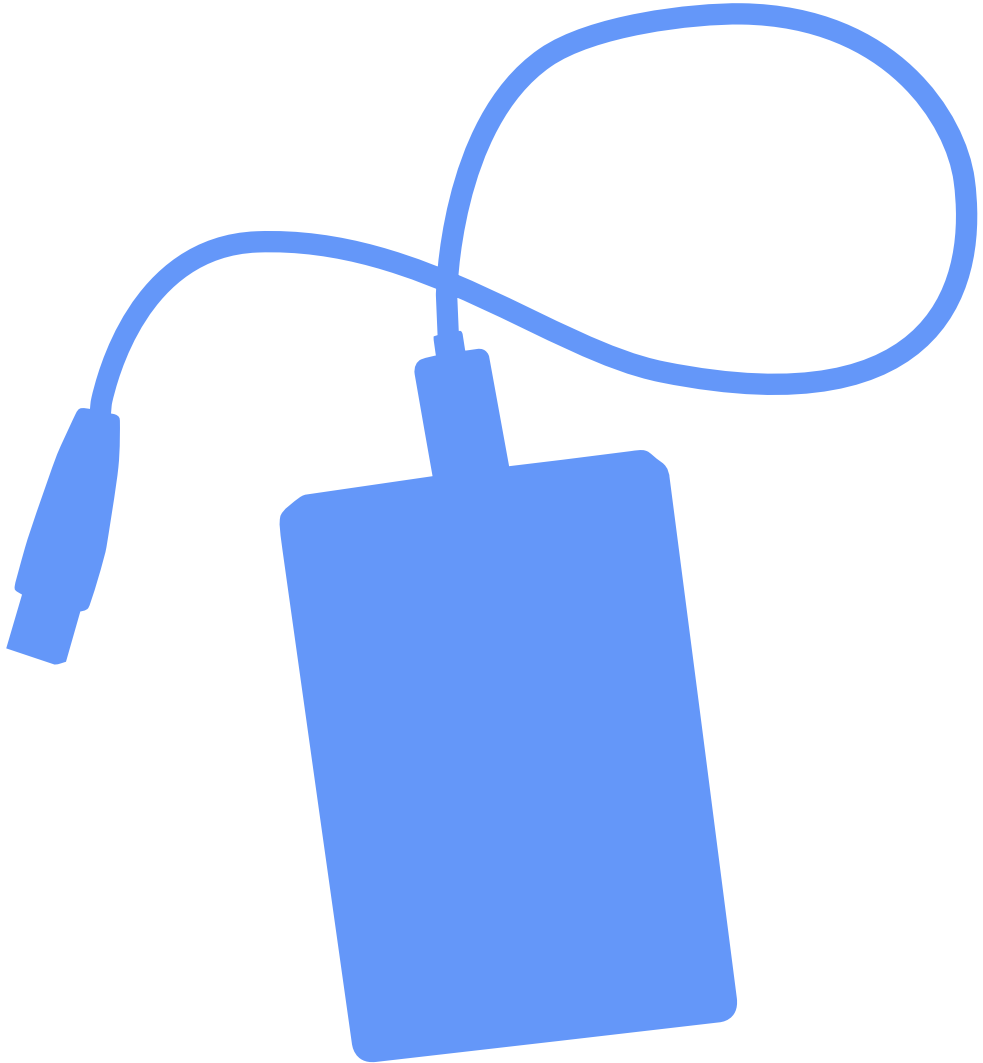


# *Back Up Your Data!*

Developing Protocols for Artistic  
Research with Media



Working with Concepts  
May 2021

*Working with Concepts* is a series of publications that report on workshops and events organized and hosted by the Blackwood. These programs position concepts as useful tools for fostering advocacy, dialogue, and resource-sharing across disciplines and sectors. *Back Up Your Data!* circulates the key terms, ideas, and strategies that came to the fore through presentations and discussions during *Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition*.

Within conditions of mediation, at some level everything becomes reduced to data.

How do art practices collect data, circulate it, and themselves become data? How do artists and organizations reckon with the production and circulation of knowledge in increasingly online media environments?

*Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition* explored how arts practices should be examined not only through their im/materiality, but also by their very existence within paradigms of platform capitalism, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and media ecosystems.

