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Review of *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* by micha cárdenas (Duke University Press)

by Shano (Hongyuan) Liang and Michael Anthony DeAnda
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ABSTRACT *Poetic Operations* by micha cárdenas critically engages theory, activist, art, design, and lived experience to develop “trans of color poetics” to disrupt systems marking trans of color lives for death.

KEYWORDS activism, design, algorithm, poetics, assemblage, trans of color

Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media. By micha cárdenas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 240 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1765-3. US List: \$25.95

micha cárdenas' *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* establishes “algorithmic analysis” as methods to consider contemporary digital media, artwork, and poetry that contribute to safety and survival strategies for trans people of color. Elaborating on feminist and queer of color critique, specifically Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Jasbir Puar's discussion of assemblage, cárdenas develops “algorithmic analysis” to tease apart the systems and operations of society and culture, intervening in thinking of these as monolithic. cárdenas begins by discussing algorithms through computer programming and extends this thinking to codes that structure culture and society. For cárdenas, algorithmic analysis is a method for discovering and examining the complexity of cultural systems to better understand the processes that structure components, which can include people, cultural artifacts, tools, civilizing structures, performances, and behaviors, to name only a few, to tease out the logics embedded in such things as art, identity, and acts of violence. She defines three operations for trans of color poetics—“the cut,” “the shift,” and “the stitch,”—to analyze and disrupt the cultural violence targeting trans people of color. The book includes an introduction that proposes the concept and method of algorithmic analysis, five chapters that discuss trans of color

poetics through theory and practice—with each chapter focused on one of three operations—and a concise, summative conclusion.

In the first chapter, “Trans of Color Poetics,” through her analyses and discussion of Esdras Parra’s untitled poem about shapeshifting, Giuseppe Campuzano’s project *El Museo Travesti de Peru* (TMP), cárdenas’s own art piece *Pregnancy*, and Kai Cheng Thom’s work, cárdenas uses algorithmic analysis and poetry written by trans women of color to describe the decolonial potentials of trans of color poetics. This chapter provides foundational understanding for its titular methods by identifying and explaining the operations of the cut, the shift, and the stitch (all of which cárdenas expands on in subsequent chapters). These poetic operations afford possibilities for trans people of color’s survival in a world that has marked them for erasure (42). “The cut,” which breaks problems down into operable parts, gesturing towards “autonomy, disrupting surveillance, and [enabling] opacity” (45) is further elaborated in chapter 2, “The Decolonial Cut.” In this chapter, cárdenas elaborates on the cut through her discussion of “We Already Know,” a performance in Sao Paulo of eight bodies moving with intention through public space at a shared speed to disrupt mediation. This performance extends a trans of color critique by using group choreography (which is algorithmic and procedural), affectual networks of support, and movement to cut into surveillance systems used to mark bodies for erasure.

In chapter 3, “The Shift,” cárdenas discusses this part of the repertoire of trans of color poetics through case studies of Janelle Monáe’s work and cárdenas’s own code poetry. As cárdenas explains, the shift here, corresponding to the variables in an algorithm with mutable values, is an operation of modulating one’s perceptibility by changing one’s form, location, or appearance. This corresponds to “trans of color” as an identity and category in flux. Focusing principally on racism, sexism, and violence against trans people of color, cárdenas examines shifting as an algorithm of performative optics and perception that is practiced daily by many trans women of color. Theorizing from this practice, she argues that the ability to modulate gender at will points to a future in which gender can be a multidimensional and multispectral concept. While necropolitical logics reinforce gender binaries to control trans of color lives, limiting expression and freedom, shifting helps trans people of color navigate necropolitics. In particular, trans of color poetics offers the ability to shift between being visible and invisible at will, which is crucial for the survival of trans people of color. In an environment that seeks to control one’s visibility, the shift offers the ability to be opaque to information surveillance, to move from highly visible to invisible, to be nonidentifiable to recognition systems of authority, and to go unnoticed when passing through a dangerous situation.

Chapter 4, “The Experience of Shifting,” provides examples of how trans of color poetics as a method transforms experiences into digital artworks. Through cárdenas’s digital game

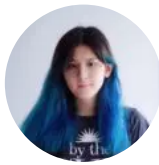
Redshift and Portalmetal and the digital game *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice, the author illustrates how shifting personal experiences into poetic algorithms reaches beyond voyeuristic empathy toward acts of solidarity. The looping algorithmic gestures in *Mainichi* (which translates to “everyday”) that emphasize day-to-day life point to many potentials for designing interactive media through trans of color poetics. This looping algorithmic form represents what cárdenas terms “the incomprehensibility of violence” to underscore that the violence is potentially infinite and repeated every day. Any choice the player makes in *Mainichi* will always lead them to encounter some form of violence, and the only escape is to walk away from this game. The game also presents a design of the intersectional experience to players that involves the teaching, learning, and shaping of algorithms for trans of color survival. In *Redshift*, cárdenas argues that “transreal” methods of storytelling—blending truth from the author’s own intersectional experiences of crossing borders, science fiction, recorded performances showcasing the designer, and other mixed media—is a practice of shifting through which designers share experiences of resilience. Furthermore, cárdenas describes how, through workshops and performances of *Redshift*, she calls players to action beyond the screen, moving beyond empathy and calling for acts of solidarity with indigenous people.

Following her call for solidarity, chapter 5 introduces the last operation of trans of color poetics—“the stitch”—and draws on several projects to exemplify how artists use stitching to create opacity, evade surveillance, and build solidarity. The stitch involves “using one entity to connect two formerly separate entities” (134), providing a clear method to address and reenvision relationships between the ideological and the material. Reflecting on Adam Harvey’s projects “Stealth Wear” and “CV Dazzle,” and Zach Blas’s project “Facial Weaponization Suite,” cárdenas exemplifies how the stitch provides stealth and safety through the adornment of clothing, demonstrating how this method combines variables together into cohesive units. These artists’ works attempt to disrupt surveillance by stitching together clothes, masks, and digital applications. In addition, cárdenas reflects again on the Sao Paulo performance “We Already Know” to further demonstrate how stitching generates decolonial justice by fostering solidarity between groups and envisioning strategies for connecting communities across borderlines of nationality, gender, race, and sexual identification.

We wholeheartedly endorse this book for scholars and practitioners interested in trans studies, design, digital media, and technology. cárdenas’s reflections and self-criticality of her own projects are especially valuable for the design classroom. In addition, the concept of algorithmic analysis affords potentials for interventions in the studies of identity, systemic structures, and culture, and provides insight into the different forms of trans of color study, which deserves more attention in trans media and queer theory. Importantly, this book models theory developed from and for trans of color existence and models how

scholars must critically reflect on how our theories have ramifications for people's lives. cárdenas develops the cut, the shift, and the stitch to celebrate trans lived experiences in her theorization. Extending current discussions across trans, queer, and feminist studies, this book speaks to the importance of trans studies, and the necessity for incorporating race into trans studies. *Poetic Operations* provides methods for analysis and design that invite exciting and innovative projects that engage in decolonial trans of color survival and celebration.

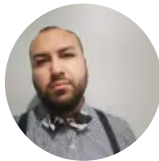
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Shano (Hongyuan) Liang is a researcher and PhD student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute interested in games studies, queer/trans studies, and game design theories. She is a game concept & gameplay designer, multi-skill game developer, 2D/3D game artist, game audio composer, and indie-game developer. She founded Wuhan KBoom Network Technology Co.LTD, a board game company in Wuhan China, dedicated to the general study and development of board games and avant-garde gameplay.

[View all of Shano \(Hongyuan\) Liang's articles.](#)



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