“Poetic Bushwick”: An Experiment in Digital Spatial Representation & Discursive Placemaking

Grace Afsari-Mamagani // May 2017

> *Our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds.*
> — Lubomír Doležel
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> *When there are many worlds, love can wrap itself around you… And all the worlds you are — gather into one world called You.*
> — Jacqueline Woodson, “each world,” *Brown Girl Dreaming*

I. Speculative Design & The Stakes of Literary Scholarship

Turning to the disciplinary implications of her work in the final chapter of *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe argues that her project seeks to “attend to the connections that could have been, but were lost, and are thus, not yet.”[1] Couching her exploration of philosophies of history in readings of C.L.R. James and W.E.B. Du Bois (against the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of teleological/progressive development), she insists upon the past conditional temporality as an intellectual mode through which to conceive of new questions regarding the intimacies “out of which our contemporary moment arises” and the potential for alternative political imaginaries for the future. The past conditional temporality, which she defines as a framework for understanding the past as “a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable,” draws attention not merely to possibilities that were foreclosed in historical time, but to modes of thinking, connecting, and attending to gaps and elisions that have been systematically forgotten.[2]

In many ways, Lowe’s concern with methodologies that aim to undo received ideological and epistemological assumptions echoes the calls that have been made by feminist and queer of color critiques for many decades. Pointing to the flattening of heterogeneity at the foundation of canonical sociology, for example, Roderick Ferguson positions queer of color analysis as a means of examining how “African Americans have been racialized as pathologically nonheteronormative” *through* its alienation

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[1] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 174.

[2] Works like David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* make similar disciplinary claims; for Scott, readings of James and Cesaire offer the stage necessary to examine narratives of anticolonial revolution with regard to the horizons in relation to which they are constructed, and to “rethink the narrative and poetic modes in which we imagine the relation between past, presents, and possible futures” (19).

from canonical aspirations to normativity and scientificity.[3] "African American nonheteronormative difference," for Ferguson, becomes a site for "thinking discourse and contradiction in tandem." And I use the word "site" here in order to call attention to the way in which sublation — the process by which localized, lived contradictions are elided in order to produce discursive or disciplinary consistency — is powered by an abstraction (away) from spatiotemporally specific experiences. These experiences (and their attendant contradictions, tensions, frictions, and traumas) take center stage in the works of women of color feminist poets like Esther Belin, Joy Harjo, and Gloria Anzaldúa. In "Case Study #311,990," from Belin's collection *From the Belly of My Beauty*, the narrator invokes her absenting from forms of knowledge that rely on this kind of abstraction of space and categorization: "My response to linear expression / places me / tangent / to other objects of place. / My existence / tarnished from recognition."[4] As a member of the Diné tribe and an "urban Indian" both connected to (through tribal and familial affiliations) and distanced from her Native language and the reservation, Belin finds herself in constant conflict with "the space with no apologies," produced by classificatory logics that render her perpetually "tangent" (i.e., never "within" or "belonging to").

However, tangency, for Belin, is not mere absence, even if it is characterized by illegibility from dominant modes of knowledge production and transmission. In the geometry of the poem, she is "tangent" to "linear expression," embodied in the concept of the circle. In the poem that opens the final section of the collection, she writes, "This essay churned in my / belly until it finally rose out / of my limbs and gave itself / form. It has been previously shared."[5] "Previously shared" implies conventional modes of publication and circulation, but it also calls on traditions of collective storytelling and retelling, of home and return, of recalling the ancient and recurring. In the shift toward the circular, Belin heeds the dialectic between wholes and holes, and to the mediation of lived contradiction by emotion, corporeality, and the blurring of the line between "feeling" and "knowing."

From this interior place emerges the poetry that catalyzes action and that provides a space of experimentation for future imaginaries. In Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the narrator of "the revolution" insists upon the productive capacity of the circular: "When I hear the word / *revolution* / I think of the carousel with / all of those beautiful horses / going around as though they'll never stop…"[6] For the narrator, figured as Woodson's childhood self, political activism begins with sitedness and an understanding of one's relationship to persistent historical struggles and the landscape one inhabits. In the poem's opening moments, the narrator's uncle tells the girl that the revolution is "*happening in the streets*" as they walk across and along Knickerbocker Ave., "him holding tight to my hand."[7] The experience of learning of and participating in revolution is expressed

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[3] Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 24.

