PANIC AT THE DISCOURSE

An Interdisciplinary Journal

UnDisciplined Special Issue
February 2020

Happy Accidents

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Editorial Team: *Panic at the Discourse*
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Jill Price is an artist, curator and educator recently awarded Queen's Arts and *Science Dean's Award for Environmental Justice*. Receiving a 2016 SSHRC and a Research & Writing Award for her MFA thesis *Land as Archive*, Price's Cultural Studies PhD project investigates how to unmake one's way out of the *Anthropocene*.

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that have been push into obscurity by neoliberal discourses by leaning on the scholarship of both critical race theory and Caribbean scholarship.

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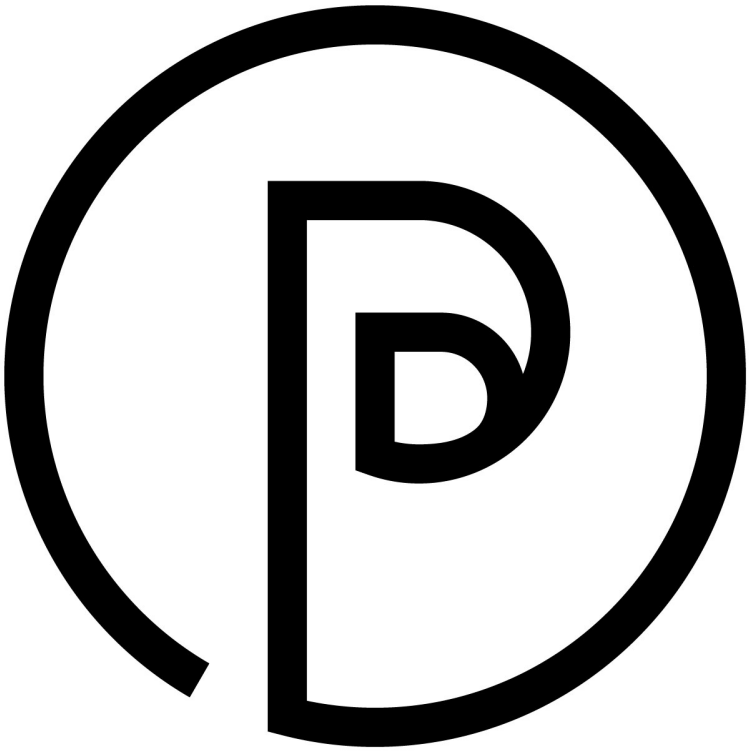

Happy Accidents: An Introduction

Ky Pearce and Michelle MacQueen

UnDisciplined is an annual conference organized by graduate students in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University in Katarokwi (Kingston, Ontario). This conference is a space for sharing scholarly, artistic, and activist work that theorizes or reveals forces that shape human experience. We aim to bring together researchers focused on areas and fields that intersect the humanities, social sciences, sciences, activism, and the arts. UnDisciplined is especially dedicated to work that challenges and dismantles disciplinary boundaries, as well as the divisions between art, activism, and the academy. For these reasons, it is difficult to identify a shared theme within this special issue, as the works contained within come from an event that prides itself on intellectual diversity. Thus, this issue represents some of the critical and exciting projects that have come together as a series of Happy Accidents.[1]

When organizing the call for participation for the conference, we only had one stipulation: work that is "undisciplined." Undisciplined, for us, means work that seeks to break down barriers and productively disrupt the academy. Often, it is work that is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary which is why we tried not to limit who could apply. Following the tradition of past iterations of UnDisciplined, we included a quote from a thinker we admire to act as guidance for applicants. For UnDisciplined 2019, we chose a selection from Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* as its guiding statement. Ahmed's words read: "When you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away."[2] Ahmed's quote demonstrates UnDisciplined's core principles of social justice and disrupting boundaries—principles that were echoed throughout the conference. Problems were exposed around representation, mental health, and community-based work, in the panels "Art and Community" and "Social Media." Problems were posed by panelists about "Queer Things," "The Animal," "Affect and the Archive," and "Politics and Performance." Throughout a panel on "History, Nationalism, and Activism," we learned that problems do not go away when the mainstream stops talking about them. We had valuable discussions about the dynamic roles that individuals, communities, and societies all play in exposing and posing problems in the panel "Activism, Resistance, and Resilience."

The contributions in this special issue come from scholars, activists and artists from vastly different backgrounds, fields, and traditions. Having such a diverse collection of presentations, workshops, film screenings, and poetry readings created valuable academic space; however, the immense diversity also made spaces difficult to navigate. In these difficult spaces, most of us found ourselves having challenging conversations, making tough decisions, and managing a great deal of anxious energy. From our experience, we found that these difficult spaces are often where we are pressing against one another's scholarly boundaries. It is *exactly* in these difficult spaces that we facilitated incredible dialogue, interesting ideas, and innovative developments. Even though these spaces are fraught and challenging, the outcomes are worth it. We like to consider all the conversations, decisions, and conflicts that emerge from UnDisciplined's difficult spaces as Happy Accidents.

The success of UnDisciplined is premised on its ability to create and harness Happy Accidents. We do this in the planning stages, when we leave our call for participation as broad as possible—the Happy Accidents that occur along the way—are unparalleled. For example, because of a small scheduling hiccup, one presenter's video piece was left running while another presenter was using the space for a poetry reading. The filmmaker, Mona Hedayati (who is also a contributor to this issue), describes the juxtaposition between her film and the poetry reading as "this strange concoction" that "opened up new possibilities for future collaboration and challenged my views on curating." In creating spaces where

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there are blurred lines between research, art, and activism, we are encouraging our participants to see collaboration and alliances where connections might otherwise be invisible. We feel that Happy Accidents represents the way that many scholars enter into *undisciplined* forms of academic, activist, and artistic work; it certainly represents the way that UnDisciplined's organizers, and even this special issue, have come together.

The selections within this special issue cover an incredibly broad range of topics, including gender and sexuality, art, politics, storytelling, museum studies, selfcare, racial experiences of neoliberalism, sound studies, and posthumanist understandings of animals. All of the selections challenge the disciplinary boundaries that contain their respective fields, asking questions of methodology, medium, theory, and the place of politics and self in academic work.

In "Undoing as Activism," **Jill Price** demonstrates the hidden potential in waste, by showing the importance of caring, collecting, and researching as acts of undoing. She highlights how these acts bring attention to an infinite chain of materials typically invisible in globalized and extractive neoliberal networks. Price poses important questions about our ways of thinking about waste, asking "Does everything need undoing or do we need to realize that nothing can be undone?"

Following Price in a critique of neoliberalism's effects on our personal lives, **Renee Whittaker** invokes the work of Black feminists to consider a form of critical selfcare. She opens her contribution, "Untitled," by describing yet another Happy Accident. She recalls being initially surprised to see her presentation listed as "Untitled," only to realize that she had accidentally forgotten to send us her title due to "the large number of items that continue to remain pending on [her] to-do list." As it turns out, this happens to wonderfully exemplify Whittaker's point: the pressures she (and we) face under neoliberal capitalism are increasing insurmountably; and yet the consumerist "selfcare" methods emerging from this economic system (such as a massage or spa day) do nothing to actually care for individuals. Overall, Whittaker's work represents a valuable Black feminist critique of women's lives under neoliberal capitalism.

Hannah Barrie's essay discusses performance's relation to empathy and identity. Like Whittaker, Barrie privileges autobiographical and storytelling elements in her Academic work. Barrie argues that the autobiographical allows for empathetic connections. Similarly, she argues that performance presents opportunities for intimacy and vulnerability, as well as personal and political transformation. Barrie engages with Muñoz's theoretical work from *Cruising Utopia,* saying that artistic works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists often embody intimacy and vulnerability, thus creating what Muñoz calls liberatory potentiality. While Barrie acknowledges the limitations of empathy as an agent of change, she focuses on its propensity for community-building, personal growth, and political change.

Luba Kozak's contribution to this collection also examines storytelling through art. She addresses the challenges of categorizing Thomas Gainsbourough's portrait of *Henry Scott, Third Duke of Buccleuch.* In particular, the modes of expression used by Gainsborough to portray the intimate relationship between Henry Scott and his dog. Kozak engages with post-humanist theory and early modern philosophy to demonstrate how the dog is treated as a near-equal in the painting, unlike any other painting of the era.

In a more futurist and sci-fi contribution, **Schyler Palm's** contribution also broaches the subject of the human. Palm's discussion of artificial intelligence's power serves as a type of mirror to humanity—highlighting both our favourable and unfavourable qualities. Palm uses webcomics to work with Haraway's leaky distinctions and Muñoz's queer utopian hermeneutics to engage with the question of queer utopia. Palm's essay emphasizes that transgressiveness and multiplicity are critical elements of

queerness that must be considered in queer media, and that popular representations of artificial intelligence have been sorely lacking queerness.

From his position as an artist-researcher, **Angus Tarnawsky** provides an analysis of his sound installation *Variable Frequencies.* Connecting to Palm's discussion of technologic futures, Tarnawsky describes how this project builds on the technology of radio in order to explore sonic, social and political implications of transmission. Detailing his artistic practice, he asks how the presence of a listener alters the surrounding environment. Through his discussion, Tarnawsky brings attention to the complexities between affect and effect, process and interaction, and invisibility and unpredictability.

Another artist-researcher, **Mona Hedayati**, discusses her video-recorded performance "Death to…*"* (2018), which explores activism through wall writing. She situates and contextualizes this piece in the geopolitics of Iran. When usual forms of democratic protest are unavailable, she argues that political dissent can appear as anti-authoritative messages transcribed on public walls. In conversation with her artistic practice, Hedayati describes the "Death to" rhetoric in Persian culture, various manipulations of narrative, and the materiality of language. Hedayati's reflection foregrounds political wall writing as a precarious emancipatory practice.

Simge Erdogan continues to thread together art, politics, and nationalism by bringing them into conversation with museums and curation. She explores how museums are discursive spaces of representation, display, and knowledge. Looking at multiple museum representations of Iznik ceramics and their heritage, she provides an in-depth analysis of differences in display elements. While she focuses on objects, her argument broadens to the story of the people, empires, and nations that created them. Through a comparative approach, Erdogan brings attention to the power of museums' curatorial approaches, and how they shape—and sometimes manipulate—our experiences of artistic heritage, material culture, and nationalist paradigms.

All selections in this Special Issue speak to Ahmed's words and have grown stronger in response to the Happy Accidents that occurred along the way. The projects expose problems that exist in our societies and in doing so, they pose problems about how we should move forward. Through scholarship, they question the ways we live and imagine possibilities for better futures. These problem-exposers and problem-posers do not stop talking about problems, and they do not go away. They have been challenged, juxtaposed, connected, and questioned by Happy Accidents and they have emerged more resilient and resistant.

Whether intentionally or inadvertently, UnDisciplined thrives because of Happy Accidents. UnDisciplined holds a space for academics, activists, and artists to pose problems and persistently challenge structures that discourage inventive and creative work. By forcing ourselves to work in an environment that seems disjointed and unrelated, we are empowered to forge connections, build stronger dialogues, and produce productive criticism by engaging with diverse viewpoints. By creating and harnessing these Happy Accidents, we are able to understand and better collaborate in the shared intellectual projects that span across our work.

Notes

[1] The authors of this introduction recognize that the phrase "happy accidents" has a connection to the pop-culture icon Bob Ross, however, would like to note that their use of the phrase popped up as its own unrelated happy accident when reflecting on the conference and collection of works submitted for publication.

[2] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 36.

Undoing as Activism

Jill Price

Abstract

Focusing on contemporary textile artists, *Undoing as Activism* provides examples of where "unmaking" and "undoing" are creative acts that draw attention to the hidden potential in waste and lead to the undoing of other material and immaterial objects. I include case studies also bring into focus how caring, collecting, and researching become acts of undoing that bring attention to a never-ending chain of living and non-living materials that often go unconsidered in global networks of extraction, production, dissemination, consumption and disposal. The paper ends by posing questions to the reader about what else needs undoing and how one might go about getting it undone.

Keywords: Undoing, Activism, Sustainability, Materialism, Textiles

To undo, unfeel, unlearn, unthink, unmake, unteach, unstitch, unweave, untangle, untie, unfasten, unwrap, unknot, unravel, unwind, unsettle… It would seem *Un* as a prefix signals us to undo the outdated tapestry of colonial, capitalist and patriarchal systems and thought upon which an abundance of human and non-human material is visibly and invisibly sacrificed in the name of economic growth. As *UN* naturally suggests that something could be undone, I find myself asking, what does it mean to *undo*?

Currently engaged in Cultural Studies PhD at Queen's University, my research-creation thesis, *Unmaking One's Way Out of the Anthropocene*, explores *undoing* and *unmaking* as creative acts. Specifically working from my position as a creative producer within the visual arts, I am investigating how *undoing* might be arrived at through the physical unmaking or taking apart of existing material and immaterial things to arrive at something different or new.

This question stems from a new level of awareness of the ecological and social trauma woven into the global systems of trade and economies of waste. Although not specifically named within Karl Marx's writing on "modern capitalism"[1] and "commodity fetishism"[2], like the desire for things, globalism further "alienates"[3] us from the endless assemblages of unjust and toxic materials attached to or left behind by any one given object.

No longer able to deny the physical and psychological by-products of transcontinental production and exchange, I have become hyper-sensitive to the realities of my Canadian settler history, present and future amidst a culture that remains complicit in the erasure of arable land both abroad and at home. This sensitivity has led me to see globally manufactured, transported, consumed and discarded goods as physical and "lively"[4] extensions of neo-colonialism, where

objects now have agency above, below and across our shared landscapes. This concept becomes clear in Jane Bennet's book Vibrant Matter when she writes "trash is not "away" in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane."[5] From this one sentence Bennet helps us to understand how chemically treated and transformed materials inevitably return to a variety of human and non-human geographies, ultimately effecting the existence or non-existence of its inhabitants.

From the dense entanglements of these highly interconnected assemblages of matter, in Louis Althusser's words, I have been "hailed."[6] But rather than being hailed by a capitalist regime, I have been hailed by the earth to resist moments when I feel the urge to put more stuff into the world or take up time-lapse technologies that document creative production at record speeds. By taking up the "hail" to *undo* or *unmake* that which has already been made, I would like to think that I am exerting a form of resistance to all those other materialisms that demand our participation and contribution towards the accelerated and never-ending production and consumption of goods. Through these gestures I hope to somewhat *undo* or distance myself from the ideological beliefs and cultural behaviours that contribute to global systems of ecological devastation and human degradation. So what does it mean to truly undo the capitalist apparatuses that continue to contribute to trauma today and repeat the violence of our entwined histories?

Going to its etymology, *undo* is a verb that *undoes* itself at its very inception as it implies that we might be able to "cancel or reverse the effects or results of a previous action."[7] Somewhat synonomous with the word deconstruct, *undo* similarily demonstrates the complexity of language pointed by Jacques Derrida in his essay *Différance*.[8] Unlike the word deconstruction, *undo* does not imply that things need to be reconstructed, but rather proposes something be returned to an earlier state. This failure of *undoing* as a concept becomes crystal clear when we consider the reality of decolonization as the return of land back to Indigenous peoples, a position powerfully clarified by scholars Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang in their essay "Decolonization is not a Metaphor."[9] While giving back land to First Nation, Metis and Inuit communities of North America is the right thing to *do*, this in no way would erase or *undo* the decades of cultural genocide experienced by multiple generations.

More negatively, one might say that to *undo* something is to "cause the downfall or ruin" of something,[10] a definition that then becomes positive when brought into the realm of philosophy or the world of theory. In these contexts, to undo might suggest one attempts to demonstrate a critical practice of thinking, reading, teaching and observing where one is constantly unmaking how they perceive or present the world.

When expanded into *undoing*, *undo* can also become a noun where it is an "act to undo a previous unacceptable act or thought. […] Often in the form of an apology, […] or a

confession."[11] *Undoings* also refers to gestures or small gifts that attempt to stand in place of a verbal apology or taking accountability for one's actions.

If we look at the field of psychology, *undoing* is referred to as a defence mechanism in which a person tries to cancel out or remove an unhealthy, destructive or otherwise threatening thought or action by performing or speaking in a way that contradicts an earlier mishap.[12] Addressed by Sigmund Freud and furthered by his daughter Anne Freud, the German term "*Ungeschehenmachen*"[13] literally means "*making un-happen"*[14] when translated. This is essentially the core of *undoing* with *undoing* referring to the phenomenon whereby a person tries to alter the past in some way to avoid adversity, conflict or mishap. On the flip side of the same coin, if we don't *undo,* remove or cancel out unhealthy relationships, threats, ideas or behaviour, can lead to our own *undoing*.

Materially, Undoings and *unmaking* have been progressive and ecological methods since the beginning of time, with different peoples having to produce, repair and transport tools for their own use. Migratory populations particularly understand the benefits of something that is able to come apart. Out of necessity, some nomadic Indigenous people such as the Cree and Chipewyan arrived at larger sheets of textiles by piecing together hides. The stitching together of furs and skins enabled the creation of tipis, rugs, blankets and clothing. Yurts first constructed by Mongolian hunters and herders, also provide us another example of early innovative structures strategically engineered for rapid dismantling, speedy reconstruction and efficient repair.[15] By simply looking at these few examples, there is no denying how Indigenous design and ways of knowing could help us undo the ecological mess we are in.

Figure 1: Left: A traditional Kazakh yurt in 1860 in the Syr Darya Oblast. (Source: Wikipedia)

Figure 2: Right A young Oglala girl sitting in front of a tipi, with a puppy beside her, probably on or near Pine Ridge Reservation, 1890 (Source: United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division, ppmsc.02515)

In a special issue of *Ecology and Society*, an article entitled "Reconnecting Art and Science for Sustainability" outlined how during a long-term action-research project among three Kawaiwete indigenous groups in the Brazilian Amazon, Janet Chernela discovered how undoing assisted in the revitalization of artistic knowledge of basketry and textiles among men and women. Understanding that "material cultural objects are signifiers of history and can be agents in the construction of history, having consequences in the social and political life of indigenous peoples,"[16] Chernela worked with local indigenous organizations and NGOs in Brazil to acquire baskets and weavings once held only in the country's museums. The researcher's goal was to to reconnect community members with objects that held ancient knowledge, which if reacquired, might offer skills that could lead to self-sustenance and sovereignty from the forestry, development and tourism that continues to threaten their communities. Beyond the unmaking of objects, lost knowledge and economic disparity, this example also served to illustrate how collaborative and participatory approaches to knowledge acquisition can undo Western approaches to knowledge retrieval and construction so as to make room for "other forms of knowing and diverse ontological worldviews."[17]

Similar projects in Guatemala under the facilitation of the organization Horizon and Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez (AFEDES), temporarily helped to undo "social and political marginalization" of women. With over 75% of Indigenous Kaqchikel women dependant on their spouses' income, they returned to weaving as a way to soften the effects of poverty and malnutrition suffered by themselves and their families. In response to the project, Guatemalan weaver Brenda Marison Bucú Puac was quoted as saying,

> Weaving is a work of art that represents the essence of Indigenous peoples. Each time we undo a thread, we do so with love because this is a way for us to 'undo' our sadness, our anxiety and our fear – and every time we weave the thread back, we are weaving our ideas, our thoughts and our dreams.[18]

Unfortunately, as reported by the AFEDES, the effects of centuries of discrimination, violence, and racism led to a decline in the production and social acceptance of the textiles. Another cultural blow occurred when industrial, large-scale companies exploited the situation by appropriating Mayan designs and patterns for commercial gain without respect or remuneration for Indigenous communities.[19]

Beyond signaling to how much we still need to undo, including the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge for the production and capitalization of academic research,[20] some Indigenous ways of being with objects makes me try to understand my own relationship with things. Why do I have so little connection with things that surround me? How do I not know

who made my clothes or where they truly came from? How do I begin to undo all that distance between myself and the network of human and non-human materials?

To *undo* this distance perhaps one needs to investigate a time where material excess may have got its legs. On her blog *The Regency Redingote*, Kathryn Kane whimsically and yet seriously addresses a time beginning in the late medieval period and continuing into the years of European colonial expansion, when "aristocratic ladies" engaged in the practice of parfilage. Also known as drizzling, parfilage was the act of removing precious metal threads from embroidered textiles. At times done for pleasure or as a way to organize large social gathering, women considered parfilage as an opportunity to "show off" their "graceful hands in motion,"[21] Parfilage also became a source of much-needed funds when the French Revolution began to take its toll on the aristocrats of France.

