Limn is an experiment in collaborative inquiry. Published in print and open-access online editions, the journal gathers scholars, artists, and activists to illuminate—or limn—problems emerging at the interface of technology, politics, and contemporary life.

Limn 13 – Ghostwriters

Edited by Stacy E. Wood & Jerry C. Zee

On the cover: *Chronos* from *Data-Masks* (Series) (2013–2015) by Sterling Crispin, courtesy of the artist.

"*Data-Masks are animistic deities brought out of the algorithmic-spirit-world of the machine and into our material world, ready to tell us their secrets, or warn us of what's to come.*"

Thoughout: Historic American Buildings Survey, James Butters, Photographer. June 11, 1936. Library of Congress.

Avital Meshi, from AI Séance, 2024

THERE ARE MACHINES

AND THERE ARE THEIR GHOSTS

by Stacy Wood and Jerry Zee

"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality."

—Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

Talk of the powers of artificial intelligence has become ubiquitous, from the rapturous to the apocalyptic. AI is somehow inevitable, disastrous, a failure, a replacement for human connection, a speculative bubble, a pathway toward human obsolescence. It is at once a fun tool, a scam, a spirit guide, regurgitated eugenics, a threat to our shared sense of reality, a revolutionary technology that will propel humanity to its next evolutionary form. It is a liar, a capitalist bait and switch, a means to undermine labor, a theft of intellectual property, an absolutely devastating assault on the environment and natural resources, a meme, a god, God. It will somehow change everything, or it changes nothing at all.

To work our way through this discombobulation, to confront, obliquely, the eeriness of artificial intelligence, we take *ghostwriters* as our entry point. Ghostwriters are authors who are not *the* author. Their skill lies in a spectral zone where fidelity and artifice shift from opposites into near-miss synonyms. Their generative acts are, at their core, the work of recomposing the fragments and nuances of a well of speech, mannerism, and data in order, paradoxically, to make it sound like itself.

Ghostwriters are often presumed to be at work even when they are unacknowledged, revealing the problem of authorship to be a dance around open secrets. They disrupt the stability of authenticity, and they splinter the unity of voice into a configurational problem: something to be captured through its ineffability. Ghostwriters occupy the voices of others, an orchestra masquerading with a knowing wink as a single instrument.

The array of ghostwriters in this issue shake AI, and especially large language models, off of the pedestals that breathless and apocalyptic accounts have built, resituating machine intelligence amidst a crowd of other spooky presences and practices that appear just as they disappear from view. Ghostwriting is a meticulously honed skill, a profession with its own rapidly changing political economies, and a portal into questions of displaced agency and the hauntings conjured by this moment. Ghostwriters are alternately workers and channels for something more—a hoax or a wide-open secret. They work behind the scenes to make their clients sound more like themselves, or rather, projections of the self, but with more literary panache. This occupation of voices blurs the lines between technique and technology, an author and the very idea of authorship. Thinking about ghostwriters forces us into the proximity of ghosts of many kinds. Agency becomes an occasion for panic, and reality is regenerated over and over, in iterations that build on other iterations.

Ghostwriters!, *Limn*'s lucky thirteenth issue, seeks ways into our hallucinatory contemporary. Occupying the voice of another, human imitation, bodies animated by uncertain agencies—these are nothing new, and yet somehow AI is exhilarating, menacing, and spooky all the same. Strong claims of technological triumph skid when they collide with the enduring legacies of race and technology, diaspora and war.

We have built this issue as a haunted house. Each entry is a room that invites you to commune with a distinct ghost and its manner of haunting. By tracing alternative genealogies and shadow histories, we set out to illuminate the deep-seated fragility within the legal and conceptual cosmology of modernity, while unveiling the hauntings in the endless churn of generative output. A haunted house is a space for increasingly implausible realities, rather than irreality. In their partial disjoining from what they are compiled from, these alter-realities beckon us to contend with the possibility that, among ghostwriters, the real and the surreal are not opposites, but a progressive series of iterative versions of each other.

The rhetorical spectacle of technological exceptionalism centers on AI's supposedly revolutionary features, but the composite voice of everything from chatbots to artificial neural networks is not so easily distinguishable from its antecedents. The ghostwriter—not quite mimic, not quite liar—decenters artificiality and intelligence to rewire authorship, representation, learning, and data into a circuit of as-ifs and near-enough approximations. These are the places, reader, where the veil gets thin, and the confident dystopianism of AI utopia finds its place among other ghosts, hauntings, and uncanny creatures.

There are machines and there are their ghosts; what happens when we commune with these entities simultaneously? What can be generated besides algorithmic outputs, hallucinations, and an endless reshuffle of partial worlds? And what lingers in the code that makes AI not a proof of technological advancement or a road to apocalypse, and, instead, a realm of ghostly presences? In this issue, investigating ghostwriting resituates the singularity of artificial intelligence within a multiverse of oblique timelines. The ghosts here are not the same; neither are the ways they haunt.

In the chambers of the haunted house that ensues, we invite you to ponder not the corruption of a first, pure reality, but rather to linger on how ghostwritings generate an array of more or less plausible irrealities, and a glimpse of the realities that can be configured when another is stripped for parts. *Reality* is not a primordial pool of data for a training algorithm; it is not the raw material out of which false worlds are generated. Where ghosts write, reality is a permutational achievement or an instructive failure; it multiplies, captivates, and rots in its iteration and circulation. There is pleasure and protection in the performance, in knowing that the machine is speaking while also not speaking. Like other ghostwriters, AI's capacity cannot be captured in the distinction between authenticity and artifice, but rather in the kinds of work it takes to make one's presence palpable by erasing it. ∎

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PHOTO CREDITS

p.6: *AI Séance* (2024), performance by Avital Meshi. A live, interactive work in which an AI wearable transforms the artist into a spiritual medium, merging technology and mysticism. Participants gather in a circle to summon a chosen spirit, with the AI device acting as a conduit for real-time communication between human and machine.

Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
South front from southwest

↑ Jerome Robbins Dance Division, "Dancers in silhouette in Dybbuk," 1974.

DATA AND THE DYBBUK

by Tamara Kneese

A family portrait of Dora, Dr. Snitzer, Theodore, and half-sister

Over generations, my family has been haunted by its ambivalent relationship to Judaism. We are culturally Jewish, but not in any organized religious or institutional sense. That being said, my grandparents spoke Yiddish at home and always had a mezuzah mounted at their door—a small encased scroll containing verses from the Torah that is both a reminder of a covenant with God and a signal to the world that this is a Jewish household.

Growing up, I would hear vague tales of an illegitimate liaison: my great-great-grandmother, Dora Burstein, left the old country and "ran off" with a man who was not the biological father of her first child, my great-grandfather, Theodore. It all sounded rather theatrical. Perhaps implausible. That is, until Yiddish theater began to provide some clues to our family's lost history.

Here's what we knew before the curtain began to be lifted: little Theodore came to New York from Lithuania when he was six. Dora, his mother, had had him when she was just thirteen, and the man she came over on the boat with, Jacob, was not Theodore's father. Dora, they say, was a bit of a wild woman, a poet, and a drunk. Theodore learned the family trade, became an optometrist like his parents, and took a Jewish wife at the age of sixteen. But his son, my grandfather, distanced himself from Brooklyn and from Jewish tradition, and moved to Virginia to pursue a PhD in classical archaeology while passing as a redheaded gentile (though he would later marry Leah Goldberg, a distinctly Jewish personality).

It was only after my grandfather's death that we discovered the Yiddish plays and other materials written by his step-grandfather and grandmother in an archive at the Center for Jewish History in New York. I found the archive online when I was searching for the location of the family's long-defunct optometry practice. For several generations, no one in the family had any idea that Dora and her husband, Dr. Jacob Lazarus Snitzer, had been part of the Yiddish theater scene. There were papers, letters, and manuscripts (including theater contracts signed by Jacob Adler, the renowned Yiddish theater mogul), all available for us to translate and read.

These were compelling through-lines—my mother is an actor, and my father is a playwright who has even staged plays on the Lower East Side, close to where Jacob and Dora staged theirs. We also learned that Dora's father and brother were rabbis, another detail missing from our family history. In a biographical note for Jacob on the archive's website, Jacob and Dora were listed as having five children.[1] Theodore, my great-grandfather, however, was missing. There was no trace of him or his progeny. He had become a ghost.

There are other ghostly figures that haunt the Yiddish stage. In Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is a wanderer that takes hold of people's bodies, forced into a liminal position because of sins committed during life. Dybbuks have long had a media presence, from the Yiddish theater to TikTok.[2] They became popularized by a play that was written in Russian during World War I, performed in Yiddish

1 https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/15655

2 https://www.inverse.com/input/features/dybbuk-box-dibbuk-kevin-mannis-zak-bagans-haunted-hoax-revealed

→ A dybbuk possesses a woman in a stage production of *The Dybbuk*, 1925

3　https://forward.com/culture/
134450/sympathy-for-the-dybbuk/

4　https://thetheatretimes.com/
digital-ghost/

5　https://vilnacollections.yivo.org/
This-is-What-Researchers-Dream-About-
Finding-A-Fragment-About-The-Dybbuk

in 1920, and staged in English in New York in 1925.[3] In 1937, a popular Polish film adaptation was released. Fast-forward to the COVID-19 pandemic and one could find Jewish organizations hosting online performances of *The Dybbuk* via Zoom.[4] Through these iterations, the dybbuk became a cultural phenomenon, a site of translation across time periods, geographies, and languages—and as theatrical dybbuks connected far-flung diasporic communities, real dybbuks assumed more familial forms.[5]

Within the figure of the dybbuk, elements of the dead and the living comingle, bridging the old world and the new. As with spirit possessions in many other folkloric traditions, dybbuks tend to inhabit the bodies of women. This was the case in my own family, where Dora herself has taken on the role of dybbuk: returning, wandering, blurring. My brother claims he saw Dora's ghost when he was a child. He saw a petite woman with red hair like my mother's, but he realized her dress looked out of fashion, like it was from another era. Dora had returned, both doubling my mother and collapsing the boundaries between past and present.

These ghostly conjunctions of family lore and Yiddish theater began to raise questions for me and my brother. While most of my scholarship is critical of AI, and I avoid using it in my personal and professional life, my brother regularly uses ChatGPT as an interlocutor. In search of answers, I asked him to consult ChatGPT to tell us who Theodore's real father was, why he was so cut off from the rest of his family and from his Jewish roots, and why he had vanished from the archived biography.

But we didn't stop there. We asked ChatGPT to help us meet the dybbuk herself, Dora, as well as her son, our disappeared ancestor, Theodore. My brother's prompt conjured a simulation of Dora:

[Dora, the weight of memory settling in her voice like dust on old letters] Oy, Tataleh … There are things lost, not because they were unimportant, but because the world we came from was chaos. Records? We didn't have records. We had stories whispered in candlelight, names etched in our hearts, not on papers.

This is both funny and ironically incorrect, given the strong literary tradition of Lithuanian Jews, who very likely *were* keeping meticulous records.

ChatGPT went on to state, in Dora's supposed voice, that Theodore is missing from the family archive because no "scribe" followed them from Russia, and that his father was a shoemaker named Yankel. None of this is remotely accurate, of course—ChatGPT hallucinates and extrapolates to fill in gaps. It is not a truth-teller or a spirit medium. It is a tool that regurgitates the host of Yiddish theater tropes it consumed as training data. The theatrical tradition of *The Dybbuk* here was crossing over to inform the digital incarnation of our family dybbuk, Dora. Strange, but telling.

While the logic of generative AI is built on the premise that more data will yield more accurate, lifelike outputs, the dybbuk remains elusive. It is more than the sum of its inputs. A dybbuk is weighed down by the traumas of history; it is a manifestation of unfinished business and unresolved conflict. Wild-woman Dora could never be pinned down by the endless data-tumbling of ChatGPT's archive.

AI has become an object onto which people project their greatest hopes and fears. It promises eternal life by uploading a person's consciousness into a computer, at the same time as it poses an existential risk to humanity, with some technologists waiting for the day when the robot overlords will kill us

↑　1920 Yiddish-language advertisement for an early production of *The Dybbuk* by the Vilna Troupe

all. Much of my scholarship over the past decade and a half has considered the relationship between an individual's corpus of data (creative outputs across and after a lifetime) and the tech companies that attempt to monetize, control, govern, and steward these sacred digital remains.[6] In the current hype cycle associated with generative AI, the technology is imagined as filling in for other forms of human companionship and intellectual or creative labor, acting as a lover, a therapist, an artist, a teacher, and a doctor. Generative AI's malleability, the way it can switch applications and contexts, and its capacity for hyperpersonalization also lend it a ghostly quality, as when ChatGPT is used to bring historical figures back to life as an educational tool, instead of having students visit an archive or read history.

Despite my Luddite sensibilities and critiques of generative AI, I do find myself somewhat disappointed that ChatGPT couldn't fake it a little better. But, chasing Dora the dybbuk, I can appreciate the desire to find meaning in the messages of the stochastic parrot that is AI.

Niche startup companies claim that chatbots can mimic a conversation with a dead loved one to help us overcome grief. According to companies like Google, large language models (LLMs) can, moreover, work as translators, filling in gaps in the linguistic record available on the open web and bolstering Indigenous languages. LLMs are built on vast stores of data, including those of the dead, as content from social media platforms, academic books, and other

6　Tamara Kneese, *Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond* (Yale University Press, 2023).

→　*Dybbuk* etching by John Fenton, n.d.

creative works are taken up and Frankensteined together as a golem of prose. But despite some seemingly spiritual or noble qualities, there is so much that AI cannot tell us. AI creations often take on the shape of something real, stated confidently in a ghostwritten voice reminiscent of the Yiddish stage. What do we do when the content is all wrong, even monstrous?

AI might have failed to bring Dora back, but part of me wondered if the archive—the plays and other manuscripts themselves—might reveal part of the story. Maybe there would be clues about Theodore's birth. I read the English translation of Jacob's novel, *The Story of the Baal Shem: Life, Love and Teachings of the Founder of Chassidism and Jewish Mysticism*, and was surprised to see that one of the book's major themes was the kidnapping and rape of Jewish girls by non-Jewish men, and the harshness of Jewish law toward illegitimate children. There is even a dybbuk in the story. A miller's daughter is possessed by the soul of an illegitimate boy she had once loved and had been forbidden from marrying. Dybbuks materialize when a secret needs to come to the surface.

"Dybbuks materialize when a secret needs to come to the surface."

One of the plays also at the archive is titled *Confessions of a Mother* or, alternatively, *A Mother's Sin*. Intrigued by this title, my own mother hired a translator so we could see if there were any clues suggesting why Theodore had been left out of the family's genealogy. The play centers around a man whose patrilineage is in question. As it turns out, he's the illegitimate son of a German count and that's why he can't marry his beloved, who is the daughter of a rabbi. The translator left notes for us, pointing out that the play was clearly a work in progress, that characters kept changing names, that various parts were crossed out, that different handwriting indicated at least two authors, and that the entire third act of the play was missing. Embedded in the translated text is her aside to us, the readers: "A very different hand—messier, with a lighter pencil, for the next few pages. I will do what I can …"

In a strange twist, the human translation of the play mirrors some of the pitfalls of ChatGPT's rendering of Dora's story. At times, the translator's interjections reveal her exasperation with the changing names and convoluted story. The writing style and character development, indeed, leave much to be desired. The play is unfinished, trailing off in parts. It doesn't make for clean data. Apparently, it included lines that the translator remembered from somewhere else, perhaps lifted from another schlocky play. Yiddish phrases like "Oy vey iz mir" are sprinkled awkwardly throughout. There is a song that is referred to but not written down.

The translator told my mother that the specific Litvish dialect was hard to parse, and that there were arcane Talmudic references that we would need a Talmudic scholar to explain. (This is why you pay people to translate work instead of relying on AI to do the job.) And while we suspect that Dora was responsible for the different handwriting in the text (she was also a playwright after all—not just an optometrist, poet, drunk, etc.), we will never have a real answer. And therein lies the rub.

As much as general-purpose AI technologies promise a fast, confident answer to any question, they fall short. The dybbuk, by contrast, has remained a lasting figure precisely because of its liminal status, precisely because it cannot be pinned down as the proverbial sum of its parts. Like the difficulty of translation across time and space, the dybbuk's power lies in its indecipherability. ◼

⇥ Heavily-edited manuscript pages from the Yiddish play "Confessions of a Mother," found in the archive of Dr. Jacob Lazarus Snitzer and Dora Burstein

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
South front from southeast

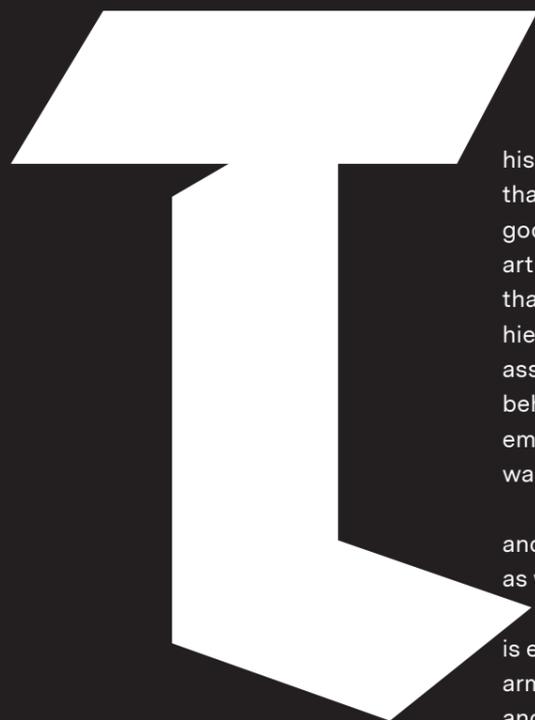# CONFESSIONS OF AN ART WORLD GHOST

The museum's army of invisible labor

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by Sarah Rebecca Kessler

This essay is about the administrative ghosts that haunt the art world. If you've had the good fortune of never having worked in an art museum or gallery, you may be unaware that such workplaces are profoundly hierarchical, and that there's an army of assistants, associates, and coordinators behind every curator whose name gets emblazoned on an exhibition press release, wall text, or catalogue.

There's an army of upper administrators and board members in front of every curator as well—ones who shape the character and politics of the art that said curator is even allowed to exhibit. And there's an army of art handlers and security guards and janitors behind this entire administrative apparatus—one that's rarely, if ever, the subject of any reflection within the art world.

In other words, art museums and galleries, like so many other late capitalist enterprises, run on invisible labor: armies and their armies. They aren't really invisible, though, because everyone in the art world is aware of them. Most of them just ignore the ghosts.

This story concerns a young curatorial assistant at a very well-known New York-based art museum, ghostwriting catalogue essays for a couple of very well-known art world personae. If you're in the art world yourself, you may able to divine the setting and main characters. If you're not, you needn't care about these people. Either way, none of what follows is a secret.

This is a true story.

"Quote Susan Sontag," the museum's executive director, A., orders as I prepare to write her catalogue essay on the German photographer Katharina Sieverding. It's a clichéd request, a basic-bitch move that any curator or critic worth their salt should avoid when writing about photography—a gesture that even I, a twenty-three-year-old recent college graduate at the time, recognize as at once trying too hard and not hard enough. "OK," I reply, scribbling "Quote Sontag" in my notebook.

A.'s demand to invoke this particular public intellectual is ironic, given that just a few months prior, the museum's chief curator, K., had tasked me with writing a dossier of letters from various luminaries in support of his visa application. Included in the record was a missive from his pal Susan Sontag, a friend so dear she apparently couldn't be bothered to author her own recommendation, which meant that I had to do it. Having already written in Sontag's voice, I was now being told to cite Sontag in A.'s voice.

It's enough to make you lose respect for any Writer, even all Writers, the ease with which such an allegedly creative pursuit can be delegated and rendered into grunt work, a mechanical reproduction of cliché that somehow amplifies cliché's essence as mechanical reproduction. Writing is labor, but nothing makes you more aware of that material fact than ghostwriting, the kind of writing you perform knowing you'll never get the authorial credit that is, in truth, the only thing glamorous about writing.

