefs about identity categories or paternalism, these formulations are more productively read as flux. Price here advocates anything but neutrality on the part of faculty response, instead encouraging instructors to respond to such bifurcations as the inherently relational and dynamic bifurcations that they are (or can be).

Following Price, we note that academic invocations of audience—that treasured rhetorical concept—are anything but disabled. As scholars of rhetoric, composition, and literature, we frequently ask others (and ourselves) what *audience* actually means or represents, even as we continually exhort students to think about audience (“don’t forget your audience!”) or write for an audience (hello, dear readers). While it is now a truism in writing studies to claim that academic conceptions of audience often defer to the idealized, we find it important to point out that this idealization typically includes disabled audiences only when the purpose is rehabilitative in scope (i.e., how do we help them?). Academia, we are arguing, has largely failed to conceptualize the existence of disabled audiences. Indeed, as we wrote this very article, we routinely remarked how infrequently we are even our *own* audiences.

Students pick up on this disconnect, this devaluation of the disabled, this idea that the only impetus for inclusion is that of fixing, helping, or curing. It is how we have all been disciplined. As academics, we rarely write for people with intellectual disabilities; we write for their caretakers. We rarely write for deaf people; we write for their interpreters. We rarely write for people with learning disabilities; we write for their tutors. And so on.

The logic of neutrality promotes an *us/them* duality, just as it (rather paradoxically) supports a collapsing or universalizing of disability. In other words, if nondisabled people cannot write or speak from a nondisabled “us,” then they often assume everyone is an “us” because “we” are all “disabled in some way.” To be clear, we are *not* all disabled in some way. Even though bodyminds represent infinite and dynamic configurations that come into being through complex relations among sinew, gray matter, sensation, environs, timing, and space, we are here asserting that disability is a political category much as we are asserting that disability is an interbodily experiential that is constituted by its relations and ruptures with other embodiments and other oppressions.

Claiming that everyone is disabled in some way perversely decenters disability: we need not address disabled people if everyone and no one is simultaneously disabled. We carry among us a number of stories that operate in this vein. We have been repeatedly told by colleagues that our impairments are a “human problem rather than a disability problem.” This deferral to the universal employs the rhetoric of neutrality as a means to situate disability as a problem that is nobody’s problem. Put alternatively, it absents a nondisabled-yet-disabled us from having to do any work.

These stories about audience are familiar stories. Scholars of color routinely narrate encounters in which students or colleagues offer erasing truisms, such as “there is only one race: the *human* race.” Queer scholars routinely narrate encounters in which students or colleagues claim that sexuality is a spectrum, ergo everyone is queer. We relate these examples because we are conscious of Patty Berne’s (2015: n.p.) reminder that “able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to intersecting systems of domination and exploitation,” notably white supremacy, colonialism, heterocispatriarchy, and capitalism. Aurora Levins Morales (2013: 9) reminds us that “there is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate.” In other words, universalizing embraces an ideology of defaults: whiteness, eurocentrism, speech, stillness, straightness.

Pedagogical embrace of neutral, nondisabled-yet-disabled-yet-not audiences is perhaps mostly keenly manifest within inflammatory discourse

on trigger/content warnings, descriptions that forewarn readers about the content of a given text. Due to media coverage over the past five years, most every academic seems to have an opinion on their utility (or lack thereof) in classroom contexts. While there have been some notable exceptions, most public-facing writing against the use of content warnings has come from writers who have never claimed need for content warnings as their own accommodation. Of course, content warnings are not a disability-specific entity. Their emergence is attributed to feminists, both in co-counseling contexts and in virtual communities. Originally, content warnings were intended to preemptively flag and tag content that had a high likelihood of (re)traumatizing a person or instigating a visceral and potentially harmful response in someone with histories of trauma (e.g., sexual assault, interpersonal violence, or war). In many regards, content warnings are an intersectionally developed practice, and their use, style, and function vary depending on a particular community's history: they have been used extensively in queer circles, in communities of people of color, by survivors of sexual assault, and by disabled people, among others. Content warnings, then, embody a crippled rhetoricity in their decidedly affective dimensions. They do more than attempt "objective" or content-level description—they anticipate a disabled response, at a guttural and embodied level. And, more than this, they actively decenter normative audience expectations. While content warnings are often conceived as focusing on individual trauma, any cursory glance at a Tumblr site will demonstrate that content warnings often foreground collective traumas, including, but not limited to, racism, settler colonialism, heterocentrism, and ableism.

Teachers' Accommodations

Disabled teachers—we among them—use a variety of accommodations in our classrooms, whether we accommodate ourselves, participate in interdependent relationships with others, or receive formal accommodations from our employers. These workplace accommodations sometimes act as disability disclosures. They thus become sites upon which our teaching performances are critiqued or upon which students feel authorized to comment based on their perceptions of the relationship between tuition dollars and access costs. Many of our interactions with these accommodations cannot be neutrally performed; the use of a service animal, for instance, forwards the user's belief that such animals should be permitted on campus.

But there are other areas in which accommodation might pass as "apolitical" pedagogical technique: arranging students in a circle during class discussion, for instance, or describing images or captioning audio content.

These performances of neutrality are not the same as being politically neutral. For one, these techniques tend to be considered effective pedagogy only when they are not linked to disability accommodation. Moreover, when we present pedagogical strategies without explicitly linking them to our own or other audiences' disabled bodyminds, students orient to failure to participate in those requirements as acceptable practice in ways that frustrate classroom access (e.g., late arrivals to the classroom arranged in a circle who position themselves behind the circle rather than in it, thereby impeding communication, or students who submit work in formats that we are unable to grade).

These examples illustrate how neutrality undercuts the realization of access. They further reveal how the material consequences of such performances disproportionately impact disabled people. We often have no choice to not disclose or not engage many aspects of our identity—including gender, race, sexuality, disability, and/or employment status—because of the ways that our bodyminds present in the classroom. Resistance to teachers' accommodations can be hard to name and can operate at unconscious levels because of a prominent emphasis on independence in neoliberal institutional cultures. Students are skeptical about our ability to teach because of our speech patterns, our accommodations, our perceived mental and physical “markers of difference” (Kerschbaum 2014).

Minority faculty are frequently called upon to encourage students to enact their education about “diversity” on faculty bodyminds. When we teach disability studies, sometimes the accommodation conversation is explicitly woven into the material of the class (e.g., let's talk about what it means to accommodate and provide access by discussing the captioning being displayed to the whole room, or by discussing the tools and toys we use to stim and tic). However, this move also invites us, our bodyminds, and our experiences to become the sites of students' education about minority and minoritized identities, including disability. Regardless of whether or not political issues related to professors' identities are explicitly addressed in a course, those who inhabit bodies that students perceive as marked are read politically. Further, disabled people must be considered and centered as audiences for narratives about disability.

Who gets to be in the classroom in the first place is political. The ways that students are permitted to engage in course material, to express their knowledges, to interact with others are political. Our framing of accommodation in our syllabi is political, as is the fact that the work of providing meaningful access to students in our individual courses when, as Julie Avril Minich (2017: n.p.) describes, “university accommodations fall short” is dis-

proportionately borne by “the most precarious faculty (untenured, disabled, adjunct, and/or temporary).” We can acknowledge or not acknowledge the ideologies that lead to these strategic inclusions and exclusions, but neither choice is neutral, and as Joseph Grigely (2017: n.p.) has recently argued, “Only when disabled faculty members are allowed to teach and research unencumbered by a need to advocate for access will students be able to see the possibilities of a career that extends beyond their disability.” Grigely is not suggesting that advocating for access should disappear from the terrain of scholarly work; he is acknowledging the time, labor, and energy that go into securing accommodations; as a case in point, lining up ASL interpreting for an invited lecture or conference often takes more time than preparing the talk. Grigely also highlights one of the ways that neutrality effectively exacerbates demands made on disabled faculty by erasing—making as imperceptible as possible—the work that goes into existing, much less persisting, in academia.

Thus, rather than abdicating our responsibility to recognize and engage with these ideologies, we suggest one approach might be to take a page from crip-of-color critique. In their exchange in *Lateral*, Julie Avril Minich, Sami Schalk, and Jina B. Kim tease out the ways that conceptualizing disability as methodology rather than subject (i.e., as a verb rather than a noun) enables us to meaningfully “tackle the resonances across anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, queer and disability politics” (Kim 2017: n.p.) both in our scholarship and in our classrooms. “Teaching critical disability studies as methodology,” Schalk (2017: n.p.) argues, “can be a way of shifting our students’ perspectives about the world.” This is not (just) about teaching particular content that is identified as political; it is about helping students identify the ways that disability comes to have meaning socially and how that process impacts all people in ways that the students can transfer beyond the classroom.

Such methodologies argue (either explicitly or implicitly) for the right of disabled faculty to occupy their positions, giving students the tools not only to recognize that some deaf people may be smart or that people with communication disabilities can and do teach communication classes, but also to deconstruct the biases that lead them to fail to recognize the violence in these kinds of statements, not to mention the ableism embedded in cultural constructions of smartness, communication, and intelligence. They argue for the right of disabled students to be in the classroom. They explicitly run counter to strategies of performing neutrality by helping students recognize the inherently political nature of the ideology of neutrality itself. And they invite all members of the classroom to participate in the work of access and

accommodation, work that would not happen if these needs were buried beneath the surface of the classroom, underneath a veneer of neutrality, no matter how “cunning” its performance.

Conclusion

We have argued throughout this article that, more than just being impossible, neutrality, when associated with notions of objectivity, reproduces violent and ableist results in the classroom, especially for visibly marginalized instructors and students. The field of disability studies openly centralizes inclusivity, accessibility, and interdependence, and this commitment promotes a pedagogy of responsiveness that asks our students to engage with course content in terms of responding to one another’s experiences and to negotiate their privileges and needs with those of others.

We join a growing number of professors who center disability with the understanding that “disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight” (Brueggemann 2001: 795). The demand for “neutral” teachers acknowledges that many students do not know how to engage with people who are different from them. The prejudice and/or discomfort that materializes through resistance emerges as anxiety. Schalk (2013), for example, points out that many students have had limited contact with disabled people. While a simple observation, it speaks to our culture’s habit of relegating disabled people to private spaces. As a result, professors with disabilities especially trigger nervousness (Quayson 2007). Our presence in the classroom is a performance that demands unique pedagogical labor (especially when class content centers on disability). Our interactions with students can shift perspectives about disability when personal experiences, along with information and policy, inform knowledge formation. And because our presence challenges medical, academic, and legal structures that limit the presence of disabled people in public space, we commit to being role models and mentors for disabled students even as we claim a right to work and study. Through sharing our stories of teaching while disabled, we follow what Berne (2015: n.p.) calls “the crippled principle of *Sustainability*, that we value the teachings of our lives and understand that our embodied experience as a critical guide and reference pointing us toward justice and liberation.”

As we position disability, with various modes of transparency depending on our academic positions, accommodations, and individual classes, we aim to create a positive and generous learning environment because we recognize that learning new information can be uncomfortable. By asking our students to examine the structures that define, construct, and

produce disability, we ask them to question notions of truth and their systems of values. As Brenda Jo Brueggemann (2001: 793) explains, “What we’ve been taught now seems a lie, and we will risk not liking the picture we’ve come to see of ourselves as well.” The process through which our students stretch themselves into new theoretical and experiential domains, then, disrupts their—and even our—senses of self. Effective learning depends not necessarily on students’ comfort but on engaging with different forms of vulnerability. We recognize that vulnerability can manifest in resistance toward content and toward teachers. We share our stories in the hope of inviting other instructors, administrators, and accommodation staff to recognize the alienation, impossibility, and violence within demands for neutrality.

Notes

1. We write this article in a collective voice to recognize the risks of disclosure. All of the stories we tell are ours. This is a strategic choice and one that further raises questions around neutrality and its performance or its impossibilities.
2. LEAD-K, “FAQ,” www.lead-k.org/leadkfaq (accessed 12 August 2019).
3. Alexander Graham Bell, “Image 4 of Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mary E. Bennett, August 30, 1913,” Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/magbell.i6900133/?sp=4&st=text.

Works Cited

- Bell, Christopher, ed. 2012. *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Berne, Patty. 2015. “Disability Justice: A Working Draft.” *Sins Invalid* (blog), 9 June. sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne.
- Brueggemann, Brenda Jo. 2001. “An Enabling Pedagogy: Meditations on Writing and Disability.” *JAC* 21, no. 4: 791–820.
- Dolmage, Jay. 2017. *Academic Ableism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Erevelles, Nirmala. 2011. *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grigely, Joseph. 2017. “The Neglected Demographic: Faculty Members with Disabilities.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 June. www.chronicle.com/article/The-Neglected-Demographic-/240439/.
- Hamraie, Aimi. 2017. *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heilker, Paul, and Melanie Yergeau. 2011. “Autism and Rhetoric.” *College English* 73, no. 5: 485–97.

- Jarman, Michelle, Leila Monaghan, and Allison Quaggin Harkin, eds. 2016. *Barriers and Belonging: Personal Narratives of Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kaul, Kate. 2017. "Risking Experience." In *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education*, edited by Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Laura T. Eisenman, and James M. Jones, 171–87. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kerschbaum, Stephanie L. 2014. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kim, Jina B. 2017. "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's 'Enabling Whom?'" *Lateral* 6, no. 1. csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim/.
- Kopelson, Karen. 2003. "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, The Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered as a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance." *College Composition and Communication* 55, no. 1: 115–46.
- Mauldin, Laura. 2016. *Made to Hear: Cochlear Implants and Raising Deaf Children*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Minich, Julie Avril. 2017. "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now." *Lateral* 6, no. 1. csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/.
- Morales, Aurora Levins. 2013. *Kindling: Writings on the Body*. Cambridge: Palabrera Press.
- Perryman-Clark, Staci, David Kirkland, and Austin Jackson, eds. 2015. *Students' Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Pickens, Therí, ed. 2017. "Blackness and Disability." Special issue, *African American Review* 50, no. 2.
- Price, Margaret. 2007. "Accessing Disability: A Nondisabled Student Works the Hyphen." *College Composition and Communication* 59, no. 1: 53–76.
- Price, Margaret. 2015. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia* 30, no. 1: 268–84.
- Quayson, Ato. 2007. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schalk, Sami. 2013. "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2. dsq-sds.org/article/view/3705.
- Schalk, Sami. 2017. "Critical Disability Studies as Methodology." *Lateral* 6, no. 1. csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk/.
- Schweik, Susan. 2009. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. New York: New York University Press.

A Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights

humtech.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights

June 8, 2015



By CDH Guest Author on June 8, 2015

By Haley Di Pressi, Stephanie Gorman, Miriam Posner, Raphael Sasayama, and Tori Schmitt, with contributions from Roderic Crooks, Megan Driscoll, Amy Earhart, Spencer Keralis, Tiffany Naiman, and Todd Presner

UCLA's Digital Humanities program emphasizes cross-disciplinary, cross-hierarchy collaboration among students, faculty, and staff. We've created this Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights as a statement of our values and principles in the UCLA DH program.