As frivolous and tedious as this sounds, Talia Schaffer's book, *Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth Century Fiction*, suggests that these acts of undoing, as revealed through the writing of the time, were quite sincere in engaging with issues of recycling, sentiment, economic alterity. These forms of *unmaking* also offered a means of self-expression, social participation, and cultural definition for women who were perhaps resisting or acting out against over-determined gender roles and their required performance during these times.[22] An example of early feminism could be extracted from the collected stories that record women carrying out deviant acts during parties and other social gatherings in which they would cut away parts of gentlemen's jackets and adornments from military uniforms so they could brag about their rapidness and bravery once safely back together in the salon and able to return to the act of drizzling.[23] Schaffer also suggests that these public "undoings" reflected France and Britain's "post–French Revolution preference for simplicity and rejection of ornate and courtly aesthetics" and served as a physical gesture by two colonial nations that could offer a "visible and tactical critique of the ancient regime."[24]

Those incarcerated or in need during Victorian times put to work "junk picking," provides an example of how productive and resourceful acts of undoing can be unjust the the health or well-being of labourers isn't taken into account. Junk, once meaning old ship rope and wire, would be cut and untwisted so as to arrive at individual fibres that could then be mixed with tar to create oakum, which served as an excellent medium to fill holes and spaces between a ship's floor and wall boards to make it water tight. Although seemingly a wonderful example of institutional environmentalism, this practice of "junk picking" was extremely difficult on the hands, often leading to sores and infection from the grime. Overseers also argued that the work was too easy, sedentary and provided workers too much opportunity to correspond and organize with one another. To deny prisoners the benefits of socialization and conversation steps were taken to separate them,[25] a systematic form of division and isolation still found in many work environments today.

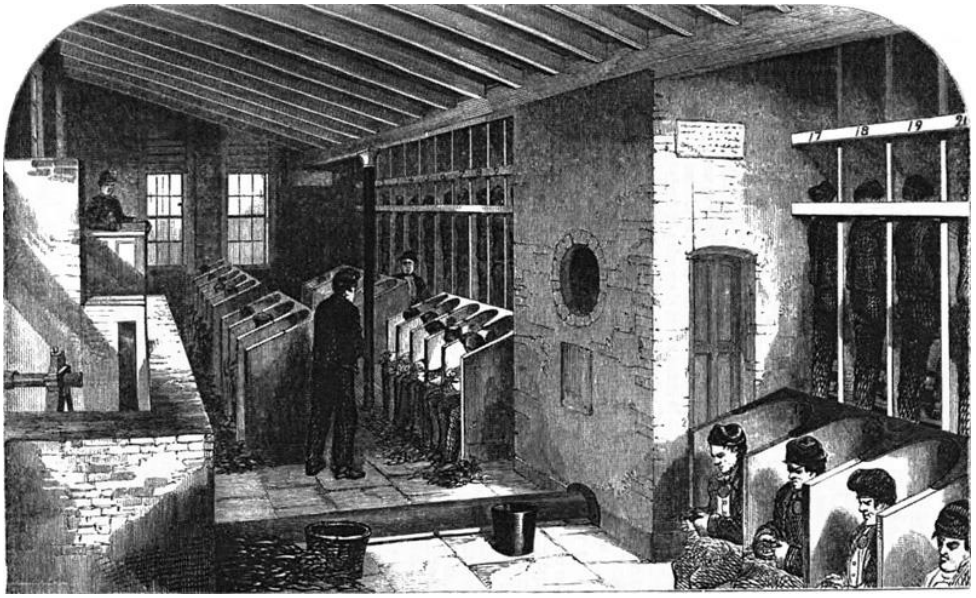

Figure 3: Tread-wheel and oakum shed at the city prison, Holloway, with a detachment of prisoners at work on the wheel, and those who have been relieved picking oakum (Source: Stitchingbyacornishseashore.blogspot.com)

In national and global times of hardship during World War I and World War II, *unmaking* was required to supplement materials much in demand. Wool, the only fibre able to keep troops both warm and dry, was so sought after that households rich or poor would *undo* existing clothing so as to do remain in good standing as patriots at home. As many of the war time knitters began as amateurs, completed garments often required undoing to ensure that no irregularities would cause unnecessary sores or discomfort while in the trenches. During this time, knitting helped to temporarily undo or unmake the delineation between the roles of the sexes, since men of all statures were expected to knit both at home and in public. For a time, this nation-wide movement also helped to dismantle the idea that the machine was better. It was often expressed by both the soldiers and the knitters that in receiving or giving something handmade, you are also receiving or giving of one's love, time and support. Further, knitting was used by injured soldiers as therapeutic practice to help undo or unmake the stress, boredom and sense of uselessness that came with being temporarily out of commission.[26]

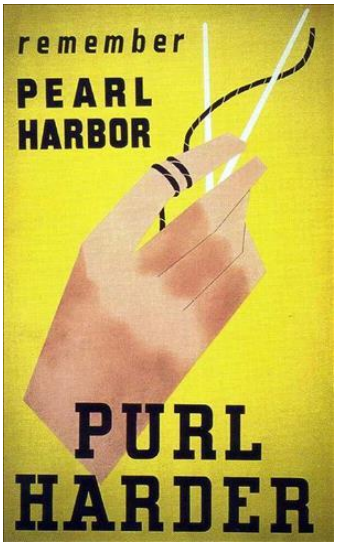

Figure 4: Remember Pearl Harbour / Purl Harder, New York City WPA War Service, 1942 poster (Source: Smithsonian: National Museum of American History online)

Looking at contemporary art practices that involve *unmaking* or *undoing* in order for art to intersect with activism, there is a long line of artists who have worked to unravel flags over the years. Artist Sonya Clark began unthreading the Confederate Flag at the Mixed Greens Gallery in New York on April 9, 2015 as a way to point to how "slow and toilsome"[27] the task is of dismantling the ideals of the Confederacy and the notion of racism in the United States. This was a symbolic and weighted gesture, occurring amidst many Black Lives Matter responses to tragedies in Ferguson, Baltimore and Cleveland as well as taking place on the 150th anniversary of when Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army, Clark shared,

> The performance of it is almost a meditative kind of, "what does it mean to undo the symbol?" … What does it mean to then use the raw elements that came together to make this symbol? To take them apart and potentially make something new again out of that?[28]

Figure 5: Left: Sonya Clark, Unravelling, 2015 (Source: Huffington Post)

Figure 6: Right: Adrienne Sloane, The Unravelling, 2017, Cotton knit, poly and cotton fabrics (Source: Fuller Craft Museum)

Not too long after, on January 21, 2017, an artist from Lexington Massachusetts named Adrienne Sloane opened a very timely installation at the Fuller Craft Museum entitled "The Unravelling." Coinciding with the inauguration of President Trump, the artist positioned a hand-knit American flag atop the US Constitution and began to unravel the flag stating that until the current Trump government is brought to accountability or unseated from its power, she would gradually undo the flag to remind the American people of what the constitution is meant to do.[29]

Moving onto the *unmaking* of garments, Amsterdam design collective Lernert & Sander produced a video entitled *Last Season*. This video documented the collaborative creatives unmaking sweaters by Prada, Jill Sander, Celine and Chloe; garments normally priced between 1,000 and 1,500 Euros. Commissioned by Holland's only Prada stockist and boutique owner Kiki Niesten, the well-known designers, marketers and artists were invited to create a window display that would tie into or draw attention to Niesten's storefront during Maastricht's famous art fair Tefaf. The artists explained, "the process of taking apart the expensive duds was soothing and satisfying, a literal rebellion against the idea of a $1,300 sweater." Although gently critiquing the textile industry and capitalist greed, the artists still managed to sell video stills of the performance for 750 Euros a piece in addition to monetizing the balls of yarn for undisclosed amounts; actions that clearly demonstrate how difficult it is to *undo* oneself from the exploitive and inequitable realities of corporate capitalism.[30]

Looking to unmake industrially machined garments from a different perspective is Kingston University graduate Imogen Hedges. Inspired by all of the old sweaters her grandmother had knit her over the years and discovering that charity shops sometimes spend hours unraveling sweaters as they get more money from the wool than the sweaters, Hedges

designed an unknitting machine built around an old bicycle frame. The "un-knitter", who sits on a chair at one end, pedals to unravel the garment. The yarn then passes through the steam of an electric kettle to remove its kinks. The undone yarn then it finds its way to a hand-cranked spindle where it is rewound into a ball for re-knitting.[31]

Figure 7: Imogen Hedges*, Unknitting Machine, (*Photo by Artist*)*

From an industry point of view, Prato's textile district, known for being at the forefront of ecological and sustainable practices, has been creating regenerated textiles since 1840. Continuing to use methods of collection and sorting to undo production stages of dying, a highly toxic process, their factory ensures that at least sixty-five percent of all fibres being used in the creation of new fabrics have come from past textiles. Sorted by hand for colour and texture, the company reintroduces human labour and care into their chain of production, systematically undoing the environmental devastation and slave labour often associated with the production of textiles. Now serving as a model for over 100 enterprises in the *Italian Textile and Recycling Association*, Prato's textile manufacturing strategies offers us a prototype of how we might ensure we are producing and consuming "happy objects,"[32] which Sara Ahmed defines as those goods or services that bring people back into closer proximity with materials, other people, their own bodies and in turn with the products of their labour.

Turning our view to Canada, even cities like Toronto are beginning to vigorously take up recycling and repurposing as a way to slow, diminish or undo the astronomical rate at which we send fast fashion to landfills at home and abroad. Claudia Marsales, a senior waste manager for the city of Markham is so committed to recycling she has been dubbed "the Queen of the Heap."[33] Starting up pilot projects and communication strategies with the goal of increasing clothing recycling from 15% recycled today to 100% in the near future, this level of *undoing* would serve as an exemplary model for how other North American cities could address their waste.[34]

Personally, it wasn't unitl the fall of 2018 that I began to physically explore *undoing* by unmaking an acrylic wool blend, machine knitted poncho I had acquired in Portugal that had become stained and shrunken over time. During this durational performance entitled *Undoing #1,* I sat in solitude for over three hours calmly and not so calmly struggling to unravel the tightly knit garment. Serendipitously, the repetitive act of untangling drew attention to labour and how materials have memory, history and value outside of their manufactured form. Once screened, the video recording of this gesture produced, by chance, sound that was identified as offering Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) to certain listeners who experience "low grade euphoria."[35] For some this euphoria is characterized by "a combination of positive feelings and a distinct static-like tingling sensation on the skin."[36] I was pleasantly surprised to discover that by recording the act of unravelling, *undoing* proved to be generative, producing other sensory materials through chance.

Figure 8: Jill Price, Undoing #1, 2018, video still (Image provided by artist)

This exploration continued by engaging in a variety of undoings from unravelling clothes to undoing my perceptions on work, art, activism, and resistance with the aim to draw attention to the vibrancy and relationality of all living and non-living matter, once again touched on by Jane Bennett's text, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.[37] Pulling from her lecture *Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter*, Bennett suggests "hoarders may have an exceptional awareness of the extent to which *all* bodies can intertwine, infuse, ally, undermine, or compete with those in its vicinity."[38] Currently spotting, documenting, collecting and caring for lost and discarded textiles in a series I call *Groundlings*, I feel as though these actions have led me to have more empathy for things and the other material beings to which they are attached.

Figure 9: Jill Price, Groundling, 2019 (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Highly aware of the risk of flattening non-human and human material through this titling, I feel I am experiencing first hand what Bennet means when she states, "to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally is to take a step toward a more ecological consciousness."[39] Initially only sought after for narratives about global, ecological entanglements between human, animal, machine and plant, the meaning of this finding, gathering and repairing has expanded so as to acknowledge local ecologies of homelessness and bodies often deemed as excess by the neo-liberal capitalist powers that be. By picking up lost and discarded textiles, I also now recognize how much other material remains on the ground and how each one of those objects embodies another tightly woven tapestry of physical, social, political, economic and psychological material.

Further along in my understanding of what it would mean for me to truly undo how I produce, move, transmit and consume in the world today, I am looking to move beyond small gestures that merely recognize trash as an extension of colonization and ask what else needs to be *undone* or *unmade*? Who needs to come together to assist in the *unmaking* of these other immaterial things? Does everything need undoing or do we need to realize that nothing can be undone? And, if we can't undo what has been done, how do we recraft that which we know today, but want to experience in the future? Perhaps, a couple of verses from Margaret Atwood's poem, *The Animals Reject their Names and Things Return to Their Origins* can provide some clues.[40]

I. It was the bear who began it. Said,
I'm getting out from under.
I am not Bear, l'Ours, Ursus, Bär
or any other syllables
you've pinned on me.

Forget the chateau tapestries
in which I'm led in embroidered chains.
and the scarlet glories of the hunt
that was only glorious for you,
you with your clubs and bludgeons.

II. At this the dictionaries began to untwist,
and time stalled and reversed;
the sweaters wound back into their balls of wool,
which rolled bleating out into the meadows;
the perfumes returned to France
and old men there fell sweetly dead
from a surfeit of aroma.
Priests gave their dresses up again
to the women, and the women ditched their alligator shoes in a hurry
before their former owners turned up to claim them.

Notes

[1] David Macey, "Alienation," *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 7
[2] Ibid., 7
[3] Within his writings on modern capitalism Karl Marx describes how economic hierarchies and industrialization of labour estranges or alienates humans from their own bodies, the materials that sustain them and universal values that could potentially reconnect them and create empathy for one another. See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964).
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[5] Ibid.
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Untitled: Self-care Through Communal Acts

Renée Whittaker

Abstract

What is self-care, and how does it work? Is it something that all people have access to? This paper, which is an introduction to my PhD project, aims to challenge the canons of self-care while arguing that they are embedded in capitalistic individualism. I look specifically at communal child-rearing and other load-bearing practices such as child-shifting, and closely examine the benefits of communal caring practices in direct response to current beliefs of what self-care should look like. Through this approach, I investigate Black women's communal anticapitalistic resistance and its positive effects in challenging neoliberal ideologies.

Keywords: Communal Care, Self-care, Neoliberal, Black Women's Resistance

Is it simply by chance that my presentation, and in turn this paper, has been titled *Untitled*? As I reviewed my entry for the presentation that led to this paper, I was surprised to see that the title was listed as "Untitled." This was an oversight due to the large number of items that continue to remain pending on my to-do list. This "to-do" list only seems to grow as time progresses. As I begin to think through the realities of our everyday, this is not an abnormal incident. I was driven to leave my presentation as untitled in order to illustrate the real daily stresses that we all experience. This is a normal event for most people. However, as my to-do list grows, my anxiety multiplies. The pressures of the world seem to push me into fits of uncertainty and mental chaos. These moments of chaos seem to present no tangible solution or possible exit plan. What do I do when the papers are piling up and the bills force me to count every penny, while I attempt to evaluate what needs to be cut? This is further complicated by the boss who adds more tasks, with the expectation that they will be completed prior to their deadline. This then has a ripple effect which forces me to take work home on a more regular basis. In response to these pressures, popular culture advises us that all you need is a good massage, a bath bomb, or a spa day to rub or wash away the worries of the day.[1] How is this effective when after the bath bomb, massage, or spa day, the same woes are awaiting me? Even worse, once the massage or spa bill arrives, I am forced to face the very real consequences of my actions; the money that I have spent to relieve my stress becomes a new point of stress.

My decision to return to school in order to achieve a higher level of education reflects the privilege that allows me to do so. Simply put, I have been able to go to school and work at a job where I have been able to create my own hours. When necessary, I have been able to ask family

and close friends for assistance. Yet, this decision has had real consequences, such as financial burdens and emotional stressors. Notably, there are people who have to face similar obstacles due to a series of social structures that act as unmovable barriers, such as unlivable wages, lack of paid sick leave, or extraordinarily high daycare costs. By no means does this paper attempt to belittle those real concerns of personal rejuvenation practices; rather, I attempt to make a call to focus on the inaccessibility of current canons of self-care, while highlighting the innate assumptions that exist regarding who is able to participate in these prescribed modes of rejuvenation.

This paper aims to begin to challenge current mechanisms of self-care that are centered around consumption and individualism, which is innately materially exclusionary. I lean on the work of Charmaine Crawford, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Saidiya Hartman as entry points to understand the significance and political power that exists in utilizing alternative methods of practicing self-care. By furthering the current popular scope of self-care, I hope that readers will be able to move towards acknowledging communal care practices that have been deemed ineffective or irrelevant in Western society. These particular practices of communal care include communal child-rearing, child-shifting, girls' nights, and for my family in particular, cousin dates. I argue that these practices reap benefits that are seldom acknowledged, much less appreciated, within the scope of Western understandings of self-care.[2]

When consulting popular Western scholarship on self-care, there tends to be a focus on the ways that emotional distress interferes with one's productivity and their ability to materially contribute to society. Indeed, self-care has gained its momentum in the attempt to increase workers' abilities in order to contribute to their modes of production.[3] As a means of increasing individuals' productivity, there is a push for each person to practice socially approved modes of self-care. This typically includes the production of acts that center the individual. These mechanisms of self-care tend to encapsulate not only neoliberal concepts regarding the individualized self, but also ideologies of improvement that emphasize both commodity collection and the acquisition of symbols which communicate wealth and prestige. Scholars such as Richard and Shea and Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison exemplify this point through their concentration on working professionals and the importance of care-givers in practicing various modes of reflective care. As the authors reveal, stress generally has adverse effects on an individual, which can impede individuals' level of care and, in return, their productivity.[4] Within this reproduction of a particular and limited concept of self-care, there exist normative assumptions surrounding who qualifies to engage in this praxis of self-care and who must be left out. Seen through omissions within popular literature, people of colour, and particularly Black women, have been rendered outside of the scope of warranting self-care; historically, viewed as less-than-human, existing in a space that can be categorized as socially dead.[5] This concept of social death comes from the school of thought known as Afro-pesimissim, which states that

Black people exist in a state of inhumanity that is the consequence of the social, economic, and psychological conditions which facilitated the existence of the trans -Atlantic slave trade.[6]

In *Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves*, Angela Davis illuminates the fact that enslaved women engaged in practices which mimicked those done by White women within the nuclear family, such as cooking and cleaning for their loved ones within the household. Likewise, these Black women were able to resist some of the dehumanizing beliefs that maintained Black women as the subordinate class.[7] Through understanding the different mechanisms that Black people are able to create and maintain in order to endure the pressures of neo-liberal capitalist society, one is able to question the institution of the family unit and problematize a definition that simplistically includes only a father, mother, and children. This is important because simply looking at the nuclear family as a basic unit means that one alienates themselves from valued resources and can be subject to unrealistic demands of doing it all with very little help.[8]

In a similar vein, Christina Ho's work on Caribbean families in the Western United States illustrates how some communities broaden the understanding of family in order to collectively work towards the betterment of the community. Within her work "The Internationalization of Kinship and the Feminization of Caribbean Migration: The Case of Afro Trinidadian Immigrants in Los Angeles," she challenges notions of the modern understanding of family.[9] By identifying particular family units as households, Ho is able to challenge normative assumptions of the role of the extended family and encourage alternative housing practices that prioritize a communal rather than individual unit, which included the mother, father and children. These counter-practices include pooling together material and immaterial resources such as money and companionship. Through engaging these communal practices of caring, Ho expands on the notion of family membership to reach beyond the scope of just the mother, father, and children and instead include extended family member such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and close friends. In turn, this addition of membership into one's household unit increases one's access to much-needed material simply by having these needed resources in constant close proximity.[10]

Another communal care practice that Ho introduces is child-shifting, or what Mary Chamberlain defines as "the temporary or permanent fostering of the child by kinfolk, usually a grandmother, aunt or a close family friend."[11] This communal practice resists neoliberal notions of individualism that typically encapsulate hegemonic notions that center the nuclear family. Instead, through mechanisms such as child-shifting, Caribbean families are able to subvert systems that are built to ensure their oppression.[12] Thus, by reflecting on this collective care practice, we can see the importance of community that is seldom acknowledged within conversations of self-care, as self-preservation outweighs the need of the community at all times. Embedded in this notion is the fear of communism and the socialist state, as communal care is centered around the community coming together to pool necessary resources together and is thus

an ontological perspective that challenges the fundamental aspect of the neoliberal state, which is individualism.[13] Moreover, it is important to mention that this concept of caring for oneself through collective means is far from a new endeavour, nor is it isolated within Caribbean culture; rather, collective models of self-care have also been utilized within the confines of slavery and Indigenous communities within the Lower and Greater Antilles.[14] Looking back to what seemed to have always been, it is important to acknowledge that this research is not a discovery, but is rather a re-imagining of alternative self-care practices and possibilities that have roots within histories that have been primarily obscured in order to remind Black women that self-care can exist outside of costly activities.