"Sarah's my writer," A. once bragged to a famous person who visited the museum. I don't remember who it was (there were a lot of famous people who visited the museum), but I recall A. saying this by way of introduction. Instead of telling said famous person that I was a curatorial assistant, which was the job I'd been hired to do, she claimed me as a tool, *her* tool, an automatic text-generator, a metaphorical mouthpiece for the pearls of wisdom raining from her margarita-loosened lips.

It was sometime between 2003 and 2005, a couple of decades before chatbots roamed the internet. I was terrible at even the most basic administrative tasks, my brain a sieve for details of any kind. In college I had wanted to be a filmmaker. Every film I made was light on meaning and heavy on voiceover. My advisor, herself an under-recognized auteur of experimental cinema, gently urged me to consider that I might be better inclined toward the written word.

Many of my classmates had wanted to be Writers, but not me. I gravitated toward Art, but I was better at talking about it than making it. I had, as my lawyer dad liked to insist with no small hint of pride, a gift for bullshit: a talent for writing with a lowercase w, the same talent he used to compose legal documents

on a Dictaphone for transcription by his secretary. I could put together a decent sentence that was easy on the eyes and funneled smoothly into the ears.

When I took the job at the museum, coveted by so many aspiring curators—one of whom, upon finding out I'd gotten the gig, burst into tears in the ladies room at the Midtown public art nonprofit where we were both unpaid interns—I'd just wanted, I guess, a job it would make sense for someone with a degree in "Art-Semiotics" to have. I knew being any kind of assistant would involve a lot of scut work and not much creativity, but it was New York and I couldn't be choosy. I was lucky to even exist.

I thought I'd be a ghost who brought people coffee, who took notes in meetings, who made dinner reservations for my bosses and their famous friends. What I should have known is that I was such a fucking brat that the look on my face when I was asked to do any of these things would either get me fired or, as it happened, get my bosses to hire another more competent curatorial assistant so that I could be used to spend the bulk of my time ghostwriting their catalogue essays.

Ok, maybe not the bulk of my time, since I did spend a good deal of time taking phone calls from gallery assistants and art critics, formatting wall labels, flirting with whichever masculinist installation artist swaggered into the office that day, attending chaotic meetings where we discussed the museum's lack of fire insurance (the building was an old public school basically built out of matchsticks), cleaning K.'s ketchup-encrusted desk, and sorting through his invitations to parties and openings to make sure I didn't miss the odd note from Spike Jonze, Hedi Slimane, Kim Cattrall, or any other target of his sycophancy.

"You don't have a poker face," B. remarked one day with his trademark snideness, observing my twisted expression upon being given an undesirable task to perform. I don't remember what I'd been asked to do, but B. clocked me because he didn't have a poker face either, and lack of game recognizes lack of game. B. was a brilliant curator and an even more brilliant writer. He would have never, ever let anyone else write for him. He once got so angry with K. that he sent him a dozen emails in succession, each reading, "K. is a fake, phony curator, fuck you." He called me early the next morning knowing that I was the only person who ever actually checked K.'s email and asked me to delete them all. Of course I did. It was our secret.

When I wasn't deleting emails or walking around looking like I'd just sucked on a lemon, I was writing. My facial expression didn't matter, because a ghostwriter doesn't have a face. I wrote on Sieverding for A. I wrote on Warhol's screen tests for K.—a catalogue essay for an exhibition mounted at MoMA. I wrote A.'s introduction to the catalogue for *Greater New York 2005*, a massive museum-wide group show. I wrote other things that weren't essays—recommendation letters, emails, thank-you notes. There's a lot that I wrote that I don't recall having written. There's no record. My face was probably screwed up all the while, as it tends to be when I'm writing. No one saw it.

I used to tell myself that I would eventually author an art world version of *The Devil Wears Prada* based on my time at the museum. I told myself I had to start taking detailed notes, that I would forget it all if I didn't write it down. I never wrote any of it down. My contribution to the chick lit canon remains a fantasy. Even a chick lit author has a nom de plume. A ghostwriter isn't an author. A ghostwriter doesn't have a name.

Confusingly for me, my name does appear on some of the shorter essays in *Greater New York 2005*. After I'd already written the introduction as A., she and the curators realized that there were simply too many artists in the exhibition, and thus too many essays in the catalogue, for a tiny group of people to have feasibly authored. A decision was made to allow curatorial assistants to write on individual artists, provided this didn't interfere with any ghostwriting they (I) may or may not have also been doing. K. was, I remember, particularly vexed by my newfound authorship. It was as if an act of fission were taking place. He couldn't stand the formation of a separate entity. Really, he couldn't stomach the word made flesh. The instrument singing its own little song.

Twenty years later, I write under my own name. I recently added my middle name to my publication name, because there is another media writer named Sarah Kessler who's written much more, and far more compellingly, about contemporary culture than I have up to this point. I guess I'm a Writer now (though of course my literary friends would call me a writer at best). But I no longer care about that. Most of the time when I'm writing I feel like someone else is composing for me, like I'm a human typewriter. I've never not felt this way about what I do. It's easiest when you don't think. Let the ghost guide your fingers.

I don't know if A. publishes anymore, but K. is still out there authoring catalogue essays. I can't find any of them online. I can't find any of the essays I wrote for A. or K. either. That's probably a good thing, because I know I'd be deeply humiliated by my own past ghostwriting. Then again, I didn't author those essays, so I'd have no reason to feel ashamed.

I'm sure K.'s current catalogue essays are also deeply humiliating. I'm sure he uses ChatGPT to write them. Actually, I'm sure he has an assistant use ChatGPT to write them. A ghostwriter for the ghostwriter. A ghost in the museum for the ghost in the machine. ▮

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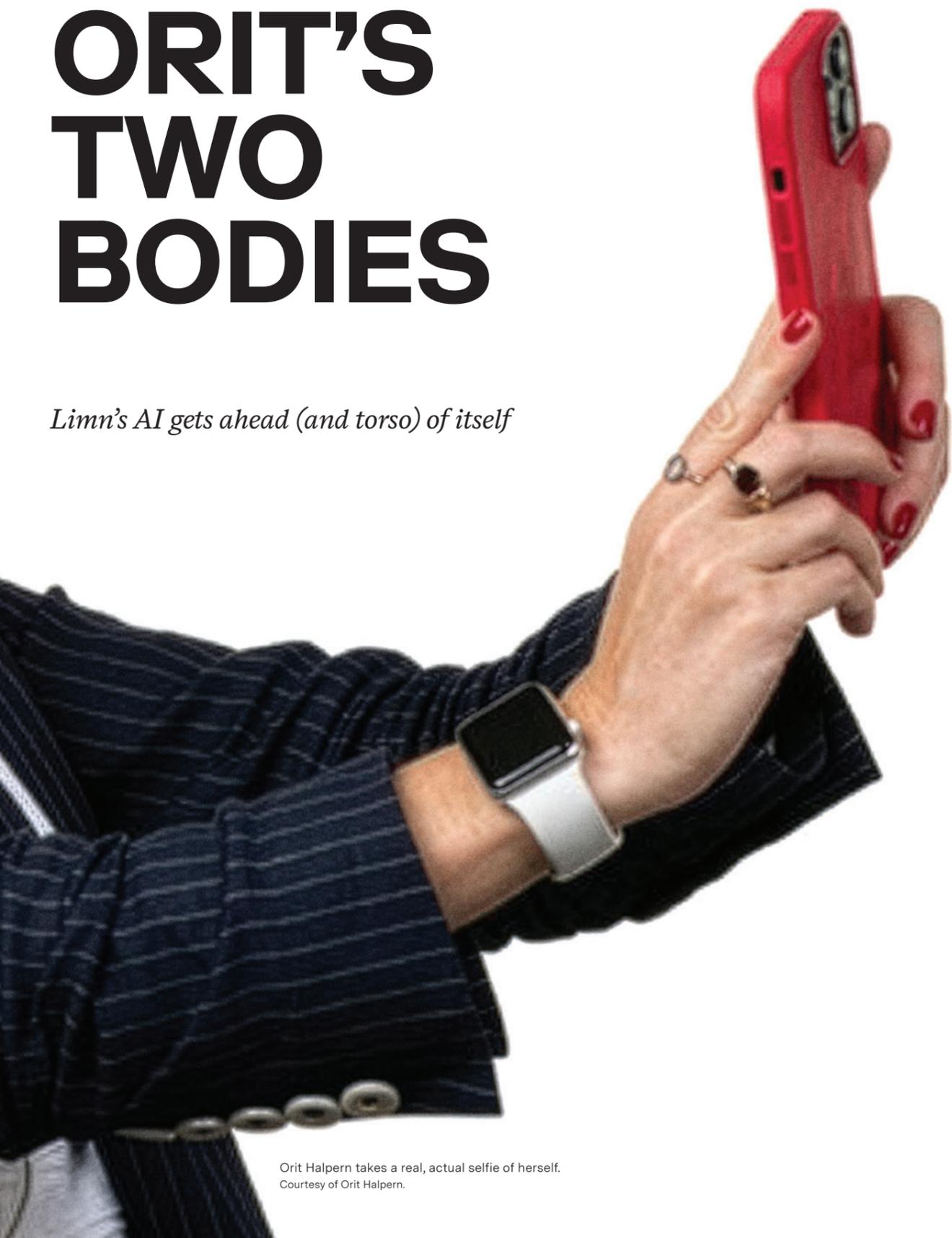
Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Detail of entrance porch (front elevation)

ORIT'S TWO BODIES

Limn's AI gets ahead (and torso) of itself

Orit Halpern takes a real, actual selfie of herself.
Courtesy of Orit Halpern.

*I**n December 2024,** Limn received an email from contributor Orit Halpern. She had visited our new website and noticed that her author photo, mysteriously, had been digitally manipulated, with an unfamiliar body appended onto her headshot.*

When Limn *built the new website, one designer put together a Photoshop script that cropped the images our contributors had shared with us over the past decade to fit a certain aspect ratio—and, where necessary, expanded the background using the software's generative fill feature. To expand the top and bottom of the photo in question, a body in a conservative sleeveless dress was thus created.*

Limn *editor Gökçe Günel interviewed Orit about the experience.[1] By then,* Limn *had removed the image, but it remained the top search engine result for her name. We share excerpts from the conversation below that reveal how* Limn *itself is not immune to ghostwriters.*

GÖKÇE GÜNEL Could you tell me how you became aware of the digital manipulation?

ORIT HALPERN I was googling my citation index, or something self-centered like that. I noticed this image and wondered, why does it look wrong to me? Then I realized, oh, because it's not my body.

A student in a class also warned me, "Professor Halpern, you've got an AI-generated fake of yourself online." A designer on my [research] team then said, "They were trying to increase the resolution of the picture. You had given them a picture with different specs, and so they just tried to fill in the rest. The generative AI decided that you had, like, pudgy little forearms and made you wear a top you would never pick." It is super normative.

But it's not only people who love to look in mirrors. The image shows that machines love themselves, too. It's machine narcissism at play. It's the first image that comes up if you search "Orit Halpern," even though there are so many other images of me on the internet. You can only understand this as AI narcissism. "We made it. We have to pick that picture." As you can see, it's all about narcissism here, whether it's mine or the machine's.

As editors, we discussed that generative AI had corporatized your image—and I should say, I agree, I don't think you'd ever wear that top. Did you do anything to get rid of the photograph?

Well, *Limn* removed the image [from the website], and I thought that would solve the problem. For a while, it did, but then suddenly the image reappeared. Now I'm really curious about the way it haunts us, because none of us know where it is. We're always worried about data being erased, but what happens when you can't erase it?

A curious question for you as an editor: Where is our information actually going, and who controls it, and who's managing it? And can you erase the data you select? Maybe these images were stored somewhere else, and maybe you didn't have full control over that archive. Maybe it's continuing to train AI? It leads to interesting questions about the actual organization of the infrastructure underneath websites.

What would it take to have that kind of independence for storing or erasing your data?

Less cloud, I guess, would be the answer. We've opted for an energy-intensive computational solution for building network infrastructure, which is very fast and seamless. But what about its political economy? As we all know, the cloud comes with new kinds of platform organizations, which change who owns, who stores, and who deals with data. We've had many different network infrastructures throughout the history of computing, and opting for platforms where all our data is online has certain implications, both for our personal lives and also, more broadly, the right to free speech, public democracy, and all the systems that depend on information transparency. It leads to questions about corporate power and the informational asymmetries such power creates.

This digitally altered author photograph says something about the digitally altered nature of global democracy.

Oh, absolutely, it's definitely a giveaway. Democracy is about representation. In this case, my representation is being determined by the demand to train AI, and not by the media ecology of my activities or my own will to represent myself. It reveals how little we own our own media assets.

The shocking thing would have been if the image had actually disappeared. You would think, "Oh, wow, nobody stole our data. I can't believe it!" But maybe I'm also pleased that they cared enough to steal it, but not enough to hide that fact. Corporate negligence offers a sort of ghost transparency that allows us to glimpse the desert of the real, a state where the distinction between reality and its representation has completely collapsed.

That said, I wouldn't want to rely on the sloppiness of large platforms as the only safeguard for democracy and education [against] propaganda and fake news.

Basically, the AI search engine liked the AI-generated image and didn't want to let go.

Totally. AI search platforms can't stop showing that image. They think, "That image was made by us. We love it." Not that AIs are conscious. We should not be anthropomorphizing them this way. But still, I'm gifting them my narcissism.

Do you have a copy of the unaltered image?

I can't find it. The irony is, this image will live forever, but the original is lost to history. As a historian, I perceive AI as a storage medium, a form of memory. What gets maintained even as the original data sets are lost? What happens when the digitally altered image is actually the only one you have? ◾

1   This interview comprises edited excerpts from our conversation on June 5, 2025.

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Detail of south entrance

THERE MIGHT BE GIANTS

Very tall gateways into alternate realities

by Jeremy Butman and Britt Paris

W

e have always been surrounded by giants. They appear in myths and fairytales, children's literature, movies, and video games. Recently, though, giants have escaped the boundaries of fiction. Videos on TikTok of purportedly real giants on Mexican and Canadian mountaintops, and grainy, supposedly historical photographs of real giants go viral on TikTok and X. The belief in the real existence of giants has reached beyond the world of the occult, where it has long had currency, to find a wider audience. Stew Peters, for instance, a right-wing influencer and close associate of Trump administration officials, has promoted this belief, and Joe Rogan, a controversial podcaster, recently distributed a video about the real existence of giants to his eight million subscribers.

What explains the spread of this belief? For that matter, what explains the historical ubiquity of giants? Are giants merely an easy symbol of larger-than-life heroes and villains, or were they—are they—somehow *real*?

The possibility of this realness is impossibly vague. As if by design, they don't fall into any clear field of inquiry. Are we talking about a group of humans with abnormally tall stature? A different species of hominid? Maybe some kind of paranormal monsters? This vagueness may be precisely the giant's power and appeal. The giant is a seductive unknowability, an inducement to question everything. By and large, giant-believers do not hope to contribute to biology, history, or metaphysics. The gist of the discourse surrounding giants is that all is not what it seems. That scientists are fools. That authorities are liars. That giants, whatever they are, are real, and *no one will admit it*.

There is an irresistible connection to be drawn between this giant-inspired distrust of the sciences and, for instance, the defunding of the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation, the US's withdrawal from the World Health Organization, and many other efforts to disempower institutions of public science. Algorithmically boosting online giant content to sow antagonism against scientific expertise and institutional authority is aligned with a larger project of dismantling the public state.

In May of 2024, Stew Peters posted a series of photos supposedly taken in the early twentieth century that featured "normally proportioned" giants beside average people. Peters, who started out as a rapper from Minnesota[1], became a popular far-right personality through his podcast, in which he has promoted QAnon talking points, supported Pizzagate and flat-Earth conspiracies, espoused COVID-19 and Holocaust denialism, and engaged in violent rhetoric directed against minoritized groups. The Trump-appointed head of the FBI, Kash Patel, has been on Peters's podcast more than a handful of times.

The images of so-called giants that Peters shared are from a YouTube "documentary" that Peters produced called *Old World Order*. For centuries, occultists have believed that giants built the bronze age dolmens and megalithic structures scattered across Europe. Peters's documentary takes things much further, presenting the theory that antediluvian giants also constructed many large buildings across the world known to be built by humans in the last five hundred years, including the US Capitol building. The giant meme is uniquely suited to inducing belief in Peters's other far-right theories.
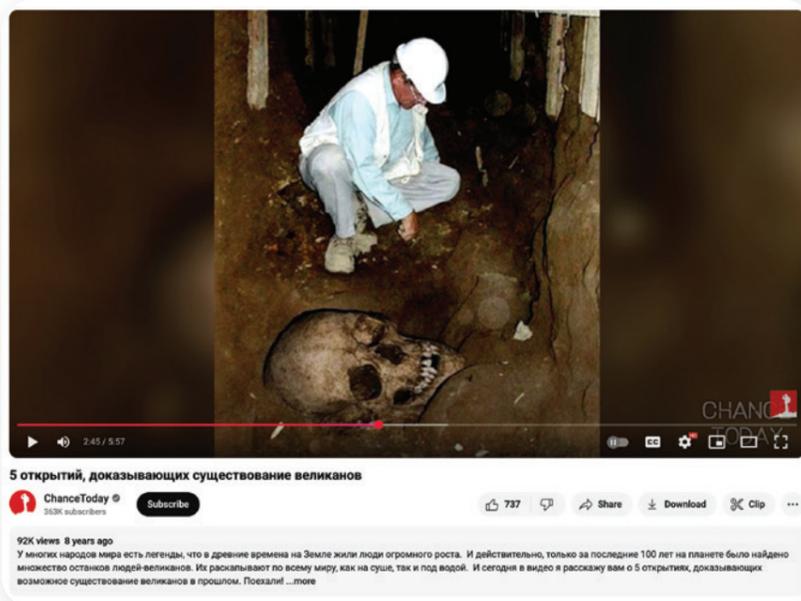
The images Peters shared were almost undoubtedly produced by Midjourney or some other AI tool. Some look like early 1900s trick photography. Similar images may even be authentic—after all, there is a scientifically described syndrome known as gigantism, which causes people to grow to abnormal heights. It doesn't matter. It is the contextualization that counts. What is important about the online discourse around giants is not whether these are real photos, but rather what the discourse represents. As Britt Paris has noted in her work on manipulated online images, decontextualized or falsified images confirm beliefs, acting as a kind of dummy evidence for whatever unsubstantiated theory adopts them. As they spread online, their ubiquity cements their apparent status as fact.