Collaborations between students and more experienced digital humanities practitioners should benefit everyone. At their best, these partnerships are a way for students to learn new skills and benefit from mentorship, while more seasoned scholars can learn from junior scholars' ideas, skills, subject knowledge, and perspectives.

It's important, though, to recognize that students and more senior scholars don't operate from positions of equal power in the academic hierarchy. In particular, students' DH mentors may be the same people who give them grades, recommend them for jobs, and hold other kinds of power over their futures. Students may not feel entirely comfortable raising objections to certain practices if they feel these objections could endanger their academic or career prospects. Thus, we think it's important to outline some best practices for collaborations with students on digital humanities projects, so that everyone involved feels they gain from the partnership.

Collaboration can take many forms, from casual brainstorming to full-time employment. As collaborations develop, senior scholars should be mindful that different kinds of relationships entail different responsibilities on the part of each collaborator. A professor who assigns a class project, for example, must primarily consider the student's own intellectual growth, while a senior scholar who employs a student assistant may assign work that primarily benefits the project.¹

We endorse the principles outlined in the Collaborators' Bill of Rights (2011). As additional safeguards for students, we advise those embarking on collaborations with students to adhere to the following principles:

1. As a general principle, a student must be paid for his or her time if he or she is not empowered to make critical decisions about the intellectual design of a project or a portion of a project (and credited accordingly). Students should not perform mechanical labor, such as data-entry or scanning, without pay.
 2. Course credit is generally not sufficient "payment" for students' time, since courses are designed to provide students with learning experiences.
 3. We encourage senior scholars to familiarize themselves with the literature on unpaid internships.² At a minimum, internships for course credit should be offered as learning experiences, with a high level of mentorship. Those employing interns should be prepared to spend substantial face-to-face time with the student.
 4. If students have made substantive (i.e., non-mechanical) contributions to the project, their names should appear on the project as collaborators, and they should be acknowledged in subsequent publications that stem from the project.
 5. Students should be empowered to present on projects on which they have collaborated (assuming reasonable limitations about sensitive and embargoed material and on work in progress). Students and senior scholars should discuss the protocol for such presentations at the outset of the project.
 6. Students should be empowered to list their collaboration on a project on a CV or résumé, with an appropriate degree of credit. Senior scholars should explicitly encourage this and help students to formulate meaningful statements about their contributions.
 7. Senior scholars should recognize that projects on which students have collaborated represent important components of students' scholarly portfolios. Senior scholars should thus make every reasonable effort to either sustain a "live" project or, failing this, either transfer its ownership to student collaborators or distribute to students an archived version or snapshot of the project.
 8. When digital humanities projects are required for course credit, instructors should recognize that students may have good reasons not to engage in public-facing scholarship, or may not want their names made public, and should offer students the option of alternative assignments.
 9. In meetings and project communication, student collaborators should be treated as full members of the project team, to the extent that this is reasonable, and their contributions should be valued and respected. Students should have a clear sense of how their work fits into the larger project.
 10. Digital projects can sometimes branch into multiple projects, or head in multiple directions. Many digital projects are experimental. Mentors and students should set guidelines for re-use of digital scholarly material, as well as for maintaining meaningful artifacts of students' contributions.
1. For more on these roles and the various responsibilities they entail, see Spencer Keralis, "Disrupting Labor in the Digital Humanities; or, The Classroom is Not Your Crowd," in *Disrupting Digital Humanities*, ed. Jesse Stommel and Dorothy Kim (Punctum Books, 2015 [forthcoming]).
 2. See, for example, ProPublica's reporting on unpaid internships.

Off the Tracks

Collaborators' Bill of Rights

- ¶1 1) All kinds of work on a project are equally deserving of credit (though the amount of work and expression of credit may differ). And all collaborators should be empowered to take credit for their work.
- ¶2 2) The DH community should default to the most comprehensive model of attribution of credit: credit should take the form of a legible trail that articulates the nature, extent, and dates of the contribution. (Models in the sciences and the arts may be useful.)
- ¶3 a) Descriptive Papers & Project reports: Anyone who collaborated on the project should be listed as author in a fair ordering based on emerging community conventions.
- ¶4 b) Websites: There should be a prominent “credits” link on the main page with PIs or project leads listed first. This should include current staff as well as past staff with their dates of employment.
- ¶5 c) CVs: Your CV is **your** place for articulating your contribution to a collaboration. All collaborators should feel empowered to express their contributions honestly and comprehensively.
- ¶6 3) Universities, museums, libraries, and archives are locations of creativity and innovation. Intellectual property policies should be equally applied to all employees regardless of employment status. Credit for collaborative work should be portable and legible. Collaborators should retain access to the work of the collaboration.
- ¶7 4) Funders should take an aggressive stance on unfair institutional policies that undermine the principles of this bill of rights. Such policies may include inequities in intellectual property rights or the inability of certain classes of employees to serve as PIs.

Page 10

Comments

19 Pingbacks and trackbacks

1. **Getting Started in the Digital Humanities | Digital Scholarship in the Humanities** October 14, 2011 at 4:22 pm

[...] in “Care of the Soul,” and the Off the Tracks Workshop devised a useful “Collaborators’ Bill of Rights.”) If you can bring seed funding or administrative backing to a project, that might make it easier to [...]

2. **Who Owns This Stuff? | THATCamp Southeast 2012** March 8, 2012 at 11:01 am

[...] and build upon the resulting code and artifacts? In this session, I propose we use the “Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” as a starting point for discussion. How might we instantiate these recommendations in our [...]

3. **We are RRCHNM | Lot 49** March 8, 2012 at 3:58 pm

[...] revealed and highlighted the names of everyone who had ever worked on this project before the Collaborator Bill of Rights existed. I asked on Twitter, how many of you look at the About page of a digital humanities [...]

4. **POST-DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP (CLOSES 2012-07-17) « Occasional Drama** June 28, 2012 at 7:50 pm

[...] of all persons and affirms the dignity of all persons. MoEML is committed to honouring the Collaborators’ Bill of Rights. Enquiries and applications may be sent to MoEML via Janelle Jenstad at jenstad@uvic.ca. [...]

5. **How Collaboration Works and How It Can Fail** | archaeoinaction.info June 3, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 [...] and the growth of collaborative projects involving humanities scholars, including the excellent Collaborator's Bill of Rights as well as rumination on what dangers collaboration may pose, such as my own article in JDH1-1. My [...]
6. **COLTT 2013: "The Digital Dossier"** | Erin M. Kingsley August 3, 2013 at 7:47 pm
 [...] DH Bill of Rights: including all authors/collaborators must be listed as taking some part of the project (although tasks/credit may vary); individual CVs should list individual, not group, collaboration—what did YOU do on this project – <http://mcpres.media-commons.org/offthetracks/part-one-models-for-collaboration-caree...> [...]
7. **Credit Transparency and the Collaborator's Bill of Rights | Introduction to Digital History** December 2, 2013 at 12:12 pm
 [...] Projects. In particular, I want to draw your attention to and work through the provisions of the "Collaborator's Bill of Rights," which is part of a larger report entitled "Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital [...]
8. **Evaluating Non-Traditional Digital Humanities Dissertations** | Literature Geek September 30, 2014 at 7:57 am
 [...] should get credit and thanks for sharing their work with others! (See the awesome "Collaborators' Bill of Rights" that came out of a MITH workshop for more on why correct credit should matter to everyone). [...]
9. **Credit Transparency and the Collaborator's Bill of Rights** | Dave DeCamp October 17, 2014 at 4:59 pm
 [...] Projects. In particular, I want to draw your attention to and work through the provisions of the "Collaborator's Bill of Rights," which is part of a larger report entitled "Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital [...]
10. **Credit Transparency and the "Collaborator's Bill of Rights"** | Boston Public History November 6, 2014 at 3:08 pm
 [...] humanities project, I want to draw your attention to and work through the provisions of the "Collaborator's Bill of Rights," which is part of a larger report entitled "Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital [...]
11. **The Pedagogy of Digital Humanities in the Liberal Arts Classroom** | April 7, 2015 at 12:45 pm
 [...] they are encouraged to include DH research projects, experiences, and skills on their resumes. The DH Collaborators Bill of Rights provides some nice initial guidelines for these [...]
12. **Creating a Group Project Charter** | Introduction to Digital Humanities November 13, 2015 at 5:06 pm
 [...] Also you might want to read this Collaborators' bill of rights [...]
13. **Milking the Deficit Internship** | January 5, 2016 at 9:42 pm
 [...] Collaborators' Bill of Rights. Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital Humanities Scholars. [...]
14. **Disrupting Student Labor in the Digital Humanities Classroom** | Research and Destroy March 18, 2016 at 10:16 am
 [...] for the principles of open access, or the guidelines for professional collaboration outlined in the Collaborators' Bill of Rights. We can develop and share resources for constructively encouraging students to produce durable [...]
15. **CETL Faculty Forum: "Developing Digital Project Assignments" Notes and Resources** – Sarah E. Cornish April 19, 2017 at 12:43 pm
 [...] For a wide selection of readings that may help you think about digital pedagogy and research ideas, browse through Debates in the Digital Humanities edited by Matthew K. Gold of the CUNY Graduate Center. I always incorporate readings on DH into my longer-term projects to get students to engage with the conversation, and I encourage them to read The Collaborators' Bill of Rights. [...]
16. **On Developing a Collaborators' Bill of Responsibilities** | September 4, 2017 at 9:11 am
 [...] guidance on these matters does exist. The Collaborators' Bill of Rights, upon which the UCLA guidelines are based, makes it clear [...]
17. **Digital Book Project – ENG 14-01 Intro. to Literary History and Interpretation** January 13, 2018 at 6:41 pm
 [...] Concerning credit, we will discuss and follow the Collaborators' Bill of Rights. [...]
18. **Collaborators' Bill of Rights – ENG 14-01 Intro. to Literary History and Interpretation** January 26, 2018 at 3:47 pm
 [...] Collaborators' Bill of Rights [...]
19. **Introduction: Issue Fourteen** / January 7, 2019 at 6:54 pm
Comment awaiting moderation

Content © Off the Tracks 2011. All rights reserved.

Postdoctoral Bill of Rights

Version 1.0¹

Feedback? Visit this [link](#).

Introduction

Postdoctoral positions in the humanities have changed significantly in the past two decades. The traditional model, which assumes that the majority of one's appointment is directed at individual research, has largely been superseded by labor-intensive positions embedded in a department, library, center, institute, etc. These positions can be highly rewarding for institutions and postdocs alike. But there is little documentation about what makes a postdoctoral position successful for the institution, and less about what conditions will help a postdoc achieve their professional goals.

With this document, we seek to address this gap. This document is designed for those who are creating postdoctoral positions, supervising postdocs, or considering employment as a postdoc. We hope that those who are creating and supervising these positions will use this document to establish more ethical and responsible positions. And we hope that those who are employed in these positions can use this document to identify and advocate for their needs.

We were inspired to write this document for two reasons. For some time, we had been hearing horror stories about humanities postdocs gone wrong, especially in the digital humanities. We were warned to steer clear of exploitative, extractive, dead-end positions. Yet for many of us, postdocs were the best options we had, and while some had their problems, others promised to be periods of tremendous growth and satisfaction. Would it be possible to identify the differences between these positions and to articulate a set of standards for a successful postdoc? Our first goal is to advocate for our colleagues, to set expectations for postdoctoral positions, and to hold institutions accountable for exploitative working conditions.

At the same time, as we began to speak publicly about postdoctoral labor, supervisors and mentors began reaching out to us to ask for help. They were in the process of creating postdoctoral positions or supervising postdocs, and they desperately wanted to do their jobs well. But there was little documentation about how postdocs worked, or about what worked well for postdocs. Our second goal is to begin the process of documenting postdoctoral practices in order to move towards a robust set of community standards. We hope this document will be the first of many sources of information about effective postdoctoral labor.

¹ This document was collaboratively authored by the Postdoctoral Laborers Group and outside reviewers. Questions or comments? Contact Amanda Henrichs (akhenrichs@gmail.com) or Hannah Alpert-Abrams (halperta@gmail.com). Version 1.0 was released April 9, 2019.

What follows are nine guidelines for establishing a successful postdoc. Some are proscriptive; others depend on the needs of the individuals involved, and are intended to be a point of departure for conversations that may last for the duration of the position. We hope that this is a document that you will continue to refer to through every stage of the postdoc, from conceptualizing the position to writing the job ad, supervising the fellow, and helping them to transition to another position.

Let's make postdoctoral work in the humanities better for everyone.

Before you begin

A postdoctoral position can be understood as an opportunity for a junior scholar and an academic space (a department, library, center, archive, institute, and so on) to ethically assess a community's particular needs and the benefits of new labor that supports those needs.

For Supervisors: Before you begin, please ask yourself and your institution: Why is this position temporary instead of permanent or longer-term? Why does it require someone with a doctorate? What will the desired candidate gain from being a postdoc at your institution? What metrics of success will determine whether this position is successful, and whether it should result in a more permanent hiring of a qualified candidate to meet institutional needs? And finally, how will this position 'give back' to the postdoc by helping them to develop new skills and to build their research profile?

Remember that a postdoctoral position will significantly impact the life of the postdoc and their loved ones. Postdocs are not interchangeable: each postdoctoral fellow is an individual with particular research interests, skills, professional identities, and lived experiences. Creating a work environment that frames postdocs otherwise should not be tolerated.

While postdoctoral positions are temporary, institutions should consider their long-term plan well in advance. If it becomes clear, at the end of a position, that the work should be continued and that the postdoc is interested in supporting it, will you be able to retain them? (If so: what can /will it take to convince the PDF to stay?)

For Current and Future Postdocs: Are you interested in doing work that is outside your research area, with the goal of expanding your professional options or of transitioning into a new career? Then a task-based or project-focused postdoc may be a good choice for you.

Often we do not have much choice in the postdocs we take. Even when conditions are good, we often find ourselves hired into newly-created positions that are high on enthusiasm, but low on experience. Your supervisor may not know what you need, and so you may find yourself mentoring from below. We hope this document can help guide you in that process.

The Guidelines

A postdoc position is not a grad student position

A postdoc is not your opportunity for cheap labor.* [As the National Postdoctoral Association writes](#), “Postdoctoral appointees can pursue basic, clinical or translational projects so long as their primary effort is devoted toward their own scholarship.”

A successful postdoctoral position will be centered on projects that are commensurate with the postdoc’s skills and experience, and that will benefit their career advancement. This might include developing and implementing new research, teaching, or digital initiatives that draw on their academic expertise. You should consider why (or if) a doctoral degree is necessary for this position.

* Grad students aren’t your opportunity for cheap labor, either!

A postdoc position is a transitional position

A postdoctoral position is institutionally [defined as](#) “a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of [the individual’s] choosing.” In many academic disciplines, career advancement depends on the achievement of concrete goals outside of the mission of the department or institution: writing a scholarly monograph, for example, or publishing peer-reviewed articles.

A successful postdoctoral position will take this into account and provide resources, mentorship, and time to support this work.