Scholars like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, and The Combahee River Collective, have highlighted how Black women have been able to engage in collective resistance that does not always involve the care of children, and therefore have included Black who are both single and without children. At times, these forms of collective resistance have also been sites of personal rejuvenation which challenge the current neoliberal ideology of continual capital consumption and individualism as seen in the Combahee River Collective.[15] Saidiya Hartman furthers this thought by acknowledging that Black women have repeatedly engaged in practices that enable them to have moments of reprieve and restoration, which is seldom acknowledged by dominant discourses.[16] These collective movements also speak to Black women who may not have children, but whom are still in need of safe spaces away from the violences of everyday life. Certainly, there is still much investigative work that needs to be conducted on the ways that communities engage in self-care in manners that do not conform to the current individualistic expectations which consume our everyday life.[17]

As I conclude this paper, I am able to take the time to reflect on times when I have been particularly stressed. During these times, the most effective methods of self-care for myself have been ones that include those whom I cherish the most. Calling my parents, cousins, nieces, nephews, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and friends has allowed me to get my fill of stories, jokes, and—most importantly—reassurance that everything is going to be alright. My community has consistently reminded me I am never alone, and that they all always have my back, as I have theirs. My woes may sometimes feel too big for me, but with my community, they begin to feel a little bit smaller. The presence of my household, as illustrated by Christina Ho, continually provides me with the gift of self-care.

Notes

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Empathy, Identification, and Life Narrative: The Political Potentials of Performance

Hannah Barrie

Abstract

Drawing on Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon's 2014 book and live show, *Gender Failure*, and Vivek Shraya's 2016 book and performance, *even this page is white*, I argue that the performance of autobiographical storytelling enables a space of empathetic identification. Empathy as an agent of change is limited in its transformative potential, but performances of life narrative can ultimately lead to community-building, personal growth, and political change if situated ethically and relationally. These works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists embody intimacy and vulnerability to create a performance space that fulfills José Esteban Muñoz's concept of a liberatory potentiality.

Keywords: Storytelling, life narrative, performance, gender, identification

This paper is an amalgamation of work from 2017 and 2019. I've returned to these ideas after a couple of years and offer these thoughts as part of a conversation—a dialogue with a past self, with past methods, and with my past interpretations of theory and performance. I look forward to continuing the conversation here, as I was able to do at the UnDisciplined Conference this past April. I encourage readers to follow the links provided throughout the paper and watch the clips of the live shows that I discuss. The paper was originally a presentation and incorporating the multimedia elements for yourself will greatly add to the reading experience.

Drawing on Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon's 2014 book and live show, *Gender Failure*, and Vivek Shraya's 2016 book and performance, *even this page is white*, I argue that the performance of autobiographical storytelling enables a space of empathetic identification, and can ultimately lead to community-building, personal growth, and political change, despite the limitations of empathy as an agent of change. These works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists embody intimacy and vulnerability to create a performance space that has transformative potential. I've read each of these works as texts and have also seen them as live performances. I'll analyze both of these experiences here, and link to several clips of the live storytelling events to allow you to experience a version of the performances. Excerpts of the transcripts are included here for clarity. Here's an introductory sample of the *Gender Failure* show:

Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal, UnDisciplined Special Issue (2020): 23–29.

Gender Failure Show, Part 8: 1:05-1:47. https://vimeo.com/111140338

Ivan Coyote: We're standing on a street corner waiting for my friend who's at the store. And this guy I don't know, never seen him before, he just strides right up to me, and he pokes me in the middle of the chest, repeatedly. And then he says: 'Are – you – a female!' (Laughter) 'Um, kind of,' I tell him. 'What kind of an answer is that?' he asks me. 'What kind of a question is that?' I ask him back. And then I say, 'what kind of a fellow goes about poking perfect strangers in the chest without their consent, anyway?' And he *nods* at this. (Laughter.)

In considering the ways that performers express their life stories, I draw on the work of philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, who writes about gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" rather than a stable identity.[1] Gender, for Butler, is what we are continuously doing, rather than being. This is her concept of performativity. Society restricts the gendered body to its expected enactments, but when subjects become conscious of this construction, it can be used for specific purposes, subverting societal expectations to embody a radically authentic self. Performativity is the repetition of acts that allows for the constitution of a gendered subject. Performance is different. It is a deliberate method of explicitly expressing lived experience and gender. A gendered subject may still be produced by its effects.[2] I propose that Coyote, Spoon, and Shraya, in performing narratives of gender, are deliberately exposing the script of naturalized gender performativity and creating new scripts of their own.

Performed storytelling generates affective and potentially transformative responses in its expression of intimacy and vulnerability. These concepts are relational because they necessitate a connection between two or more people. Psychologists Karen Prager and Linda Roberts define intimacy as possessing three conditions: "self-revealing behaviour, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings."[3] These conditions, when exemplified onstage, allow for a deliberate, performed intimacy. Vulnerability can similarly be performed. As Butler writes, "the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition."[4] But vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability, or simply the capacity to be injured by another; rather, it is premised on its relationality.[5] Bodies are vulnerable in their very physical existence in the world; we depend on each other every day to preserve each other's lives. Thus in the embodied presence and self-disclosure of performed storytelling before an audience, the artists construct both intimacy and vulnerability, while revealing the often-invisible scripts of performativity. Next, I'll consider the transformative effects that this might have.

Gender Failure Show, Part 8: 10:30-11:02. https://vimeo.com/111140338

> Rae Spoon: After everything that's changed for me, I'm more inclined to just leave the narrative open for myself. Now that I define my gender and sexuality as stories I tell and agree upon, I try to leave it more open than I have in the past. I want to leave room for future possibilities I haven't been presented with yet. I'm a gender failure, and, I failed at the gender binary, unable to find a place in being either a man or a woman that was comfortable for me, but ultimately, I think it's the binary that fails to leave room for most people to write their own gender stories.

Coyote and Spoon perform an autobiographical narrative. The stories change throughout the show. The content begins with childhood and moves through the lives of the performers, but always ties back to their self-proclaimed gender failure. They speak with confidence and a rehearsed rhythm of storytelling, letting the audience into some of their most personal moments.[6] It is vulnerable and intimate as a space of confession, empowerment, and literal gender expression.

As they express in the above excerpt, Spoon considers their gender as narrative. Their gender has undergone so many shifts and expressions that it makes more sense to talk about it as a story, rather than a fixed intrinsic identity. As Butler would argue, their gender is continuously done. The storytelling performance of *Gender Failure* is the story of the performativity of gender made public.

As Spoon explains, they identify as a gender failure, but say that in fact, it's "the binary that fails to leave room for most people to write their own gender stories."[7] I argue that these performances create that space for readers and audiences to write these gender stories for themselves. In T Kira Madden's recent essay, "Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy," she discusses this space for the reader/audience, noting that if writers kept their full personal experience in their work, the scene would be bulky, bursting, with no space left for the reader.[8] She writes that there would be "no space for the third plane, for the *Me too*, for the reader's response or touch or memory to graze what's being offered."[9] Coyote and Spoon's storytelling is deliberately crafted to leave that space for the reader/audience to identify with what the performance offers. However, this identification is circumscribed by the whiteness of the performance: the gender narratives that they perform are necessarily white, which regulates the space for the reader/audience's response or identification, perhaps privileging those who can identify with whiteness.

Certain formal elements of performance are designed to foster identification, as Anna Poletti notes in an essay discussing intimate publics in digital storytelling.[10] In the *Gender Failure* performance, first person narrative, a warm tone of voice, autobiographical information, and eye contact with the audience all serve as formal elements that constitute the performed

intimacy and vulnerability necessary for an audience to identify with the performers. The bodily presence, stories, and emotions of Coyote, Spoon, and Shraya fulfill Butler's definition of vulnerability, wherein bodies suffer, enjoy, and respond to the "exteriority of the world,"[11] while condensing and stylizing their experiences enough to leave room for the reader in the work. In these ways, the performers facilitate empathetic identification, and prompt audiences to ponder what they might also explore and become.

Vivek Shraya, an artist, author, and professor, conveys her stories through poetry rather than prose. Shraya identifies as a South Asian, trans, bisexual, femme artist. As a racialized trans woman, she clearly writes from a different position than Coyote and Spoon; her performed stories/poetry in *even this page is white* disclose her lived experience as a racialized trans femme.

> *Vivek Shraya, Fall Reading Series: 21:47-22:23.*
> *https://vimeo.com/191649830:*
>
> Vivek Shraya: pledged my flesh to iron / when soft wasn't safe / muscle to make masc / masc to make muscle / muscle to mask muffle / firm instead of supple / stubble instead of smooth / in rubble my woman refused / to buckle rumbled stayed subtle / chewed out leather muzzle / I would rather trouble / struggle rather a fist / ten knuckles than cede / one more vessel to men.

In the poem "muscle," excerpted above, Shraya performs strength and power in her body language, tone of voice, and words. She tells the audience that she built her body to be traditionally masculine in order to protect herself when she was unable to come out as a woman. Now, as a femme trans woman, she would rather face violence than back down in her femininity. She would rather risk a fist than cede anything else to men. In revealing the journey and construction of her identity, Shraya embodies a performed intimacy and, like Coyote and Spoon, creates a space for others to learn her story, empathize, and respond to what she offers.

Shraya lets us into her private life in the next poem, "agnostic:" "sometimes / the inconceivable: / i am tender / tensionless / in my body / my gender […] / is this just because / in my bed / there is / a white man? / the first time / we kissed / my nose bled / and the second."[12] She constructs vulnerability in exposing her personal space in words, allowing us a glimpse into her bed, telling us about her bodily reactions, and performing these poems to others exposed, but on her own terms.

As this poem exemplifies, these performers tell multiple stories of their bodies throughout their performances. In considering the invasive bodily focus and the importance placed on physical transition that are common in discussions of trans issues, the artists display

their commitment to creating a space of vulnerability. They do not owe these stories to anyone, but choose to disclose intensely personal information to the audience in a performance context.

However, in returning to my thoughts on the performance of autobiographical storytelling, I am wondering more about the role of the life narrative for trans and gender non-conforming individuals. How often must trans artists tell their stories for the sake of others, and might that be unwanted labour? As Hannah McGregor, host of the podcast *Secret Feminist Agenda*, notes in a recent interview with Shraya, when trans and gender-non-conforming people, especially transfeminine people of colour, write about transmisogyny, racism, homophobia, or other forms of oppression, "there is an extractive element to what it seems some audiences want from […] this kind of work."[13] McGregor continues: "People want your story, and want to be able to extract particular narratives of trauma or of pain, and there's a sense that that's a price you pay for access to the literary world, or a price that white cis readers feel they have owed to them."[14] But Shraya responds that she has been performing since she was thirteen, and is habituated to this exposure in her art; she says, "when I think about entitlement, it's more about expectations outside of the stage," such as when people send emails asking for labour without a consideration of her energy and time.[15]

Shraya's response, while not to be taken up as the response of all trans or marginalized artists, reminds me that these performances are artistic creations. Rather than simply being a narration of life story, or the reading of a journal entry, the performance of personal stories is crafted with specific artistic intents in mind, and as I noted earlier, crafted to make room for the audience, too. While we must acknowledge the effort, labour, and social positioning of the artist, and privileged viewers must question their own motives for seeking particular narratives, the necessarily relational and contextual nature of art depends on an audience responding to their own interpretation of an artist's work.

In the performance of autobiographical storytelling, sharing lived experience, and embodied presence, these artists create a performance space that is liberatory. José Esteban Muñoz writes that the stage can be a site for the performance of a desire of utopia.[16] As Muñoz argues, the concept of utopia can be important in activism, giving marginalized groups hope and a future to work towards. However, there is a tension between the staging of utopia that might occur in a radical, authentic, performative narration of one's gender story, and the actual effects of such performances.[17] Can empathy and identification be enough for political change? Poletti argues that there are risks in "deploying affect and empathy as tools for politics."[18] She states that in such contexts, "the expression, or merely the identification, of the personal gets mistaken for doing the work of the political."[19] Perhaps the emotional connection the audience feels with the performer is deceptive, masking the lack of concrete action and political movements. Lauren Berlant, whose scholarship focuses on the affective components of belonging, argues that "vulnerability and suffering can become all jumbled together into a scene of the generally human, and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and

vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion."[20] Compassion on its own is insufficient. Often, discomfort and conflict, in their prompting to confront one's own limits, can be more productive for learning and transformation than empathetic identification.

Even with these limitations in mind, I maintain that stories can form relationships, and storytelling, in its performed intimacy, vulnerability, and deconstruction of performative identities, can be transformative on both personal and political levels. I saw the *Gender Failure* show in 2014. The following year, I changed my undergraduate degree to Gender and Women's Studies, and in 2019, I graduated from a master's program in Gender Studies and Feminist Research. I can't say that these decisions stemmed from one performance, but I can say that the performance created a space for me to identify with the artists in certain ways, prompted unpacking of my own thinking on gender, and ultimately influenced my studies, work, and activism in the subsequent years.

As Muñoz writes, "It is something like a trace or potential that exists or lingers after a performance. At performance's end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event."[21] The lingering effects of the artists' performances generate a potentiality. When the performers leave the stage, nothing has ended. We might be inspired to tell our own stories, create relationships, and build communities working towards change.

Notes

[1] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.
[2] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 218.
[3] Karen J. Prager and Linda J. Roberts, "Deep Intimate Connection: Self and Intimacy in Couple Relationships," in Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy, eds. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 45.
[4] Judith Butler, "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect," in *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), 33.
[5] Butler, "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect," 34.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Spoon, *Gender Failure*.
[8] T Kira Madden, "Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy," *Lithub.* March 22, 2019. https://lithub.com/against-catharsis-writing-is-not-therapy/.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Anna Poletti, "Coaxing an Intimate Public: Life Narrative in Digital Storytelling," *Continuum* 25, no. 1 (2011): 81.
[11] Butler, "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect," 33–4.
[12] Vivek Shraya, *even this page is white*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 19.
[13] Hannah McGregor, "Episode 3.14: Getting Shit Sandwiched with Vivek Shraya," *Secret Feminist Agenda*, January 18, 2019, 31:40-32:25. https://secretfeministagenda.com/2019/01/18/episode-3-14-getting-shit-sandwiched-with-vivek-shraya/.

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 97.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Poletti, "Intimate Public," 80.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 41–2.
[21] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 99.

Representing Dogs as Rational Near-Equals in Eighteenth Century British Portraiture

Luba Stephania Kozak

Abstract

This article discusses the unconventional modes of representation in Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott, Third Duke of Buccleuch*, as well as the challenges of categorizing the painting within a specific subgenre of portraiture. Gainsborough's painting of *Henry Scott* was unparalleled in its depiction of an intimate relationship between an adult male owner and his pet, which comments on the change in social attitudes towards animals that were beginning to take place in early modern Britain. Through an interdisciplinary approach, combining discourses in contemporary posthumanist theory as well as early modern philosophies, this study focuses on an analysis of how the dog in the painting of *Henry Scott* is represented as a near-equal subject with a unique identity and attributed with visual characteristics that convey its capacity for rationality.

Keywords: Portraiture, Posthumanism, Unconventionality, Animal Rationality, Identity

Introduction

The category of the 'pet' rose in popularity in eighteenth century Britain, allowing for more intimate relationships with non-humans to develop. Pets were perceived less as working animals or emblems and more as valuable family members with distinct identities. At this time, enlightenment ideas revolved around notions such as freedom of thought and reason, while a social rhetoric of sensibility encouraged people to sympathize with non-humans. These factors enabled people to think differently and for some, to extend the notion of reason to animals. The visual arts offered a space where such new ideas regarding human and animal relations could be explored, as well as a place to contemplate controversial views on the mental capabilities of animals.

Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines the fields of art history, philosophy, and animal studies, my research examines the change in social attitudes towards animals as portrayed in eighteenth century British portraiture with a primary focus on the unconventional modes of representation in Thomas Gainsborough's (1727–1788) portrait of *Henry Scott, Third Duke of Buccleuch* (c. 1770, Figure 1). By examining the social attitudes towards pets in eighteenth century Britain, my study discusses the elevated status of dogs in Britain's early modern visual culture, which offers new possibilities for understanding the complex and sympathetic relationship between owners and their pets.

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Figure 1. Thomas Gainsborough, *Henry Scott*, 1770, oil on canvas, 125.1 x 100.3 cm

(By kind permission of the Duke of Buccleuch & Queensberry KT KBE).

By reconstructing the identity of the Dandie Dinmont Terrier dog in Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott*, an alternative narrative for the painting is presented which acknowledges the dog's near-equal role of importance in relation to the human subject.[1] I apply contemporary discourses on animal ethics and posthumanist theory, as well as early modern philosophies, to my analysis of the portrait, with a primary focus on the influential writings of the eighteenth century philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776). Central to my research is an exploration of Gainsborough's rejection of iconographic convention, which complicates the categorization and meaning of the portrait within a specific subgenre of portraiture.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My theoretical framework of post-humanism challenges humanist ideals and anthropocentric views, shedding light on a subject that has often been marginalized in Western art history because of its non-human status. My analysis of *Henry Scott* reveals what art historian Maria Pointon calls "ideological mechanisms"[2] that are embedded in portraiture. I argue that in this case, they point to a progressive view of canine companions as rational near-equals and unique extensions of human identity.

The term 'near-equal' is not the perception of the dog in *Henry Scott* as having the identical social status as an adult male human or having anthropomorphized features. Instead, I use the term to address a recognition of the animal's sentience, agency, identity, and capacity for reason. I argue that this recognition elevates the dog's role to that of a near-equal conscious individual in the painting. By breaking with iconographic convention that marginalized the role of pets in earlier portraits, Gainsborough provides the spectator with greater character insights to both the human and non-human subjects in *Henry Scott*. In doing so, Gainsborough offered

commentary on the evolving perspectives towards animals and suggested a destabilization of anthropocentric ideals.

My research also explores how human and canine identities in *Henry Scott* rely on social modes, such as the construct of gender and species roles, which contributes to a philosophical system that emerges based on an equalizing effect from the interdependency between the two subjects. My methodology centers on an interdisciplinary analytical discourse approach that offers an alternative interpretation for the painting and the inter-species relationship portrayed. I use a method of comparison to best demonstrate how Gainsborough broke with iconographic expectations by comparing the portrait of *Henry Scott* with other works by Gainsborough and those of his contemporaries.

My study is inspired by the work of many scholars and the evolving discourses in the field of contemporary animal-rights, which have highlighted the importance of human attitudes towards animals. In his book *The Cry of Nature*, Stephen Eisenman discusses the prejudices towards animals that have stemmed from a humanist tradition in the visual arts.[3] However, Eisenman combines both the fields of animal-rights and art history to demonstrate how early modern thinkers and artists began to express sympathetic attitudes towards animals, perceiving them as sentient and conscious beings.[4] Additionally, Eisenman combines modern scientific findings on the issue of animal rationality along with the theories of early modern thinkers (including René Descartes and David Hume).

The post-humanist theories of Pramod Nayar and Donna Haraway have further revealed the construct of anthropocentric and speciest politics, as well as the importance of recognizing the interconnectivity between humans and non-humans.[5] Nayar focuses on a "critical posthumanism" framework, which critiques traditional humanist theories that are exclusive to non-humans.[6] An inclusive critical posthumanism thus frames the lens through which I analyze the subjects in Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott* and attribute both subjects with a sense of self-awareness and consciousness.

Historians Ingrid Tague and Erica Fudge have been prominent in scholarship on eighteenth-century human and animal relations.[7] As Fudge and Tague would agree, because we do not have access to an animal's experiences, scholars cannot study non-humans as isolated subjects in the same way a human subject can be studied. However, Fudge implies the possibility for new ways of studying historical non-humans through the human who provides access to the animal: "Reading about animals is always about reading through humans."[8] Thus, my analysis of the human subject in the portrait of *Henry Scott* provides insight about the dog. While both scholars explore the animal only through its impact on human life, they do not focus on the individual animal as a real and historical figure in the visual arts, thus inspiring my research topic.

In his book *The Animal Therefore I Am*, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida examines the role of animals in philosophy, contemplating the consciousness of his cat who he embarrassingly undress in front of, addressing the idea of the real animal who looks back.[9] Derrida's theory of the animal gaze thus influences the analysis of the dog in *Henry Scott*, who I argue is presented looking back at the spectator not as an unconscious symbol, but as a real individual with emotions, thoughts, and agency.