[4] Esther Belin, "Case Study #311,990," *From the Belly of My Beauty* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), 17.

[5] Ibid., 65.

[6] Jacqueline Woodson, "the revolution," *Brown Girl Dreaming* (New York: Puffin Books, 2014), 308.

[7] Ibid.

through the language of embodiment, making explicit the link between revolutionary discourse and placemaking. The process of locating revolution expands outward through the trope of the circular and recurrent; in addition to its situatedness in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the poem looks to the production of historical narratives and activist traditions that include figures like Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Ruby Bridges, and Rosa Parks. The carousel stresses the collective and ongoing nature of making history and producing the conditions of possibility for different futures.

In "if," a poem appended to the 2016 edition of the book, the narrator explores historical contingency in an act of speculative historiography; "reality" opens out into a "re-imagining" of her past and of the presents and futures it might inspire. "If my mother's mother wasn't born in Anderson, South Carolina," the narrator muses, "then maybe…"[8] She imagines the conditions, in turn, that may have enabled her to become an actress, or a dancer, or "part of some big and vast coming revolution." By outlining alternative pasts in order to acknowledge the particularities (geographically and temporally located) that have shaped the narrator's positionality, the poem deploys a cursory version of Lowe's past conditional temporality. The narrator lays the groundwork for her own "history of the present," as well as for a lesson in imaginative thinking for her young audience.[9] If, as Barbara Christian proposes, the theory undergirding literature (and, specifically, black feminist literature) "ought to have some relationship to practice," then the analysis of these texts might provide important insights for pedagogy, everyday survival, and political change.

What, then, of digital genres? In this project, I begin to consider the generative possibilities at the junction of poetry, place-bound discourse, design of "publics," and interactive digital interfaces, particularly those employing data visualization-oriented JavaScript libraries. Taking direction from designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, I seek to experimentally shift my focus from the kind of problem solving-based interfaces used in corporate product and user experience design toward speculative design. In *Speculative Everything*, the authors explain that "this form of design thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives…, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being."[10] Rather than attempting to fix things "as they are," speculative design longs to express dissent with reality and envision (often participatory or technological) alternatives.

Although "Poetic Bushwick" is not a conceptual design project in that it does not prototype technologies or objects that might belong to other imagined realties, it does center poetry (to quote Lorde's definition, "poetry as a revelatory distillation of

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[8] Ibid., "if," 341.

[9] *Brown Girl Dreaming* is marketed to a demographic aged 10 to 18.

[10] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 2.

experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean"[11]) as a site for disrupting the discourses that produce differential (racialized, gendered, classed, etc.) experiences of place, reprivileging nondominant modes of knowledge production, and imagining and recombining realities in order to produce visions for the future through play. It is just that: a playground, meager and provisional but, as I have shown, deeply intentional in the theory that drives it.

II. On the Technical & Embodied

After many months of false starts with the D3 data visualization library, I recently turned toward P5.js (a JavaScript library version of Processing, fittingly developed for digital/media art production) with what I had learned about JavaScript syntax and logic in tow. Invoking the language of the "sketch," P5.js enables the programmer to produce real-time visual graphics based on sets of data. Interested in the genres of language that participate in placemaking (legal, demographic, poetic/narrative, historical, etc.) and already enmeshed in explorations of my own neighborhood, I chose to pursue a web interface that both displays accounts of Bushwick and permits their deconstruction, reorganization, agglomeration, and augmentation. In this iteration of "Poetic Bushwick," I begin with the data from a Twitter API query. In further versions, I look forward to the "mess" of discursive genres, including the archival, literary, and statistical, and the emergent contradictions and frictions between them. Already, the gaps in spatial experience are visible in a canvas populated by Twitter data, even if this set of information is inherently limiting and omits a whole world of lived reality, in both content and philosophy.

In short, "Poetic Bushwick" mimics refrigerator poetry. The words that populate the canvas are the results of a query to the Twitter API — specifically, a combination of a query for "Bushwick" and one for geographic data that confines the results to the area within a given radius (in our case, 1 mile) of a given set of coordinates (in our case, 40.697879, -73.929394, roughly the location of my apartment). In this sense, the project is complicit in ideas of absolute, geographic space, and in the satellite and positioning technologies that have emerged from a long tradition of commanding and colonizing space. The decision to request tweets that feature geographical data (not all do, as the user must have location functionality enabled on his/her phone and "opt-in" to share this information with the Twitter application) stems from a desire to better see the myriad registers in which a specific, delimited terrain might be described and enframed.