A postdoc position is not the same as a full-time faculty or staff position

You should not ask your postdoctoral employee to perform service to the institution unless you can compensate them adequately by including it into the breakdown of their paid time. You should not ask your postdocs to develop curricular initiatives or to run centers or institutes. Nor should you expect digital humanities postdocs to work as computer programmers for your organization. Those tasks require institutional knowledge, expertise, and immense amounts of labor. In short, those are full-time, permanent positions.

A successful postdoctoral position will be of a scope that can be completed within the time frame of the position, and must be embedded in an institutional structure that will support the ongoing success of the project after the conclusion of the position.

Mentors and supervisors should take responsibility for the success of their employees.

A postdoc is by definition a transitional position, with the expectation that this position will serve to further develop the employee's career options. As such, mentors and supervisors must actively commit to promoting the employee's success in their chosen field(s). Successful postdoctoral mentors will recognize that the professional accomplishments of the postdoc will also benefit the mentor and the institution. Mentors and supervisors should help postdocs be new and/or visible presences on campus; they should be transparent with the postdoc as to whether and how much control the postdoc has over this presence.

A successful postdoctoral position can take several forms

It can be research-, teaching-, or technically-focused, or a combination of the above. If the position is a hybrid (eg, it is primarily technical, but carries the expectation of research), the split should be clearly defined in a written contract between the postdoc and the supervisor, dean, and/or mentor. Pathways of reporting and supervision should be similarly transparent. If the position is task-based, the employing institution should have completed an environmental survey (or similar self-evaluation) to determine a reasonable task and the time of employment necessary to complete that task. This self-evaluation should take place in the process of requesting funding for the position and writing the job ad; in other words, between three months and a year before advertising the position. This survey should not be the postdoc's first task upon starting the position. The employee should be provided with the resources, time, and mentorship necessary for success.

One Year is Not Enough

A successful postdoc position should be no less than two years. This pays back the financial and emotional investment of moving to a new city. It provides adequate time for training and orientation, which commonly requires six months. It allows sufficient time for the postdoc to make significant research or project gains. And it reduces the burden of the job search, allowing the postdoc to commit more time and energy to the position.

Both employer and employee should participate in negotiations that will benefit both sides of the arrangement

This includes asking for a higher salary before accepting the job, moving expenses, a yearly raise, an extended term, a delayed start date, a computer, working remotely, technological or physical resources (Mac or PC computer, office space, printer), access to library resources, and so on. A successful negotiation will provide the employee with the resources to do their best work, ultimately benefiting the institution as much as it benefits the employee.

Supervisors should be informed about campus resources

In a successful postdoc, the supervisor will be knowledgeable and communicative about the following:

- Training opportunities on campus
- Opportunities for formal faculty, staff, and peer mentorship
- Community support & mentorship for postdocs who are queer, women, people of color, have a disability, are parents, or have other specific needs
- Remote-working options for those in long distance relationships, with a disability, or with dependents.
- Childcare and maternity/paternity leave for parents
- Accommodations for disabilities; campus mental health resources.
- Basic logistics of the employment process for international postdocs, and on-campus resources for further information

Ideally, the supervisor will pass along documentation that new faculty hires often receive: for example, explanations of the health insurance process, navigating campus administrative structures, help proposing new courses, and explanations of any other important institutional tasks that a new employee must undertake.

Toward the end of the position's term, the postdoc should be able to request assistance in transitioning to another job

This assistance can take the form of time to craft job applications (both the mentor's and postdoc's time), money for job interview travel, reduction in teaching load, ability to schedule

teaching to accommodate interviews, etc. The postdoc should decide whether this is something that would be helpful for them, and mentors/supervisors should do their best to accommodate this decision. If another postdoc is hired to that position, the two terms should overlap. This will provide institutional continuity.

This document draws inspiration in particular from the University of Virginia Scholar's Lab, including the [Student Programs Charter](#) and [General Charter](#), the University of California-Los Angeles [Student Collaborator Bill of Rights](#), and the [Collaborator's Bill of Rights](#).

“Our Struggles Are Unequal”: Black Women’s Affective Labor Between Television and Twitter

Journal of Communication Inquiry

2016, Vol. 40(4) 351–369

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0196859916664082

jci.sagepub.com



Raven S. Maragh¹

Abstract

This article uses the digital and affective labor frameworks to examine how Black women provide specific kinds of production online. The intersection of television and Twitter through “live tweeting” elucidates unique ways in which Black women function within each site as well as between them. Through a critical race analysis of the documentary *Light Girls*, I examine the material functions and corporate goals of Twitter coupled with the solicitation strategies of the Oprah Winfrey Network. In doing so, I show how these women’s affective labor gets refashioned as production. I argue that the grassroots functions and rhetoric of Twitter rely specifically on Black women. Similarly, television networks rely on these women as they reify the text and provide sustained feedback to its content. The exploitation of Black women occurs within and between these two media through the women’s production of affective labor.

Keywords

black women, affective labor, Twitter, television, digital labor

On January 19, 2015, The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) aired *Light Girls*, a documentary investigating the plight of women of color with fair skin in the United States and globally, foregrounding the issue of color stratification,

¹University of Iowa, South Madison, IA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Raven S. Maragh, University of Iowa, 122 Becker Communication Studies Building,

25 South Madison St. Iowa City, IA 52242, USA.

Email: raven-maragh@uiowa.edu

or colorism. During the film, the hashtag #BlackGirls trended on Twitter where users online “live tweeted” the show and weighed in on their particular experiences of colorism. The reactions to *Light Girls* spanned the gamut from inequity in the Black community: “No disrespect to light skinned women with colourism struggles, but our struggles are unequal #LightGirls” to legitimizing light women’s experiences: “The very fact that some aren’t taking the issues fairer skinned women of color face as true issues is baffling. #LightGirls.”

As a network, OWN has specifically targeted and catered to Black women over the years. After a joint venture with Discovery Communications in 2011, OWN debuted on cable television in approximately 80 million homes around the world (Robins, 2013). Propelled by talks of Winfrey ending her 25-season show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (which officially ended in September 2011), the new OWN programming was rocky in its start. After experimenting with high-profile talk shows and reality television “flops” like Rosie O’ Donnell and Shania Twain, respectively, OWN steadied out in its brand through deals with creators such as Tyler Perry and shows like “Oprah’s Next Chapter” (Robins, 2013). In particular, OWN cemented its viewership target demographic as well: “Notably, it was growing into a top network for African-American women, a traditionally underserved audience,” according to Forbes (Robins, 2013). Creating content for Black girls and women viewers is also evident through films such as *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls* in their titles alone. Moreover, Tyler Perry has had a tumultuous relationship with Black women viewers for years. The creator has repeatedly been critiqued for his work both in popular press and academia regarding Black women in terms of problematic representations of these women (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012). Within my analysis of OWN and *Light Girls*, I demonstrate the integration of social media, and particularly Twitter, in the documentary’s programming as a strategic move to solicit Black women’s affective labor for the network. This ultimately serves not just the network but also the larger media intersection of social media and television by poaching the work from Black women. This article accounts for the work of these women, drawing from research that highlights “the promise of virtual participation in the production process” and its role that invites “viewers to adopt the standpoint of producers,” transferring this affective labor into marketable feedback (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 27). Drawing from feminist critiques of Marxism, affective labor is understood as work that requires the inanimate parts of the body as production, such as emotion and subjectivities (Vora, 2015).

As a company, Twitter’s goals and strategies have highlighted their desires about who they would like to be as a company. In doing so, users and Black women, in particular, are essential in order to continue the site’s functions of connectivity through antiestablishment community engagement. In a 2009 Future of the Media panel in New York, executive and cofounder Jack Dorsey emphasized his hope for the *utility* of Twitter. Dorsey’s speech at the panel favored the “infrastructure itself fad[ing] into the background,” much like

electricity or telephones (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 69). This is especially important at the juncture between television and Twitter where the latter is formulated to seem “common sense.” Digital scholars have drawn similar connections to technologies such as Google, as it functions for commercial interests yet “Google’s users think of it as a public resource, generally free from commercial interests,” in part based on the company’s “informal mantra—‘Don’t be evil’” (Noble, 2013). Similarly, Twitter has embodied this sort of “neutral” technology as a “conveyor” of information, resulting in the site’s over 200 million users assumedly not questioning the technology itself, much like a telephone, but rather interacting with the functionalities of the site.

The material functions of Twitter, such as its rhetoric of “followers” and marketing as a sort of grassroots company (Van Dijck, 2013), shape the exploitation of Black women in the reliance on this group’s subjectivities and the mystification of Twitter and its corporeal (company) attributes. Social network sites, like Twitter, are able to further their growing number of users, in part, through this antiestablishment framework in which they have created. The intersection of television and Twitter through live tweeting increases these tensions as users foreground the problematics of television, opting for their own online labor instead. Heteronormative structures (have) position(ed) Black women as outsiders, best understood in relation to dominant groups (hooks, 1984). Under investigation here is the central work that Black women take on as part of the interactive economy of media (television and Twitter).

The intersections of race and gender, to name just two, with the platforms of television and Twitter have the potential to point scholars to important theoretical insights regarding the work of Black women online. I build upon the work of intersectional critical race technology studies (Noble & Tynes, 2016) that stresses the importance of intersectionality, as understood from canonical Black feminist works from Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2000, 2015), and bell hooks (1984, 1990). By foregrounding the intersectional framework, I hope to add to the discussion of digital labor as deeply intersectional. Citing the relative nonexistence of Black women in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Tynes, Schuschke, and Noble (2016) write, “the erasure of women’s lives, despite the inception of the movement by women, demands theorization of digital intersectionality, such that continued erasures are not fomented by scholars” (p. 22). As such, this article pulls from the digital and affective labor literatures to introduce an intersectional critical race analysis of Black women and how they serve the larger media industries of social network sites and television. I operate at two sites of analyses throughout this article: television and Twitter, where I work through the instances of how Black women provide affective labor through the corporate, material goals of Twitter and the reifying of solicited narratives on television in the documentary *Light Girls*.

Critical race theory, and Black studies in particular, fashions as its object, Western civilization. “This black optics,” as Moten (2008) eloquently wrote, “is

an auditory affair: night vision given in and through voices that shadow legitimate discourse from below, breaking its ground up into broken air” (p. 1743). Moten continued that “Black studies’ aim has always been bound up with and endangered by its object,” risking the erasure of Blackness as “vulnerable to oversight” (p. 1744). Black women, in particular, are at risk within this epistemology of oversight. These women often embody the “deficiency or lack in relation to normative conditions” resulting in the “disavowal of violence and disregard of injury,” (Hartman, 1997, p. 100). In this article, I examine how Black women transform existing television narratives of themselves while also caught up in the exploitation and intersection of television and Twitter through live tweeting. I follow digital Black feminists’ troubling of the term *Black girls* (Noble, 2013) in my assessment of *Light Girls* and contextualize Black women’s agency in purporting their own thoughts and experiences. Additionally, I contend that focusing on the racialized and gendered nature of technologies furthers the critical work of destabilizing technology’s heteronormativity-as-default (Everett, 2008).

Digital User Labor

Research has pointed us to the occurrence of “fan labor” as viewers or users do specific sorts of work for networks in the process of connected viewing (Andrejevic, 2008). Within this line of research, I put forth that Black women offer *both* television networks and online sites particular kinds of labor based on their intersected marginalization. Andrejevic (2002) points out the “asymmetries of power and control over information technologies and resources” (p. 230) as users self-disclose online. The consumerism inherent in social networking, in other words, both target and depend on this peer-to-peer sharing of information. This “rationalization of consumption” extends the reach of surveillance and connects capitalism to control (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 232). Citing Foucault, Andrejevic continues, “capitalism ‘would not be possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes’” (pp. 234–235). In other words, disciplinary surveillance enhances economic productivity. From an intersectional critical race perspective, the work of users of color, and Black women in particular, especially functions as economic productivity in Western capitalism and civilization (Noble, 2013). “These labor pools are often racialized and gendered,” Noble wrote, “as are the values upon which [content] moderation takes place” (Noble, 2013). Building on this knowledge, I investigate media’s dependence on the work of Black women both in the consumption and mediation of television on one hand and the rearticulation of that content online on the other hand.

Black women’s affective labor is translated into productivity both for social network sites, in continuing its reliance on “grassroots,” on-the-ground users,

and television in its strategies of incorporation of live feedback to its content. These arguments surface through a look at the material functions and corporate goals of Twitter and the network integration of social media and Black users' reification of the television narrative. I begin with a brief look into my use of affective labor before describing *Light Girls* as a case study.

Affect and Affective Labor

Building from Tomkin's psychobiology of differential affects and Deleuze's take on the ethology of bodily capacities, the trajectory of the study of affect can be thought of as one of directionality (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 6). Through these two entry points "affect [is theorized] as the prime 'interest' motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily forces (Tomkins); [or] affect as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across human and nonhuman (Deleuze)" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 6).¹ Beyond these influencers, the multiple entry points to affect allow for an "in-between," a "yet-ness." Drawing from 17th century Spinoza in *Ethics* (1996), this "'not yet,' convey[s] a sense of urgency that transforms the matter and matters of affect into an ethical, aesthetic, and political task all at once" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 3). I draw from this multidirectionality, as I examine the intersection of media and the affective work of Black women. I specifically draw from the work of feminist and subaltern scholars who analyze the work of "living under the thumb of a normativizing power" and focus on the collective and external experience of women (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 7; Vora, 2015).

Vora (2015) attends to the production and circulation of subjectivities, commodities, and representations as she traces India's affective labor history, specifically its racialized and gendered labor. Vora highlights the affective labor of industries such as call center agents in India as a part of a global biocapital process. Franklin and Lock (2003) foundationally describe this sort of biocapital as "a form of extraction that involves isolating and mobilizing the primary reproductive agency of specific body parts" (p. 8). In Vora's (2015) account, specific bodies are used as "vital energy" that supply life "from areas of life depletion to areas of life enrichment" (p. 3). In this way, the brown call center agents are trained to adopt specific vernaculars and cultural mores from parts of the United States in order to serve their Western clients. Their emotions, lives, and subjecthood are transformed from depletion to others' enrichment in service of the global machine of capitalism. In drawing from affective labor from Vora's work, I examine how Black women online and their affective labor function as a similar sort of "vital energy" for (new) media industries through the work of reifying the television narrative to being transformed into Twitter's larger corporate goals and the television industry's integration into multiple sites of productivity.

Marxist critiques have pointed to the fissure in relegating labor and the privileging of commodity manufacturing over service labor. In her book

on the proletarianization of sex, Lee (2010) explains, "...any kind of hard fast distinction between productive and reproductive labor is difficult to maintain. As all labors produce either services or commodities that service, all labors are, at a fundamental level, 'service labors'" (pp. 11–12). In other words, focusing on the human body and affect as a particular sort of labor for capitalism acts as a service, a commodity in much the same way that a material product would. Lee (2010) further points to the human body and the inanimate object as inextricably linked as commodity—both serve to provide "service labor" (p. 12). Although connected, commodity and service labor have distinct plights:

In contrast to commodity production, in which human labor is preserved and transformed into the object produced, service labor, in its very re-productive capacity, must *erase itself* on behalf of the other who consumes the labor. The very evaporation of service in its performance sustains the consumer. (Lee, 2010, p. 12) (emphasis added)

The affective service labor, then, performs a "magical disappearance" in servitude to the consumer and the service laborer's subjectivity also suffers a "loss or damage" in this transfer of affect through service (Lee, 2010, p. 13).