Surprisingly, not much has been written on the portrait of *Henry Scott*, other than a brief analysis of the work within larger scholarly texts. Some scholars including Diana Donald and Erica Fudge have noted the unconventional representation of near-equality in the painting, but have not elaborated or pursued the implications of its meaning further.[10] In their work on Gainsborough, art historian James Hamilton and biographer William Whitley portray the artist as only profit-driven, arguing that he did not make personal commentaries on social or political issues in his art.[11] Although Gainsborough's commentaries were less provocative than those of his mentor, artist William Hogarth (1697–1764), they are nonetheless present.[12] The unsurpassed rendition of the intimate bond of companionship expressed in *Henry Scott* distinguishes the painting from any of Gainsborough's other works and from any other portrait involving human and non-human subjects of the era or earlier. I contend that Gainsborough's keen aptitude for observation and ingenious skill for depicting the likeness and inner character of his sitters in *Henry Scott*, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with an open-minded patron with similar progressive views on canine companions, led the artist to paint a truly different understanding of his sitter's identities.

Henry Scott and Features of Male Portraiture

Henry Scott (1748–1812) was a wealthy landowner and army officer. He married Lady Elizabeth Montagu (1743–1829) and after generations of absence was the first to return to Scotland to take the principle Buccleuch family seat at Dalkeith Palace, near Edinburgh. Henry Scott helped revitalize the Scottish economy by encouraged Scottish manufacturing and petitioned against government involvement in Scottish elections.[13] In 1783, Henry Scott was elected the first president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. The portrait of *Henry Scott* was originally commissioned for the Royal Society of Edinburgh, but rejected because the dog was deemed "inappropriate."[14] This reception of the painting by the Royal Society of Edinburgh demonstrates the impact that the unusual portrayal and controversial ideas put forth in the work had on eighteenth-century spectators. The formal commissioning of the painting also suggests that the work was intended as a sincere representation of the Duke, highlighting the importance of a closer analysis of the unconventional modes of representation that challenge the context of the portrait.

Although there are other portraits of Henry Scott, Gainsborough's portrait of the Duke is significant because it represents the young nobleman during a very important time in his life: the Duke's coming of age and the full inheritance of all his estates. In the portrait of *Henry Scott*, Gainsborough painted both subjects in the foreground of the work, against an outdoor autumn setting. The young Duke is portrayed respectably, dressed in a fashionable dark coat with the Order of the Thistle pinned on his left breast and his hat tucked under his arm.[15] In the painting, Gainsborough depicted the Duke in a relaxed pose with his shoulders at ease, head tilted in a friendly manner, and his arms tenderly wrapped around his dog.[16] In comparison to the rigid formality of the subject in Joshua Reynolds's (1723–1792) portrait of *Lord Heathfield of Gibraltar* (c. 1787, London, National Gallery, NG111), the casual pose of the Duke and emphasis on emotion by embracing the dog in *Henry Scott* conveys an informal tone. Gainsborough softens the effect of grandeur in the portrait by positioning the Duke in a relaxed posture instead of in an overbearing stance, creating a friendly and inviting tone. In the painting, the charcoal-coloured, shaggy-furred dog is portrayed in a state of alert focus and is placed on a raised patch of dirt. Gainsborough added compositional complexity to the painting by positioning the dog's paw on top of the Duke's hands.

The genre of early-modern portraiture sought to capture the character and social achievements of the subjects, offering greater insights about an individual than any other genre of art.[17] In the portrait of *Henry Scott*, Gainsborough captured something beyond the likeness of his sitters. He depicted a timeless friendship that remains relatable centuries later. Yet, Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott* is the most unconventional example of male portraiture of the era because of its intimate representation of the relationship between a man and canine, as well as the sense of near-equality between a human and non-human. This is especially extraordinary considering that this was a time when British society was struggling to define what it meant to be "human."[18] As Fudge discusses in *Perceiving Animals*, early modern British society debated whether humanity was distinctly separate and superior from the natural world (especially from animals), while others argued the opposite.[19] However, rather than succeeding in creating a succinct divide between humans and nonhumans, a series of discourses around human and animal relationships transformed definitions of human identity.

The use of pictorial metaphors such as the Order of the Thistle and fashionable attire contributes a formal element to the portrait and articulates the Duke's dignified social standing; categorize the work as a grand manner portrait.[20] Yet, the inclusion of the dog in such a prominent role and intimate pose complicates the Duke's image and the subject matter. When comparing *Henry Scott* with other male portraits by Gainsborough and those of his contemporaries, how Gainsborough broke with iconographic standards can be observed. For example, in Gainsborough's competitor Joshua Reynolds's portrait of *Lord Heathfield of Gibraltar*, the male sitter is represented with symbols of military achievement that dominate the subject matter of the painting. In the portrait of *Henry Scott* however, the Order is perceived

more as a pictorial accessory and is painted on the same visual plane as the dog; therefore it is impossible to see one without the other. The dog is thus understood to contribute significant insight about the Duke's character, making him a vital extension of the Duke's identity and an important figure as well.

Gainsborough was renowned for his ability to paint beautiful costumes and was particularly concerned with lighting. In Gainsborough's portrait of *Robert Craggs* (c. 1760–1, private collection), the artist paid careful attention to the details of the sitter's coat, emphasizing the effects of light. Although the style of navy coat in both paintings is similar, the lack of attention to lighting makes the Duke's coat in *Henry Scott* appear dull and simplistic. This unusual aspect in the painting suggests an intentional compositional decision to draw the spectator's attention away from materialistic distractions to a more important matter: the Duke's relationship with his dog. At the time *Henry Scott* was painted, Gainsborough admitted in a letter to a friend that he was tired of the pressures of society portrait painting.[21] The portrait of *Henry Scott* may have offered Gainsborough a more conceptually engaging topic as an intellectual break of sorts.

Although the Dandie Dinmont Terrier in *Henry Scott* can be perceived as an objectified fashionable accessory in the portrait due to the eighteenth century perception in Britain of pets as luxury consumer goods, the dog is also a consumer of fashion, which elevates its status.[22] Similar in purpose to human clothing, animal fashion indicated status.[23] In the painting, the dog is accessorized with a leather collar, detailed with a glistening gold buckle made intentionally visible and not covered by the dog's hair. Just as fashion contributes to inform the Duke's social identity, the collar also informs the dog's identity and symbolizes ownership, which materialistically associates the dog with the Duke. But rather than constructing ownership as an oppressive notion, the collar indicates that the dog's status is elevated from that of a stray to the pet of a nobleman.

As in contemporary society, collars in the eighteenth century also conveyed an owner's concern for the safe return of their lost pet.[24] In *Henry Scott,* beyond its fashionable purpose, the collar thus further symbolizes the Duke's doting care and concern for his beloved companion. This intimate relationship between the Duke and the Dandie Dinmont Terrier challenges the perception of the dog as merely a fashionable accessory in the painting.

Identity, Nationalism, and Landscape

The non-marginalized and engaged role of the dog in *Henry Scott* presents the dog as a significant actor in the painting. As art historian Shearer West writes, "'Identity' can encompass the character, personality, social standing, relationships, profession, age, and gender of the portrait subject."[25] Based on this premise and an analysis of the canine subject in *Henry Scott*, I examine how the dog is represented with attributes that inform its identity, such as the visual

portrayal of its personality and relationship with the Duke. I argue that the notion of "identity" in Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott* is evident in both the human and non-human subjects.

I argue that the subjects in *Henry Scott* serve as extensions of each other's identities. Bred from a mix of terriers, including the Bedlington, Scottish, English, and Otter Hound,[26] I propose that the Dandie Dinmont breed embodies the merging of both Scottish and English cultural identities. At the time *Henry Scott* was painted, the Duke was experiencing a change between the familiarity of his English identity and an emphasis on his new Scottish identity after moving to Scotland to take the principle Buccleuch family seat. I suggest that the dog thus symbolizes an extension of the Duke's national identity in the portrait by portraying the merging of cultural identities. However, as art historians Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone write, "The dog is an individual character in its own right, emphasized by it being an unusual breed, possibly a Dandie Dinmont Terrier…"[27] Therefore, the distinct Dandie Dinmont Terrier breed also contributes to the uniqueness of the dog's own identity and demonstrates how the notion of nationality crosses interspecies boundaries to inform a non-human animal's identity.

Gainsborough was also a remarkably talented landscape artist, a genre that he preferred to portraiture. Considering that Duke Henry and his new wife traveled through many miles of their newly acquired lands in Scotland, the lack of a depiction of property wealth or landscape depth in *Henry Scott* is unusual, unlike in Gainsborough's earlier portrait of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c. 1750, Figure 2). I argue that the compositional decision to keep the landscape in *Henry Scott* simplistic conveys the artist and patron's decision to focus on the human-canine relationship instead of conventional modes of representing status and wealth. In *Henry Scott*, the Duke blatantly abandons social expectations and intimately interacts with his dog, which challenges social etiquettes and constructed hierarchies of power. Although it is unclear who commissioned the painting of *Henry Scott*, it is presumable that the Duke agreed to be represented in such an unconventional way, aware of the criticism the painting would receive from upper-class spectators, as well as Gainsborough's contemporaries. The extraordinary impression that the unconventional modes of representation in Gainsborough's *Henry Scott* had on eighteenth-century critics is made evident in an entry note for the painting in "Catalogue of Pictures at Dalkeith House," published in 1911. The catalogue entry reads: "This picture was originally painted for the Royal Society, Edinburgh, but refused by them because of the dog, which they thought inappropriate."[28] In comparison, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* exemplifies a more conventionally accepted masculine mode of representing dogs: as hunting, working animals near the foot of their master.

Figure 2. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, 1750, oil on canvas, 69.8 x 119.4 cm

(© National Gallery Picture Library).

Iconographic Portrait Comparisons

There is a striking similarity between the portrait of *Henry Scott* and portraits of children with pets.[29] In the eighteenth century, children were perceived as not quite human, therefore child-with-pet portraits conveyed equality through similarities, such as in Joshua Reynolds's portrait of *Sophia Matilda of Gloucester* (c. 1774–1777, Figure 3).[30] Eighteenth-century portraits of children also convey a sense of innocence that is abandoned in most grand portraits of adults in the same era. In comparison, adult sitters were commonly represented as authoritative, contemplative, and rigidly posed in formal manners. However, in *Henry Scott* we are reminded of a child-like innocence through the informal and affectionate relationship portrayed between the Duke and his canine companion, which is particularly unconventional because of the Duke's adult age. But Henry Scott is not a child, which complicates the work since adult men were perceived as being rational; thus the sense of near-equality in the work also challenges the spectator to extend the notion of rationality to the non-human subject as well.

Figure 3. Joshua Reynolds, *Sophia Matilda of Gloucester,* 1774-7, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 77.5 cm

(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

A more appropriate iconographic comparison with *Henry Scott* is mother and child portraits, given the Duke's feminized role and adult age in the painting. In *Henry Scott*, the dog takes on the role of the child and the Duke that of a parent protectively embracing his dog, which feminizes him only in the sense that he takes on a conventional motherly role.[31] In one way, the

Duke's masculinity is challenged by an outward portrayal of affection that was more common in female portraits of the era.[32] Alternatively, the Duke's affection for his dog was also recognized as an acceptable masculine feeling in eighteenth century Britain.[33] As Tague suggests, the Duke's male identity adds masculine weight to the painting to establish a sense of friendship between equals.[34] The Duke's association with a pet of the canine species further conveys the Duke's masculinity in the painting since dogs were gendered male appropriate and cats were typically gendered female.[35] Therefore, the relationship portrayed between the Duke and his dog in *Henry Scott* complicates the notions of conventional gender and species role representations in early modern portraiture.

A fascinating comparison in my research is the representation of the same Dandie Dinmont dog in Joshua Reynolds's (1723–1792) portrait of the Duke's wife and daughter, *Elizabeth, Duchess of Buccleuch and Child* (c. 1772, Figure 4). In comparison with Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott,* Reynolds's painting portrays the dog as a conventionally marginalized and emblematic subject, emphasizing the unusually intimate relationship between the Duke and his dog in *Henry Scott*. Reynolds's *Elizabeth, Duchess of Buccleuch and Child* also demonstrates conventional mother and child iconographic expectations that draw parallels with the dog's child-like role in *Henry Scott*. I propose that the dog is represented as a child-like substitute in the portrait of *Henry Scott* since the status and roles of pets and children were analogous. The flexibility of the constructed notions of "family" and "childhood" at this time enabled the dog to assimilate into the family unit and assume a child-like role.[36]

Figure 4. Joshua Reynolds, *Elizabeth, Duchess of Buccleuch with Child*, 1772*,* oil on canvas, 233.7 x 144.8 cm (By kind permission of the Duke of Buccleuch & Queensberry KT KBE).

Although the rhetoric of sensibility made it acceptable for men to express their feelings for non-humans, the portrait of *Henry Scott* pushes the boundaries of anthropocentric and masculine ideals. But to impose gender politics on the portrait of *Henry Scott* is also problematic because the relationship portrayed is at the convergence of gender and species politics. Instead, the portrait creates a new space for an alternative understanding of human-animal relations.

Competing Philosophies

The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes argued that animals were emotionless organic machines that lacked consciousness because they did not have souls.[37] However, many philosophers refuted Descartes's negative views towards animals, including David Hume who argued that animals have emotions, rationality, and even shared resemblances with humans.[38] Hume argued that if there are observable parallels between human and animal anatomies, then the same considerations should be given to the animal mind.[39] Other eighteenth century British thinkers like William Smellie and Erasmus Darwin also argued that animals were capable of reason and a range of emotions through facial expressions and body gestures.[40] The Duke's library records included works by Hume; therefore my research proposes that Hume's arguments in favour of animal rationality directly influenced the Duke's perception of non-humans.

My research centers on an exploration of how the dog in *Henry Scott* articulates a capacity for rationality through visual clues, such as a state of "nervous affection" and self-interested behaviour rather than an idealized, doting expression that is more common of dogs in other works.[41] I define "nervous affection" as the dog's response through facial and body expressions to its uncomfortable position of being embraced, which is a state of toleration and patience that comes with accepting the Duke's affection. Furthermore, I argue that the Dandie Dinmont Terrier gazes back at the spectator, demonstrating a sense of self-awareness and consciousness.

Although Gainsborough created an endearing sense of intimacy in *Henry Scott* by portraying the Duke embracing his dog, the notion of dominance remains present. As human-geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, dominance combined with affection produces the category of the pet.[42] To elaborate, the dog is understood as a domesticated pet that asserts the Duke in a position of human dominance over the animal. However, the dog challenges the notion of dominance and regains power in the painting through the position of its paw overtop of the Duke's arm, the weight of the paw even appearing to slightly lower the Duke's arm. I argue that this unconventional compositional element places the dog in a role of power and establishes a sense of near-equality in the painting.

The popularity of pet-portraits in eighteenth century Britain highlighted the recognition of animal individuality and unique character traits. Gainsborough painted several of these types of works, including a portrait of his own dogs, *Fox and Tristram* (c. 1775-1785, Figure 5).[43] The painting *Fox and Tristram* exemplifies Gainsborough's acknowledgement of canine individuality and capacity for rationality, which he expressed through the depiction of animal body language and facial expressions. For instance, Gainsborough depicted Tristram in a more relaxed pose in comparison with Fox whose stiff and tensed front paws conveys a sense of readiness. Gainsborough also provided more details in Fox's facial expression, painting him with a lovable

under-bite and white-speckled eyes. Fox's illuminated eyes to create a direction for the animal's gaze, which further express a sense of alert concentration; unlike Tristram whose dark eyes do not show any indication of the dog's gaze and may even be closed.

Figure 5. Thomas Gainsborough, *Tristram and Fox*, 1775-85, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.8 cm (Photo ©Tate Britain / CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)/ https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gainsborough-tristram-and-fox-n01483).

Animal Conversation Piece

In eighteenth-century Britain, the popular genre of conversation pieces conveyed family gatherings with pictorial details that enabled spectators to construct narratives about the subjects. Although this genre usually depicted more family members, I argue that the painting of *Henry Scott* should be considered an animal conversation piece because it presents the Duke and his dog as a family unit. Narratives about the characters of the sitters can also be drawn from the emotional bond portrayed.

Although the Dandie Dinmont Terrier in *Henry Scott* plays a significant role and shares an equal amount of attention in the portrait with the Duke, the Duke's presence in the painting determines that the work cannot be considered a pet-portrait in its strictest definition. Art historian Malcom Cormack writes that Gainsborough had "sensitivity to the character of the dog" in the portrait of *Bumper* (c. 1745, private collection), which enabled the artist to depict the individuality of the dog.[44] Cormack defines *Bumper* as an "animal conversation piece" because it depicts the individual character of the dog and is one of the first recorded instances where Gainsborough reacted to the individuality of a non-human sitter.[45] I argue that Cormack's premise thus offers an interpretive dimension for defining the subgenre of *Henry Scott*.

Pointon explains that eighteenth-century conversation pieces allowed for the articulation of social and familial decorum, noting that disconnected signs within the social situation related to cultural and political issues.[46] If *Henry Scott* is considered a conversation piece, then the "disconnected signs" that are the unconventional modes of representation in the portrait could be understood to point to a larger cultural commentary on the changing attitudes towards non-humans in eighteenth century Britain. I suggest that the disconnected signs, such as the elevated

position and engaged role of the dog in the painting or the Duke's intimate embrace of his dog that challenged social behavioural expectations, demonstrate a shift in the familial decorum of eighteenth century domestic life that enabled pets to rise in status.

Comparable Portraits

Prominent eighteenth-century English painters, including William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, and Joshua Reynolds, frequently depicted humans and animals interacting with each other. These artists not only illustrated the companionship between humans and their pets in portraits, but also exhibited how the identities and narratives of the sitters could be constructed through cross-species relationships. In comparison with the portrait of *Henry Scott* by Thomas Gainsborough, I analyze both William Hogarth's *Self-Portrait with Pug* (c. 1745, Figure 6) and Joshua Reynolds's *George Selwyn* (c. 1766, private collection), portraits that also portray owners with canine pets. However, neither Hogarth nor Reynolds fully embraced the representation of the animal as a near-equal subject beyond representing the bond between owner and pet in the manner Gainsborough was able to accomplish in *Henry Scott.* Gainsborough achieved a much greater sense of intimacy in *Henry Scott* by portraying the Duke in the physical act of embracing his dog, which charges the painting with emotional and ethical implications.[47] By representing the Duke holding his dog in *Henry Scott,* Gainsborough emotionally charged the painting with notions of sentimentality that complicated social expectations of gender, age, and species roles. However, I propose that as Gainsborough's mentor, Hogarth's attitudes towards animals may have also had an early influence on the artist and inspired him to carefully consider the individuality of animals in his later works. The unconventional depiction of the dog as a near-equal rational and conscious subject makes *Henry Scott* a dynamic example of the progressive attitudes towards non-humans and acceptance of inter-species bonds in eighteenth century Britain. The portrait of *Henry Scott* is an unsurpassed masterpiece, both in regard to its content and stylistic characteristics as I have outlined in this paper.

Figure 6. William Hogarth, *Self-Portrait with Pug*, 1745, oil on canvas, 90 x 69.9 cm

(Photo © Tate Britain / CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)/ https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hogarth-the-painter-and-his-pug-n00112).

Conclusion

My study concludes with a discussion of the influence religious faith had on Gainsborough's interest in moral issues regarding animals, as well as abstract multidisciplinary ways of thinking that shaped the artist's progressive view of non-humans. In particular, I argue that Gainsborough's Puritan values had a remarkable influence on the artist's cross-species sentimentality. The emphasis on notions of emotion and "natural" sentiment that the Methodist faith preaches likely influenced Gainsborough's representation of non-humans in paintings as subjects with emotional capacities. Biographer Alfred Fletcher accredits Puritanism with shaping Gainsborough's character, suggesting that it was Puritan values that encouraged the artist to be "independent" and "original," which I suggest also inspired the artist to break with social expectations and artistic convention.[48]

Later in his career, Gainsborough painted fancy pictures, which was a genre that depicted poor rural or urban low-life themes with narrative elements.[49] Animals emerged as key subjects in these paintings, but rather than only using conventional livestock animals, Gainsborough included pets, which made some of these paintings morally complex.[50] Gainsborough's recognition of dogs as sentient and conscious animals (evident in earlier paintings like *Tristram and Fox*, *Bumper*, and *Henry Scott*) manifests more prominently in fancy pictures where the artist directly involved dogs in moral themes to evoke the spectator's empathy for non-humans.