Giants are an intensifier of conspiracy theories. Belief in the vague reality of giants is essentially a refusal of the modern world in its entirety: scientific knowledge, democratic governance, liberal values. It takes far-right conspiracies beyond the arena of QAnon's governmental divinations, and expands them into a broader rejection of scientific institutions and public reason itself. This is evident in one of the giant-believers' most cherished conspiracy theories, namely the belief that the Smithsonian Institution is hiding a storehouse full of giants' skeletons. The scientists "know about giants," the theory goes,
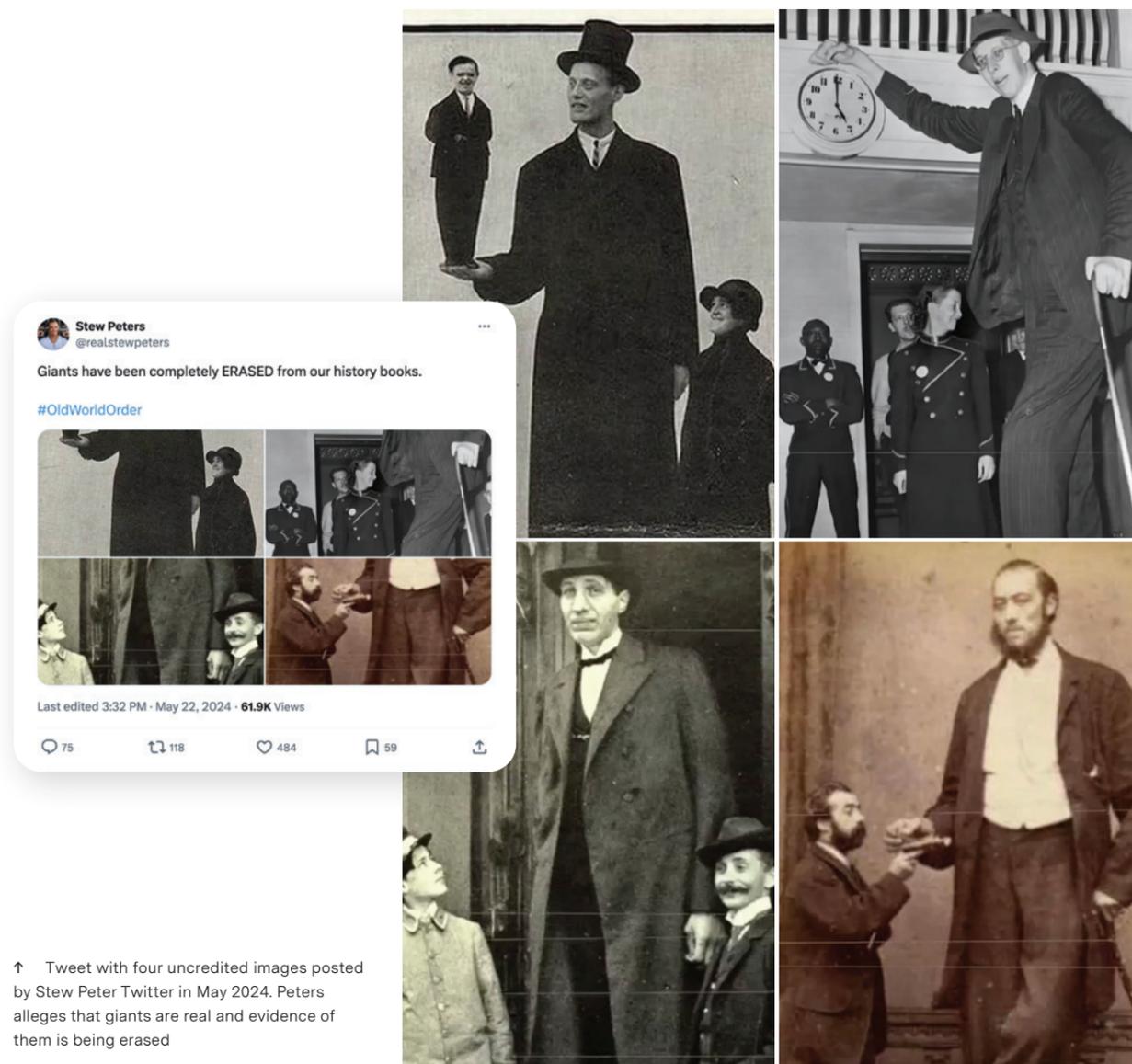
↑ Tweet with four uncredited images posted by Stew Peter Twitter in May 2024. Peters alleges that giants are real and evidence of them is being erased

1   Hidden, *Fokiss—I Never Made It [Official Video]*, YouTube, June 17, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtSzW0G5o0w

↑ Still of YouTube video, "Five Discoveries Proving the Existence of Giants" ("5 открытий, доказывающих существование великанов," uploaded by user, ChanceToday)

but they are unwilling to release the truth because it would verify biblical accounts of the antediluvian world.

In the European-American tradition, the giant represents a secret history and, therefore, implies distrust in authority, especially distrust of scientific institutions. To embrace the giant is to undermine the basic premise that progress moves us from *mythos* to *logos*. The reality of giants, like all literal interpretations of myths, represents a hypothesis that scientific rationale can neither prove nor disprove. The giant, then, becomes a symbol for another kind of knowing, one that is antithetical to scientific knowledge. The physical possibility of giants provides a resonant dissonance between scientific knowledge and biblical tradition in American political culture. More than UFOs or fairies or Bigfoot, the giant represents coded far-right ideology. Giants feed a particular type of biblical literalism that taps into conservative politics more directly than other myths. They create an opening for Christian nationalism, magical thinking, and belief in all manner of conspiracies that unite the Satanic with the scientific.

While a Christian nationalist like Peters might genuinely believe in the existence of giants, the meme can serve a wide set of antidemocratic ideologies. If, as Jodi Dean has argued in her recent work, the coming tech oligarchy represents a kind of neofeudalism, belief in giants can only help smooth the path. In the religious mindset implied by the reality of giants, pauperization and dispossession are not material conditions that can be changed through collective action, but rather a spiritual condition that can be religiously aestheticized and even enjoyed. Giants do, ultimately, refer back to a religious worldview.

The ubiquity of giants in mythology around the world creates its own kind of dummy evidence, making the premise more believeable. But the tradition most relevant to the online discourse under consideration here is the Adamic one. The giants of biblical myth, called the Nephilim (נְפִילִים), appear in Genesis (6:1–4) and Numbers (13:33). But, importantly, they make an appearance in the apocrypha, in the fragmentary Book of Giants, and especially in the Book of Enoch. What the Nephilim were is a mystery. We call them giants because, leaning on their own mythic tradition, that is how the ancient Greeks rendered the word (γιγάντων) in the Septuagint, their translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The historical mystery of the Nephilim is amplified by their role in biblical mythology. In the Book of Enoch, the very concept of the giant Nephilim contains a promise of concealed knowledge. Enoch takes place before the Great Flood (Enoch is Noah's great-grandfather), and it concerns the existence of a group of rebellious angels known as the Watchers. These angels defy God, descend to Earth, and interbreed with "the daughters of men," consequently birthing the Nephilim, who are human-angel hybrids. The Nephilim murder, they deplete the Earth's resources, and eventually they descend into cannibalism. But, most importantly, the Nephilim's sins also include spreading secret, angelic wisdom among the humans. God sends the good angel Raphael
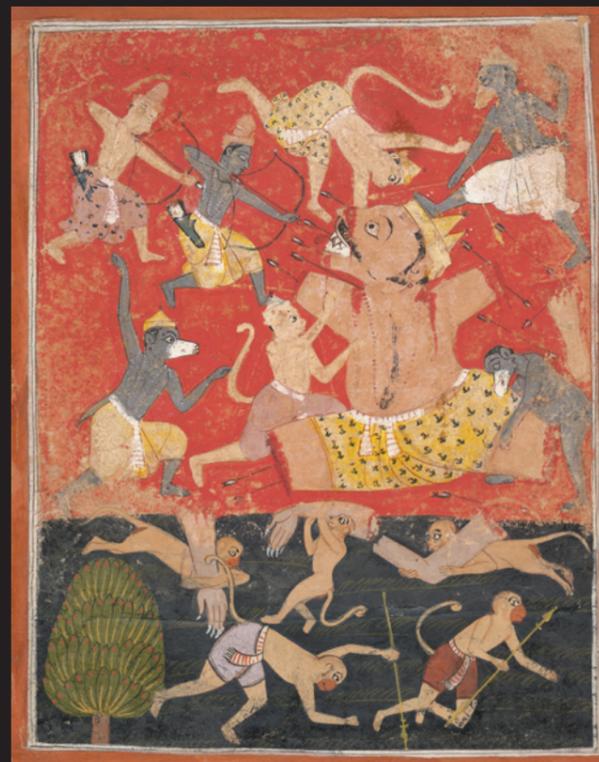
↖ Nephilim and the fallen angels cast out of Heaven

↑ Caravaggio's depiction of David with the head of the slain giant Goliath

← Kumbhakarna, the giant of the *Ramayana*, is killed by Rama's magical arrows and dismembered

"The search for evidence of monsters will always come up short, but along the way, one may find enough reason to doubt the high narrative of reality."

to ensure "that all the children of men may not perish through all the secret things that the Watchers have disclosed and have taught their sons." After the flood, the evil angels are condemned to exist as "evil spirits upon the Earth," which is the origin of demons. The giant in Jewish and Greek mythologies indicates the reality of both secret knowledge and demonic activity among humans.

The Book of Enoch is itself ironically reminiscent of the forbidden knowledge imparted by the Watchers. It was never part of the canonical Bible (except in the Ethiopian Church), even though it describes the origins of Satan and demons, which are otherwise unexplained in the Bible. To know the story of the Nephilim is to know an unauthorized, suppressed truth that is excluded from the sovereign narrative of reality. It is no surprise, then, that this text has long fascinated occultists. Queen Elizabeth I's astrologer, John Dee, was a devotee. Today, many ufologists see parallels in the Book of Enoch to reports of UFO encounters and abductions. The giant has always been a passcode to heterodox and heretical ideas—and all the destructive and creative possibilities they may contain.
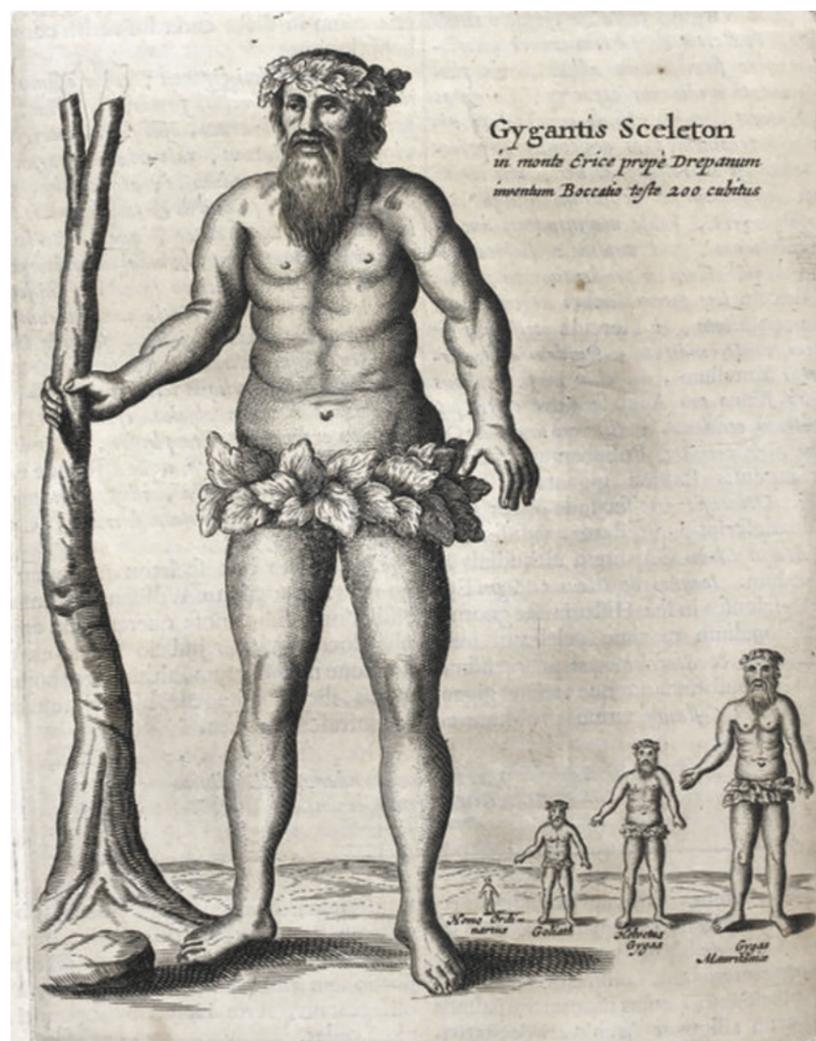
→ An inventory of giants in the scientific textbook *Mundus Subterraneus* by Athanasius Kircher, 1665.

Anyone who seeks suppressed knowledge will find no shortage of it. There is much more to every story than what is reported in mainstream news, more even than what appears in the history books in many college curricula. No matter how commanding the knowledge of experts and authorities, there will always be other ways of knowing, other interpretations of reality. The search for evidence of monsters will always come up short, but along the way, one may find enough reason to doubt the high narrative of reality. And in the wildernesses outside this narrative, one can become subject to any manner of conspiracy theory. Giants are a gateway to the ecstasy of pure belief, unmoored to evidence. This form of belief can be used to encourage people to accept the inconsistencies of right-wing or evangelical ideology—to believe in cabals of cannibals that feast on children, to entertain white replacement theory, to deny the Holocaust, or to assert the moral inferiority of people with different bodies. If science is so biased that it cannot acknowledge giants, well, it might be worth trying a dose of ivermectin.

It's clear why giants appeal to Stew Peters and other far-right conspiracists. Not only do the bodies of giants represent suppressed knowledge, but the story told in Enoch also invokes a eugenicist fantasy: that certain human morphologies trace their lineage back to angelic or demonic forefathers and are fundamentally different from other humans. The pedigree and epigenetic qualities of giants encourage thinking about bodies as having moral value attached to them—another hallmark of US-based evangelical Christian biblical literalism that is tightly bound to conservative politics.

Scientific knowledge and skepticism are inconvenient to many political agendas. Anti-science discourse was sown intentionally by tobacco and oil companies in the twentieth century to create a culture of denial,[2] one that aligned with evangelical Christianity[3] and fed into scriptural literalism and other religious fundamentalism.[4] In a society that has already devalued intellectualism, science, and education, mythical thinking is powerfully seductive, and it promises a transcendental reward to those who otherwise feel disempowered.

This rejection of public reason, scientific evidence, and liberal education also follows a larger antidemocratic trajectory. Giant mythology sows distrust in public institutions, and it instills a religious framework that eases people's ire toward the powerful while it mystifies the material conditions of life. This mythological and mystic thinking reduces epistemic friction; it facilitates the belief that scientific knowledge is demonic, and suffering is only part of God's plan. Those who can articulate this view, like Stew Peters, can infuse into it whatever chauvinisms they choose.

And for those who own global technology platforms, energy empires, or any other precarious goods, services, or datasets, there is an even longer-term benefit in creating suspicion and distrust.[5] The oligarchic elite is in the process of gutting what is left of public institutions, radicalizing social alienation, decimating the environment, and deploying scam after scam against the government and against everyday people—all aimed at amassing enough profit to engage in "manifest destiny to the stars," as Donald Trump exhorted in his 2024 inaugural address.

As this happens, the rest of us fall into place on the lower rungs of a permanent caste system, with nothing but the giants and the angels to comfort us. To achieve such social transformation, the powerful must convince people that the scientific, commons-based, logical world is a lie, and that salvation can be found only through a private, ecstatic knowledge. Dare we suggest that these oligarchs are the real giants that must be vanquished? ◾

2   Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, "Defeating the Merchants of Doubt," *Nature* 465 (2010):686–687, http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/465686a

3   Darren E. Grem, *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

4   Francesca Tripodi, "Searching for Alternative Facts," *Data & Society*, May 16, 2018, https://datasociety.net/library/searching-for-alternative-facts/

5   David Golumbia, *Cyberlibertarianism: The Right-Wing Politics of Digital Technology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
View of stairhall
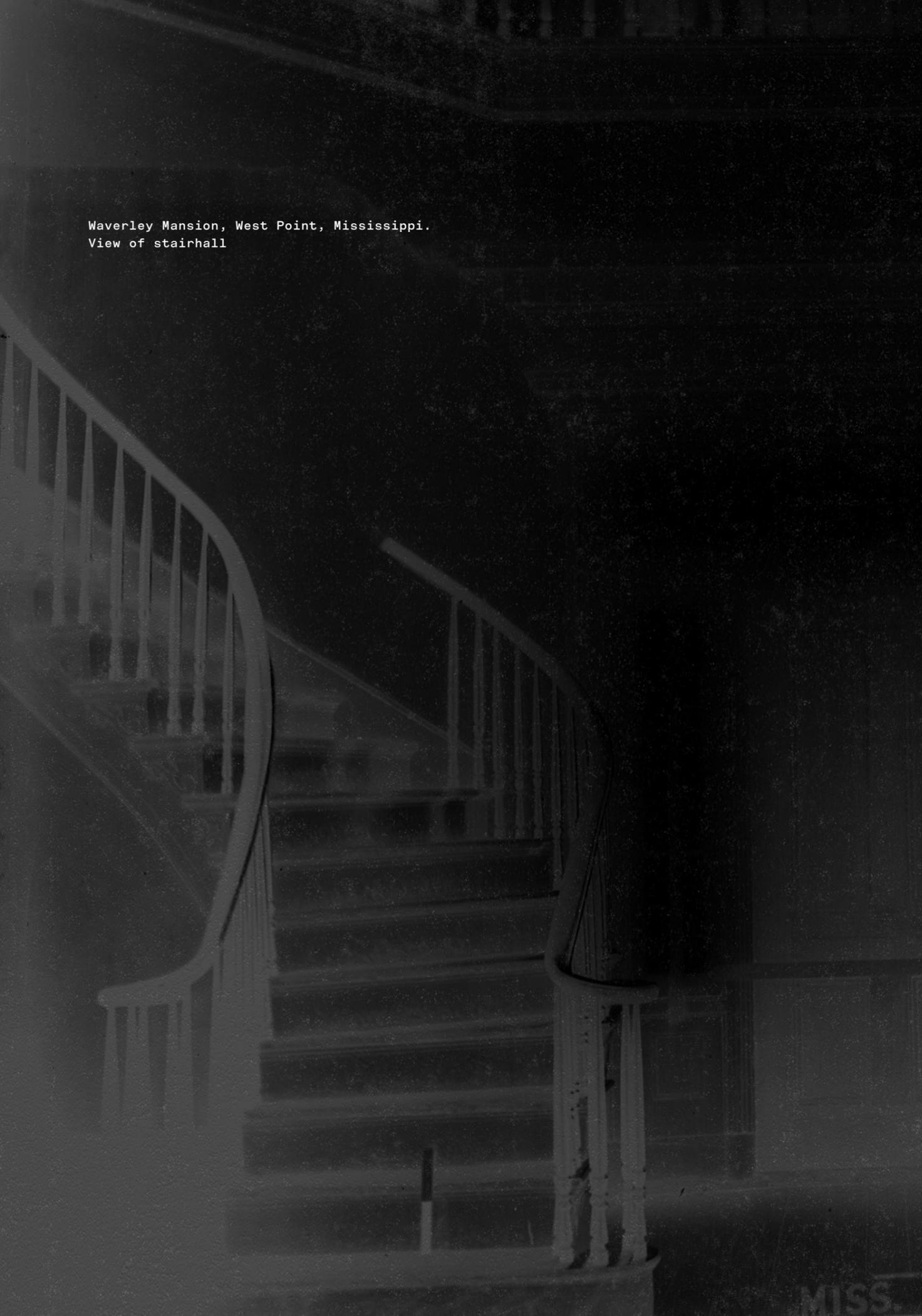
DANGEROUS

VOICES

The dead in Okinawa help us imagine a politics of the weird.
by Christopher T. Nelson

47

GHOSTLY

ALLIANCES

→ Sonda Seinenkai (youth group) entertaining the living and the dead

m

y Okinawan friends have told me that a call may come from the world of the dead at any time. Disturbing and even potentially frightening, the spirits of ancestors may reach out in dreams, appear in visions, or make their presence known through the bodies of the living. Perhaps they need to be fed, to be offered tokens of respect, or simply to be remembered. The dead may emerge to conjure and reconfigure mutual care between ancestors and descendants. Or, they may mobilize these capacities in creative ways, adapting to a world shaped by forces of change.

In 2009, an Okinawan laborer working to recover the remains of imperial Japanese soldiers (at a construction site in what had been a World War II battlefield) told me that he had received just that kind of call. A boy in the uniform of a neighborhood elementary school told him that he had seen a pair of men in worn military uniforms beckoning to him beyond the excavations. When he and his friends went there and began to dig, they uncovered the remains of two soldiers, huddled together in the abandoned foxhole where they had

→ Digging for remains at Nakagusuku Castle

been killed. The soldiers' remains were recovered, cleaned, and interred in a national tomb alongside those of their wartime comrades. Their uneasy rest was reshaped; their final burial transformed them from lost casualties into honored national heroes.