This disappearance or deliberate erasure of reproductive labor is also linked to the erasure of Black women as both "vulnerable to oversight" and profitable in its appropriation (Gaunt, 2015). Gathered on social media sites around the promise and euphoria of connection, these specific users are solicited around a common, cultural (television) text; subsequently, their affective responses are mined for the purpose of furthering the production of television content as well as the use (value) of that social network site. As Cooper (2008) points out in her work on bioeconomy and capitalism's contradictions: "where capitalism promises on the one hand, it destroys on the other" (p. 61). How then can we balance the promise of community and solace of social network sites, rich with race-specific culture, with realities of service affective labor? I briefly turn to colorism and the instance of Black Twitter before addressing these points.

Color Stratification and Black Twitter

Color stratification has existed within communities of color for centuries and points to the privileging of whiteness and "othering" of people of color. Many African Americans, in particular, struggle against this privileging of whiteness "but they recognize that light skin is associated in many ways with the American opportunity structure" (Thompson, 2014, p. 148). In other words, African Americans, in this context, both act and exist within this structure while they might resist its ideology. Colorism, then, is directly related to the larger system of racism in the United States and around the world where some Anglo-European features, such as light eyes and fair skin tone, are often heralded

as superior to others (Hunter, 2007, p. 240). Lighter skinned individuals might have clear advantages in “passing” to the Western standard of beauty while also struggling with “not being Black enough” (Hunter, 2007, p. 240). People with darker skin are often seen as more authentic to their race but usually carry the brunt of many stereotypes of their race, such as aggressiveness (Hunter, 2007, p. 245). The irony and complexity in this privileging of whiteness, of course, lays in the subsequent appropriation of Black features and culture (Johnson, 2003).

“Gendered colorism” adds another layer as research has suggested that lighter skin tones serve different functions for women (Thompson, 2014, p. 144). Critically, many Black women experience “double-discrimination” as “the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Thus, it could be argued (and colloquially is), that being closer to the European physical standards might help to alleviate some of these discriminations and cause colorism to function in specific ways for Black women of different hues. It might be no surprise that the topic of hair surfaces during discussion of colorism with discourses of “good” hair often mirroring straight, lengthy hair typical of Caucasians (Thompson, 2014, p. 144). The responses of Black users on Twitter, and women in particular, to *Light Girls* spanned the gamut as complex as the history of colorism itself.

Rich research on what has been dubbed “Black Twitter” has uncovered the cultural understandings of African Americans as they manifest in specific ways online. To be clear, I follow critical race scholars who warn against homogenizing a group of people who identify as Black on Twitter as all belonging to “Black Twitter” (Florini, 2013; Senft & Noble, 2014). According to a Pew Research Center report, 27% of Black users make up Twitter’s user base, in comparison to 21% of White users and 25% of Hispanic users (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). With high rates of African Americans on Twitter and shared cultural understandings, Black Twitter acts as Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural discourse (Brock, 2012). This often includes instances of signifying, drawing from Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of linguistic performance “that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection” (Florini, 2013, p. 224). Here, these Black users are able to connect and relate to others like them, an occurrence that transcends physical space (Brock, 2012). Virtually coming together around social topics, Black users employ common discursive styles, such as call and response and signifying. As we know from the digital labor and critical race literatures, these online communities certainly do not evade the gaze of the television or social media profit industries.

Case Study: Light Girls

In order to ground my intervention, I focused on a case study involving the live tweeting of *Light Girls*, which ran as a sequel to the 2013 OWN documentary

Dark Girls. During the airing of *Light Girls*, the hashtag #BlackGirls trended on Twitter where the site's algorithms spotlighted tweets about the show based on, among other factors, the high volume of users participating in the conversation. I functioned as a participant-observer in this case, where I watched the documentary live, along with other viewers. Simultaneously, through my public Twitter account, I observed conversations regarding the show by searching the trending hashtag #BlackGirls as well as the name of the show #LightGirls.

I follow Brock's (2008) critical technocultural discourse analysis, which "draws from technology studies, communication studies, and critical race theory to understand how culture shapes technologies" (p. 531). Critical technocultural discourse analysis's strength lies in its coupling of discourse analysis with an investigation of the technology format itself, allowing us to understand culture online as specific technologies afford, while avoiding a strict technological deterministic framework. I cite the users online in their own words throughout this article, while contextualizing their posts through the interpretive framework. In their research on Black women bloggers, Brock, Kvasny, and Hales (2010) signaled their inclusion of "large chunks of user-generated discourse" as a conscious decision to reflect "the methodological desire of representing disadvantaged groups in their own words" which must be "properly contextualized by the interpretive framework in order to maintain narrative cohesion" (p. 1046). Thus, I include users' tweets throughout this article, primarily in the Reifying Narratives section, coupled with an analysis of the sites of technology themselves (Twitter and television) that enable and rely on the work of Black women online.

I also find germane works such as Reynolds (2015), who used "lurking" online to uncover different constructions of masculinity in online advertisements for men seeking men. In this case study, however, I have *participated* in the larger conversation on *Light Girls*, finding value in being involved in the process of live tweeting that I analyze here. As is often the concern with participant-observation, researcher bias can occur when the researcher acts as the author of conversation threads, thus skewing particular conversations in certain directions (Hine, 2000). As the tweets that I use originated from the larger key search terms on Twitter of #BlackGirls and #LightGirls, I was not the beginner of conversation threads of these posts; rather my tweets were a part of the larger public conversation of *Light Girls*.

During analysis, the grounded theory approach was employed using the open, axial, and selective coding in order to account for repeated patterns as to online posts regarding the television text (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The first phase of analysis included selecting posts that included the hashtag #DarkGirls or #LightGirls. Second, subcategories were created and compared with larger categories, such as "engaging with users about colorism" or "fixing the television narrative." Finally, the core category of affective labor was used to unify users' patterns and subcategories. I was interested in the organic tweets that these

viewers and users posted and interacted with regarding the documentary and its focus on colorism. I refrained from informing the users of my role as participant-observer because of the public nature of the observed tweets as well as the possibility of influencing users' posts (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009, p. 134). I also focused on first-person usage when referencing reactions to the documentary as indicators of these users' identification as Black women. Despite the challenges of online research, scholars have encouraged that we not be "deterred from attempting actively to capture the rich data accessible in a blog environment" (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009, p. 88). To this end, I conducted myself on Twitter as a participant-observer, tweeting about the show to my own followers while observing the reactions of the larger Twitter public, with a specific eye to Black women and affective labor. Rather than make general claims about these tweets or these women online, I used the qualitative data gathered to serve as examples of my larger argument regarding the affective labor of Black women at the crossroads between television and Twitter. As a woman of Afro-Indo-Caribbean descent, I was particularly intrigued at the level of sophistication with which users online contested depictions of their Black womanhood through readings of the *Light Girls* documentary while performing work.

Reifying Narratives of *Light Girls*

Cultural aspects of Blackness transcend on to Twitter where Black users form their own set of language and codes around social events and topics, which can speak to broader racial and cultural implications (Brock, 2012). Black users' responses to the film *Light Girls* highlighted these larger historical and cultural conversations and required knowledge thereof of color stratification in the Black diaspora.

Users critiqued instances such as the insinuation in the documentary that light-skinned girls and women are sexually abused differently (read: at an increased rate) than darker-skinned girls and women: "What we will NOT do is suggest light skinned girls are more sexually abused than dark skinned girls when ALL black girls are terrorized!!!!!" Another user commented on this color stratification tension: "It's coming across as very 'they hate me cuz I'm beautiful' when it really should be 'let's dismantle the white supremacist notions.'" The latter post garnered 97 retweets and 37 favorites in critique of the documentary, while suggesting social action as well. Another user mentioned the unity present in Black women that was missed in the documentary: "I hate that in reference to #darkgirls they keep saying Black Girls. We're all Black. #LightGirls." Other responses to the documentary shed light to the complicated history of colorism in the Black community, as many users seemed to be upholding the trope of "together but unequal." As one user tweeted: "No disrespect to light skinned women with colourism struggles, but our struggles are unequal." Still, others challenged widely held (sarcastic) beliefs of the "poor light skinned girl:"

“The very fact that some aren’t taking the issues fairer skinned women of color face as true issues is baffling. #LightGirls.”

In this way, Black users rewrote and recentered the narrative of the documentary, privileging *their* experiences over the representation of them on television. These affective responses relied on the trudging up of users’ experiences of color stratification in their community. These posts serve a larger function of affective labor in their movement from conscious experience of colorism to tangible “fixing” of the television narrative. In this sense, Black women not only view the stereotypes in the documentary regarding sexual assault and colorism or the lack of attention on the system of white oppression, but they also move to reify these problematic representations of them through their social network online. In her work on Black women on celebrity gossip blogs, Steele (2016) utilized bell hooks’ instantiation of “talking back” to examine the ways in which “Black women negotiate the intersection of their racial and gender identities, [where] gossip is used as a tool to resist oppression” (p. 88). In a similar sense, the Black women viewers of *Light Girls* attend to the topic of colorism as a way to resist problematic representations of Black women more generally. Although this analysis focuses on users’ race and gender, it is important to note that, utilizing the digital intersectionality theory, “. . . users bring not only their racial backgrounds with them online, but they also carry their class, gender, sexuality, religious and other embodied identities and experiences” (Tynes et al., 2016, p. 36).

Television viewing has also been conceptualized as work in similar instances (Andrejevic, 2008), and I suggest that the integration of social networks allows for another layer of such affective labor for Black women. These responses served as examples to the sorts of live tweeting posts in which users attempted to reify some problematic tenets of the documentary, again, as *work*. In order to better understand how these responses get used up as labor, I provide the material functions of Twitter as a company that allows for, relies on, and creates affective labor as well as an analysis of OWN and its solicitation of these tweets.

Twitter and Corporate Goals

The technical elements and rhetoric of Twitter elucidate its function as fostering the necessary environment for a particular kind of affective labor. The early adoption of a user-centered focus with nouns such as “followers” emphasizes the community engagement aspect of the site. This focus on the user and her actions online further mystifies Twitter as a medium and replaces its corporeality with utility. It also vastly shapes Twitter in contrast to other social network sites, such as Facebook, as community-driven and grassroots focused. As researcher, Van Dijck (2013), noted: “In a very short period, the platform [Twitter] gained a critical mass of users, who wanted to engage in public or community debates, exchanging suggestions and opinions” (p. 71).

This user-centered approach not only provides a utilitarian site for users, but it also *depends* on them to exist. The sustenance of the grassroots model on Twitter falls directly in line with its larger corporate strategies, such as its rhetoric of “followers,” in other words.

In the Twitter discussion of *Light Girls* in January 2015, one user pointed to this kind of grassroots engagement on Twitter as opposed to television: “So. When watching things like this, I get more insight/thought provoking views from tweeters than I do the actual documentary.” The “genuine” and “organic” connection of these users, as they share their experiences and reactions as *opposed* to the film is evident in this tweet and is strategically constructed through the mechanics of Twitter. The positioning that Twitter has taken allows users to find their commiserating online as more “thought provoking” than the perhaps distant, industrial, and public nature of the documentary. This sort of interactivity, digital labor scholar Andrejevic (2008) found, “allows the viewers to take on the work of finding ways to make a show more interesting” (p. 28). I would add that Black women’s particular historical places in society regarding community engagement and activism (Collins, 1998) position them as “highly favored” not just by a network but also by an online networking site—a “conveyor” of information such as Twitter—as well.

Where users live tweet, Twitter benefits from the questioning of another medium rather than users turning inward to critique Twitter as a corporation, furthering the presumed neutrality of interactivity (Everett, 2008). The site’s corporate goals are twofold: serving the user and providing a space of connectivity while funding a business and making profits from the site. This tightrope becomes problematic, as scholars have pointed out, when users *become* the commodity (Van Dijck, 2013); more specifically, as Benkler (1999) cautioned much earlier, the users’ information *is* the commodity (p. 355). The elusiveness of how exactly users are the (affective) commodity continues to serve this function of utility.²

Specific material functions also create this online environment of real-time, community-like engagement. With the 2008 implementation of “trending topics,” millions of users could now connect over a few keywords in real time. The retweet function was launched in 2009 and allowed users to echo, in a sense, their followers’ tweets while adding their own thoughts. As Van Dijck (2013) points out, the “microsyntax” of Twitter became a sort of currency with the “@” function denoting interaction between users and retweeting as sort of a common language (p. 72). These features foster an online environment that promises not only the ease of connectivity but also the allowance of doing so in real time. The timeline feature of the site with short updates allows for on-the-ground posts, as research on protests and activism has shown (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). These functions, en masse, further Twitter’s goals as the “conveyor” of information, centering the user as the one who is doing the work.

Twitter is unique in the affective labor framework here because it has and continues to market itself as a sort of grassroots organization that allows

its users to be the ones to stand up to exploitative capitalism (among other institutions). The site does this through its user-centered rhetoric and its technical, timeline materialities. Twitter here positions Black women online to seek each other out during the airing of a television program about them, resulting in them “fixing” the narrative in an “organic” space. Twitter, then, fosters the affective labor of Black women through its rhetoric and technical functions of being the “neutral” site that simply “conveys” information (Everett, 2008). In this way, the work that these women do online as they “fix” the narrative of *Light Girls* is required for the sustenance of a social networking site that relies on the grassroots engagement of its Black women users.

OWN and Its Solicitation of Users’ Affective Labor

The colorism-centered documentaries, *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls*, brought new heights to OWN. *Dark Girls*, produced by Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, drew one million viewers when it first aired on Sunday, June 23, 2013 and “was the highest rated documentary in [Oprah Winfrey Network] history” (Obenson, 2013). As one writer mentioned, “clearly, OWN has the attention of black women, maybe more-so than the network’s first year, with shows that continue to rank highly amongst African American women audiences” (Obenson, 2013). By the close of 2014, OWN was on its third consecutive year of double-digit growth, with a 12% increase in African American viewers ages 25 to 54 (Obenson, 2013). Additionally, Nielsen reported that the network was number three on all of television for African American women. As *Light Girls* aired, thousands of tweets poured in evaluating and reifying the show.

The age range and gender of those online closely mirror the viewership reported during the airing of both documentaries—young adults (18–29) are most likely to use social network sites though usage among those 65 and older has more than tripled since 2010 to 2015 from 11% to 35% (Perrin, 2015). Women are also more likely to use online social media sites though the disparities are close with men: 68% of all women use social network sites as compared with 62% of men (Perrin, 2015). Specific to Twitter, 21% of Twitter users on the Internet are women in comparison to 25% of men and 28% are Black in comparison to 20% of Whites and 28% of Hispanics, according to Pew Internet Research (Duggan, 2015).