Gainsborough may not have realized that his moral and ethical considerations were shaped by philosophical discourses regarding animals that were developing in the early modern period. Although there is some scholarly debate about Gainsborough's education, the rich moral

issues portrayed in his fancy pictures demonstrates that the artist was indeed engaged with philosophical matter.[51]

In eighteenth-century Britain, non-human animals were objectified and perceived as fashionable accessories and indicators of status and wealth. Yet, as in the case of pets, the new role of animals in early modern British society enabled entirely new ways of interacting and perceiving domesticated animals, at times elevating the animal's status. By representing the dog as a near-equal subject in *Henry Scott*, Gainsborough draws attention to the construct of the non-human subject's status and place within society. As a result, Gainsborough conveys to the viewer the idea that how the non-human is perceived is a malleable social concept, which is a topic that remains relevant in contemporary fields of animal studies.[52]

Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott* was extremely unconventional for the era because of its display of male intimacy and sense of animal near-equality, challenging gender and species role expectations. As a result of breaking with convention, Gainsborough complicated the categorization of *Henry Scott* within the portraiture genre. However, the portrait of *Henry Scott* should be considered an animal conversation piece because it depicts the Duke and his dog as a family unit and narratives about the sitters can be constructed from pictorial details.

The intimate display of affection between an owner and his dog in Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott* is a tender representation of an inter-species bond that spectators centuries later have continued to relate to. Yet, the unconventional representation of the dog in *Henry Scott* as a near-equal subject in terms of rational capacity and importance challenges the iconographic standards of non-humans in early modern portraits that more commonly adhered to traditional humanist views that revolve around anthropocentric values. The unconventional representation of the Dandie Dinmont Terrier in *Henry Scott* as an individualized subject with a capacity for rationality and emotions demonstrates the influence of early modern philosophies regarding animals. Furthermore, the unconventional elements in the portrait of *Henry Scott* also highlights the complex status of pets in eighteenth century British society, as well as the expectation for owners to intimately know the characters of their non-human companions.

The unusual depiction of the dog as a near-equal subject in *Henry Scott* is unlike any other portrait of the era. By focusing the analysis on the canine subject in the portrait of *Henry Scott*—a subject often overlooked in art history studies because of its non-human status—I argue that Gainsborough represented the dog as an individual with affectations that suggest a capacity for rational thought and self-agency, emphasizing the near-equal status of both subjects in the painting. The representation of the dog as a conscious and present actor in *Henry Scott* thus demonstrates a shift away from the use of animals as merely symbolic or pictorial accessories in portraits.

Duke Henry's relationship with and perception of his dog was directly influenced by the philosophies of David Hume as well as the rhetoric of sensibility that normalized the expression

of sympathy towards non-humans in the eighteenth century, which Gainsborough sympathetically captured in the portrait. Finally, I argued that Gainsborough was appreciative of philosophy and indeed interested in morality, which can be observed in the artist's fancy pictures, later in his career. The portrait of *Henry Scott* serves as an early example of Gainsborough's exploration of moral and philosophical issues concerning animals that, in collaboration with a progressively open-minded patron, provides commentary on larger social changes in attitudes towards non-humans that were beginning to take place in eighteenth century Britain. By analyzing *Henry Scott* through a post-humanist lens, one that considers human morals and ethics, as well as acknowledges the significance of the unconventional role of the non-human in the portrait, modern spectators are reintroduced to one of England's greatest artists and his noble patron. In this way, I propose an alternative way of understanding the canine subject in *Henry Scott* as a rational, sentient, and present individual worthy of the spectator's attention. The dog is *someone* in the portrait of *Henry Scott*, not *something*.

Notes

[1] The Dandie Dinmont Terrier in the painting of *Henry Scott* was likely named either Ginger or Pepper, but its name is unknown due to a lack of record keeping. For this reason, I refer to the dog by its breed throughout the paper.
[2] Marcia Pointon, *Hanging The Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 4.
[3] Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2013).
[4] See specifically Eisenman, "Moral Rights" in *The Cry of Nature*, 19–43.
[5] See Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism: Themes in 20th and 21st Century Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) and Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, *vol. 3, Posthumanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[6] Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 4.
[7] See Ingrid Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth century Britain* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015) and Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000).
[8] Fudge, *Perceiving Animals*, 3.
[9] See Jacques Derrida, "The Animal Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry 28*, no. 2 (2002): 369–418, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344276.
[10] See Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 112 and Tague, *Animal Companions*, 229–35.
[11] See James Hamilton, *Gainsborough: A Portrait* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2017), 1–3 and William T. Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Murray, 1915), 9.
[12] For examples of Hogarth's social and political commentaries, see the artist's moral paintings and satirical prints, including William Hogarth, "The Marriage" from *A Rake's Progress (*c.1733, London, Sir John Soane's Museum); William Hogarth, "The Reward of Cruelty" from *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (c.1751, University of Manchester, The Whitworth Art Gallery, P.22759); and William Hogarth, *The Bruiser* (c.1763, University of Manchester, The Whitworth Art Gallery, P.1994.103).

[13] For more on Henry Scott, Third Duke of Buccleuch, refer to Brian Bonnyman, *The Third Duke of Buccleuch and Adam Smith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
[14] Anonymous, *Catalogue of the Pictures at Dalkeith House* (England: privately printed, 1911).
[15] The Order of the Thistle is a great honour of Scottish chivalry, presented to persons of high distinction in nobility or government service; see "The Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle," *Britannica Academic*, accessed October 1, 2019, http://academic.eb.com.libproxy.uregina.ca:2048/levels/collegiate/article/The-Most-Ancient-and-Most-Noble-Order-of-the-Thistle/72152. For more on eighteenth-century fashion, see Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
[16] See Richard Scott (Duke), *Bowhill: The House, Its People and Its Paintings*, ed. John Montagu Douglas Scott (Hawick: Caique Publishing Ltd, 2012), 19.
[17] For more on portraiture, see Andrew Wilton, *The Swagger Portrait: Grand Manner Portraiture in Britain from Van Dyck to Augustus John, 1630-1930* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1992).
[18] For more on the issue of defining 'humanness' in eighteenth-century Britain, see Fudge, *Perceiving Animals*, 9.
[19] See "Introduction: The Dangers of Anthropocentrism" in Fudge, *Perceiving Animals,* 1–10.
[20] Grand manner portraiture is categorized by the inclusion of visual elements that convey the wealth and status of the sitters. It was a popular style in eighteenth-century Britain that Joshua Reynolds was instrumental in introducing to the genre of portraiture. See "Grand Manner – Art Term," (London: Tate Gallery, 2018), accessed October 1, 2019, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/g/grand-manner. For more on grand manner portraiture in eighteenth-century Britain, refer to Wilton, *The Swagger Portrait*, 45–55.
[21] John Hayes, *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 78.
[22] For more on the role of pets in early modern fashion, see Tague, *Animal Companions*,10.
[23] Ibid., 56.
[24] Ibid., 54.
[25] Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.
[26] See "Terrier Dandie Dinmont," *Canadian Kennel Club*, accessed October 1, 2019, http://www.ckc.ca/en/Choosing-a-Dog/Choosing-a-Breed/Terriers/Dandie-Dinmont-Terrier.
[27] Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone, *Gainsborough* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 206.
[28] Anonymous, *Catalogue of the Pictures at Dalkeith House*.
[29] Also see Joshua Reynolds, *Miss Jane Bowles* (c. 1775, London, Wallace Collection, P36).
[30] For more on the status of children in early modern Britain, see John H Plumb, "The New World of Children in Eighteenth century England," *Past & Present*, no. 67 (1975): 90, accessed October 1, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650233.
[31] See Tague, *Animal Companions*, 236.
[32] See for example Thomas Gainsborough, *Lady Jane Whichcote* (c. 1775, Peterborough, Burghley Collections, PIC130).
[33] Tague, *Animal Companions*, 236. Also see Rosenthal and Myrone, *Gainsborough*, 183.
[34] Tague, *Animal Companions*, 236.
[35] Ibid, 139.
[36] See Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 177.
[37] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, (New York: Philosophical Library/Open Road Integrated Media, Inc. 2015), ebook, 45-47.
[38] See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A Selbey-Bigge (Public Domain, 1902), Kindle Ebook, specifically chapter IX "Of the Reason of Animals," 47-50 and David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Public domain, 1738), Ebook, specifically Part III, Section XVI "Of the Reason of Animals," 123-125.
[39] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 124.
[40] See Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain*, 110.

[41] See for example Thomas Gainsborough, *Sir Henry Bate-Dudley* (c. 1780, private collection).
[42] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 2.
[43] Also see Thomas Gainsborough, *Bumper* (c. 1745, private collection) and Thomas Gainsborough, *Pomeranian Bitch with Puppy* (c. 1777, London, Tate Britain, N05844).
[44] Malcom Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 159.
[47] See Tague, *Animal Companions*, 236.
[48] Alfred E. Fletcher, *The Makers of British Art: Thomas Gainsborough, R.A*., edited by James A. Manson (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd., 1904), 5.
[49] See Rosenthal and Myrone, *Gainsborough*, 140.
[50] See for example Richard Earlom after Thomas Gainsborough, *A Shepherd Boy* (c. 1781, New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, B1970.3.377).
[51] For a discussion about Gainsborough's lack of education, see Martin Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 6; Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, 4 and 22; and George Williams Fulcher, *Life of Thomas Gainsborough, R.A.* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856), accessed October 1, 2019, https://archive.org/details/lifethomasgains00fulcgoog, 156. For an opposing argument in favour of Gainsborough's intellect, see Susan Sloman, *Gainsborough in Bath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 141.
[52] See for example Adrian Franklin, *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1999); Tom Regan, *Animal Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Jim Mason, *An Unnatural Order: Why We Are Destroying the Planet and Each Other* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005).

Where Are All the Gay Robots?: Finding More Fully-Queer Utopias in AI Science Fiction

Schyler Palm

Abstract

Claims about humans are central to AI depictions, both fictional and non-fictional. Like a funhouse mirror distorting our vision, AI can both highlight the parts of humanity worth celebrating and evince our less favourable qualities. Accordingly, but worryingly, mainstream depictions of AI in all its forms lack conjunctive depictions of queerness, implying a sanitized future where queerness is erased. While some scholarly work has extracted subtle queer utopias from AI science fiction, more work must be done to explore an AI future where queerness persists. I bring two works to bear on this issue, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, to show how this queer-friendly future could be imagined and what that future might look like. I will show how two webcomics, which I believe do this work exceptionally well, can serve as exemplars to science fiction and speculative content creators committed to this endeavour.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Robots, Queer Utopias, Queer Theory, Science Fiction

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has always been with us. From the Jewish golem to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, to more contemporary works like *The Matrix*, *Westworld*, *Mass Effect*, and *Black Mirror*, it is plain that non-human intelligence of human creation has long had a place in our fiction. Putting aside the complex question of how best to define artificial intelligence—or even just *intelligence*—we know that AI has served many different literary functions throughout history, posing questions about hubris, immortality, the dangers of unfettered technological advancement, and even what it means to be human. Yet as time and technology progress, the questions posed by AI stories become less and less hypothetical. Today we play host to disembodied digital assistants tethered to the Internet, travelling around in our pockets or waiting on the kitchen counter to be called upon. Alexa, Cortana, Google Assistant, and Siri, once the stuff of science fiction, can remind us of appointments or to pick up milk on the way home, show us the fastest route to the supermarket, or tell us the best place to get coffee in a 10 km radius. And while there is certainly discussion to be had about these (non-)agents of capitalism as minstrels and caricatures of gender,[1] this paper will focus instead on fictional AI and the spaces of queer imagining they

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afford. As evidenced by our digital assistant friends, life increasingly imitates art. Or as Haraway puts it, "myth and tool mutually constitute each other."[2]

What does AI have to say about queerness?

In Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*[3] several binaries or "leaky distinctions" are discussed that post-structuralist thought would have us interrogate. Haraway calls special attention to three of these binaries—human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical—casting the cyborg as the agent of their blurred boundaries. The cyborg for Haraway is a liminal entity working to collapse. Where human meets animal we have werewolves and the Animagi of Harry Potter lore; where organism meets machine there is Darth Vader and Iron Man; and where physical meets nonphysical there are spirits, ghosts, angels, demons, and even the occasional disembodied AI. And all of this can be a good thing. AI in its many iterations, both fictional and non, presents a significant opportunity to expand our representations of queerness, and by extension the sorts of beings we allow ourselves to be.

There are a host of other binaries we might include in Haraway's list (such as male and female, or heteroerotic and homoerotic), and there are certainly examples to be found in pop culture of how each has been blurred. But there is a notable discrepancy between depictions of Haraway's three leaky distinctions and those kinds of corrupted binaries that are more *explicitly queer*, which is to say, explicit in a way that is actually helpful to queer-identified people living in the present sociopolitical climate. For example, a film like *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, depicts nonphysical, polyamorous relationships between humans and AIs,[4] so by non-normative standards of queerness it seems to fit the bill (and has indeed been credited as such).[5] But *Her* nevertheless presents beings with clearly cisgender personas, embodied or not, and positions its characters into ostensibly heteronormative relationships. When *Mass Effect's* EDI gains a robot body, she becomes both a physical and non-physical entity, localized and de-localized, occupying and feeling through both her new robot body and the sensors of the Normandy spaceship. While this may be, strictly speaking, another leap for queerness and non-normativity, EDI's first embodied action is not the mythic achievement of a human's first breath, sentience emerging, ready to claim her rights and individuality, but a runway-walk in metallic high heels. Queer though she might be, she is still a rigidly gendered and sexualized character, made for a straight, male audience and, still again, positioned into a heteronormative relationship. One cannot help but wonder whether this kind of binary-corrupting and boundary-pushing is of more benefit to cishet consumers who stand to gain greater relational freedom through this kind of representation (machine-human relationships, partial-bodied relationships, etc.) than it is of benefit to disenfranchised queers most in need of positive representation. In short, a strange sort of queering and de-queering is happening together: as Haraway's boundaries are blurred on the one hand, they are reconstituted and reasserted on the other. AI in these instances is not being used to its fullest, boundary-blurriest potential. With few notable exceptions,[6] queer AI is rarely depicted, and this absence should give us pause.

This brings me to my second point: queering is a fundamentally *utopian* endeavour oriented to futurity and as long as queerness is absent from AI futures, a sanitized future is implied where queerness has been exterminated, erased, and forgotten. In fact, science fiction as a genre is so often concerned with the future that it should be surprising—*even enraging*—that more queer AI utopias have not already been depicted. As it stands currently, if the genre of AI sci fi could speak, it would seem to be saying we are better off without queerness.

In response to this state of affairs, I turn to Muñoz's queer utopian hermeneutics. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,[7] Muñoz claims that queer utopianism, far from being naive to present, less-than-ideal circumstance, is a critical endeavour that orients us to the future. "Queerness is not yet here," he says. "We have never been queer…"[8] as if to say that we *could* be queer if only we strove for such futures. To Muñoz, queer utopianism does not languish in the unobtainable or dwell too long on present toils, but looks instead to the horizon for real possibility. Queer utopianism "dream[s] and enact[s] new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."[9] It is, in a word, *hopeful*. Given science fiction's concern for the future, *utopian* hermeneutics seems a fitting tool for reading queerness into fiction. I find this blurred-boundary queerness in two webcomics: *Artifice,* written by Alex Woolfson and illustrated by Winona Nelson, and *O Human Star* by Blue Delliquanti. First, I discuss the ways that *Artifice* uses its AI-human romance to paint a picture of transgression, and how this essential transgressiveness contributes to *Artifice*'s queer, utopic vision. Second, I analyse *O Human Star*, emphasizing the ways its queerness is explicitly multiple, which is to say, is queer in more ways that just suggesting cis, gay, male intimacy. *O Human Star* works to explore different configurations of queerness, deconstructing and reassembling gender and sexuality in beautifully Frankenstein-ian ways.

Before I do this, I want to note that the utopianism I speak of here should not be a read as a genre judgement on the kind of fictions created in each case discussed so far (*Artifice*, *O Human Star*, or any of the others). I am not saying that this work is utopian and that one is not, or this work is dystopian and that one is not. I mean only to say that utopian logics, by Muñoz's hermeneutics, look for *utopianisms* by taking otherwise constrictive binaries and turning them into new ways of being. Which is to say, these logics seek out ways that an AI depiction asserts utopia, or *can be read as utopic*. To put this yet another way, they ask: What are the ways that a work asserts its queerness? How does it subvert and refashion binaries, thereby availing new ways to be queer?

Artifice and Queerness as Transgression

The first transgressive work comes in the form of *Artifice*,[10] offering a powerful image of a queer agent under oppression. In *Artifice,* the character Deacon is an AI android coming to terms with sexuality and sexual experience markedly different from the status quo. Not unlike many queer people's experience, his identity is shown to be repressed, shamed, and desperate to be

explored. Deacon is a soldier treated like a slave and an instrument, literal bullet fodder yet possessing incredible strength. Dr. Maven, his interlocutor and narrative stand-in for conversion therapy, has control of Deacon's life but also his mind. With his command codes she can force him to do whatever she wants. In spite of the technological future in which *Artifice* takes place, it appears to have suffered social relapse in its attitudes toward queerness. When Deacon first meets Jeff, the human who he later comes to love, he asks Jeff if he is "a homosexual" and we learn that "outer colonies" in this universe are not accepting of queer people.[11] *Jeff reveals his homosexuality with considerable shame*. There is a known genetic cause for homosexuality in this future, as well as the means to splice it away, and most parents have taken this route—suggesting queer eradication as a real dystopian possibility. To most people in this world, Jeff's sexuality (and eventually Deacon's) are seen as deviant, even to themselves. The institutional powers that plague Deacon and Jeff have not only placed limits on their freedoms and behaviours, but also on the very thoughts they are allowed to think. But although Deacon and Jeff do not get along at first, their queer attraction is ultimately the means by which they overcome their antagonism.

When Jeff expresses doubts about an AI's ability to feel, Deacon says, "I'm designed to experience the full range of human emotions and sensations. I might not experience them the same way you do, but they're just as real to me."[12] The comic takes pains to affirm the feelings of both characters, as we might expect any two people in healthy romantic relationship to do, while at the same time allaying doubts that Jeff or the reader might have about the legitimacy of Deacon's feelings. This also draws an important comparison between queer and cisheteronormative relationality, effectively stating that non-normative feelings are not less real than normative ones.

Both characters are aware of the opposition they face, yet with trepidation, anger, exhaustion, and shame, they plod on, knowing that as the weeks progress and the retrieval team that is sent to collect them grows closer, the likelihood of their escape is slim. This is love literally under fire, queerness by conscientious objection, liberation by outlawry. Deacon disobeys his corporate masters at multiple turns, and though he and Jeff ultimately escape it is only by fighting their way out. Importantly, *it is through transgression that their queerness is claimed*, by facilitating their escape from corporate influence and the binaries that constrain them. This need not mean that all queer utopias must involve gunfire and violence, but when the alternative to queerness is keeling over and accepting defeat, transgression becomes an essential ingredient of liberation. Looking away from the terrible present and imagining a hopeful future, as Muñoz would have us do, can only be accomplished by overturning the causes of that terrible present, namely the institutions and social climate created by rigid binaries. A queer utopia is fundamentally oxymoronic then, both stuck in its moment of oppression and hopeful for futures free of it. The key in mediating this tension lies in Muñoz's concept of the "not yet conscious":

> This 'we' does not speak to a merely identitarian logic but instead to a logic of futurity. The 'we' speaks to a 'we' that is 'not yet conscious,' the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment. The 'we' is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger social order could be, what it should be.[13]

The queer "we" that Muñoz reflects on is a "we" of tomorrow and hope. Remember that our utopian logic does not need to make wide, brushstroke claims about the good or bad of the worlds we speak about. The world of *Artifice* is stoic, corporate, militaristic, and socially regressive, but there is still utopia to be found here. As David Leavitt says of E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, "Defying expectations and the suffocations of class, [Maurice] and [his lover] Alec elope into a rural wilderness […], in the process fleeing not merely the restraints of sexual puritanism but the very 'fencing off' process implied by ownership. They flee, in other words, not just propriety but property; they challenge ownership not just of themselves but of England."[14]

In the same way, Deacon and Jeff of *Artifice* flee property and ownership through their time in the wilderness of the outer colonies, and by their final escape. But unlike Maurice, Deacon of *Artifice* is literally property, subject to the programmatic whims of his creators and a society that denies him the same rights as a human, never mind access to marriage or adoption. Both he and Jeff are captives not only of anachronistic social mores but of a bloodthirsty corporation. *Artifice* turns its own terrible reality on its head, showing that the true queer utopia lies not in imagining a future without these circumstances, but in defiance of them.