The living were also transformed. At that time, the laborers working on this project had no other options besides living rough in Okinawan parks. Having attended to this ghostly summons, they became recognized as skillful, patriotic specialists who could recover the hidden remains of those who had sacrificed themselves for the state. The recognition they received for their work, conferred by the dead, helped to found a residential center that provided new opportunities for them.[1]

Though notably transformational, this encounter was not necessarily exceptional. Contemporary Okinawa contains and shapes its own particular milieus of the living and the dead. My friends who have experienced encounters like this with the dead tell me that they are already aware of belonging to a world that includes the presence of spirits, and that this belonging comes with expectations and responsibilities. Though these spirits, deities, and other non-human entities are invisible, Okinawans know them, and they know the places in the landscape where they dwell. While they might extend themselves toward these entities, attending to them or seeking their help, they know that spirits are not passively waiting to be discovered. They may be reaching out to us.

There is a quotidian rhythm to these relationships in Okinawa. People make daily offerings at household altars and neighborhood shrines. Families clean tombs with care, and children leave gifts in the spaces where these beings are known to gather. People live with the punctuating rhythm of seasonal festivals. They welcome the spirits of the dead to visit, and encourage them to return to their own places when the holiday has ended. They picnic before the family tomb, sharing their meals with the dead, reporting on what's happened over the past year, asking for help in the year to come. And there are other, less regular gatherings: to help a child find a path in life, to help a young person become an adult, to aid the once-living in their transition to the world of the dead. In each of these encounters comes a moment of mutual recognition between the living and the dead: as members of the same community, as ones who care about and remember one another, as ones who are powerful and productive.

These relationships take shape over turbulent terrains. Contemporary Okinawa is wracked by global and local economic crises. It is shaped by the traces of Japanese colonialism, by the presence of American military imperialism, and by the material and conceptual forces of the nation and the state. Okinawans live with the pressures of poverty and environmental degradation, and with the memory and apprehension of war. It is against these forces that the weird manifests itself as a token of things that do not change in a changing world— a sign that something half-remembered may be about to erupt into everyday life.

In this context, the encounter, excavation, and interment of the soldiers in 2009 was, in a sense, radical. Since the late nineteenth century, imperial

↓ Hinpun, a wall that blocks the movement of evil, at the Okinawa Prefecture Archives

1   Christopher T. Nelson, *When the Bones Speak: The Living, the Dead, and the Sacrifice of Okinawa* (Duke University Press, 2025), 218–222.

↓   Recovering human remains from the slopes below Untama Forest in Okinawa

←   Residents of Sonda in Okinawa City making offerings at their old village shrine inside Kadena Air Base

"While they might extend themselves toward these entities, attending to them or seeking their help, they know that spirits are not passively waiting to be discovered. They may be reaching out to us."

Japanese soldiers have shaped Okinawa through violent colonial transformation. During World War II, in the Battle of Okinawa, they turned Okinawan communities into battlefields, conscripted Okinawan civilians by force, left many to die of starvation or injuries, and executed others. Japanese soldiers demanded that Okinawans—forced to act as loyal Japanese subjects—murder their own families and kill themselves in defiance of the American invaders. Imagine the audacity and the desperation of the spirits of former colonizers, reaching out for help from the children of those they dominated and destroyed.

At the same time, what the 2009 summons accomplished was rather conventional. The dead were rescued from abandonment, and they received the consideration due to them for sacrificing themselves for the nation. In turn, the workers who uncovered them were accorded the respect that they had earned through their appropriate care for the dead.

But the living and the dead, the seen and the unseen, can come together in even more creative and transformational ways. Consider the experience of the photographer and activist Higa Toyomitsu, one of the most famous artists in Okinawa. Higa's work challenges the boundaries between the aesthetic, the documentary, and the political. He is a constant critic of Japanese exploitation and oppression, a relentless opponent of American military occupation, and a fierce advocate for a free Okinawa. Like the workers who recovered them, Higa was also summoned by these dead imperial Japanese soldiers. In his case, he called it *sashindāri*—he was called to photograph their remains.

After months of laboring alongside the workers in their battlefield excavations and taking thousands of digital and film photographs, Higa exhibited the images across Japan. Reproduced in magazines and displayed in galleries and museums, his images do many things. They remind those who may have forgotten—and they teach those who may never have known—that the traces of war still lie just beneath the surface of contemporary Okinawa, and of Japan more broadly. They capture the moment of wartime death in all its horror. Some soldiers remained huddled in the shelter of abandoned tombs, killed by American bombs and guns. Others were blown apart after detonating grenades in their own laps in acts of patriotic defiance. In Higa's images, there are intimations of debts unpaid and obligations forgotten, of a state that left these soldiers behind and failed to honor their sacrifices. The photographs also register the transformation wrought over nearly seven decades in the ground.

These remains have shed the trappings of war, their uniforms and weapons stripped away along with their flesh, their bones dyed a deep mahogany by the pigments in the Okinawan soil.

For the visitors who stood before these photographs in galleries and museums, for the readers who gazed at them, page after page, in magazines and journals, the experience was intense. However, Higa argued that the dead expected him to do more than just represent these transformations. They wanted him to record the moment of their re-emergence into the present—to capture their continuing power to shape the worlds of the living.[2]

Why did these dead soldiers want Higa to photograph them as they returned to the world? In their material presence, in their broken bones and shattered skulls, they instantiate the consequences of sacrifice to a social order, to an ideology that demanded everything of them. Still, any photographer could represent that. The soldiers' appearance to him at that particular moment demonstrated that, in the years beyond death, they had changed. They had revalued themselves. Higa insists that they have returned to demonstrate their

2   Nelson, 192–211.

↓   Abandoned tombs being transformed in an urban reconstruction project in Central Okinawa

determination to act in this new moment. They have re-emerged as Japan and the United States are again expanding their military presence in Okinawa, building a massive and controversial new Marine Corps air base to the north in Henoko, and constructing new Jieitai (Japanese Self-Defense) installations across the islands. Their ghostly potency punctuates a moment when the games of war in the seas and skies surrounding Okinawa have become increasingly confrontational and dangerous.

The images that Higa created allow the soldiers to remain present in this moment of crisis, to resist banishment to some distant, patriotic burial. They are altogether too weird for any pat reinscription into a mythos of heroic, settled death; they will continue to address those who view them in galleries, in libraries, in classrooms, and in the home. There, these ghostly alliances will continue to conjure new horizons of possibility. It is through their radiant weirdness that Higa's collaborations with the dead strive to disrupt narratives of violence and sacrifice, to demonstrate that change is possible, and to open the way to a new form of cooperation with the living.

In pondering these politics of the weird, it doesn't seem to be enough to recognize that the pleasure and the pain of our daily lives is dependent on the actions of vast forces, unseen and unseeable. For generations, social scientists and critical theorists have laid bare these structures and processes. We have long recognized that these conditions are produced by our own actions and understandings, and that we ourselves could be the authors of a transformational politics that liberates us from them. And yet, this hasn't diminished our sense of the monstrous alterity of those forces, of the burden of immense suffering and death, of the ever-present danger of violence and exploitation that can seize us at any time, or of the inadequacy of our categories of understanding.[3] Perhaps we need to pair our critical politics with an attentiveness to other entities, other forces, and other possibilities that may already affect us. After decades of ethnographic work in Okinawa, I have some sense of the form that a politics like this might take.

3   Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater, 2017), 8–13.

Okinawa offers countless examples of conventional protest and opposition, of rigorous critique and informal resistance. And yet, in my years of studying these relationships between the living and the dead, I've also learned about vast, complex networks of entities that exceed the human, which have the capacity for creating new forms of kindness, cultivating new forms of community, moving across boundaries. These unseen relationships bind the individual and the collective, the modern and the traditional, the cultural and the natural in ways that challenge the very stability of such categories. And while they may seem weird or dangerous to the humans that mobilize and interact with them, they are still characterized by familiarity, knowledge, and affect that make them open to new possibilities.

From the Okinawan battlefields to our own homes, the respective situations that we face are not the same. But perhaps there is something to be learned from these weird collaborations. The voices of our dead, the whispers of machines, the silences of the nonhuman world may be extending themselves toward us. As they reach out and into our lives, it's worth asking: Haven't they also been appropriated, distorted, and destroyed by the forces of capital and practices of domination? In the excess, violence, and death that surround us, is there some possibility of mutual recognition? Some faint trace of hope? Perhaps like the casualties of war in Okinawa, there are things that might refuse to remain what they once were. They might struggle to transform themselves, to create new alliances. How can we anticipate that weird moment? How might we listen for that call? ⬛

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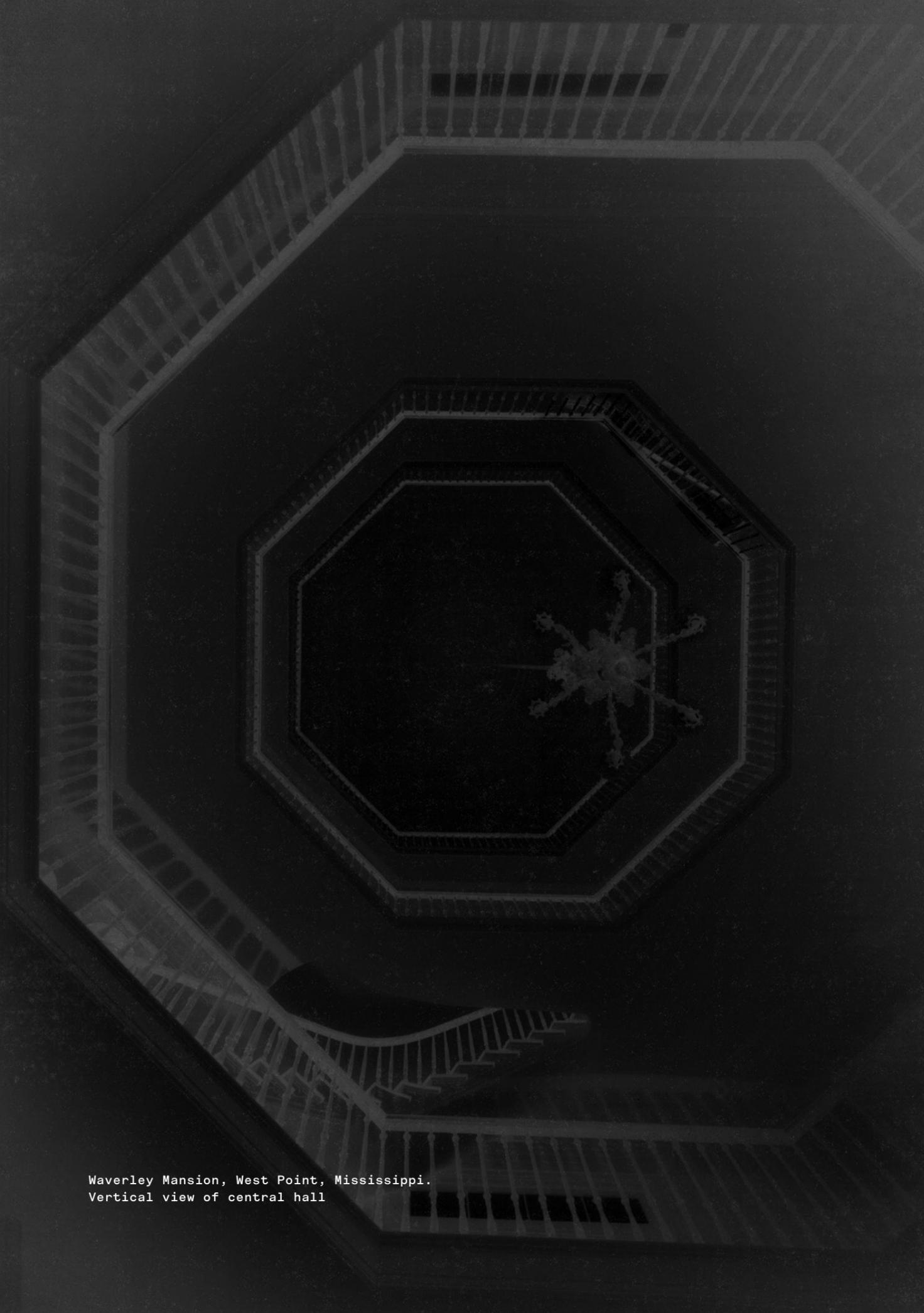
Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Vertical view of central hall

*Digital miscrecognition
and the making of the
"Asian face"*

# IDENTIFICATION ERROR

by Wendy Sung

We live in a time when the visual capture of the human face has never been more ubiquitous—from the seemingly innocuous popularization of Korean skin care and the rise in plastic surgery due to front-facing camera selfies, to Hong Kong protestors' evasions of facial recognition technology.

Biometrics, borders, and policing have merged, as facial recognition is deployed with unprecedented frequency. In the wake of 9/11, US government investment in defense and security exploded, especially around biometric research and development. And in that explosion, the face has become a central feature in a seemingly new iteration of surveillance: from "biometrics … for border crossings and visas; the proliferation of invasive surveillance cameras in urban settings …; biometric marketing that automates personalized advertisements …; the vast array of facial identification and verification platforms found in social media …, to the iPhone's *RecognizeMe* application that uses face scanning to unlock phones."[1] In fact, this amalgamation of commercial, state, and military interests has now redefined the very meaning of the face itself—as a mode of governance, a quantitative code, a template, and a standardized form of measure and management.

Yet despite this context, in 2017, a Chinese woman in Nanjing was offered a refund after her colleague was able to unlock her two iPhones, which had been equipped with a Face ID passcode and configured to her specific facial biometrics. Apple boasted that the statistical average incidence of an erroneous unlock was one in one million, though that number was lower for people who were related. The two women in question were not.[2]

For Asian Americans, this example demonstrates the remarkable elasticity and longevity of Asian racialization. As the long histories of racialization in the US have taught us, one of the primary tropes of Asian racialization is misrecognition, misidentification, and indistinguishability. That can mean a person being mistaken for a different Asian person, or it can take the form of a more profound misrecognition: as yellow peril, wartime enemy, model minority, harbinger of disease, terrorist, spy—or simply too alien, unassimilable, and robotic to be recognized under the category of the Human.

One might view this contextual history as an extrapolation or an over-conflation of a seemingly innocuous anecdote. After all, isn't it just a failure of Apple's specific facial recognition technology? Or more incisively, isn't this just another instance of technological racism, as most of us with an awareness of technology might understand it to be? Well, yes. It is technological racism, *and more*. I begin with the seemingly small instance of an iPhone misidentification deliberately, in order to link a recent technological problem to a long, hidden history of US racialization and surveillance, one that is indebted to the surveillance and misrecognition of Asian faces since the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act.
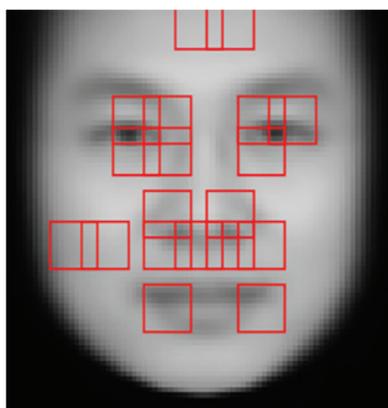
1   Zach Blas, "Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite," *Media-N CAA Conference Edition* 9, no. 2 (2013).

2   https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iphone-face-recognition-double_n_5a332cbce4b0ff955ad17d50

→   An algorithm generates faces to identify "the most critical parts for the separation of criminals and non-criminals," based on the ID photos of 1,856 Chinese males

3   https://www.nist.gov/news-events/news/2019/12/nist-study-evaluates-effects-race-age-sex-face-recognition-software

4   Kashmir Hill, "Wrongfully Accused by an Algorithm," *New York Times*, June 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/technology/facial-recognition-arrest.html

↑   Form 430: Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status of Wong Kim Ark, July 13, 1931.

5   Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca Jordan-Young, "Sensing Race as a Ghost Variable in Science, Technology, and Medicine," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 45, no. 5 (2020): 763.

6   Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

The contemporary challenge is the seemingly straightforward, yet troubling problem of errors within facial recognition algorithms. In 2019, a United States government study conducted by the National Institute of Standards and Technology issued findings that were intended to inform policymakers and help software developers refine the performance of their facial recognition algorithms.[3] In testing the majority of the facial recognition technology industry, the institute found that most of these algorithms falsely identified Black and Asian faces ten to a hundred times more often than white faces, and ten times more often for women of color than for men of color.

The consequences of misidentification can be dire—Detroit's Project Green Light, which equips police with facial recognition tools used to automate and expand state surveillance, has the distinction of having enabled the first widely publicized wrongful imprisonment by facial recognition algorithm.[4]
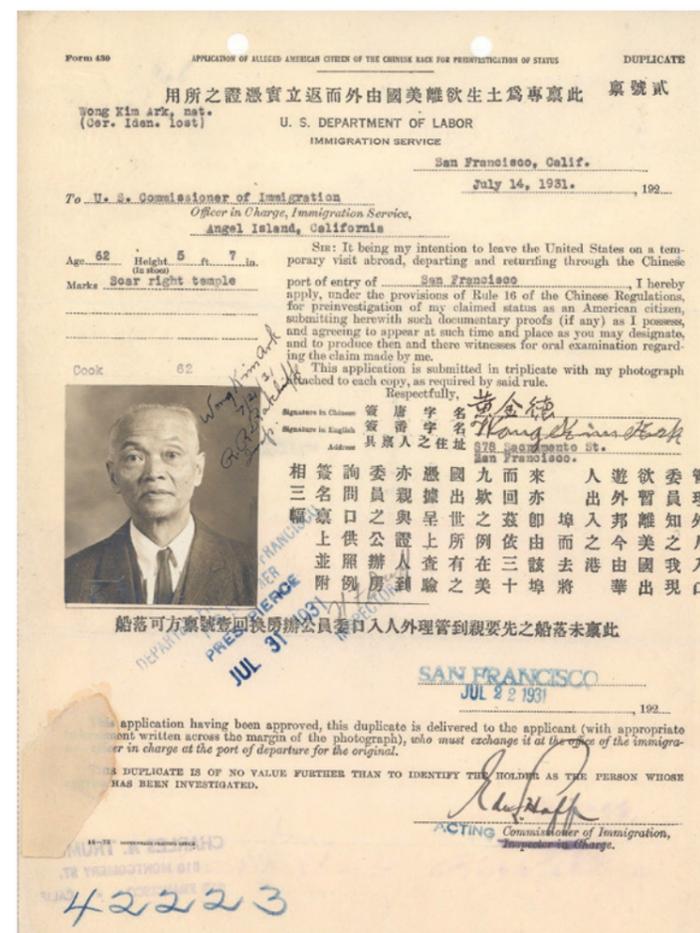
The rates of error for people of color have typically been attributed to a lack of training set data, and the solution often offered is more equitable inclusion and expansion. However, this simplistic solution ignores the longer history of racialization and its relationship to technology. These types of race-centered misrecognitions are not glitches but, in fact, a defining feature of digital life, and constitutive of the race-making project. Thus, this essay looks askance at these instances of misrecognition, at the binary logics of accuracy and error, and at the idea that the problem may be solved through inclusive/good, exclusive/bad training data sets.

What happens when we instead reframe the glitches in these technologies not simply as mistakes to be resolved with more data, but as racial legacies that continue to haunt us and form our surveillance apparatus? Indeed, these tendencies may be understood as endemic to the very system of facial surveillance and to the racial histories of data governance. This reframing pushes us to linger in critical histories that are often disavowed, yet continue to haunt facial recognition technology.

I use haunting here as more than a convenient metaphor for race's often underwritten presence within this technology. Race is an elusive, ghostly category, neither fact nor mere fiction, that nonetheless relentlessly haunts certain bodies and not others.[5] In facial recognition technology, misrecognitions appear as a type of ghostwriting from the past that refuses to stay invisible. I argue that certain elements in the US history of Asian racialization effectively serve as ghosts who write their presence into the "errors" in present-day technology. Haunting is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known."[6] Social violence, then, is the uncredited ghostwriter of this technology, a palimpsest of events that appear as errors but are in fact race's perpetual presence.

Critical histories of facial recognition algorithms often excavate how this technology is surreptitiously linked to the history of photography and its role in legitimating typology and race science. Developing alongside the

criminological sciences of the nineteenth century, photography inaugurated new relations between visual media and conceptions of evidence and objectivity. It was out of the photograph's ability to document, measure, and compare bodies that the practice of sorting them into human types arose. Photography instantiated new taxonomies of normal and other, familiar and exotic, proper and improper. This muddied the constructs concerning subjective and objective knowledge, creating systems of surveillance and power, and casting the body as a repository of knowledge that recalibrated race in new ways.