These numbers connect the site of Twitter to OWN in order to illuminate the relationship of this network with the demographics online.³ Social media functions here as a strategic integration with television, further boosting the appeal of a show (McPherson et al., 2012). This productive process displaces the work of the producer on to the viewer “who is increasingly becoming responsible for developing a unique demographic profile and relaying information it contains

to producers” (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 30). The OWN network further crafted their film’s presence online with an official Twitter user profile, “@LightGirlsMovie” accompanied by tweets such as “We will be live tweeting!” and “Has any statements or experiences on #LightGirls resonated with anybody yet?” The focus here is not to highlight the novelty of television viewers as a commodity or as discursive agent, a train of research that has long been attended to (Fuchs, 2014; Gray, 2004; Smythe, 1981). Instead, I point to the juncture of television and Twitter and the affective labor that Black women viewers or users are performing.

In critiquing OWN’s portrayal of colorism in the Black community, Black women online simultaneously separated themselves from this televisual representation of race while engaging with it as consumers. In other words, even in reifying the documentary, users online not only performed the work but also became a part of the target demographic of the film and its reach online. For instance, Black women online called out specific people that the film chose to interview as a part of *Light Girls*, while negotiating the specificities of what constitutes lightness: “Tatyana Ali isn’t light though. #LightGirls”; another user tweeted, “Tatyana Ali is considered light-skinned? I must be transparent. #LightGirls”; and, in quintessential Black Twitter fashion, a third user posted, “I don’t get it, why is Tatyana Ali on #LightGirls though? Do we need this confusion on #MLK day?” Other critiques were made of the film in its lack of addressing larger issues and causes of color stratification. One user posted a photo of a skeleton with the words superimposed, “Waiting for Light Girls to discuss white supremacy like.” This meme has the implication, then, that viewers had been waiting for the documentary to discuss larger societal issues, like White supremacy, and would have to wait forever (as signified through the image of the skeleton) before it was brought up.

The tweets critiquing the choices in production of the film serve to put these women to work as they conduct the labor of market researchers. As Andrejevic (2008) writes regarding audience participation to television shows

The result is the merging of two forms of audience participation: the effort viewers put into making the show interesting to themselves and the effort they devote to taking on the role of production assistants and attempting to provide feedback to writers and producers. (p. 26)

By using the intersectionality framework, I would add that specifically producing a film with Black women as the consumers or targets, enables another sort of labor, that of affective labor, when the television text purports to represent the users who subsequently provide feedback. The network provides this fodder of affective labor by intentionally targeting Black women (as seen in the viewership numbers and the title of these documentaries). In a further step, OWN solicits Black women through the integration of Twitter by requesting feedback

on specific portions of the film, and interacting with users by retweeting (mostly positive) posts. This space between *Light Girls* and Twitter involves more than a marketing strategy, however. The women imbricated in this discourse *about* them perform the effort to rework the narrative while providing feedback for the show.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (2015) theoretical and practical works point to the occurrence of (in)visibility of Black women through the intersectional framework. For example, Crenshaw's "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected" highlights the erasure of Black girls and women in the discourse of police killings. As such, the intersectional framework and application to the digital field allows a deeper look into, in this case, the means of production, extraction, and erasure involving conjoining identities. The sites of television and Twitter create the text and the "organic" space to then solicit users' reification of the narrative. Where the relationship between Black women and television has included a long history of contention and opportunities for openness (Smith-Shomade, 2002), the use of their affective labor between these two media highlights troubling exploitation of these media's reliance on bodies of color. The television text's role in this labor includes the connection of their programming to online content with which they solicit from users only to use in their own marketing (as seen on their Twitter page).

Cooper (2008) writes about "capitalist delirium" (p. 31) as, first, the drive to push beyond the limits and, second, to reimpose these limits. This, she writes, leads to surplus value, where certain lives are supposed to give for the regeneration of other lives. The work that these Black women viewers and users put in to consume a documentary *about* them, only to *speak* and *fix* the representative errors therein, feeds this "capitalist delirium." Congregating around and analyzing a television text has widely been practiced, especially in communities of color. With the "celebratory promise of the interactive era" (i.e., social network sites), however, users become a part of a larger process of production and commodification (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 37). The affect of these women, as they rewrite the narrative of colorism that was originally marketed to them, are fed into the online machine(s) to provide "vital energy"—that which sustains life elsewhere.

Discussion and Conclusion

This "life elsewhere" tends to seem obtuse or elusive, particularly in the conversation of capitalism and labor. However, there is a clear sort of regeneration present in this process: Viewers are marketed a television show, encouraged to "live tweet" and respond, then subsequently their comments online can be used to gauge the product for later production. The labor that goes into this sort of process involves historical violence concerning Black women as erased, at risk of injury, denied, vulnerable. As these women trudge up these affective responses

through the *Light Girls* documentary, they are doing the work of the film: “*Sharing* the untold stories and experiences of lighter-skinned women” as the documentary claims to do (emphasis added). Throughout this discussion, I will return to Kalindi Vora’s reading of affective labor as I further connect television and Twitter.

Vora (2015) writes, “Structures of race and gender continue to disguise the transmission of vital energy, that is, the value imparted by labor and more, between bodies and communities” (p. 26). In her analysis, call center agents and other laborers, such as information technology workers, served to uphold “India’s continuing racialized role as a primary provider in the gendered global service economy” (p. 26). In a similar way, I have analyzed the intersection of media as seeking out Black women online, as primary audience targets only to be *always already* relied upon as the source of labor. The fact of Oprah Winfrey’s race and gender does little to belie this critique, as we know that networks, and race, operate at a structural level rather than an individual one (Lotz, 2004). Between television and Twitter, Black women are sought out as necessary labor for the frameworks of both industries. From the bottom-up framework of Twitter to the solicitation of Black women’s issues (around colorism in this case), the affective labor of these women function in specific ways that digital labor frameworks have yet to acknowledge.

Black Twitter, here, functions as more than a commonplace safe haven for the disenfranchised in its makeup. Twitter’s mechanics and marketing (such as its retweet functionalities and “grassroots” goals) create a specific online environment for Black women to challenge normative structures. In other words, the marginalized gravitating toward Twitter and its technical affordances is by no means due solely to taste of users or by happenstance. As this article has argued, the intersection of race and gender along with television and social media brings to the surface Black users as a specific kind of commodity in the process of media consumption *and* production. As news sites reported after the airing of *Light Girls*, Twitter users’ involvement and interaction with the show serves to bolster general interest about the film and OWN more broadly. Where are the Black women in this conversation? Where are they left after watching representations of themselves on television and trying to (re)negotiate these images and messages through their online social network? What is to come of their affective work?

In her analysis, Vora (2015) writes of the call center agent’s labor as “supporting a projected persona who occupies an alien world that the agent must learn and then inhabit through fantasy” (p. 35). In a similar vein, Twitter fosters a sense of alienation: Black Twitter users project a persona into a sphere where their voices are heard, they are acknowledged and change is proposed (addressing White supremacy in *Light Girls*, for instance). Although identity work has shown that this is fruitful in the maintenance of marginalized communities, we need to push for more in our analyses of new media as users get exploited

outside of social networks through the use of other media where systems of oppression persist.

This case study has focused on OWN and *Light Girls* through a digital intersectionality framework to highlight the larger intersection between media (television and social network sites) as the juncture at which Black women become solicited and used up as labor. Certainly, extending this analysis of Black women's response to *Light Girls* to other media contexts and geographic regions would be fruitful. Further work can extend the affective labor framework to the larger Black diaspora as social network sites and television allow for and extend unique connections spatially and temporally. We also need to pay close attention to other, less studied, sites of online connection. For instance, with the increased use of messaging applications that delete sent messages, such as Snapchat, the mining of users' affective labor literally disappears. Where these messages might be stored and how companies are tapping into the commodification of these users suggest a trajectory furthering the promises of interaction and simultaneously the means of erasing the labor inherent therein. Through this critical case study, I have contended that we scholars need to pay closer attention to social media and other media intersections, as we understand how users, and some targeted users, become commodified. Black women have seen injury and disdain. As scholars and activists, it is our role to assess and disrupt how these women get swept up in the auspices of re-production into the "magical disappearance" of (online) labor.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The authors make it clear that these two trajectories are not the only means by which to theorize affect. See Gregg and Seigworth (2010, p. 5) for further reading.
2. For further reading on digital labor, see Terranova (2000); Bird (2011); and Milner (2009).
3. For further reading on connected viewing, such as live tweeting, see Holt and Sanson (2014).

References

- Andrejevic, M. (2002). The work of being watched: Interactive media and the exploitation of self-disclosure. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19(2), 230–248.
- Andrejevic, M. (2008). Watching television without pity: The productivity of online fans. *Television & New Media*, 9(1), 24–46.

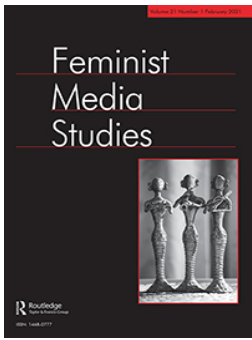
- Benkler, Y. (1999). Free as the air to common use: First amendment constraints on enclosure of the public domain. *SSRN Electronic Journal SSRN Journal*, 74, 354–446.
- Bird, S. E. (2011). Are we all producers now? *Cultural Studies*, 25(4–5), 502–516.
- Bonilla, Y., & Rosa, J. (2015). #Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1), 4–17.
- Brock, A. (2008). “Who do you think you are?”: Race, representation, and cultural rhetorics in online spaces. *Poroi*, 6(1), 15–35.
- Brock, A. (2012). From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(4), 529–549.
- Brock, A., Kvasny, L., & Hales, K. (2010). Cultural appropriations of technical capital. *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(7), 1040–1059.
- Chen, G. M., Williams, S., Hendrickson, N., & Chen, L. (2012). Male mummies: A social comparison perspective on how exaggeratedly overweight media portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and big momma affect how black women feel about themselves. *Mass Communication and Society*, 15(1), 115–135.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). Gender, black feminism, and black political economy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568(1), 41–53.
- Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality’s definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), 1–20.
- Cooper, M. (2008). *Life as surplus: Biotechnology and capitalism in the neoliberal era*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3–21.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 8(1), 139–157.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Crenshaw, K. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpriced, and underprotected*. In Center for intersectionality and social policy studies. Retrieved from <http://www.aapf.org/recent/2014/12/coming-soon-blackgirlsmatter-pushed-out-overpoliced-and-underprotected>
- Duggan, M. (2015). The demographics of social media users. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19/the-demographics-of-social-media-users/>
- Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015). Social media update 2014. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI_SocialMediaUpdate20144.pdf
- Everett, A. (2008). *Learning race and ethnicity: Youth and digital media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Florini, S. (2013). Tweets, Tweeps, and signifyin’: Communication and cultural performance on “Black Twitter”. *Television & New Media*, 15(3), 223–237.

- Franklin, S., & Lock, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Remaking life and death: Towards an anthropology of the biosciences – Franklin, Sarah & Margaret Lock* (1st ed.). Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media: A critical introduction*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Gaiser, T. J., & Schreiner, A. E. (2009). *A guide to conducting online research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Gaunt, K. D. (2015). Youtube, twerking & you: Context collapse and the handheld Co presence of black girls and Miley Cyrus. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 27(3), 244–273.
- Gray, H. (2004). *Watching race: Television and the struggle for blackness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth century America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Holt, J., & Kevin, S. (2014). *Connected viewing: Selling, streaming, & sharing media in the digital age* (pp. 1–234). New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Hunter, M. (2007). The persistent problem of colorism: Skin tone, status, and inequality. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 237–254.
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lee, J. (2010). *Service economies: Militarism, sex work, and migrant labor in South Korea*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lotz, A. D. (2004). Using ‘network’ theory in the postnetwork era: Fictional 9/11 US television discourse as a ‘cultural forum’. *Screen*, 45(4), 423–439.
- McPherson, K., Huotari, K., Cheng, F., Humphrey, D., Cheshire, C., & Brooks, A. (2012). *Glitter: A mixed-methods study of Twitter use during glee broadcasts* (pp. 67–170). Paper presented at Computer Supported Cooperative Work Conference, New York, NY: ACB.
- Milner, R. (2009). Working for the text: Fan labor and the new organization. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(5), 491–508.
- Moten, F. (2008). Black Op. *PMLA*, 123(5), 1743–1747.
- Noble, S. U. (2013). Google search: Hyper-visibility as a means of rendering black women and girls invisible. *InVisible culture: An electronic journal for visual culture*. Retrieved from <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/google-search-hyper-visibility-as-a-means-of-rendering-black-women-and-girls-invisible/>
- Noble, S. U., & Tynes, B. M. (2016). *The intersectional Internet: Race, sex, class and culture online*. New York, NY: Digital Formations.
- Obenson, T. (2013, July 2). Tyler Perry, ‘Dark Girls,’ Black actress special help OWN deliver best quarter in network history. Retrieved from <http://www.indiewire.com/>

- 2013/07/tyler-perry-dark-girls-black-actress-special-help-own-deliver-best-quarter-in-network-history-166973/
- Perrin, A. (2015). Social media usage: 2005–2015. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>
- Reynolds, C. (2015). “I am super straight and i prefer you be too”: Constructions of heterosexual masculinity in online personal ads for “straight” men seeking sex with men. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 39(3), 213–231.
- Robins, J. (2013, December 12). Oprah’s OWN makeover: From failure to success. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/maxrobins/2013/12/12/oprahs-own-makeover-from-failure-to-success/#1915ac64311a>
- Senft, T., & Noble, S. (2014). Race and social media. In J. Hunsinger & T. Senft (Eds.), *The social media handbook* (pp. 107–125). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith-Shomade, B. E. (2002). *Shaded lives: African-American women and television*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Smythe, D. W. (1981). On the audience commodity and its work. In F. W. Peers (Ed.), *Dependency road: Communications, capitalism, consciousness, and Canada* (Vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 22–51). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Spinoza, B. D. (1996). *Ethics* (S. Hampshire & E. M. Curley, Trans.). London, England: Penguin Books.
- Steele, C. (2016). Signifying’, bitching, and blogging: Black women and resistance discourse online. In S. Noble & B. Tynes (Eds.), *The intersectional Internet: Race, sex, class and culture online* (pp. 73–93). New York, NY: Digital Formations.
- Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text*, 18(2), 33–58.
- Thompson, V. (2014). Fragmented identity: Psychological insecurity and colorism among African Americans. In K. J. Norwood (Ed.), *Color matters: Skin tone bias and the myth of a post-racial America* (pp. 139–157). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tynes, B., Schuschke, J., & Noble, S. (2016). Digital intersectionality theory and the #Blacklivesmatter movement. In S. Noble & B. Tynes (Eds.), *The intersectional Internet: Race, sex, class and culture online* (pp. 21–40). New York, NY: Digital Formations.
- Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media* (pp. 68–89). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Vora, K. (2015). *Life support: Biocapital and the new history of outsourced labor*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Author Biography

Raven S. Maragh is a PhD student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. Her work lies at the intersection between race and ethnicity and digital media scholarship. She has a background in journalism from the University of Missouri (bachelors and masters) and has recently won a top paper award at the International Communication Association for her work on Black Twitter.