O Human Star and Queerness as Multiple

Another way to look for queer utopias is to consider the many facets of queerness beyond sexual orientation, in particular gender and gender expression. To do this, I turn to another webcomic, *O Human Star*,[15] which posits a different queer AI future. Although this comic is less emphatic than *Artifice* about queer transgression, it is nevertheless radical by who it chooses to centre and by how it comingles AI with trans identity and gender dysphoria.

In *O Human Star*, Alastair Sterling awakes sixteen years after his sudden death to a new android body. The source of this new body is unknown to both him and Brendan, his old lover and business partner, but it has been meticulously constructed to look and function exactly as his old body. Although Brendan (Alastair's lover) was not responsible for creating this new body, it was not for lack of trying. Brendan had himself created, shortly after Alastair's death sixteen years prior, a copy of Alastair's mind that he implanted in a *different* robot body. Unlike the new Alastair, this other robot named Sulla, was an imperfect copy. But three years prior to the events of the comic (when Sulla was thirteen years old), Sulla asked Brendan to transition her to a girl's body, which Brendan agreed to do. As the comic progresses, Brendan, Alastair, and Sulla start

an odd sort of family together, with Brendan and Alastair as parental figures to Sulla, their *transgender, adolescent robot daughter*.

Sulla's creation can be read as a metaphor for same-sex procreation. Brendan (a male human) and Alastair (an ostensibly male android) together conceive Sulla, who is the product of Alastair's imperfect mind copy and Brendan's technical genius. By this dynamic, *O Human Star* suggests a utopia that is differently queer and differently utopian from works like *Artifice*. It posits a future where two men (not even two *human* men) can begin a family in some way born of themselves. Sulla bears many similarities to Alastair but has none of his memories and a very different personality. She is just as smart and has similar social anxieties, but is bubbly and talkative where Alastair is reserved and quiet. She is, by all accounts, a happy and healthy adolescent, transness and robot-ness fully withstanding. By depicting this imperfect yet healthy family, the comic legitimates queer relationality.

Furthermore, a conversation between Alastair and Brendan reveals that an AI is only a copy at the moment of their creation. Thereafter, the AI goes on to make their own decisions, memories, and individual identity. But though Sulla is now her own person, she was at one time an imperfect copy of Alastair. Because she has accepted her transness, and in light of what we learn about Alastair's traumatic childhood, an important question hangs over Alastair: is he also trans but has not yet realized? Does he have some sort of 'true' gender buried beneath queer shame? What are the critical differences between Alastair's life and Sulla's? The comic is careful about arriving at conclusions here, and steers clear of absolute statements about Alastair's identity. But when juxtaposed to Sulla's, Alastair's situation does point to something notable about the debilitating effects of queer shame. Sulla is carefree and happy where Alastair is stoic. She has been raised with love and opportunity, and in spite of the anxieties brought on by gender dysphoria and her looking-like-a-human-but-being-a-robot, she is otherwise well adjusted. Whatever identity lies buried for Alastair beneath a mountain of shame and abuse, it is not the unhappy version of himself he is now. Sulla functions as a vision to the reader and to Alastair, of who Alastair could be if he were free of his past. Sulla's well-adjusted transness is at least partially the product of an affirming caregiver, and this juxtaposition functions to critique the culture of queerphobia that Alastair has internalized.

O Human Star's radical queer utopianism comes not only from how it embraces the gayness of its fathers, but from how it affirms trans identity, human-AI sexual and romantic relationships, and non-traditional families all at once.

Conclusion

In writing about efforts to legalize same-sex marriage, Munoz criticizes what he sees as "the erosion of the gay and lesbian political imagination."[16] For Munoz, these efforts, well intentioned as they might be, are ultimately doomed to failure because they hinge on promises of

freedom bound in heternormative ways of relating. True liberation, born of a truly queer imagination, must reject the ossified mores of present reality and envision something better. While I will not here critique the claim that marriage is an entirely "flawed and toxic ideological formation,"[17] one might still say that a more fully queer utopic vision would not end at acceptance, nor would it presume that gay marriage is the be-all and end-all of queer liberation. There is always another horizon.

Although *Artifice* and *O Human Star* represent excellent examples of queer utopias, neither can be said to be *truly and fully queer*. One might say that such a queer work would need to be infinitely transgressive and endlessly multi-faceted, in addition to the many other qualities that make up queerness. But no such thing is possible, and I do not make that argument here. This paper aims only the emphasize that transgressiveness and multiplicity are important dimensions of queerness, and that making these dimensions explicit by representing experiences of actual queer-identified people makes for better, queer utopias. Mainstream AI discourse, for all its ubiquity, has been sorely lacking in explicit queerness, and an AI future without queer AI is a future devoid of queerness. Though far from perfect, *Artifice* and *O Human Star* provide prototypical (or at least very good) models for how to depict queer AI more fruitfully. Rather than sanitize or shy away from their queerness, these works make queerness foundational to their utopic vision.

Notes

[1] Others, like Kevin LaGrandeur in *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (2013), have argued that AIs are slave-like entities whose lot becomes increasingly horrific the closer they come to having personhood. Indeed, Scott Turner gave the name "Minstrel" to his 1993 story generator computer program, though he did not specifically describe it as AI.
[2] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 465.
[3] Ibid., 458–62.
[4] *Her*, directed by Jonze (Los Angeles: Annapurna Pictures, 2014), Netflix.
[5] Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage, "Sex and the AI: Queering Intimacies," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 11, no. 1 (2018): 73–96.
[6] A recent example is Michael Fassbender of *Alien: Covenant* (2017) playing two androids making out with each other. While fittingly transgressive, these sinister characters are not the positive representation queer people should settle for.
[7] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1–4.
[8] Ibid., 1.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Alex Woolfson and Winona Nelson, "Artifice," *Webcomics.Yaoi911.com* (blog), March 25, 2011–March 31, 2012, https://webcomics.yaoi911.com/artifice/.

[11] The geopolitical significance of the term "outer colonies" goes undiscussed in the comic; however, it does function as a metaphor for socially conservative rural communities that many young queer people are often anxious to escape.
[12] Woolfson, "Artifice," 46, https://webcomics.yaoi911.com/artifice/artifice-page-46/.
[13] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.
[14] David Leavitt, "Introduction" in *Maurice* by E.M. Forster (UK: Penguin Books, 1971), xxiii.
[15] Blue Delliquanti, "O Human Star," *OhumanStar.com* (blog), January 25, 2012, http://ohumanstar.com/comic/chapter-1-title-page/.
[16] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 21.
[17] Ibid., 21.

Variable Frequencies: A Sound Installation Investigating Process and Interaction

Angus Tarnawsky

Abstract

Variable Frequencies is a sound installation that uses transmission to question expectations of causality and interactivity. I explore this from an aurally-informed perspective, paying close attention to the concept of affect as a relational force. My understanding of this approach and acknowledgement of its importance was nurtured through a series of experiments with portable radios. Through these experiences, I observed that both transmission and reception are often affected in ways that are non-linear and unpredictable. The artwork that emerged from this research, *Variable Frequencies*, uses the infrastructure of radio to facilitate engagement with sound and space. In this paper, I will outline the practical mechanics, theoretical framework, and socio-political rationale of *Variable Frequencies*, detailing how the project generates an experiential platform for investigating process and interaction.

Keywords: Affect, Installation Art, Noise, Radio, Sound Studies

Introduction

Variable Frequencies builds on the technology of radio to explore sonic, social and political implications of transmission. Through a unification of physical and ephemeral states, fixed elements are encouraged to evolve into relational systems. Considering the ways in which sound installations can derive interactivity from participation, the project addresses the interdependent nature of 'affect' and 'effect' with reference to the specific framework defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.[1] In the preface to the English edition of the book *A Thousand Plateaus*, translator Brian Massumi clarifies that for Deleuze and Guattari, 'affect' broadly represents "an ability to affect and be affected."[2] In the scope of my own practice, I rely on this definition and the successive work on the subject by Massumi, and other contemporary theorists like Jane Bennett, and Erin Manning, who consider affective relations—rather than purely emotive affection—as a way of understanding actions, beyond observable cause and effect.[3]

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Sound and Space

Sound commands attention and rewards devotion. If considered in relation to time and space, foundational couplings emerge. For example, loud sounds might appear powerful in large or reverberant spaces, whereas soft sounds can achieve greater intimacy in smaller spaces. However since sounding (the making of sound) and listening are inherently relational processes, more complex scenarios tend to emerge. The combination of physical sites and material configurations—human or otherwise—play a great role in determining the eventual reception of sonic events. In any circumstance, listening, or simply being exposed to sounds for longer durations, can create altered modes of perception that encourage deeper engagement with the surrounding environment.

In her book *Listening to Noise and Silence*, artist and writer Salomé Voegelin proposes that "sound prompts a re-thinking of temporality *and* spatiality."[4] In this context, she considers how "time and space extend each other and produce each other as immaterial composite."[5] As a point of contrast, Voegelin notes that "vision captures, orders and disciplines space but it does not see the simultaneity of its time."[6] From a sound installation perspective, if sound, vision, time, and space can impact listeners, in what way does the presence of a listener alter the surrounding environment? Rather than focusing on purely acoustic alterations, I am interested in how *presence* affects the context of sounds in spaces.

Philosopher Jacques Rancière addresses this concern through what he terms "the distribution of the sensible."[7] In part, this concept can be defined as "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."[8] In this way, politics, social visibility, cultural context, and privilege are seen as inseparable elements. For Rancière, "artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility."[9] For my own practice, this leads to questions of *where* and *how* such politics of listening, sounding, and active engagement might intersect within contemporary gallery spaces.

Overview of the Installation

Variable Frequencies attempts to work harmoniously with a variety of sites to exploit the potential of sympathetic resonance *and* dissonance. Using extended lengths of copper wire, sculptural forms are constructed as architectural extensions of gallery spaces (Figures 1- 2). A custom-built radio transmitter is attached to each wire sculpture, allowing it to function as a radio antenna. Depending on the size of the room, the broadcast range of the structure is up to ten-metres. This transmission is received by a series of portable radios, positioned discreetly inside wall-mounted frames, and tuned into the broadcast frequency (Figure 3). Sonic compositions are then distributed spatially within the confines of the installation space.

In addition to utilizing physical space, the project also relies on unused broadcast space, existing between commercial FM stations. For example, the use of 90.2 FM where stations exist on 90.1 FM and 90.3 FM. When installing at a new site, finding vacant frequencies is often a challenge. Additionally, North American regulations limit broadcasting on commercial frequencies beyond a relatively small radius of approximately thirty[10] to sixty[11] metres. As a whole, these kind of constraints have proven to be positive, in that they encourage unique versions of *Variable Frequencies* to exist from one installation to the next.

Once the antenna and receivers are switched on, nearby bodies—knowing and unknowing participants—have the potential to alter the effectiveness of the transmission and reception. This process is made audible through bursts of noise and intermittent connections to commercial radio stations. On the one hand, the interference occurs since the radio transmitter—an influential DIY design by Japanese media artist Tetsuo Kogawa—is relatively unstable.[12] On the other hand, almost all analog radio receivers are highly sensitive to environmental factors. Aside from bodies, variables like nearby objects, time of day, location within a space, or the geography of the site, can all cause fluctuations in reception or transmission. In part, these reactive tendencies can be explained through capacitance. This term describes the means by which small amounts of electricity can be transferred between sources. Commonly occurring with direct electrical connections (physical contact with circuits), it can also exist wirelessly. For radio, either circumstance results in the inability of devices to accurately tune into or distribute broadcast sources.

While attempting to elicit control over radio waves, the multiplicity of affective actions and reactions constitutes what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as an 'assemblage.'[13] That is to say, within the system, everything is relational. Affect mobilizes as a form of omnidirectional influence. Visible interventions and invisible mechanisms work together to encourage material engagement. Noise appears and disappears, defining change through constant emergence. Interstitial zones connect aware and unaware agents of change. Interference between signals is inevitable. Through all of this, observers become participants, and passive viewing or listening is guided towards immersion in time, space, and transmission.

Figure 1. Variable Frequencies #2 (installation view), OCAD University, Toronto, 2018.

Figure 2. Variable Frequencies #3 (antenna detail). OCAD University, Toronto, 2019.

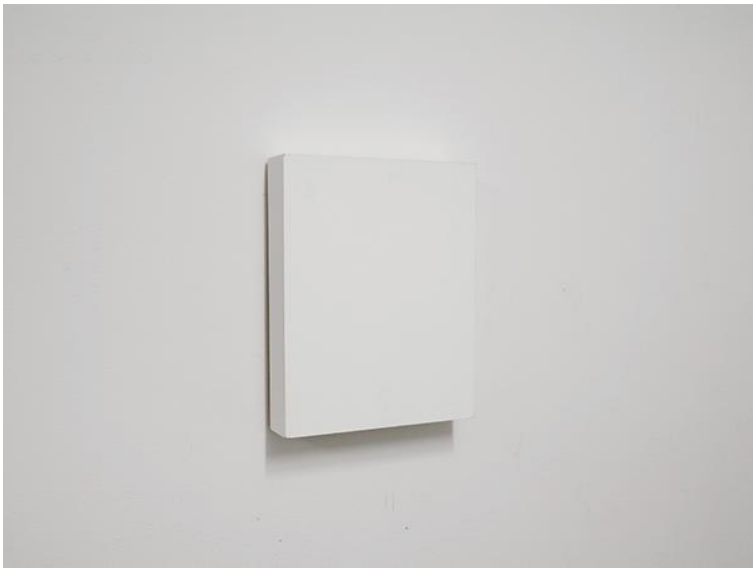

Figure 3. Radio receiver, positioned inside wall-mounted frames. OCAD University, Toronto, 2018.

Radio Politics and Broadcast Structures

Radio waves are a form of naturally occurring electromagnetic radiation, often observed by humans but not fully understood until the 19th century. Anthropologist Daniel Fisher describes radio as a "spatial metaphor."[14] He sees transmission as a form of modernization, a technique for nation building, a resource for counter-hegemonic voices, and a platform for participatory democracy.[15] However, frequently harnessed for capital or political gain, the contemporary world is dictated and shaped by the invisible signals of broadcasting in vastly different ways. While many systems work so that the masses can receive signals—radio or otherwise—transmission itself remains a privilege. Newer forms of media distribution may challenge or provoke this hierarchy, but they are inevitably shaped to some extent by pre-existing systems and ideologies. Sound theorist Brandon LaBelle suggests that "transmission is equally about power and propaganda," adding that "to transmit is to tap the political heart of social connection."[16]

Broadcasting is one of the most important developments of the 20th century, enabling a massive change in the ability to communicate locally and globally. While the process of transmission is invisible, to this day much of the wider broadcast infrastructure is visible. Communication towers dominate landscapes, amplifying not only the reach of transmissions, but elevating the visual presence and importance of such actions. Inspired by this idea, the most prominent visible element within *Variable Frequencies* is the site-responsive radio antenna. Woven intricately within a space, it provides a point of engagement for viewing, listening, and interacting with the installation.

Expectations of Interaction and Participation

As part of a wide-reaching analysis of noise, economist Jacques Attali reflects that "more than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies. With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world."[17] For Attali, noise generates boundaries and articulates spatial territories. In this sense, noise is a crucial transgression of interaction, providing a chaotic alternative to reinforce moments of stability. Within *Variable Frequencies*, this process is enacted as a fragile relationship between physical presence and invisible occurrences. Touching the wire antenna causes an immediate effect. However, the dynamic outcome of this action is relatively limited. Physical contact tends to generate noise in the entire transmission, while moving around different parts of the larger installation space shifts the tuning of individual receivers to nearby commercial radio stations. Even without human intervention, those same stations sometimes overtake the installation space, frequently creating unexpected sonic fluctuations. Often, regardless of attempts to impact the signal, nothing changes at all. This instability defines *Variable Frequencies*, insofar that affective relations do not elicit predictable cause and effect reactions. This goes against a common approach taken by interactive artworks, where explicit examples of causality provide evidence of human participation. With *Variable Frequencies*, the symbolic action of effecting change is shifted towards an awareness of affective gestures, where the process is not subservient towards strict notions of causality.

Conclusion

Variable Frequencies highlights that stable forms of interaction cannot always be assumed or guaranteed. In probing further, the project asks what forces exist to connect or distance gallery attendees from anticipated or desired outcomes. Although the main visible element of the broadcast antenna serves to encourage tactile participation, obvious sonic alterations occur more dynamically through interaction with the discreetly positioned radio receivers. These are objects that are still impacted by participation, but in a way that theorist Erin Manning describes as "minor gestures."[18] Thus, in considering the difference between 'affect' and 'effect', *Variable Frequencies* brings attention to process and interaction, as they function within complex modes of invisibility and unpredictability.

Notes

[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 1–25.
[2] Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements," in *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi.

[3] Brian Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* No. 31, Part II (1995): 83–109; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
[4] Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 124.
[5] Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence,* 124.
[6] Ibid., 169.
[7] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.
[8] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.
[9] Ibid.
[10] "RIC-40 — Frequently Asked Questions on Low Power FM Broadcasting," Government of Canada, accessed November 1, 2019. https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/smt-gst.nsf/eng/sf02087.html#q4
[11] "Low Power Radio - General Information," Federal Communications Commission, accessed November 1, 2019, https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/low-power-radio-general-information.
[12] Rob Kozinuk, "How to Build a One-Watt FM Transmitter Based on a Workshop by Tetsuo Kogawa," in *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission*, eds. Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2004), 301–17.
[13] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. 4.
[14] Daniel Fisher, "Radio," in *Keywords in Sound,* eds. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 153.
[15] Ibid., 156.
[16] Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 220.
[17] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 6.
[18] Manning, *The Minor Gesture,* 18–19.

Political Wall Writing as Activism

Mona Hedayati

Abstract

Political Wall Writing as Activism is a discussion on my new video-recorded performance, *Death to…* (2018), that explores the practice of wall writing, a rare manifestation of political dissent in Iran, in the absence of formal channels of democratic protest. In an effort to contextualize this practice, I will first situate it within its distinct historical background and analyze the dominant rhetoric surrounding it, then compare and contrast the coordinates of this type of activism versus the narrative I offer in the video, and finally discuss the shift from language to performativity, before positioning this discourse within its grand narrative.

Keywords: Activism, Censorship, Iran-US relations, Cultural Clash, Language Barrier

Artist's Statement[1]

Death to… is the video documentation of a performance which explores the role of political wall writing as a form of activism aiming for mass mobilization with a historical permanence in Iran. Political dissent, when formal channels of democratic protest are non-existent, has often resulted in anti-authoritative messages being transcribed on the walls over the past several decades. Hastily written by protesters and then carelessly erased by state agents, wall writing has a long archaeological presence in politically-unstable countries, particularly in the Middle East.

I focus on Iran as I layer these oppositional messages onto the wall, where such political messages often start with the phrase "death to," followed by political ideology or affiliation. In so doing, I repeatedly occupy dual roles: of the protester writing these statements in Farsi, and then the state agent carelessly painting over them, allowing the layers underneath to show through without ever attempting to erase the phrase "death to," highlighting the historical predominance of this rhetoric as a politicized extension of colloquial language. This form of activism problematizes citizen-state dynamics by foregrounding the role of the activist as a disruptor of power relations, thereby challenging the authority by claiming the wall as a tool of mass communication, highlighting its presence in the public sphere that is subject to this ongoing clash.

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Background

On multiple occasions during my recent archival research on Iran's political history, I came across photographs of ordinary people paid by the state to paint over wall writings in an effort to hide the original messages under the guise of "cleaning up" the city after protests.[2] That awakened a curiosity in me to know more about the history of this practice as I had a clear visual memory of the wall writings being everywhere in Tehran during my childhood.

More research revealed that this is a deeply-rooted form of political activism across the Middle East, particularly in Iran. Subsequently, I situated this practice broadly by looking into the geopolitics of the Middle East, considering that the persistent lack of freedom of speech is a symptom of totalitarianism, regardless of regime change. This drives masses to express themselves in ways, like political wall writing, because they don't have an open platform for protest. The role of foreign intervention in the region and its relation to wall writing was another factor to take into consideration, a manifestation of which is detected in the phrase: "Yankee Go Home," a staple in protests against the United States interventionism. There is a pattern that suggests the ongoing ominous infiltration of "enemy," that can be seen in the progression of wall writings as a by-product of foreign intervention: "death to warmongers, agitators and hypocrites" that appear in my work. This parallels the historical context that my work refers to. Given this background, I intended to point towards this practice as a complex form of activism highlighting the role of the wall, both as a medium of free expression and also as an agent that blurs the boundaries in the hierarchy of power between activist and state apparatus.