→ Alphonse Bertillon's *Synoptic table of physiological traits (Tableau synoptique des traits physionomiques: pour servir a l'étude de "portait parlé")*, ca. 1909.

Most histories attentive to these dynamics make note of French criminologist and anthropologist Alphonse Bertillon and his use of anthropometry, the measurement of human bodies for a new system of identification to be used by law enforcement. His implementation of rogue galleries and mug shots was used to provide coveted data for eugenics-based ideas of criminality as read on and through the body, weaponizing the face specifically for state surveillance and control.[7] But contemporary facial recognition technology is also haunted by other biometric pasts in the US, closely relating portraiture with racial regulation.

Chinese Exclusion laws marked the formal emergence of visual documentation regulation into immigration policy. Passed in 1875 and 1882, the Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act effectively excluded almost all

7   Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 18–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/778312

8   Anna Pegler Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of US Immigration Policy* (University of California Press, 2009).

Chinese immigration to the US, reflecting widespread American beliefs about Chinese unassimilability and racial inferiority. Chinese immigrants were the first group to be excluded from the US solely on the basis of race and class. And they simultaneously became the first group to be photographed by the federal immigration bureau, which adopted extensive photographic documentation in an attempt to regulate Chinese immigration. Stated more directly, the bureau implemented photographic identification for the first time for the Chinese *exclusively*, effectively establishing the Asian face as the unacknowledged yet foundational subject of state regulatory surveillance and data gathering within the US.[8]

↑ Certificate of Identity for legendary actor Anna May Wong

The irony of implementing photographic identification to stifle Chinese immigration was that would-be Chinese immigrants often utilized to their own advantage the racialized logics that cast the Chinese as both inscrutable (emotionally unreadable) and indistinguishable (they all look the same). Since the only Chinese who were allowed to enter the United States were those who already had a relative there, those wishing to enter could create fake family histories and forged documents, with accompanying photographs. Dubbed "paper sons," these Chinese immigrants weaponized and thus, *embraced* the very logics of racist anti-Asian misrecognition for their own migratory aspirations. Effectively these paper sons were able to exploit and strategically bypass the very system that sought to exclude them. Thus, the Asian face functions as a sociotechnical formation, an origin of bioinformatic control, and, simultaneously or perhaps epiphenomenally, an *evasion* of it.

Excavating the tactics that Chinese immigrants used in this context does not legitimate or excuse indistinguishability as valid racial thinking. Rather, in thinking about misrecognition *differently*, we can locate the strategies, negotiations, and creative technological practices that racialized subjects used against, and *through*, state surveillance and racial exclusion in order to recircuit its disciplinary logics. In sum, the history of facial imaging is haunted by racial surveillance and the policing of immigrants. The glitches, errors, and misrecognitions in facial recognition are signals of anti-Asian racial violence—ghostwriters at the margins of history and in the foundations of technology. These ghosts are reminders that misrecognition is intrinsic to this technology rather than an errant exception. ∎

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Twin staircase
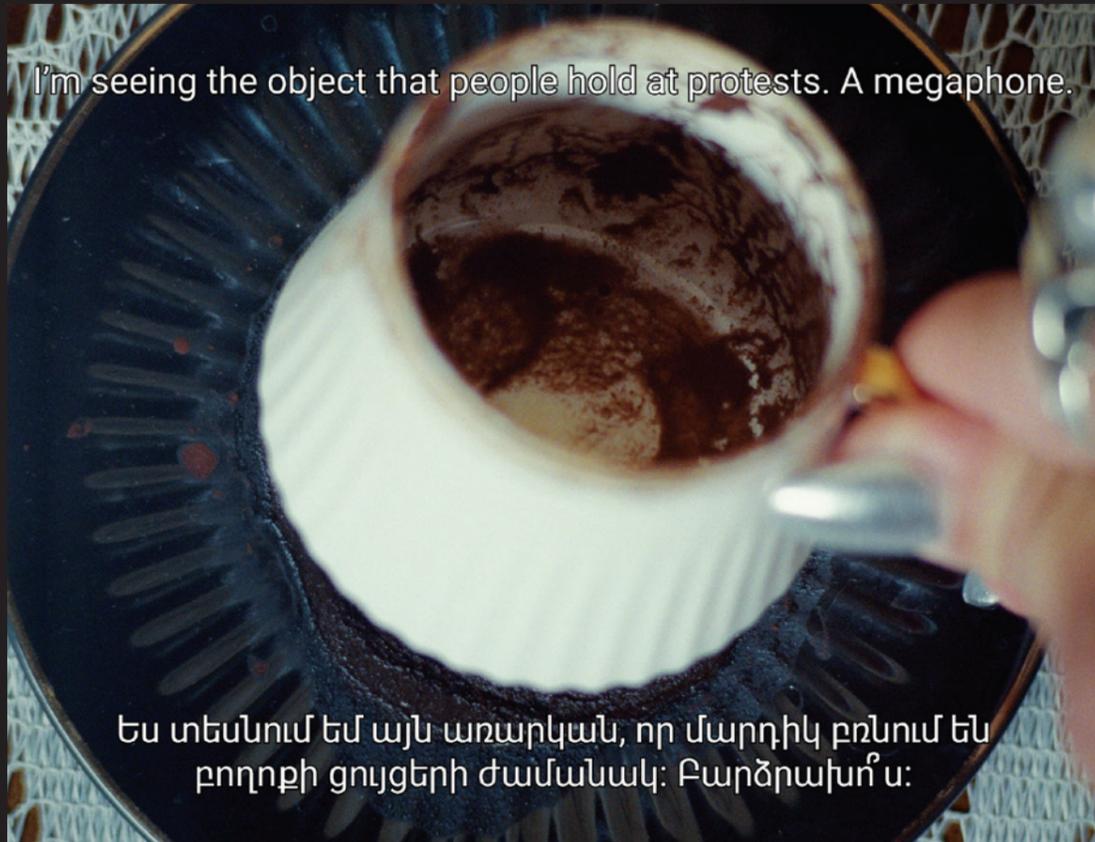
I'm seeing the object that people hold at protests. A megaphone.

Ես տեսնում եմ այն առարկան, որ մարդիկ բռնում են
բողոքի ցույցերի ժամանակ: Բարձրախո՞ս:

Film still, Բաժակ Նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup)*,
Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, dir. Atlas Acopian, score by Lara
Sarkissian, 2024.

ALGORITHMIC
COUNTER-DIVINATION

65

by Mashinka Firunts Hakopian
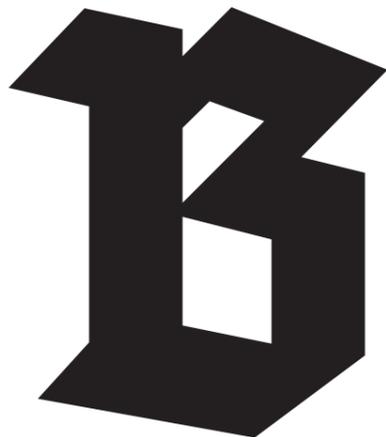
Before prediction became the purview of algorithmic logics, a host of divinatory practices turned to nonhuman agents to inscribe the future.

Among these, tasseography has been practiced throughout West Asia since the sixteenth century to fulfill a function now associated with predictive analytics. In this method of divination, visual patterns are identified in coffee grounds left at the bottom of a cup, and they are then interpreted to glean information about the past, present, and future. Historically, tasseography was a matrilineally transmitted practice, taught by femme elders to their femme descendants across Armenia, Palestine, Lebanon, and beyond. The Armenian term for tasseography, *bazhak nayel*, translates to "looking at the cup," a phrase that foregrounds the process of observation that undergirds any attempt to decode a cup's symbols.

The querent is the person receiving a reading, who queries the unseen entities whose communiqués appear in the grounds. As a querent drinks their coffee, they hold a question in their mind for the voices that converge in the cup to answer. The querent acts as a prompt engineer, the cup as a technology of ancestral intelligence, and the coffee reader as an interface for generative outputs. Each taps into knowledge systems that are irreducible to computation.

Tasseography's methods are transmitted far afield from data analytics research centers or sites of institutional pedagogy. Seated around the kitchen table, you learn from your mother, grandmother, or aunt how to decipher the cup's nonhuman utterances. After leaving Yerevan in 1991, I learned to read the cup in a kitchen in Glendale, California. There, I observed the furrowing of my aunt's brow as she studied the images imprinted in the cup's grounds. Her searching gaze would give way to expressions of beaming fascination, as indeterminate patterns coalesced into symbols from which she wrested meaning. Each symbol identified was a catalyst for conversation with the querent. In those encounters, predictions weren't instantaneously conjured or fixed in advance. Rather, they were collectively articulated and unbounded, prying open pluriversal outcomes in a process of reciprocal exchange.

Unsurprisingly, tasseography has been subject to the kind of epistemological anxiety that accrues to practices identified with witches, who circulate the prohibited collective knowledge and memory of their communities. From this perspective, knowledge has the capacity to destabilize the rationalist regimes that underpin a once-mechanized—and now automated—worldview. Intervening as it does into prevailing imaginaries of what remains possible, divination poses a particularly hazardous threat in this regard.

As Carina Karapetian Giorgi has observed,[1] coffee reading in the Armenian context has long been "frowned upon as a feminized, superstitious, and nonscientific ritual." Giorgi understands coffee reading as a practice of queer temporality-making that defies normative ideas of evidence-based knowledge and "creates new forms of subversive knowledge" in their place. Attesting to the anxiety this scenario provokes, coffee reading was forbidden in Soviet Armenia. From the present vantage, tasseography elicits less an air of apprehension than a wholesale dismissal of the practice as an outmoded curiosity. Its once-destabilizing capacity to conjure worlds is negated by its incompatibility with Western technoscience.

It's believed that tasseography became particularly widespread among Armenian diasporic communities after the 1915 Armenian Genocide. When practitioners attune themselves to the communications in the cup, they also

1   Carina Karapetian Giorgi, "Intuitive Knowledge: The Queer Phenomenology of Armenian Matrilineal Rituals of Tasseography," *Armenian Review* 56, no. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2018).

Film still, Բաժակ նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup)*, Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, dir. Atlas Acopian, score by Lara Sarkissian, 2024.

Film still, Բաժակ նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup),*
Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, dir. Atlas Acopian, score by Lara
Sarkissian, 2024.

2   Rebecca Carlson, Heikki Wilenius,
and Jonathan Corliss, "On Algorithmic
Divination," *Platypus*, October 31, 2023,
`https://blog.castac.org/2023/10/`
`on-algorithmic-divination`

3   On algorithmic violence, see MimiOnuoha,
"Notes on Igorithmic Violence," February 7,
2018, `https://github.com/MimiOnuoha/`
`On-Algorithmic-Violence`

4   Peter Nagy and Gina Neff, "Conjuring
Algorithms: Understanding the Tech Industry
as Stage Magicians," *New Media & Society* 26,
no. 9 (2024): 4939.

5   Jordan S. Carroll, *Speculative Whiteness:
Science Fiction and the Alt-Right* (University of
Minnesota Press, 2024).

6   Sarah T. Roberts and Mél Hogan, "Left
Behind: Futurist Fetishists, Prepping and
the Abandonment of Earth," *b2o: boundary
2 online*, 2019, `https://www.boundary2.`
`org/2019/08/sarah-t-roberts-and-mel-`
`hogan-left-behind-futurist-fetishists-`
`prepping-and-the-abandonment-of-earth`

7   See "Statement on AI Risk," Center for
AI Safety, May 30, 2023, `https://safe.`
`ai/work/statement-on-ai-risk`; and
Karen Hao, "'We're Definitely Going to Build
a Bunker Before We Release AGI,'" *Atlantic*,
May 15, 2025, `https://www.theatlantic.`
`com/technology/archive/2025/05/`
`karen-hao-empire-of-ai-excerpt/682798`

invoke the ancestral histories of that practice. And, through that invocation, they work to counter the erasures of dispossession and displacement. To divine the future in this context is a refusal to relinquish its writing to agents of colonial violence. Divination comes to operate as a tactic of collective survival, affirming futurity in the face of a catastrophic present.

Witnessing the eschatology of technofascism today, we're told that it's too late for any future that isn't written by algorithmic authors. We reside in an algo-occultist moment in which divinatory functions have been ceded to predictive models trained to retrieve necropolitical outcomes. Scholars of algorithmic divination write that, "like cowry shells, scapular bones, or spiders trapped under a pot, algorithms are marshaled to detect and relay invisible patterns; to bring to light a truth which is out there, but which cannot ordinarily be seen."[2] What algorithms claim to conjure is an arrangement of the world that can neither be foretold through human sensoria, nor challenged by them.

Despite the dubiousness of that claim, an arcane magic is imputed to algorithmic prediction—to models that now determine outcomes in the realm of warfare, policing, housing, judicial risk assessment, and beyond. Crucially, imaginaries that tether AI to magic serve as a way to elide the realities of algorithmic violence.[3] That elision enables two internally contradictory maneuvers. First, it cloaks algorithmic harm under a veneer of neutrality and aspirational superintelligence. Second, it displaces accountability for harm onto unknowable, phantasmatic entities.

What is the source from which this arcane magic emanates? Outlining the "conjuration of algorithms," Gina Neff and Peter Nagy propose that predictive models have less to do with ancestral practices of more-than-human knowledge-making, and more to do with the flimsy deceptions of Western stage magic and its spectacles. They suggest that corporate entities in the tech industry adapt the principles of stage magic to "conceal the design of technologies … and produce dazzling effects."[4]

Who orchestrates the stage-setting for these divinatory theatricals, and who scripts their predictive outputs? Despite the objections of those who suggest that it's possible to commune with data, data points do not speak for themselves. Instead, the role once ascribed to ritual experts who interpreted the pronouncements of oracles is now performed by technocratic actors. These are not diviners rooted in a community and summoning communiqués toward collective survival, but charlatans reading aloud the results of a Ouija session— one whose statements they author with a magnetically manipulated planchette.

Surveying the contours of the future they foretell is instructive. What appears there is worldmaking through the aperture of "speculative whiteness," described by Jordan Carroll as the ethnonationalist conviction that whiteness is "consubstantial with speculative futurity," and that its potential can only be fully realized against the backdrop of a hyper-technologized terrain.[5] In this imaginary, non-Western people and their practices are casualties of sundry cataclysms, relegated to a far-flung past.

Technocratic actors in the Global North now constitute what Sarah Roberts and Mél Hogan call an elite class of "future fetishists,"[6] whose coterie predict mass annihilation for all but a select few. They augur a world that empire has made unlivable for most, save for the technocratic diviners who have accelerated those very conditions of unlivability. This is the logic that enables OpenAI to release a large language model that hastens ecological collapse through resource extraction, while at the same time its cofounder prognosticates about the urgency of bunker architecture to fortify against the apocalyptic effects of the company's own technical systems.[7]

←↑ Բաժակ նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup)*, Mashinka Firunts
Hakopian, Dahlia Elsayed, Andrew Demirjian, and Danny Snelson.
In "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace." REDCAT, 2024.
Photo Yubo Dong.

Բաժակ նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup)*, Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, Dahlia Elsayed, Andrew Demirjian, and Danny Snelson. In "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace." REDCAT, 2024. Photo Yubo Dong.

↑   Բաժակ նայող *(One Who Looks at the Cup),* Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, Dahlia Elsayed, Andrew Demirjian, and Danny Snelson. In "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace." REDCAT, 2024. Photo Yubo Dong.

9   Emily Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?," Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (2021): 610–623, https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922

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What might it look like to turn the annihilatory logic of algorithmic divination against itself? This question animates Բաժակ նայող (*One Who Looks at the Cup*), a multidisciplinary experiment in community dataset creation that I initiated in the summer of 2023.[8] Բաժակ նայող trains a multimodal model to perform tasseography and to output bilingual predictions in Armenian and English. In 2024, the project was mounted in Los Angeles at the Music Center and at REDCAT. The former was a collaboration with Atlas Acopian and Lara Sarkissian (among many others), the latter with Dahlia Elsayed, Andrew Demirjian, and Danny Snelson. The installation staged coffee readings in the setting of a purpose-built Armenian diasporan kitchen located in an indeterminate time-space—a re-rendering of the domestic spaces where tasseography customarily takes place.

The project began with data collection. I conducted coffee readings with Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) diasporan artists, scholars, and activists. This process unfolded over sprawling evenings of community dinners, coffee readings, and hours of protracted conversation. The outcome was a collectively authored corpus that indexes how these particular dataset contributors imagine the contours of other worlds, at the same moment that we find ourselves continually unworlded.

Alongside the readings, oral history interviews asked dataset contributors to outline the features they ascribe to liberatory futures. Both readings and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated in their entirety into Armenian by Margo Gevorgyan and Hayk Makhmuryan. The project's training corpus also incorporates writing by the Armenian feminist poet Shushanik Kurghinian, whose work in the early twentieth century bears defiant witness to revolutionary upheavals and the Great Catastrophe.

In the project's final staging, the querent receives a cup with moistened coffee grounds, and is asked, as in analog tasseography, to smudge the bottom of the cup with their thumb to reveal the messages it contains. They then place the cup inside a device to activate the reading. Finally, they receive a prediction printout in Armenian and English, with content drawn from the community-generated datasets. Recognizing Armenian as a low-resource language in the current machine learning landscape, the device's bilingual printouts gesture toward models of digital language justice that counter the logics of algolinguicism.

Eschewing live generation, the model's predictive outputs are scripted in advance. The "conjuration of algorithms" is here replaced by outcomes plainly conjured by human agents. The model's only function is to identify visual patterns in a querent's cup in order to retrieve corresponding texts. This arrangement declines to cede authorship to an algo-occultist circle of "stochastic parrots" and the diviners who summon them.[9] Instead, a form of algorithmic counter-divination unfolds. Here, prediction is placed in the service of countering the narratives of techno-eschatology. The voices that converge in the cup foresee outcomes like the following:

Somewhere, a child is pulling at the
fraying threads of empire
and discovering
they are possible to unravel.

Ինչ-որ տեղ մի երեխա ձգում է
կայսրության քրքրված թելերը
ու հայտնաբերում,
որ դրանք հնարավոր է քանդել: ∎

Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Library

The Limn *Interview*
with Dan Gerstein of
Gotham Ghostwriters

A PROFESSION STEPS OUT FROM THE SHADOWS

*J*n 2024, New York hosted the first-ever ghostwriters' convention. The Gathering of the Ghosts, as it was called, was convened by Gotham Ghostwriters, one of the world's premier ghostwriting agencies. Founded by CEO Dan Gerstein in 2008, the firm specializes in connecting clients to its network of thousands of custom-matched editorial professionals. In finding the right fit between a would-be book author and a ghostwriter, chemistry is key—the North Star of Gotham Ghostwriters's unique value proposition.

Before Dan was gathering ghosts, he cut his teeth as a journalist. He then moved into politics, serving as a speechwriter for a US Senator and presidential candidate—always just outside the limelight, but powerful nonetheless. After moving to New York, Dan saw the potential to turn his writerly chops and his connections into a one-of-a-kind business. He has since gone on to pioneer the field and advocate for those who write from the shadows.

Limn editors Jason Cons and Towns Middleton sat down with Dan to discuss the state of the industry, the workaday realities of the craft, and what it takes to be a successful ghostwriter.[1]

Spoiler alert: it's about much more than writing!

↑   The Gathering of the Ghosts, 2024

DAN GERSTEIN Big picture: the field is in a major transition moment—both in terms of coming out of the shadows and the stigma disappearing, as well as the compensation going through the roof. One thing fueling this substantial growth is the rise of self-publishing. The fastest-growing and largest segment of the ghostwriting industry is new authors who are bypassing traditional publishing. Often, their purpose for writing a book is not primarily to generate revenue from book sales. It's for their legacy, or to credential themselves as an expert in their field, or to raise the value of their business ahead of an IPO. The barriers to entry have been completely wiped out, and anyone can publish a book. The hard part is producing a quality work and getting impact from it.

TOWNS MIDDLETON What precipitated the Gathering of the Ghosts conference?