The P5.js programs that make up most of the backend of "Poetic Bushwick" obtain the Twitter data (automatically returned as a JSON file with seven days' worth of information, from time of load) and proceed to render it visually. Requests to the Twitter API are sent and the resulting information received by programs running on a Node.js server hosted temporarily on a free Heroku

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[11] Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 37.

account. The use of Node enables the programmer to run JavaScript scripts server-side and request and receive information prior to page load, so that visualizations can update dynamically with data updates and user interaction (and allows us to produce web applications entirely within a JavaScript framework). In order to make the page accessible beyond my local drive, I utilized a Heroku (a polyglot cloud platform that helps bypass more extensive and expensive cloud infrastructure) instance in order to deploy the Node.js application to the web. Running on Heroku, the Node.js server mediates between the Twitter API and the “Poetic Bushwick” browser interface.

Upon receiving JSON data based on the preset query parameters, the scripts parse the information, omitting duplicates from retweets and other forms of quotation in order to prevent the canvas from becoming so sense that it precludes interaction or legibility; positioning the tweet data on the digital canvas, using an equation borrowed from elsewhere (namely, from a Stack Overflow thread) to translate geographic coordinate data to spatial information in screen space; and producing individual word objects that can be repositioned. I have chosen to render the data on a blank canvas rather than a satellite or other map rendering in order to emphasize relational over absolute positioning. Where tweets carry the same original geographic coordinate data, they partially overlap in screen space, rendering visually legible the depth and simultaneity of spatial experience.

By panning around the digital world, the user can deconstruct the layers of language associated with this slice of Bushwick on a popular social media channel and experience these discursive acts in a re-spatialized (rather than abstracted Twitter feed) environment. She is invited to use this vocabulary to articulate her own experiences, cobble together alternate possibilities, and provide her own words to enhance (or dispute) the ones on screen. She may witness the dissonances that materialize amidst this particular juxtaposition of data and rearrange the graphical organization that exists in order to tease out her own. She might laugh at the absurdity and levity of some of the Bushwick impressions before her, or notice the harsher realities nestled beneath them.

Necessarily routed through my own experience of inhabiting Bushwick (I have, after all, made myself the arbitrary center of the “world”), “Poetic Bushwick” is laden with a very real awareness of embodiment. In small ways, the scripts that drive the site carry the marks of the bodies that contributed to them and the medical procedures, physical and mental ailments, and movements they have undergone. In larger ways, they are products of my own intellectual experiences with programmatic logic and knowledge production and my social relations — my partner, David, has been indispensable to this project and to my education, particularly in recent months.

The aims of this particular iteration of “Poetic Bushwick” are, of course, humble. In the coming months, I hope to experiment with environments that aggregate information across sources and genres, including radical and poetic projects already invested

in reconfiguring spatial and political realities in pursuit of more generous, more just futures.[12] I hope, too, to consider the potential of larger-scale participatory projects and the design of "publics" in which users can interact and engage in acts of collective storytelling. As John McCarthy and Peter Wright note in their work on the "Politics and Aesthetics of Participation," dialogical encounters between participants create the conditions for unexpected exchanges in which "people [potentially] experience a sense of the value of another person, and learn about self and other, not only as they are now but also as they might be in the future."[13] Over time, I am interested in developing methods to facilitate a process akin to "(re)mapping," a term Mishuana Goeman uses in her work on Native American women's writing and spatialization to describe the labor of employing different (in this case, traditional tribal) modes of storytelling and mapmaking "to generate new possibilities" and denaturalize the processes that have "defined our current spatialities."[14] If for, as for the narrator of Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*, "little pieces of Brooklyn began to fall away, revealing us," then perhaps revelatory deconstruction of place can, in turn, permit a different kind of placemaking, in which "many worlds" and the systems by which they are constructed are visible, simultaneous, and endlessly promising for infinite possible futures.[15]

[12] To invoke the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place" ("Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002), 16.

[13] John McCarthy and Peter Wright, *Taking [A]part: The Politics and Aesthetics of Participation in Experience-Centered Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 39.

[14] Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3.

[15] Jacqueline Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* (New York: Amistad, 2016), 70.