"Death to" Rhetoric

Looking at the history of political wall writing as activism in Iran since the 1953 coup, one can immediately detect a recurrent manifestation of slogans starting with "death to" or "hail to."[3] Iranian sociologist Mehdi Mohseniain Rad's *In Pursuit of Proper Understanding* [**به دنبال فهم درست**] on the history of wall writing lists roughly 700 pre-revolutionary slogans.[4] This research shows that a considerable number of wall writings start with the phrase "death to" that stems from a peculiar place in Persian culture. Farsi is a language of bold exaggerations. In colloquial Farsi, we willingly wish death upon ourselves in saying "may god kill me" when we do something wrong, and we equally address the death wish to others with phrases such as "hope they bring the news of their death." This lingo also seeps into political defiance. During surges of regime change, wall writings starting with the phrase "death to" are often followed by the name of a specific party or affiliation; other times, it is addressed broadly towards an ideology removing historical boundaries. One can see, for instance, "death to imperialism, capitalism and colonialism" throughout the years and sometimes it is difficult to associate them with a specific era. "Death to America," a slogan that has been picked up and overemphasized by western media, falls into this ideological category as American imperialism and its representations

angered activists enough to put America next in the line-up after England, a popular "death to" slogan during the nationalization of the Anglo-Persian oil company.[5] Despite the common belief that the Islamic republic officially devised the term, its roots go further back to the American and British designed coup of 1953. However, the Islamic republic happened to highlight the rhetoric as part of their systematic propaganda in the media and integrated it into their state apparatus by organizing chanters to shout it out in the streets and commissioning massive murals on the public walls based on it. The rhetoric not only served the pre and post Islamic revolution ideologies but also proved its anti-establishment anarchist legacy under the reign of the Islamic Republic through slogans such as "death to the executioner," referring to the 1988 mass killing of political prisoners and later on "death to the dictator" in response to presidential election fraud in 2009.[6]

Manipulating the Narrative

Wall writings appear with a great sense of urgency and immediacy, often overnight. The intent of the anonymous activist is almost always a distinct hope for this practice to become contagious and galvanize masses, which does happen to serve its purpose at least during the bursts of unrest. One can notice how a few "death to" and "hail to" slogans immediately multiply into several hundreds in a matter of days, where ignoring them becomes an almost labourious task. Censorship attempts begin with police patrols or individual reports, followed by state agents going through neighbourhoods and painting over an abundance of slogans individually without meticulous care. That is how, a passer by can literally read what they just supposedly painted over as a peculiar ghost image of the original writing. Sometimes another message will appear on top of that whitewash immediately or with a delay which creates a layered discourse that, over time, loses its capacity to communicate messages embedded in deeper layers, gesturing towards the archeological quality of this practice.

In making *Death to…*, I allowed myself artistic freedom to modify actual circumstances on multiple levels. First, I chose to blur the lines and obscure the roles of activist versus state to foreground the wall writing practice. I was interested in performing this binary of writing and erasing to focus on the practice as a rivalrous, compulsive ritual between the activist and the state agent by concentrating on the act alone. I slowed down my pace of writing to highlight the role of the activist and extract the temporal presence of slogans by painting and writing over them immediately, thereby exaggerating the archeological aspect of the ghost imagery as a discourse that has been buried under layers of paint encapsulating intervals of protest and censorship. In such a circumstance, decoding these messages become almost impossible even for the reader of the Perso-Arabic alphabet, creating an indiscriminate language barrier.[7] Instead, the role of the wall is foregrounded as a living medium of mass communication and the only platform of free speech that goes through periods of consecutive tension between the activist and the authority, the claim to power and its reversal time after time throughout all these years.

Neutrality of Language

Since I wrote in Farsi rather than English, most of the audience is unable to understand anything from the words, hence language becomes a material medium and that is how the shift from language to performativity happens. Bearing in mind that meaning is absent for a large portion of the audience, it is crucial to consider the distancing of language from its landscape of signification and its heavily politicized intent. This illegibility highlights the materiality and physicality of text as a purely formal element rather than a bearer of meaning.[8] In this case, there is a broken cycle between the signifier and signified. This break halts a viewer's attempt to decipher the meaning out of only text and instead makes them decode the event through the act and process. The focus here is no longer on interpreting the text, but in the manner the text is enacted. This level of obscurity brings out the performative as the main channel of interaction for the western viewer as the trap of semantics is absent, and the language barrier becomes the visual language.

Conclusion

This video is an effort to foreground political wall writing as a precarious emancipatory practice that has been established as a creative response to the absolute absence of freedom of speech. Majorly showcased across the Western media platforms as an out-of-context radical insurgency against superpowers, this historical practice has been majorly discounted when fighting for causes such as social justice, civil rights and due process. By providing this crucial context for practices such as political wall writing, such platforms can familiarize Western audience with ongoing liberation movements happening across the Middle East, instances of which outnumber radical ideologies winning the utmost exposure.

Death to… (2018). Image courtesy of the author.

Notes

1 I am truly indebted to organizers of Undisciplined who redefined the conventional divisions across disciplines and modes of art and cultural production and encouraged stepping beyond such boundaries by curating panels and screenings/performances that created new potentials and encouraged further dialogue.
2 Elizabeth L. Rauh, "Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture, From the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1316–43; Lawrence Wu and Michelle Lanz, "How the CIA Overthrew Iran's Democracy in 4 Days," *National Public Radio*, February 7, 2019, https://npr.org/2019/01/31/690363402/how-the-cia-overthrew-irans-democracy-in-four-days.
3 For information on 1953 Iranian Coup, see *New World Encyclopedia* entry at: https://newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/1953_Iranian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat#Planning_Operation_Ajax.
4 Mehdi Mohseniain Rad, *In Pursuit of Proper Understanding*, [**به دنبال فهم درست**] (London: H&S Media, 2016), 82–140 (in Persian only).
5 For information on Anglo-Persian Oil Company see *Encyclopedia Iranica* entry at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anglo-persian-oil-company.
6 Rauh, "Thirty Years Later," 1316–43.
7 If language is a form of coded signs that are supposed to be decoded to hold a signification, here, this process of layering hinders that mechanism to occur because of illegibility.
8 Jonathan Walker, "Reading Materiality: The Literary Critical Treatment of Physical Texts," *Renaissance Drama* 41, no. 1/2 (2013): 199–232. doi:10.1086/673904.

Multiple Narratives of Display and Heritage in Museums: Iznik Ceramics in Comparison

Simge Erdogan

Abstract

Museums are discursive spaces of representation, display and knowledge. Through their displays and exhibitions, they affect, shape and manipulate our ways of looking at objects and their heritage. Display elements such as spatial organization, light, colour, and texts play a pivotal role in communicating key messages of the exhibition embedded in its narrative. This raises a question: to what extent does a museum display shape our understanding of objects and their heritage?

This study examines the power of museum representation by looking at the display of Iznik ceramics in three museums: the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum in London, and the Tiled Kiosk Museum in Istanbul. Looking at each museum's display elements and design aesthetics, this study identifies three different modes of display adopted in the display of ceramics: aesthetic, contextual and systematic. Through a comparative analysis, it highlights three alternative narratives generated respectively on Iznik ceramics' artistic heritage, material culture and national heritage, and a common nationalist paradigm that is present in all three.

Keywords: Museum, Display, Representation, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Museum exhibitions are instruments of knowledge, power, and representation. Museums not only shape our understanding of objects but also generate multiple meanings and narratives about them. Design aesthetics and display elements play a pivotal role in these visual and written narratives, for without them, an exhibition would be nothing but a random grouping of objects in space. Display elements (i.e., the use of light, colour, space and texts) articulate different systems of knowledge and representation which not only manipulate our understanding of the exhibits, but also narrate multiple—sometimes overlapping, sometimes contesting—stories about them and their heritage. This becomes most evident when the very same objects are displayed in different museum settings. Each museum is likely to represent identical objects in its own ways and hence they are likely to create differing stories about the objects' broader cultural meanings, past, and heritage. Yet to what extent does a museum display affect our understanding of objects and their cultural heritage?

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This paper aims to understand the power of museum display in generating narratives of culture that manipulate and eventually shape our understanding of the objects. To do so, I will provide a comparative analysis of the display of Iznik ceramics in three different museums: the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the British Museum in London, and the Tiled Kiosk Museum in Istanbul. Examining these museums' exhibition spaces, their display elements, and design aesthetics in particular, I will identify three approaches of display: aesthetic, contextual and systematic which create alternative visual and written narratives on the very same objects' cultural heritage. I will conclude by exploring common problematic representations in all three museum spaces, which reproduce a nationalist paradigm and form problematic links between Iznik ceramics' Ottoman past and so-called Turkish heritage.

Iznik Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum

Iznik ceramics at the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East (August 2015, image courtesy of author)

When the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East finally opened its doors to the public in 2006, it sparked great interest and excitement. The new Jameel Gallery, still home to the museum's 10,000-piece Islamic collections, replaced the former gallery which was regarded as to be "confusingly structured and poorly lit..."[1] Curated by senior curator Tim Stanley, the V&A's Islamic Middle East Gallery features a spectacular collection of over 400 objects Íare brought together in order to show visitors the interconnectedness of Islamic art and its interactions with different parts of the world, including influence over other artistic traditions.

Moreover, through its displays, the gallery aims to "develop interest in and promote understanding of the diversity of Islamic art and to inspire in all people, an appreciation of its beauty."[2]

Aesthetic display refers to a tendency to highlight the beauty, uniqueness and aesthetic qualities of exhibits by presenting them, as art historian Stefen Weber suggests, "…beautifully in a clear and correct order.''[3] Adopting an aesthetic display, the V&A's Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East presents its exhibits, including Iznik ceramics, as beautiful and unique artworks of Islamic Art.[4] Accordingly, the exhibition space is divided into seven thematic sections: the first three refer to crucial themes in Islamic Art,[5] while the other four explore key regions and dynasties of the Islamic Middle East (fig. 1).[6] These four geographic regions are divided into multiple subsections, each exploring different artistic and decorative styles present in these dynasties, and convey different versions in style and decoration of each object. The thematic and stylistic organization of the space are enhanced with design aesthetics which illuminate the visual and aesthetic qualities of the beauty of the objects on display.[7] As the V&A's Summative Evaluation Report suggests, the Jameel Gallery's layout succeeds in communicating the key messages and the main themes of the exhibition to visitors. Half of the visitors interviewed were able to identify different artistic and decorative styles present in these dynasties "as well as various forms of art displayed in the gallery."[8]

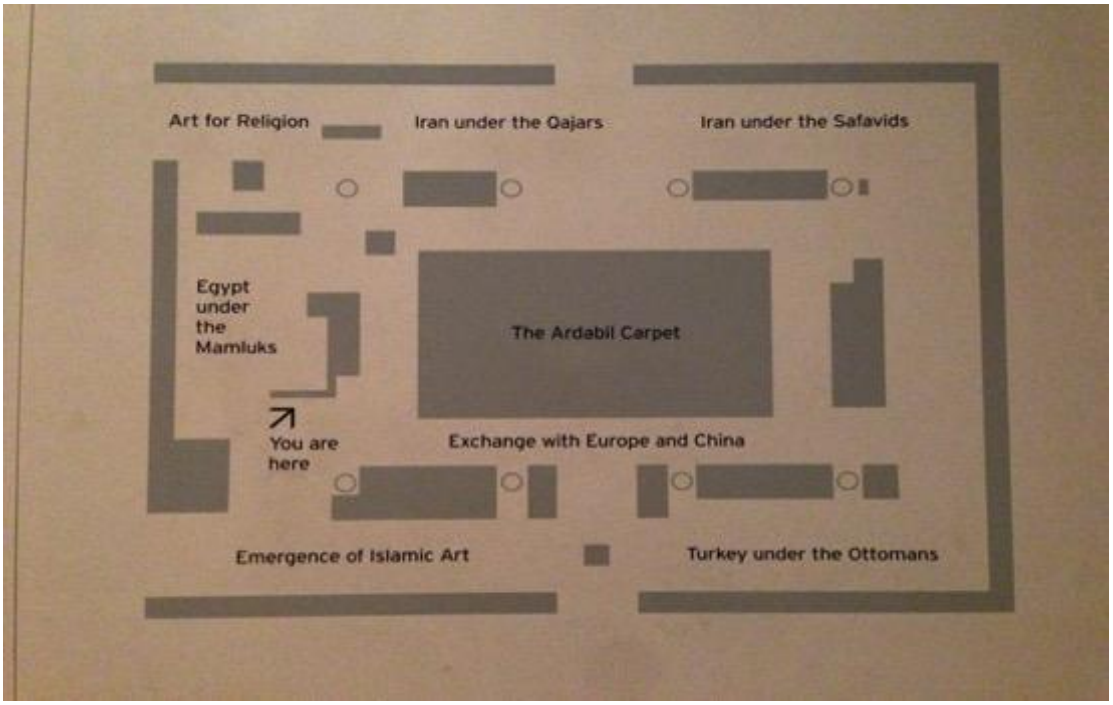

Figure 1: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
Gallery layout showing themes and sections (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

In this arrangement of the Jameel Gallery, Iznik ceramics are exhibited in the *Turkey under the Ottomans* section, which contains ten sub-sections. Quite expectedly, each one of these

sub-sections explores a different artistic style in Ottoman Art between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The museum's Iznik ceramic collection is distributed amongst two main sub-sections: *Iznik ceramics after 1550* and *Iznik ceramics before 1550*. The main idea behind this organization is to highlight the changing technical qualities (referring to the shift to polychrome tiles after the 1550s) and the emergence of novel designs (referring to the emergence of a distinctly Ottoman repertoire of floral designs before and after the 1550s) in the production of ceramics.[9] Looking at these sub-sections more deeply, the *after 1550* sub-section includes two wall-mounted display cases, which exhibit thirty-one objects (fig. 2). These exhibits are divided into three parts with two shelves against a black backdrop that is sparingly lit with internal lighting hoods.

Figure 2: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
Iznik ceramics after 1550 sub-section and additional Iznik tile displays (August 2015, image courtesy of author)

The *before 1550* sub-section exhibits the ceramics in a freestanding glass case which includes a group of nine objects and one mosque lamp (fig. 3). They are put against a white backdrop and lit individually. All objects stand on a dark blue platform which creates a visual unity with the exquisite blues and whites in many of the ceramics. The choice of dark blue also encourages visitors to recognize—and hence explore—the defining characteristics of this particular period of Iznik ceramic production; the absence of under-glaze decoration in red and a dominant blue and white colour palette. Through this curatorial decision, the Jameel Gallery not

only creates a more aesthetically pleasing visual experience but also succeeds in drawing the visitors' attention to some defining features of Ottoman ceramic production of the period.

Figure 3: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
Iznik ceramics before 1550 sub-section (August 2105, image courtesy of author)

While the objects in the two sub-sections are exhibited in groups, there are two pieces that are displayed individually. The first, "Basin with Golden Horn Design", is placed in a freestanding case with a glass top and placed in the middle of the room. This is the first object that visitors encounter when they enter the gallery from the museum shop (fig. 4). The second object, "A Vase with Flowers", is exhibited in a wall case above the main introductory section panel. These individual exhibits have similar design aesthetics to those previously discussed. The Basin is placed in a glass case, standing on a black platform and internally lit from below. The Vase, on the other hand, is put against a black backdrop and lit individually. The overall colour of this display is dark blue, again a curatorial decision which highlights the exquisite blues and whites on the object (a feature that also indicates that this object was produced before 1550). Through these individual displays, the gallery presents these two exhibits as dramatic and eye-catching treasures of a collection. Moreover, through the use of individual displays, the Jameel Gallery makes many viewing angles possible by "facilitating the optimum viewing of each individual work."[10] The gallery allows a more careful examination of the objects, and hence admiration and appreciation of their beauty, style and technique.

Figure 4: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
The display case featuring "Basin with Golden Horn Design" (August 2015, image courtesy of author)

Aesthetic Masterpieces

Through aesthetic display, the Jameel Gallery narrates a story of the emergence and evolution of the art and style of Iznik ceramics. This narrative is conveyed first by a visual storyline which focuses on a stylistic evolution of ceramics and second by stylistic sub-section divisions and object placements, which present ceramics as beautiful works of art to be aesthetically appreciated.

As visitors move from one sub-section to another, they follow a visual narrative which focuses on the evolution of a distinct style in the arts of ceramic production. The key and carefully selected location of display cases make this possible. For instance, *Iznik ceramics before 1550* sub-section exhibits a mosque lamp (a key object that signals the emergence of distinct style and early experiments with the colour red to underglaze decoration) in the left corner of the display case (fig. 5). Putting this mosque lamp at this corner forms a visual unity between this section and the following *Iznik ceramics after 1550* sub-section. When visitors move to this next section, they see later examples of under-glaze decoration in red, which represents the evolution of style, the expansion and the rise of quality in color palette, and

variation in shapes and design. By linking one section to another, visitors are encouraged to follow the evolution of the style of ceramic production.

Figure 5: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
Mosque Lamp in 'Iznik Ceramics before 1550' sub-section, detail. (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

While narrating the story of the evolution of ceramic production and distinct style in Iznik, the gallery also narrates a story of cross-cultural stylistic and artistic interactions between Iznik and other regions. This is made possible through space layout and thematic section divisions. To convey the message of cross-cultural influences on Iznik production, the *Iznik ceramics before 1550* sub-section is placed between the *Exchange with Europe and China* section on the right and the *Iznik ceramics after 1550 sub-section* on the left. To complement the story, early examples of "blue-and-white ware" ceramics (which reflect Chinese influences) are placed towards the right corner of the display case closer to the *Exchange with Europe and China Section.* Likewise, the *Iznik ceramics after 1550* sub-section is placed next to the *Safavid Ceramics* section (fig. 6). Through this, the gallery communicates one of the main messages of the exhibition: "Ottoman and Safavid styles are different but have a shared origin and shared characteristics."[11]An example of these shared characteristics is the colours, designs, and glazes of Chinese ceramic work that was an important source of technical and aesthetic inspiration for both the Safavid and Ottoman ceramic production. The visitor responses indicate that the gallery is successful in conveying cross-cultural influence and allowing visitors to make connections between Iznik and other ceramic production centers. Of those interviewed, six visitors reported

that the gallery showed them the influences of Islamic art such as its fusion with the west, influenced by China, influences on other parts, and influences on European art.[12]

Figure 6: The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East.
Iznik Ceramics after 1550 sub-section (right) located next to Safavid Ceramics section (left) (August 2015, image courtesy of author)

Iznik Ceramics at the British Museum

John Addis Gallery of Islamic World. Main space (August 2015, image courtesy of author)

Between 1989 and 2018, the John Addis Gallery of Islamic World was home to the world's largest Iznik ceramics collection and the British Museum's world-renowned collection of Islamic World art, artefacts and contemporary artworks from vast territories including Levant, North Africa, Central Asia, and Turkey. In October 2018, the John Addis Gallery was replaced by the newly refurbished Albukhary Foundation Gallery of Islamic World.[13] Opened its doors to the public after an ambitious four-year project, the new gallery reflects the museum's aim to present its collections in new and creative ways and show visitors more of the cultural diversity of the region.[14] As the British Museum's first gallery devoted to the art and culture of the Islamic world, the John Addis Gallery still entices a remarkable example for the power of museum display and representation. It was an important space which adopted an alternative mode of display and representation in the display of Iznik ceramics. In contrast to the V&A's Jameel Gallery where an aesthetic approach is embedded in the thematic arrangement of sections and stylistic arrangement of sub-sections, John Addis Gallery adopted a contextual approach that was reflected in geographical-dynastic organization of space and chronological placement of objects in display cases.[15]

The main aim of contextual display is to bring to light the historical and cultural context of objects that "evoke the original contexts from which museum objects were taken."[16] Accordingly, space was divided into two geographical sections: the Eastern Islamic World (such as Iran and Central Asia) and the Western Islamic world (such as Egypt, Sicily and Turkey). To narrate the history of each geographical region, these sections were further divided into dynastic sub-sections that are organized around chronologies.[17] In contrast to the dark and sparingly lit atmosphere of the Jameel Gallery, which puts emphasis on objects' visual and aesthetic qualities, the John Addis Gallery exhibited objects in groupings contained in display cases that are divided by shelves. The gallery, as well as display cases, were well lit with both natural light and with integral yellow hoods. This created an intimate atmosphere within the space via the use of warm colours.