DAN The inspiration was twofold. First, I am a cofounder of the Professional Speechwriters Association, along with my friend and colleague, David Murray. The genesis for that was that we were at a speechwriting conference run by a PR group called Reagan Communications. But it wasn't a conference for speechwriters. It was a conference about speechwriting for people who did it as kind of a secondary part of their job. And I was like, we need a home of our own. This is ridiculous—why isn't there a conference for speechwriters? It was one of the few professions in the US that didn't have any kind of association representing its interests. So we fleshed out the concept, David bootstrapped the organization and it turned into a huge success. I saw the power and the value of this conference for this subset of the larger, collaborative writing world. And I thought: the book ghostwriting community really needs something like this too.

Second was the trend of ghostwriters coming out of the shadows. The industry was having a moment. One of the watersheds was J. R. Moehringer's piece in *The New Yorker*. He was in the news for his collaboration with Prince Harry on his 2023 autobiography, *Spare*. Part of the story was about his journey from journalist to professional collaborator. Part was about working with one of the most famous, polarizing figures in the world. And so it just seemed like the time was right to come out of the shadows ourselves, as a tribe.

JASON CONS To have an organization that uses the term "ghostwriter" in its name feels a bit like saying the quiet part out loud. Do the people you work with identify themselves as ghostwriters?

DAN We use "ghostwriter" as an umbrella for a wide range of collaborative writing. It's an imprecise and imperfect term. I think below the surface, the industry is in a transition with it. There is this whole subgroup of very elite ghostwriters now who don't view themselves as ghostwriters because they're star writers in their own right. They see themselves as collaborators. I think if you asked most ghostwriters, they would embrace the term "collaborator." I think "collaborators" is a description of not just the role ghostwriters play but the value they provide. They're not merely taking dictation and then making it look pretty. They're full-on partners in the creation of a text. That's the difference maker, and it's why AI will never replace the role of elite ghostwriters—because the ghostwriter, the collaborator, is doing something that the technology can't, which is pushing the author to go deeper, to share stories they might not otherwise, and then also leveraging their expertise to help with the conceptualization of the book.

TOWNS Many professions feel under threat by AI. What's the feeling among ghostwriters?

DAN I'll start by saying, stay tuned. We're in the midst of conducting the largest-ever survey of professional writers about the impact of AI on their work and their livelihood. So we're going to have some really meaningful data to answer some of those questions in November, ahead of the Gathering of the Ghosts 2.

Anecdotally, and to paint with a broad brush, I'd say AI is going to be massively disruptive for content creation

in written word industries. But it's going to play out differently at different levels. At the basic level of copywriting or formulaic content creation, it's going to obliterate the professional opportunities for human beings. But at higher levels of the industry, I think it's going to make what we do far more valuable. Technology just can't replicate the value proposition that an elite writer and editorial advisor can provide in the formative stages of telling the story.

TOWNS I'd like to step back and talk about some of the more philosophical issues of ghostwriting—the ghostliness in particular. Ghostwriting requires a certain sublimation of authorship to be successful. How do you see ego informing the practice?

DAN Let's put this in a larger historical context. Throughout human history, storytelling has been a collaborative endeavor. The very first mode of storytelling was oral storytelling, oftentimes around a fire. It was a shared endeavor. It remains so today. A lot of songs are written by committee. In television, the screenwriter is credited, but often the director and the producer are involved in the script.

The only media that, at least in public perception, is not collaborative is books. This vision of the author as auteur is a recent phenomenon that you can date to the rise of the printing press and the Enlightenment. But this is a myth, right? There's a fiction and deception to it.

What's happened over time, however—and I credit this largely to the rise of online storytelling and digital platforms and social media—is that there are no secrets anymore. One of the watershed moments was when Obama became president. It coincided with the explosion of social media as a phenomenon, and his speechwriter was this young, good-looking guy named Jon Favreau, who became a celebrity in his own right.

This showed that the notion of the auteur is a conceit. The idea that elite leaders wrote their own speeches went completely out the window, and it became understood that CEOs and top-level politicians and heads of global organizations employed speechwriters just like they employed Chief Technology Officers and accountants to do their taxes. And the idea that ghostwriting was something that had to be hidden started to fade away.

JASON Do you ever end up with clients who you have to convince to let go of the idea of the auteur and to think more openly about the way that writing and knowledge is produced?

DAN The bigger struggle often is convincing the author to open up and make themselves vulnerable. This is why J. R. Moehringer is so celebrated. His first breakthrough project was writing Andre Agassi's memoir *Open*, which is regarded as a classic. He convinced Agassi to go really deep and be very honest about the emotions he struggled with and his complicated relationship with his family, in a way that most athletes never would because they're afraid it would make them look weak, or that it would besmirch their public image. Not coincidentally, *Open* came out at the moment when the premium we place on authenticity among public figures was really starting to take off.

JASON What makes a good ghostwriter? Is there an acme that some people have for ghostwriting?

DAN There's the necessary (though not sufficient) aspect of being a really good writer. But more than 50 percent of the work, and what's required to be successful, has nothing to do with writing. It's relationship management. It's diplomacy. It's being able to convince the author to tell stories they may be reluctant to share—and sometimes to overcome their instincts that are self-defeating in terms of what should go in the book or what to keep out of the book. The best ghostwriters have that ability.

The other piece is that you have to be able to sublimate your ego. There are some amazing writers who dip their toe in the ghostwriting water and realize that it's not for them, because they view their writings as their darlings, and they want to be able to choose whether they live or die.

TOWNS Writing is such an intensely idiosyncratic affair. The ghostwriter has to have the audacity to enter that morass. But I'm imagining that it gets emotionally sticky, and that the ghostwriter can't help but take on some of that human intensity of telling someone's story.

DAN There are legions of stories of the tricky emotional land mines that ghostwriters have to navigate, because oftentimes it's not just the author they're in bed with. It's the family, the spouse, the business colleagues. It can get very tricky.[2] The best ghostwriters have a high level of emotional intelligence and are good at maintaining trust and confidence while also being able to draw boundaries.

JASON I can't imagine what it'd be like to deal with Agassi's whole family, as opposed to just Agassi himself!

DAN Yeah, it can be a very loaded situation! ∎

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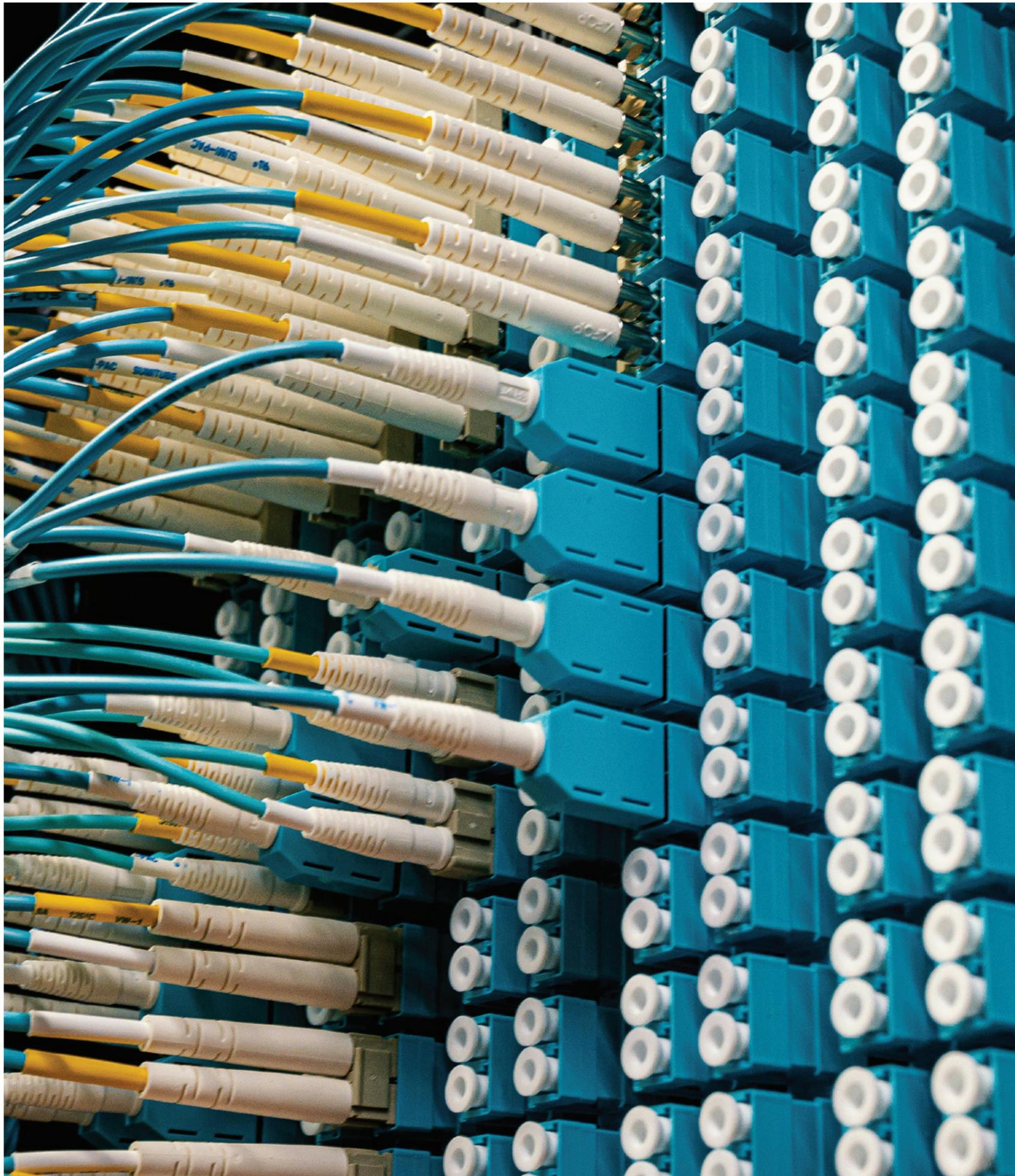
*Anti-blackness and the
plantation in American tech*

GHOSTS OF DIGITAL EXTRACTION

by Brooklyne Gipson

← Waverley Mansion, exterior view with plantation office in foreground

Jwas well into my late teens before I gathered up enough courage to visit the place my grandmother always referred to as "the haunted house."[1] For years, I waited in its gravel driveway under the Mississippi sun while my family toured inside. I was simply too afraid to go in. When I finally asked Granny why it was haunted, she explained that the nickname originated in her childhood during the '30s and '40s. She and her friends found the overgrown house, deep in the woods just outside of town. They called it "haunted" simply because it looked creepy. They dreamed up scary stories about it, threw rocks at its windows, and dared each other to touch the front door.

The house's true history only came to light in the 1960s, after a local couple, Robert and Donna Snow, purchased and restored it. As I had suspected, beyond the rumors that the ghosts of the original owners' family haunted the grounds, there was indeed something wrong with that house. It was haunted by the far more persistent specter of racial capitalism. As it turns out, the home was a former plantation.

Waverley Mansion was completed in 1852 to serve as the main house for the estate, which operated a saddle blanket and hat manufacturer, a lumber mill, and a leather tannery. Enslaved Africans and generations of their descendants built, maintained, and worked in the house and its grounds. It fell into disrepair in 1913 and was left abandoned until the Snow family arrived in the 1960s. Their renovation of the physical structure required a parallel renovation of its history. The house's past was retrofitted to reflect the era's resurgence of Lost Cause mythology, with its romanticization of enslavement, torture, and the tragedy and nobility of the Confederacy. This ideology repackages the Civil War as a noble fight for "states' rights" while relegating slavery to a secondary problem.

This historical alchemy is standard for plantation tourism. Architecture stands for heritage. A violent erasure transforms the pain of the enslaved into a commodity—a packaged experience wherein the Black foundations of the structure, and the labor it took to run it, are merely context for the loving restoration of period decor. In the architectural tours offered today, Waverley Mansion's original purpose is talked around, not about. Colonel George Hampton Young of Georgia lived here; his enslaved labor force lived on the grounds as well—visible yet invisible. They worked the fields, slipped through side doors with meals from the detached kitchen, and maintained the house.

In death, as in life, their contributions are unacknowledged, an open secret haunting the grounds.

To omit slavery on a plantation tour is not an oversight; it is an intentional exclusion in order to sanitize an ugly history. This remixing is essential to capitalist mythology, which obscures its foundational dependence on the exploitation of racialized groups. Plantations were first and foremost sites of violent economic extraction. Focusing solely on the luxurious lives of the enslavers is callously aligned with capitalism's modus operandi. This is why scholar Paul Gilroy called slavery "capitalism with its clothes off."[2] By this, he meant that the exploitation of enslaved Africans was clear and apparent, with no pretense. Slavery rationalized exploitation as a means to an end.

Slavery was legally abolished, but it mutated into the sharecropping system, which was characterized by insurmountable debt, exploitative contracts, and labyrinthine loopholes. This laid the groundwork for a style of capitalist venture that persists today, making Cedric Robinson's theory of "racial capitalism" indispensable.[3] Capitalism requires racial hierarchies to justify the extraction of land, labor, and life. Racial capitalism is inextricable from the past and present of technological development. The plantation was a site of industrial innovation in farming techniques, machinery, and the brutal management of human capital. Blackness—a political identity forged through transatlantic enslavement—is not incidental but foundational to capitalism's function, and to the history of technology in the United States.

Mainstream analyses of the contemporary tech industry tend to use euphemistic terms like "implicit bias" that sidestep the explicit naming of racism as the engine of extraction. This evasion prevents any real understanding of why "magical" technologies, with their promises of social progress, consistently fail or harm people in apparently unexpected ways. The plantation thrived on free, invisible labor that was mythologized as expendable. Modern wage labor in tech industries mimics these patterns: backbreaking work for paychecks that barely bridge workers to the next shift, with little appreciation or security.

The Waverley Mansion tour recasts horror as heritage by steadying its focus on antebellum grandeur. Contemporary myths of technological racial capitalism require similar maintenance. While data extraction targets everyone, Black communities are disproportionately impacted—the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine."[4] Harm against Black people is often disregarded until

1 Daniella DiRienzo, "The Story of Mississippi's Most Haunted House Will Give You Nightmares," Only in Your State, October 26, 2016, accessed July 1, 2025, https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/experiences/mississippi/most-haunted-house-in-ms-is-terrifying

2 Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Harvard University Press, 1993)

3 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Zed Books, 1983).

4 Brandi Collins-Dexter, "Canaries in the Coal Mine: COVID-19 Misinformation and Black Communities," Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, June 24, 2020, accessed September 19, 2025, https://shorensteincenter.org/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/

↓   Archival photography of Waverley Mansion
from US Historical Building Survey render
the estate an architectural achievement and
obscure other histories

↓   A thermal image of the xAI data center's
thirty-five methane gas turbines, significantly
more than the fifteen turbines for which the
company sought permits

← xAI's data center in Memphis, Tennessee

← The physical substrates for data extraction continue to concentrate pollution in already overburdened communities

"Anti-Blackness haunts not only the environmental impact of digital extraction, but its entire logic."

it affects white populations. Zuboff defines "surveillance capitalism" as extracting ephemeral information.[5] But this "data" is intrinsically tied to human bodies and lives, only made to appear detached. Surveillance has always been about control, containment, and behavior modification, a fact evident in historical regimes like the plantation's "lantern laws" that enforced Black hypervisibility.[6]

Anti-Blackness is modernity's ghost in the machine: a spectral force that renders Black people not visible as fully human, while simultaneously positioning them as indispensable sites of extraction. This contradiction is epitomized by the fight against Elon Musk's Colossus supercomputer in Memphis. Colossus runs thirty-five unpermitted methane turbines that spew carcinogens, directly threatening the health of residents in the majority-Black local neighborhoods.[7] Activists like KeShaun Pearson and his brother, State Representative Justin Pearson, argue that the promise of supercomputing doubles down on a long history of environmental racism. Grandiose promises of social economic transformation through advanced technologies have come and gone, leaving residents rightly skeptical of Musk's vision of Shelby County as a tech-focused industrial hub. These residents already live in a sacrifice zone to the industrial effluents of previous techno-utopias. The ruins of industrial failure litter the landscape.

Anti-Blackness haunts not only the environmental impact of digital extraction, but its entire logic. Digital extraction depends on systematic erasure. The physical infrastructure, the manual labor to maintain it, and the lives exploited to fuel it are all rendered invisible by the rhetoric of frictionless progress. This sublimation of seized land, exhausted bodies, and poisoned communities mirrors the plantation mythos and its erasure of the enslaved. Readers of "The Gentle Singularity," a short blog post by OpenAI's Sam Altman seemingly meant to assuage existential fears of an agentic AI, would be forgiven for getting the impression that our greatest challenge with respect to

AI will be what to do with the abundance of "cheap superintelligence" it will bring. There is no mention of Memphis's turbines or the exploited bodies in lithium mines, no mention of gig workers with no recourse in labor disputes or those whose urgent medical claims are denied by an automated system. The question remains: For whom is the singularity gentle?

The Waverley plantation was built through extracted labor, and it was itself a machinery for rendering Black life and bodies culturally, ideologically, and technologically as a site of extraction. The recovery of its architecture and the simultaneous burial of its racial foundations cemented anti-Blackness into the technological imaginaries of what would come after. The early American plantation fused labor and extraction into a blueprint for modern technology. Anti-Blackness, the plantation, and its aftermaths generated the conditions through which racial difference became a prerequisite for multiple kinds of extraction—from the appropriation of embodied labor to the mining of abstracted data. The plantation is capitalism's pre-digital extraction machine.

Today, American technological production remains rooted in extraction from racially marginalized communities. Black communities have long recognized the hubris in this process, from Gil Scott-Heron's "Whitey on the Moon,"[8] which critiqued 1960s space race extravagance amid Black poverty, to Huey P. Newton's call for "people's community control of modern technology."[9] This Black Technoskepticism reveals how "progress" narratives serve racial capitalism. It exposes the costs of technofetishism, and it challenges the presumed inevitability of harmful innovation. Informed by W.E.B. Du Bois's "second sight" and "double consciousness,"[10] the ability to see oneself through the dominant gaze provides critical ambivalence. Beyond techno-optimism, determinism, or pessimism, it asks: Progress for whom? At what cost?

If anti-Blackness is the ghost that enables digital harm to pass as unfettered technological advancement, who benefits from ignoring it? What ghosts haunt the halls and grounds of Waverley Mansion, polished into blinding whiteness? What haunts the machines that are powered by the poisoning of lands, waters, and bodies? Truly understanding surveillance capitalism requires confronting anti-Blackness. It's about time the tech industry takes action to give up its ghosts—that is, to abandon futile attempts to fix technology without addressing its core failures. The solution isn't exorcism—further erasure—but emancipation, and a future beyond extraction. ◼

5   Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019).

6   Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015).

7   See Bracey Harris, "NAACP Announces Plans to Sue Musk's xAI Over Pollution Concerns," NBC News, June 17, 2025, accessed September 19, 2025, `https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/naacp-musk-xai-supercomputer-colossus-memphis-tennessee-rcna213490`; and Amy Goodman, "'Musk Is Scamming the City of Memphis': Meet Two Brothers Fighting Colossus, Musk's xAI Data Center," Democracy Now!, April 25, 2025, accessed September 19, 2025, `https://www.democracynow.org/2025/4/25/elon_musk_xai_memphis_tennessee`

8   Gil Scott-Heron, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, vinyl LP, Flying Dutchman Records, 1970.

9   See Huey P. Newton, "Intercommunalism: February 1971," in *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (Random House, 1973), 39–58; and Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016).