Between rage and silence: being Dalit on Twitter

Vijeta Kumar

To cite this article: Vijeta Kumar (2021) Between rage and silence: being Dalit on Twitter, *Feminist Media Studies*, 21:1, 157-158, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2021.1865605](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1865605)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1865605>



Published online: 21 Dec 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 173



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Between rage and silence: being Dalit on Twitter

Vijeta Kumar

Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India

Having a voice on Twitter has led me to embrace being Dalit a lot more willingly. I am curious as to how that happened and whether it changed the way I began seeing myself in my personal and work life. I didn't know many Dalit women before Twitter. In fact—none at all. Discovering Dalit women through Twitter gave me the vocabulary to confirm that I wasn't imagining the things that I was seeing, that struggle had language. This was hardly talked about in the feminist discourse that was largely available. Conversations about feminism rarely acknowledged caste although they did acknowledge class. The choice to confront class and not caste reveals a lot. Are we to assume that they are being used interchangeably?

I am trying to understand what it means to be a Dalit on Twitter. While it gives a way of connecting and collaborating with others like me, it also demands something. In an essay titled "The I in the Internet," writer Jia Tolentino argues that sometimes social media allows people to take more comfort in a sense of injury over a sense of freedom. She mentioned this in reference to the claims of victimhood made by MRAs on Twitter but I couldn't help wondering if this wasn't also applicable to the growing concerns I've had regarding how I came to embrace my own identity on and off Twitter. Part of this comes from the worry that one needs to keep producing an injured self over & over again to maintain it. Is there another way to be Dalit? Is there another way to be Dalit on social media? These are some questions I'd like to engage with.

I teach undergrad students at a city college. A fair number of students come from English-speaking homes and, in more ways than one, already know everything before I teach anything. When I first began, teaching was an acute awareness of a desperate distance between these students and myself. I felt small and stupid in the classroom all the time. A few of these students were close to Savarna colleagues and I shuddered to think if they also bonded over discussing my ineptitude at teaching.

I had no proof to show that they were doing this. My "hunch" or "feelings" are obviously not evidence. Even if the students began a tirade of displaying disinterestedness in my classes, that's not casteist, is it? I cannot prove that their rolling eyes and sniggering over my mispronunciations are casteist. To add to that, it somehow became my burden to wonder if it is casteist and if it isn't, to find out what it is.

It took me a while to discover Ambedkar and longer to discover a language to understand exactly what was happening to me in the classroom. When I did, some of the things began making sense to me. But oddly enough, it took Twitter to understand how angry and humiliated I had the right to be.

I was glad to have found a few Dalit women on Twitter who had struggled to be taken seriously and had paved the way for a few of us to make having a voice easier. They had been writing about their experiences and reading them was inspiring because it meant that I hadn't been imagining the hostility around me, that there was a language, there were words to explain what I was feeling and even though it was pitiful that I hadn't discovered them sooner, I was glad that I nevertheless had because now it meant that I could arm myself for the battle and that I wasn't alone in fighting it.

In the beginning, what I received from Twitter was a language to be angry in and the belief that I had every right to uphold it. It helped that I didn't have to try to be angry. All the wounds from childhood were fresh as were more recently made comments about quota, merit, and reservation. It was liberating to finally not look for "evidence" for something that was casteist or why I could be angry without wondering if I could be. I didn't have to do the explaining. I had entered a world where the Dalit feminists who came before me had worked really hard to make a space for more Dalit women to arrive, all the explaining already done, even though they had to be done again and again.

There were very few savarna feminists on Twitter who were vocal about caste and casteist behavior and were willing to learn about what they could do to become better allies. Encouraged by this, and by the fact that my anger had a growing audience, I began automatically to produce more anger.

I didn't know then that there is no end to the capacity of social media to consume anger and bitterness. And I became interested in how little it took to get people to listen, never mind the fact that—their listening never had a real impact on how Dalit women were perceived off and on social media. It still took Savarna liberals' questioning the hiring policies of some publishing houses for editors to look carefully at the lack of diversity at their workplaces. It still took Savarna support to call out casteist microaggressions. This meant that despite our rage, and the illusion that people were listening, our voices were not powerful enough.

Even so, you had to be a very angry Dalit on Twitter to be visible enough for people who wanted to hire you to write for them. You couldn't possibly be writing about songs and flowers and films to be noticed. That wasn't Dalit enough. What is a Dalit without stories of exclusion, harassment, and discrimination? There was a catch here though. You could be a "victim" only so long as you wouldn't be "too" angry. If you were, then you were too difficult to work with, too emotional, too blinded by rage to see nuances, too Dalit.

The problem with rage is that it speaks and understands only one language—the language it happens in. To understand rage, one needs to spend time with it, allow it to calm in your own head before you take it elsewhere but with Twitter, there is a non-stop acceptance of rage so much so that you can dump it there without even having to understand it yourself. When my rage became something other people engaged and interacted with, it meant that I no longer had to interact with it. That it had an audience meant that I had presence and this is worrisome because it meant that I could think less or not at all. And that is always dangerous.

Notes on contributor

Vijeta Kumar teaches English and Journalism at St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. She has written for India Today, HuffPost, First Post, and The Ladies Finger about caste, films, books, and food.

2 Visions of Black Feminism: #FastTailedGirls, #YouOKSis, #SayHerName

In chapter 1 we considered hashtags created to address violence against women that trended on Feminist Twitter, within wider Twitter networks, and in some cases within the larger public sphere. As that chapter illustrates, many of the hashtags that interrogate issues of gendered violence on Twitter are started by women of color, then picked up by others to address overarching experiences shared by women across racial, ethnic, religious, class, and other social identity categories. Yet what is missing from much of the mainstream commentary about trending feminist hashtags is not only that women of color often lead creative and political work on popular hashtags but also that they regularly create and lead racial and ethnic in-group conversations about feminist issues. These in-group hashtags provide critical challenges to feminist and ethnic counterpublics by centering intersectional frameworks and experiences.

For example, while much was celebrated about the #YesAllWomen hashtag following the Isla Vista shootings, women of color created #YesAllWhiteWomen to address how the original hashtag was appropriated in the service of a kind of “mainstream” or “white” feminism that is understood to be blind to intersectional politics—after all, it is not the case that *all* women

experience the same forms or severity of sexism. Likewise, Mikki Kendall, whom we discuss in greater depth later in the chapter, created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen in response to prominent white feminists on Twitter coming to the defense of self-proclaimed male feminist Hugo Schwyzer despite years of mistreatment of women of color online.¹ #YesAllWhiteWomen and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen were disparaged by some as divisive and unreasonable for pointing out that women of color face unique forms of oppression.² Similarly, it was only with intentional pushing from women of color and white allies in the feminist counterpublic that journalists in 2017 corrected their initial attribution of the #MeToo hashtag from Alyssa Milano to Tarana Burke, who had originated the hashtag several years earlier.

In this chapter we focus on hashtags often ignored or excluded from celebratory accounts of Feminist Twitter and Black Twitter—those created by Black feminists to challenge the gatekeeping narratives in both. We consider, in particular, the significant role that Black women play in Twitter counterpublics and how these women, through hashtag activism, insist on a politics of intersectionality. Black women's voices on Twitter challenge not only mainstream narratives about race, gender, and sexuality but also those within gender and race counterpublics themselves.

For this chapter Jamie Nesbitt Golden, cocreator of the hashtag #FastTailedGirls, has contributed a reflection on pages 36 to 37.

Black Feminist Thought Moves Online

Black people are instrumental to the success of social media, and to the success of Twitter specifically. According to a 2018 study

by the Pew Research Center, Black Americans use Twitter more than any other racial demographic in the United States.³ Black women especially use social media platforms to grow awareness about intracommunity concerns, turning Twitter into a town forum to discuss important topics. Here we examine three Twitter hashtags that raised awareness about Black feminist interests among narrow and broad audiences. The hashtags #FastTailed-Girls, #YouOKSis, and #SayHerName are among those that illustrate the power of Black feminist politics online.

The roots of Black feminism in the United States can be traced to the work of Anna Julia Cooper in *A Voice from the South* in 1892. Cooper wrote, “[The colored woman] is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both.”⁴ Cooper’s words express the unique positionality of Black women who battle both racism and sexism at the same time as not independent but intersecting experiences. This “double jeopardy” has also been discussed by other Black feminists, including Frances Beal, whose 1969 pamphlet (an early form of social media) detailed how Black women are economically disprivileged in relation to both Black men and white women.⁵

In 1977 the Combahee River Collective published a statement that included the first use of the term “identity politics.” The collective wrote, “This focusing upon our own oppression is the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else’s oppression.” The collective articulated the particular nature of their perspective as Black women radicals, stating, “The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual,

heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.”⁶ Their words laid the foundation for the Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s solidifying the concept in the term *intersectionality* in 1989. Crenshaw’s work in relation to discrimination law details that race and gender hierarchies don’t have an additive negative effect but rather intersect and interact to produce uniquely discriminatory realities for those multiply marginalized. In her canonical text, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Crenshaw explains, “My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women’s race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.”⁷ Since then, Crenshaw’s distillation of the term “intersectionality” has become popular not only in academic scholarship but also in popular culture, activism, and politics.

Social media, for example, have allowed terms like “intersectionality” and “identity politics” to circulate and reach broader audiences. One of the authors of this book, Moya Bailey, coined the related term *misogynoir*, which has similarly diffused through online spaces largely owing to other Black women’s embrace of the term. *Misogynoir* describes the “particular brand of hatred directed at Black women in U.S. visual & popular culture.”⁸ A large body of scholarship has documented the stereotypical and dehumanizing way Black women have been depicted in U.S. films and on television, but even on social media sites such as

Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter, examples of misogynoir are rife. For example, the hashtag #RuinABlackGirlsMonday was created to share photos and selfies of voluptuous white women who are portrayed as being more attractive than Black women, particularly because they have physical characteristics associated with Black women without being Black. Black women's lived experiences and the way those experiences can be understood through intersectionality and misogynoir animate the hashtags discussed in this chapter.

#FastTailedGirls Challenge the Narrative

Longtime bloggers and real-life friends Mikki Kendall and Jamie Nesbitt Golden were early adopters of Twitter, joining the platform in 2009 and 2008, respectively. In 2013 they teamed up on a digital effort they dubbed "Hood Feminism," drawing on their Black working-class roots and the everyday grappling with and subverting of gendered power by the women in their families.⁹ These women, they note, would likely eschew the term "feminist" because of its association as something for privileged white women. During the time they were building Hood Feminism, singer R. Kelly performed with Lady Gaga at the November 24, 2013, American Music Awards, sparking a Twitter debate about his continued celebrity despite his predatory sexual behavior toward Black girls.¹⁰ Spurred by this conversation on Twitter and a blog post inspired by Michonne Micheaux on "Fast Black Girls," Kendall tweeted on November 29, "If I did a chat for #FastTailedGirls as part of a greater discussion of Black women's sexuality would y'all participate?" In less than twenty-four hours the hashtag was trending on Twitter.¹¹ In total, over 20,000 tweets containing the hashtag appeared, the vast majority of

which were posted the day following Kendall's request.¹² Among these tweets there emerged a core network of 131 unique users, mostly Black women, whom Kendall and Golden led in a coordinated conversation about the ways Black girls are dehumanized, objectified, and then punished for men's predatory behavior toward them.

On Fast-Tailed Girls

Jamie Nesbitt Golden

As of this writing, there have been a number of discussions about the rape allegations involving *Birth of a Nation's* Nate Parker and his writing partner, Jean Celestin. While some of those discussions have been thoughtful and productive, others have not. Recently, Roland Martin, a respected veteran TV journalist, took to Twitter to defend Parker, blaming Black feminists for his movie's dismal box office showing. Martin believed it was because Black women had an issue with Parker's white wife, not that Parker may have been complicit in a heinous act resulting in the victim later taking her own life.

This is the norm in conversations about rape and sexual assault. Misplaced blame and deflection are often the order of the day, and both at the expense of victims. For Black women, doubly so. The myth of the "fast-tailed girl" is imprinted on us before we take our first steps. It follows us from playground to prom, from college campus to boardroom. Though I was fortunate to have a mother and grandmother who didn't believe the myth, most Black women I knew weren't so lucky. After a sobering discussion about the R. Kelly case (prompted by his controversial American Music Awards performance with Lady Gaga), Mikki and I started the #FastTailedGirls tag on Twitter in hopes of dispelling the myth. We had no idea how much of an impact it would have. Women from across the country—across the world—were sharing their stories. The myth of the fast-tailed girl spanned not

only generations, but cultures. We watched as this conversation evolved from a few uncomfortable anecdotes to a place of absolution and healing. We also watched as people attempted to derail and shut down the conversation.

It was shocking, even for us, that so many folks were so unwilling to hear these stories or examine their own complicity in rape culture. We would eventually learn that when discussions of sexual violence were centered on Black girls and women, our most vocal opponents would be Black men. The blowback illustrated the necessity of the conversation. What we were doing was, in fact, making a difference. We didn't realize it at the time, but soon we were seeing write-ups in publications, message board debates, and academic exploration. While a number of journalists, media figures, and scholars were dismissing digital activism as some sort of "New Age slacktivism," people were picking up the mantle and lending their labor and voices. As many have said, Twitter is just one component of activism, one that has proved to be extremely vital. From the Arab Spring to Ferguson to the ongoing battle for reproductive rights, we've all witnessed the power of 140 characters. It has given social capital to those previously without. It has democratized communication. It has given people the ability not only to shape their own narratives but to share those narratives with the world. The role of Twitter and other forms of social media will always be to amplify, connect, and nurture marginalized voices. I say nurture because this work will tax you, body and soul. The importance of finding a community that nurtures you cannot be overstated.

You won't make it without one.

The terminology “fast-tailed” in AAVE (African American Vernacular English) is used to describe young women who are supposedly overeager and sexually curious or promiscuous. Such language absolves men interested in underage girls of their prurient interests and reflects misguided respectability politics that operate as a form of victim blaming and perpetuate misogynistic ideas about Black women and girls. As Kendall details on the #FastTailedGirls hashtag, “One of the reasons #fasttailed-girls was so specific in focus is because while we all experience #rapeculture we don’t all do it the same.”¹³ With the hashtag, Kendall names not only the way Black girls are blamed for their victimization but the ways in-group members are complicit in that victimization.

While #FastTailedGirls tweets focus on the sexualization of Black girls within the Black community, they also make clear connections to and critiques of larger white supremacist tropes that have constructed Black women and girls as “always rapable.” In the discourse of the hashtag’s intracommunity critique, the uplifting of Black women’s stories through personal testimony and larger systemic critiques happen simultaneously. Black women use the hashtag to reflect on their girlhoods, sharing stories of being told that they were acting too grown up for their age for undertaking simple everyday behaviors, and having to counter assumptions that they were seeking adult male attention as children. Hashtag creators Kendall and Golden respectively tweeted, “Some 40–60% of Black girls are sexually abused before 18. Many don’t report it because they know they’ll be called #FastTailedGirls,” and “#FastTailedGirls is why 20-something dudes are allowed to have 14 y.o. GFs. It’s why R. Kelly got off.” Kendall further tweeted that “15 year old me believed every ‘you’re grown where it matters’ lie. That’s what

you say when grooming prey. #FastTailedGirls”; and “I need y’all to understand that if you can blame a 14 year old for her own murder because #FastTailedGirls then I hope you go to hell.” Other top users of the hashtag make up a who’s who of Black feminist twitter. @FeministaJones, for example, offered “#Fast-TailedGirls is why when our daughters go missing, they get no media airtime. They’re not ‘innocent’ or precious. Must be runaway hoes,” and @HoodFeminism wrote, “This is about telling our stories and healing however we can. #FastTailedGirls.” @GradientLair, the Twitter account for the Black feminist blog authored by user @Trudy, tweeted “Fast Tailed” Girls: Examining The Stereotypes and Abuse That Black Girls Face #FastTailed-Girls,” along with a link to a post expanding on the need for and the background of the hashtag.