The John Addis Gallery's contextual display built a context, a history and a story around objects, which "told [a] bigger story about cultures, people and cultural history."[18] Accordingly, ceramics were presented in this space using "rigid dynastic periodization"[19] and a highly chronological order. Iznik ceramics featured in three sections, each represented by a display case. The first section was the *Ottoman Empire* section, which was located on the left-hand side of the main space towards the back of the gallery (fig. 7). The second and third sections were *Iznik Pottery 1520s–1530s* (fig. 8) and *Iznik Pottery 1550–1560* (fig. 9) respectively, which stood in front of the window.

Figure 7: John Addis Gallery of Islamic World.
Turkey under the Ottoman Empire Section (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

Figure 8: John Addis Gallery of Islamic World.
Display case exhibiting samples of Iznik pottery from the 1520s–1530s (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

Figure 9: John Addis Gallery of Islamic World. Display case featuring samples of Iznik pottery from 1550–1560 (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

The dominant contextual logic behind the display of objects in the John Addis Gallery was also reflected in its design aesthetics. In contrast to the V&A displays (which use a combination of different colour backdrops and design materials such as platforms and shelves), the John Addis Gallery adopted an aesthetic unity in its presentation: all objects were put in glass cases that use no backdrop, enabling visitors to see the samples from all sides. The well- and internally lit display cases had a yellow colour, presented objects in groupings and equally distributed them amongst the upper, middle and lower parts of the cases. These presentation choices reflected a concern to draw visitors' focus to the context, rather than individual qualities of objects.

Artifacts of Material Culture

In contrast to the Jameel Gallery's story of the evolution of ceramic production and style of Iznik as works of art, the John Addis Gallery narrated a different story that was based on the history of Iznik ceramics. This was made possible by a variety of curatorial decisions: first by the geographical ordering of space and chronological placement of objects, which brought to light multiple contexts in which objects were embedded and produced; and second by the use of texts that placed focus on the materiality of objects over their artistic qualities.

The John Addis Gallery's geographical section divisions and chronological object arrangements revealed an aim to contextualize and historicize Iznik ceramics. The gallery's

visual storyline showed visitors multiple contexts in which Iznik ceramics are produced. As visitors moved within the space, they followed a narrative that is concerned with the different roles that ceramics played in past social, cultural and artistic contexts. These contexts included changes in visual qualities, cross-cultural interactions between Iznik and other ceramic production centres and the rise of the quality and technique of the products. Starting from the main display case, *Pottery of Iznik*, visitors were encouraged to explore the history of Iznik ceramics within these multiple frameworks (fig. 10). The first display case presented the history of Ottoman Empire whereas the next section, *Iznik Pottery mid-sixteenth century,* introduces Chinese influences on Iznik ceramics (fig. 11). Accordingly, as visitors moved from one display case to another, they explored "many qualities of artifacts that are important for specific place[s] in particular social contexts."[20] The use of a contextual and historical approach to display not only allowed visitors to embed Iznik ceramics within the broader history of Ottoman Empire and the heritage of ceramic production, but also placed an emphasis on ceramics' materiality over their visual and aesthetic qualities.

Figure 10: John Addis Gallery of Islamic World.
View of main display case featuring Pottery of Iznik (left) and display case featuring ceramics from 1520–1530 (right) (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

Figure 11: John Addis Gallery of Islamic World.
View of the Iznik ceramics 1520–1530 sub-section (left) from Iznik ceramics 16th century section (right) (August 2015, image courtesy of author).

Iznik Ceramics at the Tiled Kiosk Museum

Tiled Kiosk Museum.
Main hall (June 2015, image courtesy of author).

The Tiled Kiosk Museum is a public museum located in Istanbul, Turkey. It exhibits its Iznik ceramics collection in a one-store museum building which consists of the main hall and five side rooms.[21] Behind its exhibits and design is a systematic display, which refers to "the grouping of objects by means of any number of conceptual categories."[22] This display approach reflects an aim to expose visitors to the range of artifacts on view, and hence encourage their exploration and discovery. This becomes most evident in the spatial organization and design aesthetics of the exhibition space, which inform us about a variety of attempts for classification and systematization. Accordingly, Tiled Kiosk displays are organized in multiple ways that articulate multiple systems of knowledge and organization which incorporate themes, styles and techniques together. In contrast to the V&A and British Museum's exhibitions where sections are divided into subsections that explore different themes, we do not see any sub-sections at the Tiled Kiosk. Rather, the exhibits are placed in six key sections. Three sections, *Miletus Ware, Blue and White Ware* and *Polychrome Ceramics,* are placed in the main hall and explore different techniques of ceramic production in Iznik. Two sections explore other ceramic production centers, *Kütahya* and *Canakkale Ceramics,* that emerged in the Ottoman Empire and one section explores the Seljuk ceramics. These sections are placed in three side rooms.

When we look at the placement of exhibits within display cases, we see a combination of both groupings and individual displays. Some exhibits are presented in groups in freestanding display cases while others are exhibited individually in wall cases (fig. 12). Similar to the British Museum, Tiled Kiosk has a well-lit atmosphere. Its objects are put against white walls of the gallery and lit internally with lighting hoods on the upper part of the cases. The main hall and rooms of the Tiled Kiosk have an intimate atmosphere created with the use of warm colours and lighting.

Figure 12: Tiled Kiosk Museum.
Design aesthetics and inner organization of the main hall (June 2015, image courtesy of author).

Iznik ceramics at the Tiled Kiosk feature in four sections, three of which are placed in the main hall and one in a side room. The majority of ceramics in the main hall are exhibited individually or in a composition of two-three objects in wall cases along the walls of the hall. In one display case that stands at the center of the main hall, there are six objects exhibited in groups. Another display case, placed between doors, exhibits a total nine objects (fig. 13). Through the use of lighting, the overall colour achieved in their displays is light green, a colour that creates low level of contrast in the space. Through this, the gallery creates a bright and unified space which places an equal emphasis on objects on display and "draws in the visitor and allow them to explore the area as a whole."[23]

Figure 13: Tiled Kiosk Museum.
Grouping of exhibits in free-standing display case (June 2015, image courtesy of author).

The groups of samples, on the other hand, are brought together to explore the style and technique of their production, and diversely placed inside display cases, well-lit with internal lighting hoods that have an overall yellow colour (fig. 14). Recalling the Tiled Kiosk's main objective is to show visitors the range of objects (by placing emphasis on their categories based on types, styles and techniques), the exhibits in this museum have no chronological concerns. This is in contrast to the V&A and British Museum displays. The non-chronological placement of objects reflects intentions to classify objects according to their style, production and technique rather than their histories.

Figure 14: Tiled Kiosk Museum.
"Polychrome Mosque Lamp" exhibits, detail (June 2015, image courtesy of author).

Authentic Objects

The Tiled Kiosk's systematic display narrates a different story when compared to the previous museums. The storyline at the V&A focuses on the emergence and evolution of the 'art' of ceramics, while the British Museum prioritizes the ceramics' historical context. With an intention to show visitors the range and originality of objects, Tiled Kiosk's narrative is concerned with the 'authenticity' and 'making' of ceramics. In other words, the gallery presents them as authentic cultural products of Turkish nation that can be seen as both works of art and functional objects which can be appreciated for their originality, variety, technique, and types. The words 'authentic' or 'authenticity' in museums usually refers to a piece of art or object that has a proven and undeniable provenance to an original maker, producer, or artist.[24] It has an undisputed origin, it is genuine, and original. Looking at the Tiled Kiosk displays from this perspective, attaining an authentic value to the displayed ceramics can be seen as an attempt to turn them into 'original' products that can (undeniably) be traced back to certain context, time period, and more importantly, to their maker; in this case the Turkish nation.

As visitors follow different sections, they explore the 'originality' and 'authenticity' of the ceramics. Starting from the main hall, visitors first explore the objects' aesthetics, decoration, and style, followed by the story of multiple techniques and production in Iznik. Visitors are encouraged to explore the 'uniqueness' of ceramics on display through this organization based

on technique and production. Texts and labels accompanying objects also play a key role in systemizing objects and presenting as authentic objects of Turkish nation that can be seen as both works of art and functional objects. Through use of language, an emphasis is placed on the technique and production of objects, and this suggests an attempt to show visitors the displayed objects' importance and value and encourage them to see these objects as products of Turkish culture.

Ottoman vs. Turkish? A Common Nationalist Paradigm

Although the three museums represent Iznik ceramic differently—as artworks, artifacts and authentic objects, and narrate different stories about their heritage—they all form problematic links between their Ottoman past and so-called Turkish heritage. That is to say all three museums, and their respective narratives, form a cultural and artistic lineage between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. In doing so, the museums create an illusion of uniformity and uninterrupted culture. This representation reconstructs the nationalist paradigm that has become popular since the decline of colonial influence in the nation states of the Islamic Middle East and in the field of Islamic art.[25] Developed by a joint group of native and foreign authors both in the West and non-West, this paradigm approaches and explains a variety of Islamic art and culture through national character traits.[26] More concisely, it takes modern nations as its starting point in its construction of some geographical continuities in the arts with these nations' predecessor empires and states.

As the analysis of display elements and design aesthetics showed, The V&A Jameel Gallery frames Iznik ceramics within the category of Ottoman arts and design. Exhibited under the *Turkey under the Ottomans* section, Iznik ceramics are merely placed within Ottoman artistic and cultural heritage. Interestingly, by doing this, the gallery also forms some links between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, as well as between the ceramics' Ottoman and Turkish heritage. Using the notion of 'Modern Turkey' and 'Turkishness,' which was invented in the late eighteenth century as a point of reference for sixteenth-century objects, the gallery reconstructs the nationalist paradigm that is present in Islamic Art and history, which creates an alleged cultural, historical and artistic uniformity between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. While some captions present Iznik ceramics as elements of Ottoman artistic and cultural heritage, which represent "Ottoman art" or the "taste of Ottoman court", others refer to them as elements of "Turkish fritware", as seen in a caption taken from the final paragraph of the introduction panel of *Iznik ceramics after 1550* sub-section:

> From the 1590s, standards declined as court patronage receded. The final phase of Turkish fritware production was initiated by Sultan Ahmed III (ruled 1703-30)

These samples are referred to as "Turkish fritware" rather than Ottoman fritware, even though the final ceramics commissions were made by the Ottoman court in an eighteenth-century context during the rule of Ottoman Empire.

Likewise, the British Museum's John Addis Gallery reconstructs a similar nationalist paradigm. Although the John Addis Gallery contextualizes its exhibits within the geography and history of the Ottoman Empire, it still represents them as artifacts of *Turkish* material culture. This creates an inconsistency between the gallery's storyline and object labels. While the former is excessively concerned with the history of objects within the Ottoman Empire, the latter predominantly interpret them as Turkish. Starting from the beginning of the *Ottoman Turkey* section, visitors encounter a narrative which presents Iznik ceramics as cultural products of Turkish heritage. Indeed, the main introductory panel of the Ottoman Empire section, tells visitors (with a nationalist viewpoint) that "Ottomans were Turks in origin who established themselves in Asia minor and raided Byzantine territories from about AD 13000…" Another good example that elucidates the nationalist paradigm is the caption from the label of the object entitled as "Large Footed Bowl": "This uniquely Turkish form is known as a tezza. Few survive, but they were very popular as can be seen by their depiction in Turkish miniatures of the time…"

Finally, when we look at the Tiled Kiosk's narrative, we see similar nationalist tendencies. The Tiled Kiosk Museum, however, takes this paradigm a step further and represents its exhibits as 'pure' products of Turkish cultural and national heritage. In the V&A and British Museum, Iznik ceramics are placed within the broader category of "Islamic Art" and "Islamic World" which represent a conceptualization conversant with the Orientalist tendency to generalize all arts that were produced under predominantly Muslim dynasties as Islamic. The Tiled Kiosk, on the other hand, places Iznik ceramics in a nationalized Anatolian geographical context. Following the paradigm of Turkish nationalist history writing, the museum presents a story of uninterrupted Turkish cultural heritage. To achieve this, certain aspects of Iznik production which were present both at the V&A and British Museum—such as the cross-cultural interactions and artistic exchanges between Iznik and other production centers—are ignored in the space. Likewise, the gallery also ignores the historical background of objects. It neither mentions the history of the Ottoman Empire nor makes any references to Iznik ceramics' broader place within Islamic art and heritage.

This focus on "our" art and architecture can be seen as a reflection of the national art history of Turkey.[27] Nasser Rabbat suggests that after the breakdown of Ottoman Empire, Turkey experienced radical rupture with the past that paved the way to the rise of national art history, which selects pieces of Islamic art and segments from the Ottoman past as its own and connects them to the history of a nation.[28] Although the two museums in the United Kingdom (the V&A and British Museum) intend to reveal the diversity, variety or cross-cultural influences of Iznik ceramics and their heritage, they still adopt a narrative based on nationalist art history which assumes an uninterrupted cultural continuity between the Ottoman Empire and Modern

Turkey. The Tiled Kiosk Museum display, on the other hand, reflects this nationalist paradigm in its entirety, neglecting the Ottoman past and cross-cultural influences, and taking modern Turkey as a starting point of reference for objects' heritage.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of the display of Iznik ceramics at the V&A, British Museum and Tiled Kiosk reveal different, aesthetic, contextual and systematic modes of display. Once these three visual representations come together with visual and written stories created by texts and labels, they generate three different narratives of the heritage of Iznik ceramics. Accordingly, the same objects become unique works of art of artistic heritage at the V&A. At the British Museum, they become artifacts of material culture which have important historical and geographical values. Finally at Tiled Kiosk, they become authentic and unique objects of national heritage. Hence, although coming from the same city, same socio-cultural background and time periods, the very same objects are ascribed different cultural meanings.

The study and comparative analysis of Iznik ceramics in three museums also reveals the reflection of the nationalist paradigm which is still present in museum exhibitions and displays. Although each aforementioned museum chooses how to display the ceramics and selects how to narrate them, they all form some problematic links between the objects' Ottoman and Turkish heritage. Emerging literature and current museum practices recognize museums as cultural institutions that shape our understanding of Western and non-Western objects and cultures. As such, Iznik ceramics become an interesting case that illustrates the legacy of the national paradigm, which evidently is still alive both in the Western and non-Western museum practices.

The multiple representations of Iznik ceramics and their heritage evince a remarkable example that indicates the power of museums in the construction of knowledge about objects. The comparative analysis of Iznik ceramics reveals the complexities and potentials of the museum representation by articulating three different modes of display which generate three alternative narratives on Iznik ceramics past, value, and heritage. Through the lens of Iznik ceramics, we get a chance to unfold some written narratives, visual storylines, and curatorial decisions which play a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of the objects. Once we discover this close relationship between museum displays and representation, we start to ask new critical questions about museums, their spaces, and curatorial decisions. This allows us to ask some questions about how our experiences are shaped, and sometimes manipulated, by museums, and by various display methods that are adopted in their exhibition spaces. When framed in different museum spaces, the same object that we saw, engaged with, and admired before can indispensably be interpreted in multiple, rather divergent ways. Yet, the objects that museums put on display are very likely to create different visual and aesthetic experiences,

acquire new cultural meanings and generate alternative stories. This is how they become a constitutive part of the broader story that museums choose to tell us. The story of Iznik ceramics is the story of the people, empires, and nations that created them, it is the story of the cultures and interactions that they represent, and more broadly, it is the story of the world that created them, as well as the world that houses them, which is the same world that surrounds us.

Notes

[1] Jason Elliot, "Beauty and Harmony," *The Guardian,* July 15, 2006. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/jul/15/art.art.
[2] Juliette Frisch, "The Jameel Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: Working from Vision to Reality," in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim Wold in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Junod Benoit, Georges Khalil, Stefen Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi, 2012), 194.
[3] Stefen Weber, "A Concert of Things: Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art," in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Junod Benoit, Georges Khalil, Stefen Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi, 2012), 29.
[4] Opened in 2006, the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East exhibits a selection from the V&A Islamic Middle East collection, consisting of approximately 10,000 objects acquired through purchases, donations and bequeaths since the mid-nineteenth century. The Jameel Gallery intends to show the visitors the beauty of objects, and hence communicate the key message that "Islamic art is beautiful, varied and interesting." For more information on the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East, see Lucy Trench, *The Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A Pub, 2010); Frisch, "The Jameel Gallery," 194.
[5] The three sections that explore key themes in Islamic Art are entitled the *Emergence of Islamic Art*, *Exchange with Europe and China* and *Art for Religion*.
[6] Four sections that explore key regions and dynasties are entitled *Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, Qatar Iran, and Mamluk Egypt.*
[7] Stefan Weber, "A Concert of Things," 30; Katherine Molineux, "Permanent Collection Displays," in *Manual of Museum Exhibitions,* eds. Barry Lord and Maria Piacante (Lanham: Lowman & Littlefield, 2014), 29.
[8] Olga Fakatseli and Julia Sachs, *The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East Summative Evaluation Report* (London: Audience Focus Ltd, 2008).
[9] Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby, *Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London: Alexandria Press, 1994); Gulru Necipoglu, "From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth Century Ceramic Tiles," *Muqarnas 7* (2010): 136–70.
[10] Heather Maximea, "A World of Exhibition Spaces," in *Manual of Museum Exhibitions,* eds. Barry Lord and Maria Piacante (Lanham: Lowman & Littlefield, 2014), 102.
[11] Fakatseli and Sachs, *The Jameel Gallery*, 44.
[12] Ibid., 25.
[13] The new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of Islamic World showcases the Museum's diverse collection of Islamic objects. It aims to explore the cultural significance, breadth and impact of the Islamic world through new displays which encompass works of art alongside objects of everyday life, including musical instruments, games, ceramics and traditional dress. The gallery was created by a team of British Museum curators led by the Senior Curator Venetia Porter. The refurbishment project started in 2014 and completed in October 2018. The new gallery was developed with the support from the Albukhary Foundation in Malaysia.

[14] Venetia Porter, "The British Museum's Latest Journey into the Islamic World Started 30 Years Ago," *The National,* November 21, 2018. https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-british-museum-s-latest-journey-into-the-islamic-world-started-30-years-ago-1.794359
[15] For more information on the British Museum John Addis Gallery, see John Carswell, *Iznik Pottery* (London: British Museum Press, 2006), 9; and Marjorie Caygill, *Treasures of the British Museum* (London: British Museum Publications 2009), 134–35.
[16] Maximea, "A World of Exhibition Spaces," 107.
[17] The right-hand side exhibits objects from dynasties that emerged in the Eastern Middle East such as that of the Fatimids, and Seljuks, and the left-hand side explore dynasties of the Western Islamic World such as the Mamluk and Ottomans.
[18] Molineux, "Permanent Collection Displays," 127.
[19] Nasser Rabbat, "Islamic Art at a Crossroads?" in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi, 2012), 77.
[20] David Miller, "Artefacts and the Meaning of Things," in *Museums in the Material World,* ed. Simon J. Knell (London: Routledge, 2007), 177.
[21] The Tiled Kiosk (or Tiled Pavilion) is a public museum located in the Fatih district of Istanbul. It takes its name from tiles adorning its interior and exterior. The Building is the earliest example of Ottoman civil architecture, which was built in 1472 as part of Topkapi Palace complex and started to be used as the Imperial Museum in 1880. In 1981, the museum was annexed to the Istanbul Archaeological Museum complex and since then, it has functioned as a ceramics museum. Today it is still part of the museum complex that consists of three buildings. It is hosting a collection of 2,000 objects from Ottoman and Seljuk periods, acquired through excavations, donations and purchases and it is exhibiting a selection of Ottoman and Seljuk ceramics, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For more information on the Tiled Kiosk, see Wendy Shaw, "Museums and Narratives of Display from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic," *Muqarnas* 24 (2007): 253–79; NS Mehmet Onder, *The Museums of Turkey and Examples of the Masterpieces in the Museums* (Ankara: Turkiye Is Bankasi, 1983).
[22] Maximea, "A World of Exhibition Spaces," 105.
[23] Feilo Sylvania. *Lighting for Museums and Galleries.* 2015. https://www.sylvania-lighting.com/documents/documents/Museums%20and%20Galleries%20-%20Brochure%20-%20English.PDF.
[24] Kaiti Hannah. "Authenticity in Museums and Heritage Sites: All It's Cracked Up To Be?" *Active History*, June 25, 2019. http://activehistory.ca/2019/06/authenticity-in-museums-and-heritage-sites-all-its-cracked-up-to-be/.
[25] Nasser Rabbat, "Islamic Art at a Crossroads?" 80.
[26] Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 61.
[27] Rabbat, "Islamic Art at a Crossroads?" 80.
[28] Ibid., 81.