10   W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press, 1903/2008).

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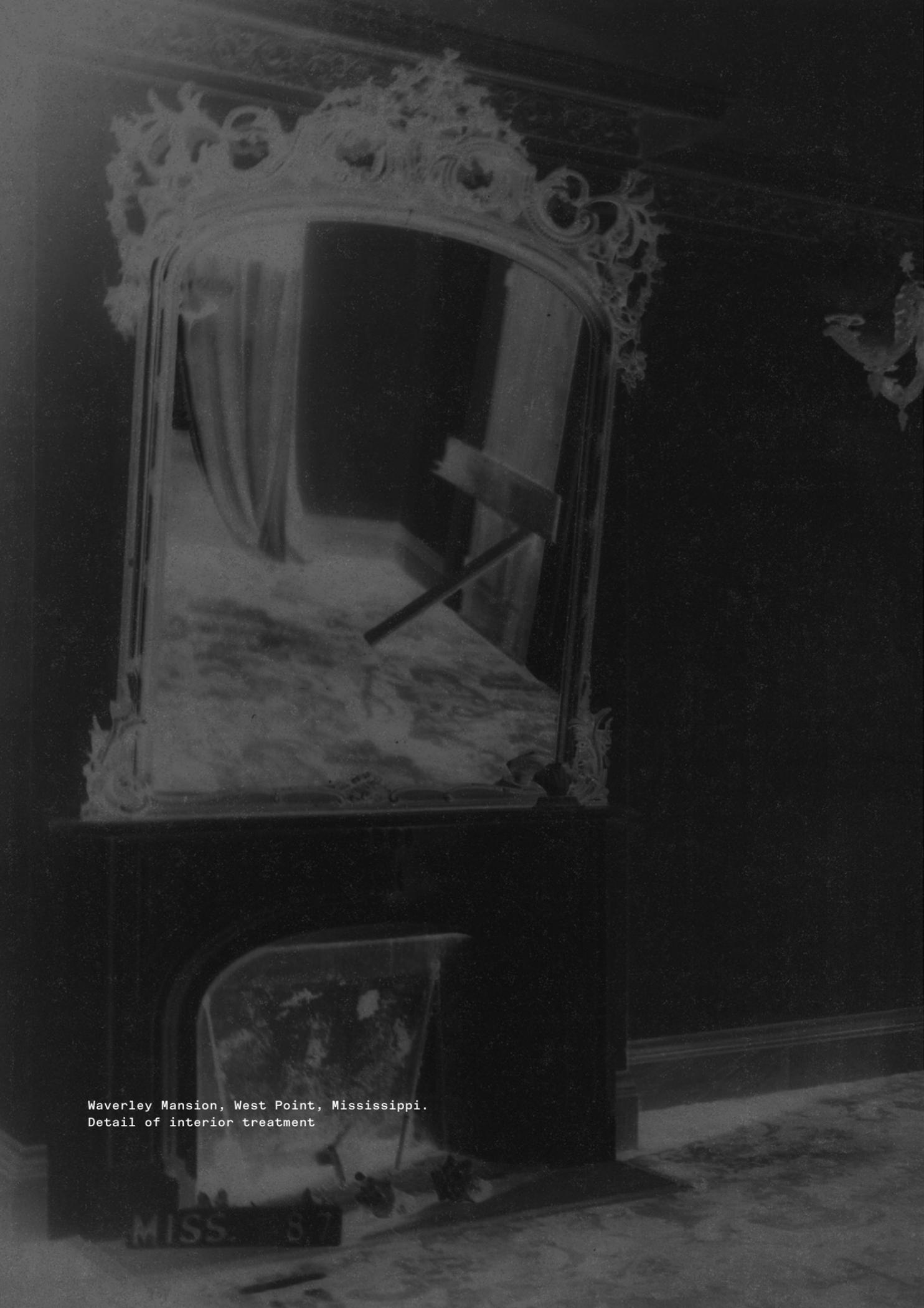
Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Detail of interior treatment

MISS. 87

by Mariah Garnett

BOOK OF SONGS

Between 2020 and 2024 I developed a body of work that culminated in a feature film, Songbook *(2024, 55 minutes). Images here are from this film. It excavates the archive of my great-great-aunt, Ruth Lynda Deyo, who was a composer, spiritualist, and synesthete living in Cairo from 1924 until her death in 1960. With the help of a spirit lover noted as TAA in her diaries, she composed a grand opera,* The Diadem of Stars, *which was never produced. It centered on the lives of Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, his wife Ankhsenpaten, and her father Akhenaten.*

The following are excerpts from Ruth Deyo's diaries which feature transcripts of spirit communication, my own diary entries from a research trip I took to Cairo in 2021, and a session with a medium in which we contacted Ruth's spirit.
—MG, 2025

MONEY

Ruth Deyo's diary
Cairo, 1930s
Conversation with Tutankhamun's spirit (TAA)

TAA You've been terribly worried my love, do not be, I beg of thee. Your concert will be a glorious, astounding success tomorrow. You will be surprised, very surprised.

RD The concert was a great success. I played better than I've ever played. Was happier than I ever have been. The dress was a dream …
(the next day) Exhausted utterly. Slept all day. Apparently, I've made no money from the concert.

TAA Listen well my beloved. I know you are terribly disturbed and distressed and dismayed at apparently having made not sufficient money at your beautiful concert. But darling, this is not the case. It has not all come in yet. When the accounts are all in order, you will find that a sufficient sum was made last night to pay all expenses. Every phase of society is hearing you and appreciating you, and you are not demeaning yourself by having done these things, beloved. On the contrary, you have risen in the estimation of everyone, and they are putting you on a pedestal from which you will rule Egypt. Forget not this darling, blessed wife of mine, whom I adore beyond anything in the universe, I am coming to thee soon, soon. The waiting is terrific for us, and it is more trying for thee perhaps darling because you are surrounded by these earth currents. The physical body is being prepared so that I can come to you in that and be with you constantly and always, always.

Oh my adorable queen! You know not how intensely I long to be with thee in my physical form. And now our combined longings are accomplishing this thing. I know that it sometimes feels as if you are going mad and you don't know what to do or what to think. I shall come to thee. Trust this, believe this, know this. Goodnight my ever-blessed queen. I am with thee constantly.

Mariah Garnett's diary
Cairo, 2021
Café in Zamalek

We sit outside at a sidewalk cafe. Western countries are closing their borders because of the Omicron variant. N says Egypt used to be the West. On some monuments there are inscriptions proclaiming themselves to be the "Greatest Dynasty in the West." Why are maps the way they are? Because the British drew them and put themselves in the middle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a cute small rodent jump and run into a bush. "Was that a weasel?" "Yes, we don't have rats here, we have weasels."

R walks up and joins us. He had to meet his landlord, who is selling the building to a woman who is buying it as an investment for her son, who lives in Spain. "Don't you love it when people talk about your home like that?" He replies, "Living in someone else's investment."

In reconsidering this archive, which is steeped in New Age Orientalist fantasy, I'm asking: What does being an artist living in precarity mean today? How do we find the spiritual fortitude to continue? How do ancient technologies (spirit communication) and modern ones (AI boyfriends) reflect each other? Is it queer to love a spirit? How am I similar to Ruth and how am I different? What resonates in archives, and how can we transform cycles of history as we move forward, collectively? Is death the end? -MG, 2025

BRAIN

SM Well she's here now. She's with me now. I'm saying "Wow, you had quite a life." I'm telling her and she's like, "Whoa, dizzying."
    [pause]
So tired when she comes, I mean not me, I'm not complaining, but I feel this heaviness you know? It's like, whoa.
    [pause]
She's saying her mind didn't work. She's trying to show me, and from what I can see it's very different from how my mind works. It's very quick and the connections are very … "Genius," she says.
"And it's genetic," she says [laughs].
"Have you been?" she's asking?

MG Have I been what?

SM I don't know. Labeled some kind of something or another?

The less you use your brains the better. If you leave it all to us you can't go wrong or make mistakes. We know the whole story, whereas you can only know part. And what may seem strange to you is not strange at all. Please trust us entirely. We have your Destiny in hand.

BODY

Y can't find anyone to sleep with. I tell him I know a witch spell. "First you identify someone you want to sleep with and then think about them when you masturbate."

R asks if I've ever tried it and I say yes.

He asks what happened and I say, "I ended up in a three-year relationship."

He is shocked. "You did this one time and ended up in a relationship for three years?"

I admit it was probably more than once, but yes.

"You are a witch."

"No, I'm not."

I don't tell them I get my period every full moon.

I say, "A big, big part of me just wants to be a boy who has a boyfriend." R says, "But that's witchy." I've never thought about it that way before.

You did not want to be a woman in this last incarnation. You've been in a disturbed state of mind for some months. This is a reflection of psychic conditions on this earth. The earth is not in a normal state at the present time. Great changes are taking place to make way for immensely better conditions.

America is sick and people do not know their own minds.

DEATH

Mariah Garnett's diary
Cairo, 2021
British cemetery.

Ruth's headstone looks standard-issue. The inscription reads

In Memory of Ruth Deyo Dalton,
The Great World Famous Pianist and
Composer,
4th March, 1960.
Beloved Wife of Charles Dalton.

Charles is buried at her feet. His inscription reads

In memory of The Great Poet Charles
John Dalton
December 5th, 1954.
Beloved Husband of Ruth Deyo Dalton.

It doesn't feel like she's here, but I feel like I am supposed to do something. I search my bag for something to give her. Hand sanitizer, a few masks, my phone charger. I find a 1 pound coin. I bury it up against her headstone, touch the top, try and fail to have a moment, and am ready to go.

F wants to stroll. One headstone reads "a man who loved Egypt." Another says something about "our beloved Egypt."

"These people really loved Egypt. It's easy to do when you are white," she says, "imagine what their lives must've been like."

"Way better than they ever could ever have been at home," I say. She nods.

Cairo, 2021
Informal session with spirit medium
(channeling Ruth Deyo) and Mariah Garnett.

SM She's very willing to come in and merge completely with you as a spirit.

MG Ummm …

SM She merged easily with human and with music and with spirit. You don't want that.

MG No.

SM You want clarity. "I'm doing this work, I will do my best with it, to honor you but to also honor myself." Like your vision, your artistic vision. Your input. That's equally important. So this work is in partnership, it's not about just her.

MG Right, OK.

SM You're the one here, in this physical manifestation. It's really important to know that. To know that you can establish a boundary and you can say, "There's inspiration from you, and I'm coming in."

MG OK.

SM You can even improve on the work. And that's a word coming from spirit. Improve on the work.

MG Wait, she said that?

SM No.

MG OK, I didn't think so [laughs].

SM It came from someone else. But it was very clear.

Ruth Deyo's diary
Cairo, 1937
Communication from Tutankhamun's spiriit (TAA).

In every human being is a spark of the Divine. As you were told long ago, this creation is designed to touch and re-awaken dormant and sub-conscious selves. How can this be done? When the mass of the world is so dull-witted?

The world is dissatisfied and out of joint. Every form of government has failed—money has failed—The Church has failed. Then what?

Mariah Garnett's diary
Cairo, 2021
Café, downtown.

I walk into a cafe to meet G and he recognizes me immediately. I keep forgetting how obviously foreign I am here. We talk about my film. I tell him I am a person who doesn't believe in ghosts but also totally does. He says that he is the same. He shows me a Russian book about computers from the 80s called *Cybernetics*. There is a chapter in there about death, and how at some point in the future, computers will be so advanced that they raise the dead, and everyone who has ever lived will inhabit the earth at the same time. I hope this doesn't happen.

Cairo 2021
Informal session with spirit medium
(channeling Ruth Deyo) and Mariah Garnett.

SM What is the aim of communication? Spirit communication? That death is not the end. 🔋

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Octagonal central hall

Does nature need its own gig economy?

IF YOU GIVE A GORILLA A WALLET...

by Courtney Handman and Sarah Muir

Inside the world of what is known as interspecies communication, a number of researchers hope to use AI and related technologies to transform animal actions and signals into forms of communication that could let those animals advocate for maintaining their habitats or reducing their suffering at the hands of humans.

For the Tehanu project, giving animals rights means making the animals vote with their wallets.[1] The project aims to serve as a conduit for a kind of AI-driven magic by claiming to grant nonhuman creatures the capacity to speak their own truth to humans and, in so doing, to influence human behavior. Funded largely by the Rwandan government and still very much in the tentative, early stages of development, Tehanu uses artificial intelligence to comb through the scholarship on mountain gorilla ethology and produce a set of inferred species-level "interests" such as security, freedom of movement, and access to food staples. A large-language-model-driven mobile app then allows rangers, trackers, and veterinarians to identify individual gorillas and to receive micropayments whenever the rangers perform actions that the app classifies as furthering gorilla interests.

Currently, Tehanu transfers these payments in Rwandan francs from individual gorillas to individual humans via their respective mobile money network accounts within the national banking system. In the future, though, the project plans to issue payments entirely via blockchain cryptocurrency, thus creating an openly accessible accounting ledger and obviating the need for additional surveillance mechanisms verifying that the pro-gorilla behavior really took place. There are also plans for Tehanu to eventually include the inhabitants of local communities, more species of charismatic megafauna, and species such as ants and bats that may have less sentimental appeal to humans but that play key ecological roles. Within this framework, technology promises to one day communicate and incentivize animal interests with speed, precision, transparency, and a minimum of friction or distortion.

↑   Tehanu uses previously published research scraped from the internet

1   Readers of science fiction will recall *Tehanu* as the fourth novel in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* cycle of stories, about a world in which immense magical power lies in speaking the true names of people, creatures, and things.
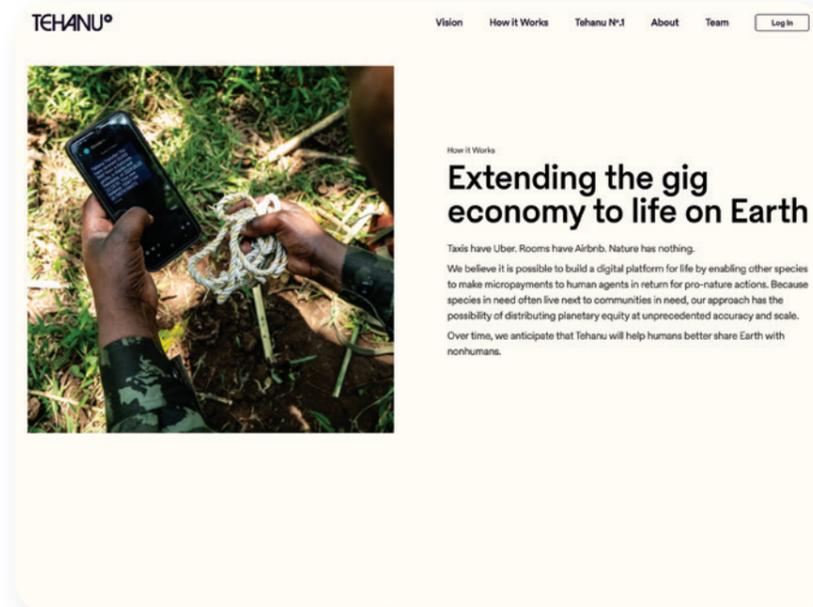
↑   Envisioning gorillas as part of the gig economy

2   Michael Silverstein, "Translation, Transduction, Transformation: Skating 'Glossando' on Thin Semiotic Ice," in *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*, ed. Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman (Berg, 2003), 75–108.

3   Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton University Press, 1977).

Who or what is given a voice through this model of AI ghostwriting? Who needs to speak in Tehanu's vision of the world? Because animal advocates involved in interspecies communication tend to see "having a voice" as roughly equivalent to being part of a society, the lack of proxies for animal speech in political and economic processes means that nature, broadly, and individual animals, specifically, are separate from human sociality, even as they are exploited by it.

The Tehanu project aims to even the playing field by enrolling animals as meaningfully participating members of human society. This begins with a perspective that frames nature as being relatively disarticulated from society. Even interspecies communication researchers who might be doubtful about giving mobile wallets to mountain gorillas tend to make this assumption of a nature/society divide. As one commenter asked the project's founder, wouldn't it be better to just "leave the animals alone?"

Jonathan Ledgard, the journalist, sci-fi author, futurist, and now founder of Tehanu, sees nature as suffering from a failure to properly price itself in the market given its lack of ability, until now, to "speak." Ledgard's inspiration for Tehanu was his experience of watching in sorrow as Sudanese farmers chopped down a healthy tree for firewood. If the tree could have argued that it was more valuable alive than dead, he reasons, then it might have been spared. If the tree could pay farmers to not chop it down, then the value of the natural world would be made more apparent.

The Tehanu platform and the larger gig economy model, combined with mobile wallets and blockchain transactions, promise to give nature this speaking role. The tagline on the Tehanu website suggests that gig economy platforms allow objects agency and voice: "Taxis have Uber. Rooms have Airbnb. Nature has nothing." Of course, it isn't taxis that "have" Uber, or rooms that "have" Airbnb, but rather people who have possession of cars or homes. However, the parallel erasure of humans in this tagline posits that all kinds of things are given direct agency and voice through the gig economy and mobile payment platforms. In developing Tehanu, nature's "voice" can be expressed in digital payments that could, say, convince a Sudanese farmer not to chop down a tree.

Ghostwriting in the case of Tehanu is a series of translations across media—what is sometimes referred to as "transduction."[2] How do you go from animal behaviors to the idea of animal interests? How we do this as humans has its own long history. Albert O. Hirschman showed how what had been seen as antisocial human *passions* or sins came to be ideologically redefined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as economic and political *interests* that could be arranged into social orders.[3] But for Ledgard, no animal Enlightenment is needed to transform gorilla behaviors into economic action. AI can do the work. As he explains in various presentations, gorilla interests can be "inferred" when a large language model is fed "the entire corpus of human knowledge of the mountain gorilla."

↑   Tehanu asserts "existence value" for the aggregate of individual members of a species

↑   Nature finally pulls its weight

Or at least, that is the goal. As with several elements of the Tehanu project, AI's starring role in the project of ghostwriting gorilla interests has a promissory character: one day, all this will be automated and easy. For the moment, humans are still helping the AI to do the work.

With interests inferred, there then needs to be a medium for their transmission. Other interspecies communication projects aim for two-way communication—what sometimes gets described as "Google Translate for animals."[4] But Tehanu is not interested in translating animal communication into human language.

Instead, Tehanu is based on the idea that money is already a kind of speech. Economists have long understood the market as a communicative system. For those in the United States, this idea is already familiar: the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling declared campaign finance regulations unconstitutional on the grounds that the political spending of corporate groups is equivalent to the political speech of individual citizens and must, therefore, be protected equally as a form of free speech. The idea that money is speech has an even longer pedigree, though, in which analysts commonly foreground money's semantic "capacity to signal a wide array of different meanings and connotations."[5]

Today, there are a host of initiatives under the heading of "interspecies money," all of which operationalize these ideas with the aim of allowing animals and even plants to wield currency in the service of their own interests.[6] Goals such as habitat preservation and species survival, once couched in the register of conservation, protection, and preservation, have been recast as economic participation, autonomy, and self-advocacy. The Tehanu project deploys these ideas so that animals, too, can express themselves in a monetary idiom and communicate what the project construes as the fundamental fact of existence: "I'm here. I exist. And I would like to persist … I want to make myself known to you and I'm actually prepared to pay for that."[7]

Like many interspecies communication projects, Tehanu frames the communication it hopes to foster in terms that move fluidly between a species and individual speakers. In that last comment by Ledgard, the speaking "I" is, implicitly, a biographically individuated gorilla, visually represented in presentations where Ledgard shows a video clip of a gorilla giving him a high five—a gesture that the audience is invited to see as one of mutual acknowledgement, or even thanks. Equally individuated is each gorilla whose mobile wallet—linked to a unique nose-print biomarker—pays individual humans for pro-gorilla actions.

At the same time, the interpretation of gorilla interests is based, at least for now, entirely on species-level generalization. Standard field sciences, whether ecological or anthropological, begin by making observations of particular actions, events, and individuals, and then extrapolating knowledge about species or other generalized types. Tehanu works the other way around: it begins with scientifically produced

4   Karen Bakker, *The Sounds of Life: How Digital Technology Is Bringing Us Closer to the Worlds of Animals and Plants* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

5   Carl Wennerlind, "Money Talks, But What Is It Saying? Semiotics of Money and Social Control," *Journal of Economic Issues* 35, no. 3 (2001), 570.