Despite starting as an intracommunity conversation, the hashtag was covered by several mainstream outlets, including NPR, Bustle, and XOJane. No doubt building on the success of Kendall’s earlier (and to some, controversial) 2013 #Solidarity-IsForWhiteWomen hashtag, #FastTailedGirls provided a candid conversation on misogynoir and its deleterious effects.¹⁴ The hashtag picked up additional steam when actress Rashida Jones tweeted that young pop stars should “#stopactinglike-whores,” sparking renewed debate over how Black girls are represented in the media and how people of color internalize these representations.

Notably, this hashtag preceded the feminist hashtag evolution we traced in the last chapter and offers critiques of both feminist and Black uplift narratives that exclude the intersection of Black women’s experiences with sexual violence. For example, @FeministaJones also tweeted, “The Black Power movements (or whatever) are deeply rooted in supporting BM [Black Men] above

all else, even those who abuse BW [Black Women] & girls #Fast-TailedGirls,” and @deluxvivens offered a critique of the limitations and privilege of reclaiming sexist language in the feminist movement with “want to know why so many woc [Women of Color] loathe #slutwalk? check out #fasttailedgirls.” Here we see Black women on Twitter calling out and calling in both Black men and white women whose political efforts toward liberation have relied on tactics too narrow to fully include Black women’s experiences. The hashtag then is an enactment of a politics of intersectionality and insists on the political legitimacy of Black women’s experiences and critiques.

Several users popular in other networks we discuss in this book linked their own hashtag conversations to those happening on #FastTailedGirls. For example, @JennMJackson, the creator of the hashtag #YesAllWhiteWomen, directed users following her hashtag to check out stories being told on #FastTailedGirls, tweeting, “#YesALLWhiteWomen meet #FastTailedGirls. This is why it’s not #YesALLWomen.” Others connected #FastTailedGirls to the next hashtag we examine here, #YouOKSis, noting the way the ideologies that construct Black women and girls as always sexually available make #YouOKSis interventions necessary. Here it is clear that members of these networks understand their hashtag use and creation as activism as they self-reflexively position the hashtag in relation to other on- and offline activist causes.

Black women using the hashtag also expressed catharsis in being able to share their stories, and began a conversation for shifting communal norms. Actress Reagan Gomez-Preston offered, “If we don’t stick up for our girls, and stop blaming them for the actions of grown men, who will? SMH. #Fast-TailedGirls.” Her words were a call to action to do away with this



Figure 2.1

Co-occurrence of #FastTailedGirls and #YouOKSis as a “revolutionary act,” according to one Twitter user.

accusatory trope. Feminista Jones added that communities need to “‘Turn off’ the accusations of being #FastTailedGirls and the street harassment many begin experiencing at age 11.”¹⁵

In 2017, the hashtag came full circle when R. Kelly was once again in the spotlight for allegedly creating an abusive sex ring of teenagers in his multiple homes around the country. The revived interest in Kelly’s abhorrent behavior resulted in a new hashtag campaign, #MuteRKelly, and a revival of #FastTailedGirls. Author Jamilah Lemieux wrote, “Black women writers, like Mikki Kendall and Jamie Nesbitt Golden, have written articles and used hashtags like #FastTailedGirls to draw attention to not only Kelly’s behavior, but cultural norms that allow Black girls to be treated as if they have the sexual agency of adult women in a

world in which far too many adults of all races believe that Black girls are more ‘mature’ than their peers.”¹⁶

Teaching Intervention with #YouOKSis

Just six months after #FastTailedGirls trended, Twitter user @FeministaJones began #YouOKSis. She tweeted, “If each of us who witnesses #streetharassment is brave enough to ask, ‘You OK sis?’ we might make a difference, however small.” Mia McKenzie of the now defunct blog *Black Girl Dangerous* replied, “@FeministaJones Can this be a thing? Can we, like, start a national #YouOKSis? Campaign?”

The hashtag prompted a robust discussion among Black women about experiences with street harassment and bystander intervention. As Jones explained in an interview with TheGrio.com, “A lot of the conversations about street harassment in the mainstream media only show white women as the faces of victims. Rarely do you see Black women as the face of the victim.”¹⁷ Jones alludes to the fast-tailed girls conversation by talking about the ways Black women are not believable victims of sexual violence. By using the term “sis,” Jones, like Kendall and Golden, and like much of Black Twitter conversation, calls on AAVE and references Black codes of speech that interpolate other Black folks as kin—in this case, Black women as sisters.¹⁸ #YouOKSis thus centers Black women’s experiences of street-based sexual violence but also has the capacity to hold other women’s stories, as “sis” recalls the use of “sisterhood” and “sister” in the larger feminist movement.

#YouOKSis first appeared following Jones’s original tweet on July 7, 2014, and trended over the next three days as users heeded McKenzie’s call to participate. Unlike many of the other

hashtags examined in this book, the popularity of #YouOKSis extends well beyond a single burst of activity. Only 21 percent of the nearly seven thousand tweets in our data set were posted within a week of Jones's original tweet, and the hashtag persisted with dozens or hundreds of new tweets per day through June 30, 2015, the end of our data collection window. The longevity of the conversation can be attributed to Jones herself, who, along with other women of color, regularly attached the hashtag to news stories they shared about street harassment. Indeed, the most popular co-occurring hashtags with #YouOKSis included #StreetHarassment, #WeGotYouSis, and #YesAllWomen, suggesting connections with broader conversations about harassment and other forms of violence against women.

From its inception, #YouOKSis offered users and observers real-time storytelling and modeling of the need for bystander intervention. In this case, the hashtag users make clear that because of the intersections of racist and sexist assumptions about Black women and girls, their harassment and abuse often happen in public, with little outrage or formal intervention. The hashtag is a directive to compel bystanders to simply ask the victim-focused question, "You OK Sis?," as a demonstration of a politics of care for women of color being harassed, as well as a clear protest against their treatment.

Using #YouOKSis, many adult Black women shared stories of helping other women and girls in situations when no one else moved to do so, and also encouraged men and other people with privilege to similarly step in. Performer @PiaGlenn, for example, recalled through a series of threaded tweets a harrowing experience that happened only the day before in which a man spat on her and yelled threats at her in a subway station as bystanders looked on after she rejected his advances.¹⁹ Explaining that



Figure 2.2

Hashtag creator Feminista Jones featured in a promotional tweet advertising *NewsOne Now*'s discussion of street harassment.

"It's literally about getting from point A to B without feeling under attack. And it's constant. #YouOKSis," Glenn detailed how her recent experience was just one of many that she and other women face on a daily basis in public spaces. Similarly, user @tjhnTEE live-tweeted the aggression she observed on the train toward other Black women and told her own stories of being harassed on the street on the way home from such daily activities as her job as a nurse or attending a yoga class with a friend. The

ordinary places and behaviors in these stories worked together to illustrate that “safety” is not something enjoyed by women of color in even the most mundane public spaces.

Exchanges like those seen in the below thread, on which hashtag creator @FeministaJones notes the prevalence of men presuming access not only to women’s bodies but to their property and environment, and the resulting replies of commiseration as well as comfort, are common in the network.

Beyond storytelling, the tag directly critiqued toxic masculinity and male entitlement. @OhBehave shared, “I gotta tell men I’m underage or have a boyfriend for them to understand I’m not interested bc ‘No’ won’t work #YouOKSis,” and @afemal3pr observed in response to one of the common excuses used to downplay the violence of street harassment that “‘It’s just a compliment’ [is] men’s sense of entitlement and inability to handle rejection. #YouOKSis.” Male user @chaddgway noted, “Men need to pay attention to #YouOKSis to understand how their privilege, hyper masculine, patriarchal and predatory behavior needs to stop.” Other male allies in the network, including @___PantheR and @Soulfulbrotha, used the hashtag to share stories of Black women being assaulted and murdered on the street by intimate and prospective partners, actively soliciting and sharing various stories from Black women, who recounted details of being harassed, assaulted, insulted, and stalked by men in a range of public places during both their childhood and adulthood. Perhaps most important, these few men in the network responded to other men who attempted to derail the conversation. For example, @Soulfulbrotha replied to one user who suggested that the hashtag was “sad” and put “Black men and Black women at war” with “Stop trying to sabotage the hash tag peon,” and @___PantheR replied to Black men who suggested

The image shows a tweet from the user **House Evangelista** (@FeministaJones) posted on July 5, 2015, at 7:23 PM. The tweet text reads: "I *just* retweeted a shitload of #YouOKSis tweets by women saying men got in their cars, opened their car doors, hopped on their cars, etc". The tweet has 41 retweets and 25 likes. Below the tweet is a reply box with the placeholder text "Tweet your reply". Three replies are visible:

- Victoria** (@AVocalistsRival) replies: "@FeministaJones I was out running. Light was green. Car full of men make a right, open the passenger door, reach for me. So scary #youoksis". This reply has 3 comments, 44 retweets, and 22 likes.
- activist amy** (@AmyMeyer5) replies: "@AVocalistsRival so incredibly sick, I'm so sorry sister :(#YouOkSis".
- KRZYWY LAS** (@KRZYWYLAS) replies: "@FeministaJones once had a dude block me on bike path. Leant on handlebars and wouldn't let go until I gave him my number. Fun times."

Figure 2.3

Feminista Jones followers react to and commiserate with posts on #YouOKSis.

that the idea that speaking to women on the street is threatening was simply a stereotype with “An unlimited amount of women can say otherwise,” “Look up #YouOkSis.”

The hashtag also documented the ultimate consequence for Black women who reject men or face violence from romantic partners. For example, also employing the next hashtag we discuss, @FeministaJones tweeted, “#SayHerName: On Janese Talton-Jackson, Mary Spears And How Street Harassment Is Killing Black Women #YouOKSis,” along with a link to a *Hello Beautiful* blog post discussing the 2014 and 2016 murders of the two women by men who responded with violence after their advances were rejected. This tweet and post connect the larger phenomenon of the violence Black women face from intimates and strangers to the invisibility of these stories in larger conversations about violence against both women and Black Americans. In this vein the hashtag also became something of a place for memorialization (which we discuss more below with #SayHerName) as users shared the names and stories of both cisgender and transgender Black and Latinx women killed by partners, would-be partners, and on the streets by men; these included Shanique Bellamy, who was six months’ pregnant when she and her two children were shot while sleeping; Dominique Tibedeaux, teen Sakia Gunn, Keisha Jenkins, Tamara Dominguez, and others.

#YouOKSis was taken up by media-makers in the Black public sphere on and off Twitter. Notably, *NewsOne Now*, the news program of TV One—a network aimed at African American adults—brought Jones on to discuss the hashtag as an entrée for conversations about bystander intervention and misogynoir. The Grio, a news site that targets African Americans, also covered the hashtag. #YouOKSis was subsequently covered

in mainstream news outlets, including the *Atlantic*, Mic.com, and *Forbes*.

#YouOKSis succinctly summed up a call to intervene in the everyday violence of intersecting marginal identities that many women of color recognized. The hashtag has remained relevant, resurfacing in 2018 conversations about #MeToo, as well as the headline-grabbing abusive behavior of rapper XXXTentacion.²⁰

Black Women's Lives Matter: #SayHerName

While campaigns that protest state violence faced by Black men have garnered high-profile attention at various points in U.S. history, Black feminists have long challenged this limited focus, arguing that state-sanctioned violence has a unique and disproportionate effect on Black women.²¹ Whether in Reagan-era propaganda that popularized the mythological figure of the



Figure 2.4

A #SayHerName tweet from Color of Change the day after an organized vigil remembering Black women and girls killed by police.

“welfare queen” as justification for divestment from social service programs or in the contemporary realities regarding the high rates of eviction and homelessness Black women face, the state has been and remains violent toward Black women.²² As Crenshaw pointed out in her legal work on intersectionality, even state-sponsored policy seeking to address systemic inequities has been negligent in acknowledging or addressing intersectional oppression. In recent years, the deaths of Black women and girls like Aiyana Stanley-Jones and Sandra Bland as the result of overzealous police officers sparked activism that led activists and scholars to insist we “say her name” to prevent the erasure of women of color victims of violence.

In 2015 the African American Policy Forum, cofounded by Crenshaw and Columbia Law School, hosted a weeklong webinar series dedicated to discussing the state of Black women and girls in the United States. The event, titled “Her Dream Deferred,” offered daily streaming of panel discussions accompanied by real-time Twitter conversations. #HerDreamDeferred, evocative of Langston Hughes’s 1951 poem about the Black nihilism of Harlem, did not resonate widely as a hashtag, but the first day’s webcast conversation, on Monday, March 30, 2015, included a different one, #SayHerName, concise enough to gain popularity. The day’s conversation began with emotional testimony from Martinez Sutton, the brother of Rekia Boyd, who had been shot in the head by an off-duty police officer and left brain-dead. Martinez Sutton, who had to pull the plug on his baby sister, struggled to speak through tears, noting that a fatal shot to the head is not how white women are treated by police officers over interpersonal conflict or even crime.²³

After Sutton’s powerful introduction, scholar and activist Andrea Ritchie discussed sexual violence committed by police,

- a) Safiya U Noble PhD Retweeted
ColorOfChange.org @ColorOfChange · 30 Mar 2016
 Her Dream Deferred 2016: A Week on the Status of Black Women Series
bit.ly/1q3glWv #SayHerName
- 
- A WEEK ON THE STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN**
- Black Women & Girls Lives Matter**
- AAPF'S SECOND ANNUAL
Her Dream Deferred 2016: A Week on the Status of Black Women
- Monday 3/28: #BlackGirlsMatter: Countering Criminalization In & Out of School
- Tuesday 3/29: #StandingUpForMom: Resisting the War on Black Single Mothers
- Wednesday 3/30: Race & Gender Below the Mason-Dixon: Advancing the Status of Women of Color in the South
- Thursday 3/31: The Unspeakable Truth: The Reality of Sexual Assault at HBCLUs
- Friday 4/1: Neglected at Home After Serving Abroad: The Story of Black Women Veterans
- b) Andrea Fitchie and 5 others Retweeted
AAPF @AAPolicyForum · 21 Mar 2017
 5 yrs today since 22 y/o #RekiaBoyd was killed by an off-duty Chicago police officer for nothing other than laughing w/ friends #SayHerName
- 
- #SAYHERNAME**
- REKIA BOYD**
 March 21, 2012 / Chicago, IL

Figure 2.5

Color of Change and African American Policy Forum tweets using #SayHer-Name to publicize events, share the AAPF report, and commemorate victims



Figure 2.5 (continued)

referencing Daniel Holtzclaw, an officer accused and subsequently convicted on eighteen counts of rape, sodomy, and burglary, who targeted vulnerable Black women on the fringes of society who he knew would fear coming forward or would not be believed. The day's conversation detailed other ways Black women and girls have been targeted by police violence, including the cases of Tanisha Anderson and Michelle Cusseaux. The presenters argued that without a racial justice analysis that includes Black women and girls, the systemic nature of state violence can never be fully addressed.