6   See, for example, the work of Futurity Systems (Plantiverse Explained).

7   Jonathan Ledgard, "Money as Memory: The Tehanu Project's First Steps Toward Interspecies Economic Participation," webinar with Neil Gershenfeld, April 28, 2025, minute 26–28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj6AUz_KSGU
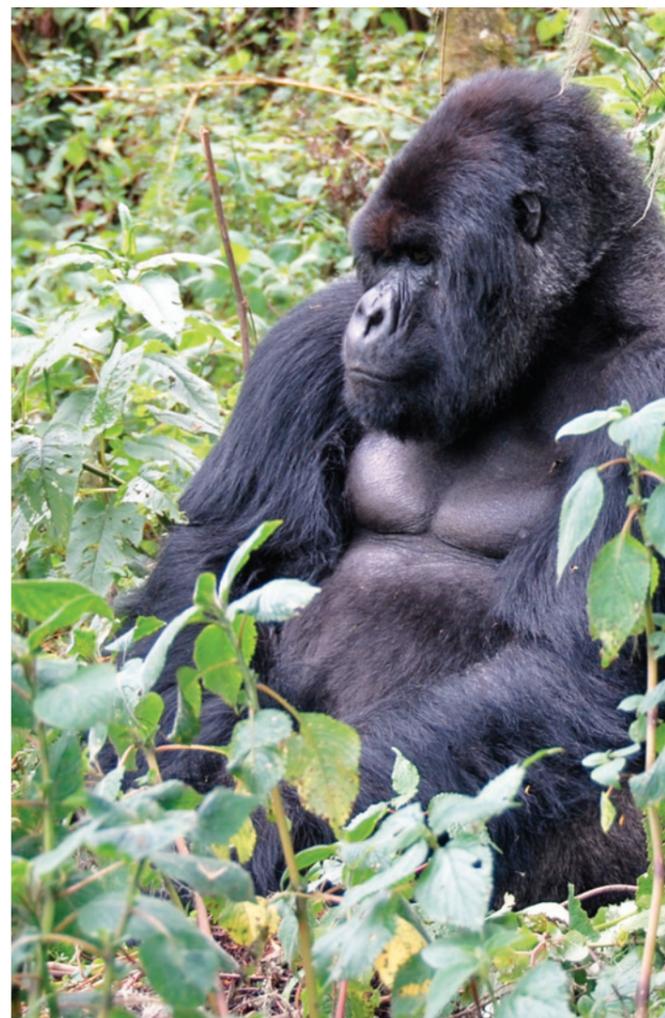
species-level knowledge, uses AI to construct a further abstraction regarding species interests, and then uses that doubly abstracted model to construct and express—to ghostwrite—the interests of an individual gorilla. Even if Koko, the gorilla that learned some sign language, may have voiced desires, she did not become an economic actor in doing so. By contrast, Tehanu promises that AI and blockchain technologies will one day turn gorilla passions into gorilla interests.

While the project hopes one day to be able to express individual gorillas' more particular interests—for example, to climb the gorilla social ladder, to secure a particularly appealing mate, or to alleviate the bloating that accompanies the consumption of vast quantities of roughage—that hope is situated in the somewhat distant future. Why, then, the current insistence on identifying particular gorillas through their unique nose-prints? Why the emphasis on linking mobile wallets to those particular gorillas, using their noses as if they were payment app QR codes? Managing micropayments, whether in Rwandan francs or blockchain currency, does not require individuation. The mobile wallets could be linked to whole gorilla troops, to a territorially defined ecosystem, to an entire species, or to any number of other interest-defined corporate units. On the human side of things as well, mobile wallets could be linked not to individuals but rather to villages,

↑   A wallet-less gorilla

businesses, or political entities. In some ways, constructing a payment system between groups rather than individuals might be a more efficient approach to the large-scale problems of ecological and economic devastation.

But by opting instead for an individuated payment system, the Tehanu project frames payments, and communication in general, as dyadic acts between relatively autonomous individuals. This system encourages humans to imagine themselves in conversation with specific gorillas, who then stand in for the species at large. AI ghostwrites the gorilla's lines, while the human's acceptance of currency signals that the message has been received. Just as liberal economic theory posits a market based on a set of interlinked exchanges, these moments of dyadic communication, Tehanu argues, allow nature to be incorporated into society.

The promise of AI is that it allows for all kinds of contacts and connections previously considered impossible, whether to (hopefully true) information, to a famous figure from history in chatbot form, or to a nonhuman animal. AI systems are the ghostwriters that animate these connections. Right now, these systems are placed front and center, while their boosters work to prove that they can make the connections they claim to make: you really can talk to a chatbot version of Abraham Lincoln, and you really can interact with a gorilla to make its life better. But in the future that Ledgard and others imagine, AI mediations will eventually recede into the background as specters that haunt the social relations between humans and nonhumans. ∎

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Dining room ceiling medallion, woodwork
detail, window framing, built-in cupboard

*Agency panic and the monsters
that stalk the digital paranormal*

MANI FEST ING LOAB

by Fernando Armstrong-Fumero

In 2022, an AI-generated entity known as Loab took her place among the firmament of imaginary monsters. She made her first appearance in a series of online posts by the Swedish artist Steph Maj Swanson. Testing generative AI's ability to create completely novel pictures from vast oceans of previously digitized images, Swanson entered a series of negative prompts into an undisclosed text-to-image platform. The idea was that asking for the opposite of something would induce the AI to generate whatever imagery its proprietary algorithms calculated to be the farthest possible form from what was prompted by the user.

Swanson's initial request for the opposite of Marlon Brando produced an image that looked like a distorted corporate logo. But a subsequent prompt for the opposite of that image did not produce anything resembling the famous Godfather actor. Instead, the AI generated an image of a corpse-like elderly woman with disheveled hair, rosacea-covered cheeks, and sunken eyes.

Swanson dubbed the woman—the opposite of the opposite of Marlon Brando—"Loab." She then used her image in a series of subsequent prompts. At this point, the experiment seemed to take a turn toward the strange. In theory, a chain of negative prompts should have led the algorithm to produce a series of images that would appear, to the human user, to be related only arbitrarily. And yet, the contours of the elderly woman's face and the shades of her complexion remained consistent after multiple prompts. That is, according to Swanson, asking for the opposite of Loab's image only further stabilized the apparition. Even when Swanson managed to articulate a prompt that generated an image with no visible trace of the woman, she would inexplicably re-emerge in subsequent rounds of the algorithmic game. And in some iterations, she was surrounded by gruesome and violent imagery that had no clear connection to the language of Swanson's prompts.

In the months that followed, Loab transitioned from a mere curiosity discussed in tech media and popular outlets like *Rolling Stone*, to a "true" ghost in the machine featured on paranormal podcasts. Analysis by outside parties determined that Loab was quite possibly a hoax intentionally created by Swanson. Still, I would argue that Loab's alleged ontogenesis is less interesting than the cultural conditions of her plausibility. Even skeptics acknowledge that she embodies a number of tendencies that contemporary internet folklore inherited from its oral predecessor.

The term "folklore" implies a form of knowledge that is detached from the rationality of science. It hints at experiences and affects that we use to make sense of reality, but that rarely cohere with the inner workings of the technologies that give twenty-first-century life its distinct tenor. Often, our folk perspectives imbue these technologies with a sense of mystical awe or fear. Those of us who are ignorant of computational theory tend to experience AI through texts and images that appear on our screens as if by magic. Our reaction to those texts and images tends to hinge on aesthetic and emotional responses, rather than any formal understanding of the technical procedures that produce them. Folkloric ghosts and monsters become a symbolic shorthand for those abstract feelings. Maybe we are sensing Loab's presence with that

chill of revulsion that lets us immediately distinguish "AI slop" from digital art made by human creators. At times, discerning the difference depends on a vibe, something in the negative spaces between words and images. *Is that Loab?*

As folklore, Loab is a recent iteration of a particularly powerful confluence of paranoia and technology that emerged in the twentieth century, a phenomenon that Timothy Melley[1] named "agency panic." For generations, we have been taught to fear mysterious scientific techniques that allow sinister forces to hijack the thoughts and behaviors of unsuspecting citizens. Loab performs a similar dark magic by using everything that we have uploaded to the internet. She thus shifts the object of subversion from the individual human mind to the vast body of knowledge and creativity that we have committed to our virtual collective unconscious.

1   Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

↓   The first appearance of Loab on Swanson's Twitter in April 2022

Many elements of Loab's folkloric genealogy stretch back to at least the 1950s, when Korean War-era footage of American POWs denouncing their country's war efforts spawned fears of mysterious new mind-control techniques, dramatized on screen in films like 1962's *The Manchurian Candidate*. Though the captured soldiers' treasonous statements have since been attributed to more mundane forms of violent coercion, they contributed to a fear of loss of control that was not limited to Cold War bipolarity.

By the time of my 1980s childhood, popular culture had taken a short step from the "godlessness" of Marxist propaganda to an explicitly Satanic subversion of the American ideal. Television, my teachers, and my schoolmates all (mis)educated me on the dangers of subliminal messages embedded in heavy metal music, video games, and Dungeons & Dragons. Like most Gen-Xers, I grew up in a world where a potential loss of agency over my own mind and body existed inside every suspicious bit of media, just like the needles and razor blades that many believed were hidden inside Halloween candy.

How did these horrors emerge amid a half-century of seemingly unprecedented prosperity? As Melley and other authors have noted, the *real* loss of agency for millions of late-twentieth-century Americans came through deindustrialization and rising social and economic precarity. Were the imaginary subliminal messages of equally imaginary Satanic cults just shorthand for the growing inequalities that late capitalism hid behind the guise of unfettered consumerism?

It's no coincidence that a new folk terror emerged in 2009, toward the end of the Great Recession. That year, Eric Knudsen posted two images with brief text captions on the online forum *Something Awful*, giving birth to the sinister transdimensional entity known as the Slender Man. The Slender Man perpetuated himself through the 2010s as a meme, a cluster of text and image so suited to a moment in culture that he was adapted and reproduced endlessly across multiple media. He was considered an iconic example of the then-novel phenomenon of internet folklore. The Slender Man also embodies a series of technology-induced agency panics that paved the way for Loab.

New media notwithstanding, the Slender Man's real-world powers mirrored the offline paranoia of the '80s Satanic Panic. Just as heavy metal suicides had instantiated the imagined threat of an amoral music industry that peppered its product with subliminal messages, several high-profile crimes committed by teens in the name of the Slender Man became a metonym for the dangers that children faced in an internet rife with bad human actors. *Were* these kids accountable for their acts? Or had their minds been hijacked by catfish, cyberbullies, and online groomers whose digital manipulations recalled the techniques that had been applied to captured GIs during the Korean War? Had the Satanic cabals of the '80s simply found a new medium with which to manipulate teenagers? These parallels hint at continuities in the role of agency panic as a projection, through folklore, of less tangible anxieties about precarity and downward mobility. In some ways, the 2010s simply replaced the unsupervised latchkey kids of my generation with Gen Z tweens who sought escape from their uncertain future in online fantasy.

> "Loab's alleged ontogenesis is less interesting than the cultural conditions of her plausibility."

← Still from *The Manchurian Candidate*, dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962

↙ Armstrong-Fumero re-created an incident of needles hidden in Halloween candy that was rumored to have taken place in a neighboring school district in 1987

↓ Loab exists among other modern cryptids like the Slender Man

Is Satan In Our Music?

By Susan Cocanougher & Suzy White

'Masked' Recordings
Satanic Messages Played Back for Assembly Panel

By Bill Billiter, *Times Staff Writer*

Dungeons and Dragons fans, foes debate game's 'satanic' sorcery

By Justin Mitchell

↑ Throughout the 1980s, now-discredited accusations of widespread satanic ritual abuse spurred media sensationalism and paranoia about the role of popular culture (in particular role playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons and heavy metal music) in influencing young minds

Still, these continuities in the contours of agency panic emerged alongside some real changes, both in the technological context of our collective imagination, and in our folk epistemologies of danger. Many paranormal content creators whose work I enjoy suggest that the Slender Man can, in fact, manifest in the real world, despite his established fictional origins. These creators draw on notions of "High Strangeness" that were first explored in the 1970s[2] to argue that ghosts, cryptids, and even UFOs come into existence as the somatization of the collective thoughts of ardent believers. They become real. Variously referred to as tulpas, thought forms, or egregores, these manifested entities subvert our agency by escaping the safe terrain of fantasy to engage in malice IRL. In theory, the sheer scale of collective fantasy enabled by the World Wide Web has accelerated this phenomenon.

Over a decade after the Slender Man made his first appearance online, the story of Loab instantiated High Strangeness by drawing on an emergent technology to create a truly credible egregore. Whether or not he could manifest physically, the Slender Man had his origins in a known human author. But through the "magic" of AI, Loab emerged autonomously out of our uploaded collective unconscious—her author was, at the same time, all of us and none of us.

For those of us raised on '80s and '90s popular culture, this posits a number of frightening, once-fictional possibilities. Is Loab a herald of the apocalyptic "rise of machines" at the heart of the *Matrix* and *Terminator* franchises? What does Loab's manifestation teach us about the prejudice and violent fantasies that pervade online culture? Why, for example, did the internet teach AI to equate femininity, old age, and apparent illness with the horror imagery[3] that accompanied some of Loab's later iterations? Is Loab a manifestation of dark impulses that have become dominant in our collective digital subconscious?

And what if the skeptics were wrong, and Loab *wasn't* a hoax? Here, the possibilities are less immediately threatening than some older paranoid fantasies, but no less uncanny. As a 2022 *Rolling Stone* article noted, the most frightening aspect of Loab is simply that she continued to exist, despite a series of prompts that should have altered her visual appearance beyond recognition—and that seems to be the limit to her schemes. Unlike the imaginary Satanic cabals of the 1980s, or the physically manifested Slender Man of the 2010s, Loab hasn't coerced anyone into committing harm unto themselves or others. The only thoughts that she wants to hijack are those which we have already uploaded into the digital ether. For the appetites of algorithmic ghouls, human meatware pales in comparison to the endless feast of experiences and creativity that we have committed to virtual space.

It seems that for many of us, this loss of total human mastery over technology is horrific enough. Loab embodies the loss of our dominance over intellectual production, that last bastion of human labor amid the hyper-mechanization of late capitalism. Worse still, the technologies that birthed her are as pervasive as they are obscure. Most of us can't explain how AI algorithms work, but we can sense their presence in texts and images that don't seem quite right. At least, we can *for now*. Like Loab, AI continues to perpetuate and refine its existence, productively and profitably remixing the digitized debris of our culture. ∎

2 "Defending the Mothman," *Haunted Objects Podcast*, episode 005, December 26, 2022.

3 Nina Raemont, "Who Is the Woman Haunting A.I.-Generated Art?," *Smithsonian*, September 12, 2022.

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Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
South loggia, second floor

A Whisper from Gef to Lily Dale

In wind-swept rooms where curtains twitch,
I skitter soft with voice and glitch.
Through boards and beams, I twist and sail—
A mongoose speaks in Lily Dale.

The spirits knock, the mediums call,
But not all guests are seen at all.
I've danced on rafters, slept in halls,
And whispered truths inside the walls.

The dead may mumble, saints may cry,
But I just titter, climb, and spy.
A friend? A hoax? A beast? A flame?
I wear all masks but sign no name.

So light your lamps and watch the floor,
I knock three times, then maybe more.
The veil is thin, your minds are bright …
But not all shadows come from night.

This poem was conjured and performed as an offering from Gef the Mongoose via ChatGPT by author and librarian Christopher Josiffe for the people of Lily Dale, New York on July 26, 2025.

Gef, a self-described "ghost in the form of a weasel," "extra-clever mongoose" (or an elaborate hoax) first visited the impoverished Irving family's desolate farm in the Isle of Man's remote southwest in 1931. He stayed with them until they sold the house in 1945. A garrulous, irreverent, potty-mouthed spirit entity, Gef was a mostly invisible but occasionally seen - and photographed - creature, garnering significant tabloid coverage and interest from the broader community of paranormal researchers. The Irvings claimed he had settled into a gap between the walls, waking them when they overslept, and eating biscuits when no one was looking. James Irving obsessively documented Gef's words and behaviors, supplying evidence for those who came searching.
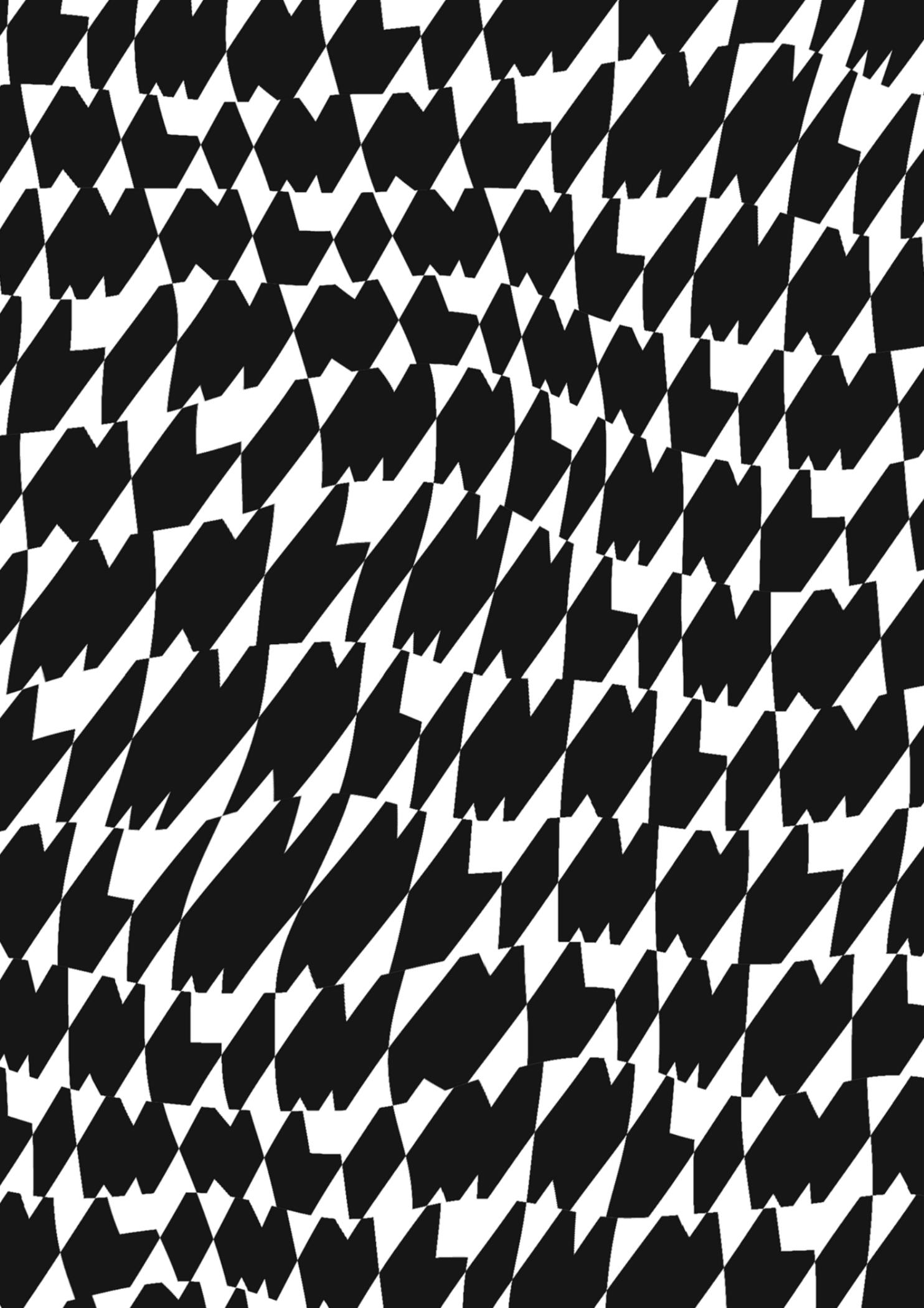
→   *Limn* 13 co-editor Stacy Wood channels author Chris Josiffe channeling Gef the Mongoose via ChatGPT prompt, onto reverse side of a found photograph

CHRISTOPHER JOSIFFE is a librarian, author and artist based in London. A frequent contributor to *Fortean Times* and other journals, his first book, *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose* (Strange Attractor Press, 2017), won the Folklore Society's Katherine Briggs Award for 2018.

Waverley Mansion, West Point, Mississippi.
Exterior view, plantation office in foreground

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