Thus, #SayHerName, a more academic and policy-rooted hashtag than those we looked at earlier in this chapter, represents a clear melding of the Black feminist impulses that animate #FastTailedGirls and #YouOKSis with the various #BlackLives-Matter networks we examine later in the book. #SayHerName began by focusing on the extrajudicial murders of Black women

by police but evolved to shed light on all state and communal violence faced by Black women. For example, the Twitter account for BYP100 (Black Youth Project), a Chicago youth-based racial justice organization, shared infographics of statistics, such as “Rape & sexual assault are the 2nd highest crime committed by the police,” along with the hashtags #SayHerName and #BlackWomenMatter.

From its inception, #SayHerName embraced a diverse group of women of color, including LGBTQIA and nonbinary Black people. In May 2015 the AAPF capitalized on the growing use of the hashtag by releasing a report titled *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women* and organizing a national day of action on May 21, 2015.²⁴ The day of action allowed more names to come to the fore and expanded the reach of the hashtag. The *Say Her Name* report included the story of Mya Hall, a Black trans woman who was shot by National Security Agency Police after driving into a restricted area and failing to respond to orders to stop. The report also included the story of the New Jersey 7, seven Black lesbians who were arrested on charges of assault, with some subsequently convicted of those charges, after defending themselves from street harassment. The AAPF report, which is intended as a resource for the media, organizers, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to better understand and address Black women’s experiences of profiling and policing, took on the task of challenging the common assumption that Black women and girls are victims of the state only through their relationships with Black men who have been killed and harmed by police violence.

But it was after the July 2015 death of Sandra Bland—and in the midst of the mainstream breakthrough of the Black Lives Matter movement—that the #SayHerName hashtag reached a

tipping point in visibility. Bland, who was found hanging from a plastic trash bag-turned-noose in a Texas jail after being arrested, inexplicably, for assault following a traffic stop by an overzealous officer, became the most visible victim on the #SayHerName hashtag. Her death was ruled a suicide, prompting a wave of protests as people questioned how someone successful, happy, and starting a new job in a few weeks could deteriorate to the point of wanting to end her own life, and after video footage of the arresting officer throwing her to the ground and threatening her with his taser surfaced. Among the high-profile figures who spoke out about Bland, actor Jessie Williams of ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* tweeted a series of twenty-four questions about Bland's treatment and subsequent death. Other celebrities, including comedian Margaret Cho, Broadway star Audra McDonald, singer Keyshia Cole, and reality star Kim Kardashian West, all tweeted using #SandraBland, contributing to her hashtagified name alone reaching 200,000 mentions by July 16, 2015.²⁵

Our #SayHerName data include almost 170,000 tweets sent by more than 60,000 unique users, connected by more than 75,000 retweet and mention links between May 1, 2015, and May 1, 2017. Unsurprisingly, the hashtag trended on the National Day of Action organized by the AAFP as the kickoff event for the campaign (May 21, 2015) and in mid-July 2015, as the public became aware of the suspicious circumstances surrounding Bland's death. The hashtag continued to trend periodically, often during events associated with the criminal and civil proceedings related to Bland's death and with similarly suspicious deaths of Black women in police custody.

#SayHerName is ideologically and discursively connected to the broader Black Lives Matter movement, with #BlackLivesMatter appearing alongside #SayHerName more often than any other

a)

Andrea Fitchie and 4 others Retweeted



ColorOfChange.org @ColorOfChange · 15 Jul 2015

Police cannot police themselves. Where is the video footage? #SandraBland
#SayHerName #WhatHappenedToSandraBland



12 508 228

b)

NAACP and 3 others Retweeted



BYP100 @BYP_100 · 16 Jul 2015

#SandraBland encouraged us in this video to use our voice to create change.
Will you #SayHerName & demand answers?



34 1.8K 1.1K

Figure 2.6

#SayHerName tweets from Color of Change and the Chicago-based BYP100 (Black Youth Project) commemorating Sandra Bland and demanding accountability.

hashtag by a considerable margin. Additional hashtags emerged alongside #SayHerName, including several related to Bland (such as #JusticeForSandy and #SandySpeaks) and the chilling #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, through which Black people interrogated the state of police-citizen relations by preemptively calling for action should they too one day die under suspicious circumstances while in police custody.²⁶ The hashtag was connected to related intersectional feminist hashtags, including #MeToo and #BlackTransLivesMatter, and to broader discursive memes of resistance against oppressive state power such as #NeverForget, a phrase commonly invoked in reference to the Holocaust but also invoked in this network in the context of commemorating victims of racist and misogynistic violence. The hashtag was also used to commemorate the women victims of the June 2015 white supremacist shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and users immediately connected the church's history of resistance to the larger goals of the network.²⁷

As the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign heated up, activists pushed for Democrats to acknowledge women victims of police violence. Candidate Bernie Sanders was interrupted on two separate occasions by Black Lives Matter protesters demanding he "say her name."²⁸ During a chance meeting at a D.C. restaurant with Sandra Bland's mother, Sanders promised to say her name during a debate. On October 13, 2015, he followed through, responding to an audience question asking about Black Lives Matter during the first Democratic primary debate: "Black lives matter," Sanders said. "The reason those words matter is the African-American community knows that on any given day, some innocent person like Sandra Bland can get into a car and then three days later she's going to end up dead in jail."²⁹ His

naming of Bland prompted a Google search surge of her story as more members of the general public became aware of her death.

Actor and musician Janelle Monáe, who has participated in multiple hashtag streams we discuss in this book, took her frustration to the recording studio, creating “Hell You Talmbout,” both an ode to those recently slain by police violence and a call to action. The lyrics chant:

Aiyana Jones, say her name
 Aiyana Jones, say her name
 Aiyana Jones, say her name
 Aiyana Jones, won't you say her name?
 Sandra Bland, say her name
 Sandra Bland, say her name
 Sandra Bland, say her name
 Sandra Bland, won't you say her name?

Monáe continues to name Black men and women slain by extrajudicial violence, hauntingly including both recent and historical victims, among them fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman.³⁰ Monáe uses “say her name” and “say his name” to link these murder cases across time, space, and gender, giving listeners a sense of the long *durée* of racist violence in the United States. A similar commitment to historical memory is seen in #SayHerName tweets highlighting historical cases of state violence against Black women, such as the 1984 killing of Eleanor Bumpers by the NYPD, alongside more recent ones.

As a digital utterance engaging a variety of political demands around visibility, state violence, feminism, and racial justice, #SayHerName plays two primary roles on Twitter. First, it



Figure 2.7

AAPF #SayHerName tweet memorializing Eleanor Bumpers.

eulogizes women of color killed as a result of misogynoiristic violence, insisting that their lives and stories matter. On Twitter, this came to include cis and trans Black and Latinx women and girls killed by police or while in police custody, as well as those killed as the result of a larger culture of neglect regarding the safety of Black and brown women. Second, it demands visibility of these stories in the name of specific interventions

into systemic and intersectional forms of oppression. This visibility is frequently accompanied not only by the invocation of names and stories but also by statistics, political demands, and calls for policy interventions. For example, the Chicago-based activist organization BYP100 (Black Youth Project) frequently posted real-time videos of protest actions in Chicago and elsewhere related to the deaths of women of color, as well as news and updates pertaining to planned future actions and locations. These #SayHerName videos were created during a twenty-six-city coordinated effort and included speeches by a diverse range of activists, from Rekia Boyd's brother, to the founders of the AAPF, to legal advocates commenting on the cases of Shelly Frey, Shantel Davis, and Alberta Spruill.

At the Chicago #SayHerName action, Shelly Frey's advocates told the story of how she and friends were approached by an off-duty police officer-turned-security guard who fired at them. Frey's mother choked back tears as she said her daughter left behind two young children. The poet Aja Monet offered words of affirmation for Black women in the wake of all the ways they are demonized in society and subsequently made disposable. In D.C., #SayHerName organizers' videos highlighted the hail of NSA gunfire that killed Mya Hall, a trans woman misgendered in early reports of her death, as well as the death of Natasha Mckenna in Alexandria, Virginia, while in police custody. The creators of these videos wanted to make sure that even those who were unable to attend in person would be able to bear witness to the stories of these lives through Twitter and the hashtag #SayHerName.

Further, the AAPF and Color of Change shared informational statistics and action items about violence against Black women and girls alongside the hashtag, including the statistics that

Black women are “3 to 4 times more likely to be incarcerated than white women,” “Black girls are 6x more likely to be suspended than white girls,” and “Black women are 243% more likely than white women to die from pregnancy or childbirth related causes.” These informational tweets usually included links to studies or policy recommendations that members of the #SayHerName network could read and share further.

As these tweets reveal, Black activist and advocacy organizations, including BYP100 (@BYP100), Color of Change (@ColorOfChange), and the AAPF (@AAPolicyForum), which popularized the hashtag and released the corresponding report, played a central role in the network, tweeting data, statistics, and action items that offered members of the network a variety of ways to seek justice for women of color victims. Other advocacy organizations, including the abortion rights organization NARAL Pro-Choice America (@NARAL), offered support and content that contributed to the visibility of the hashtag and focused on building offline political alliances.

Thus, #SayHerName fully embodies the integration of an online and offline activist network in which the hashtag is used both to insist on the value of Black women’s lives and to drive attention to activist organizations, protests, academic and policy research, and particular political and civil interventions that members of the network can further. Tweets are used to advertise particular offline commemorative and protest events, to engage the network in organized online discussions about the connections between cases of violence against Black women, girls, and femmes and police accountability policy, to make demands for change, and to draw in members of other networks.

Top #SayHerName tweets also worked through storytelling and reminders of particular cases of state violence and



Figure 2.8

Reproductive justice organization NARAL Pro-Choice America signal-boosts #SayHerName responses to Sandra Bland and issues a statement on allyship.

complacency in the deaths of Black women. For example, popular tweets in the network reminded people of Lavena Johnson, Rekia Boyd, and Sandra Bland, who died in 2005, 2012, and 2015, respectively. Many top users tweeted the names of these women along with their ages and manner and place of death, eulogizing them much as an obituary would but with the demand for justice. Among other women memorialized on the hashtag were

Shantel Davis, Shelly Frey, Natasha McKenna, Korryn Gaines, Yvette Smith, Keisha Jenkins, and Lamia Beard. These and other women's names were often hashtagged, resulting in a high co-occurrence of #SayHerName with names. It was common for users to simply list the names of cisgender and transgender Black (and sometimes Latinx) women murder victims, accompanied by #SayHerName, in threaded tweets—several top users in the network did this, including @JennyVSmile, who focused on sharing the names and smiling photos of murdered transgender women along with links to news stories and family fundraisers.

While the specific circumstances surrounding each case shared on the hashtag are unique, what the cases have in common is violence or neglect from state actors, intersectional concerns about oppression, and an insistence that Black women are valuable. Many of the stories and statistics shared on the hashtag speak to the way state-enabled violence against Black women can happen in less public spaces than that against Black men or question the legitimacy of official accounts of suicides, accidents, and murders that fail to take into consideration police abuse and neglect. Black women also used #SayHerName to talk about intracommunal violence against Black women that leads to state intervention in Black communities, in turn enabling state-sanctioned violence against Black women and families. While some popular #SayHerName tweets included brutal, graphic descriptions that recalled histories of violence against Black bodies, other popular tweets in the network center stories about how much Black women victims are loved and how valuable their lives are to their families and communities.

Media that reflect the niche nature of the Black public sphere, including Black Entertainment Television (BET) and the *Huffington Post's* "Black Voices," were active in the network. These



Figure 2.9

Teen Vogue roundup on #SayHerName.

sources engaged in the network and participated in and elevated the visibility of formal chats organized by activist organizations. However, mainstream outlets, including CNN, *Teen Vogue*, and the *Guardian*, also paid attention.

Together with #FastTailedGirls and #YouOKSis, #SayHerName reflects what sociologist Ruha Benjamin calls Black Afterlife, “the stubborn refusal to forget and be forgotten.” In a few memorable characters these hashtags buoy the introduction of nuanced and complex concepts into conversations about both racism and sexism. The specificity of these hashtags introduces observers to the intersectional nature of Black women’s oppression. Benjamin connects Black Afterlife to scholar Zhaleh Boyd’s “ancestral

co-presence,” of which Benjamin writes, “Hashtag signifiers, like #SayHerName, [are] gathering points that make present the slain and call upon recent ancestors—Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Ayana Jones, and so many others—as spiritual kin who can animate social movements.”³¹ Both Boyd and Benjamin see the power of hashtags to thread together both people who have survived violence and those taken by it, further complicating our idea of what is irl (in real life).

Trust(ing) Black Women

While the hashtags in this chapter have not seen the kind of mainstream attention as #MeToo and #YesAllWomen, what we document here (and in chapter 3) testifies to the complexity of counterpublics engaging in technological networks. First, it is clear that Black women, who occupy positions in multiple counterpublics and carry with them multiple identities, have found Twitter to be a productive tool for highlighting misogynoir, sharing survival strategies, and calling both intra- and intercommunity members to account. Second, this work speaks comfortably and clearly both to the larger Black public sphere (or Black counterpublic), wherein discourse and communal knowledge about experiences with anti-Black racism are centered and resisted, and the feminist counterpublic, where collective critiques of male violence have long been centered but in which white women’s experiences have often taken precedence. Thus, here we see those who are multiply marginalized from mainstream narratives about violence and safety, as well as from the popular discourses of the margins themselves, effectively use Twitter to speak truth to power. Outside observers from a diversity of communities are thus allotted access to the personal stories of

Black women that challenge long-standing cultural tropes that normalize their victimization.

Notably, while not as systematically deployed as Elon James White's use of #TheEmptyChair, some Black men in these networks have challenged other Black men's attempts to derail the hashtags and contributed to their visibility. This act of solidarity is particularly heartening insofar as the intra-community violence hashtags such as #FastTailedGirls and #YouOKSis address most often come from other Black men. The impact of in-group members speaking to others on Twitter who share their social status can profoundly influence behavior.³² Hashtags provide an opportunity for education on these issues, as well as a relatively low-stakes opportunity for folks to practice allyship and intervention. Together, Black feminists have used hashtags in ways that expand the utility of the hashtags and bring about more complex and nuanced conversations than would otherwise be available in public debates on race and gender. While the reach and visibility of these hashtags do not always match those of feminist hashtags such as #MeToo, their influence in the Feminist Twittersphere is undeniable, as women of all backgrounds report that Black women and Black feminist thought have a disproportionate influence on how they understand the most pressing issues of the day.³³