*Medium, Format, Protocol*

Emily Doucet

*Grammars of Trust*

Aliya Pabani

*Stories, Letters, Channels*

Zinnia Naqvi

*Listening and Responsible Mediation*

D.T. Cochrane

***Running with Concepts Guest Presenters***

Adwoa Afful, Kristen Bos, Meredith Broussard, Anita Say Chan, Beth Coleman, Sonia Corrêa, T.L. Cowan & Jasmine Rault, Heather Dorries, Ellen Graham & John Kim, Rick Harp, Shalini Kantayya, Nora N. Khan, Kite, Sean Lee, Anita Li, Carol Linnitt, Esery Mondesir, Kristine Neglia, Pedro Neves Marques, Ogimaa Mikana Project (Susan Blight & Hayden King), Carmen Papalia, Mike Pepi, Karyn Pugliese, Nicky Recollet, Tiara Roxanne, Caroline Sindors, Brett Story, Lewis Raven Wallace, Bianca Wylie

***Running with Concepts Research Fellows***

Emily Fitzpatrick, Cassandra Gemell, Kat Germain, Parker Kay, Olivia Klevorn, Matthew Ledwidge, Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik, Estraven Lupino-Smith, Matt Nish-Lapidus, Jennifer Su, Polina Teif, Pegah Vaezi

# Introduction

Alison Cooley & Fraser McCallum

*Back Up Your Data! Developing Protocols for Artistic Research with Media* responds to *Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition*, a virtual event that brought together thirty-two artists, scholars, and media practitioners, along with twelve Research Fellows, to lead an interdisciplinary series of discussions, presentations, film screenings, and workshops. Four Program Respondents—D.T. Cochrane, Emily Doucet, Zinnia Naqvi, and Aliya Pabani, whose essays are included here—were commissioned to produce responses and share lessons from the suite of events. Looking to a diverse set of concerns in media practice and adjacent fields—including data sovereignty, citizen science, journalism, documentary filmmaking, data visualization, disability justice, critical design, open mapping, queer ecology, and science and technology studies—*The Mediatic Edition* consciously engaged with other disciplines in order to trace their reflection back onto artistic practice.

*Running with Concepts* is the Blackwood’s hybrid educational event, bridging recent and ongoing Blackwood programming and publishing in an experimental conference format. Recent iterations include *The Geologic Edition* (2015), *The Choreographic Edition* (2016), and *The Empathic Edition* (2018), each staged spatially across the University of Toronto Mississauga campus. In response to lockdown conditions, *The Mediatic Edition* took place as a virtual event from October 2020 to January 2021.

In developing the conference for a virtual format, we asked: What approaches to data management, transparency, and open-source collaboration can be translated to the arts? How can artistic research contribute to new interfaces that mediate engagement with research? How can artistic practice, and the organizations that support it, navigate tensions between open data and data sovereignty protocols? *Back Up Your Data!* turns the imperative to store, collect, capture, and safeguard data on its head, offering instead a retort or a refusal: interrupt, scale back, or suspend inherited knowledges about data’s openness, accessibility, availability, and ubiquity. Back up the tendency to use data uncritically in mediated spaces, and reckon, instead, with the lifecycles and systems data implicates.

At a time of virtual-only gathering and screen saturation, deeper consideration of how we meet and interact online guided *The Mediatic Edition*. At an early phase of conference planning, Anita Say Chan, Sean Lee, and Carmen Papalia—artists, activists, and scholars of media and disability justice—offered productive insights into the ways that online spaces are not inherently more accessible than physical ones. They noted unequal access to technology, tech training, and fast internet speeds, and the slow uptake of accessibility best practices, as some of the key inhibitors to more equitable access online. Our attempt to navigate mediation and accessibility came in the form of a combination of live workshops, screenings, pre-recorded conversations, transcripts, audio descriptions of films, and visual descriptions during discussions.

This report is another outcome of that mandate: to bring additional levels of interpretation to the Blackwood's programming in another format, and at a different pace. Alongside essays from the four Program Respondents included in this publication, in this introduction we have developed a list of statements that distill lessons learned throughout the conference. Each one adapts contributors' insights into a singular statement, framing data ethics as a practice requiring responsibility at all levels of art production—from individual artists, to organizations, to larger institutions. We adopt the list format in keeping with its capacity for provocation and generative discussion, inspired by precedents offered in the co-authored *Feminist Data Manifest-No* and Mike Pepi's "Elements of Technology Criticism."<sup>1</sup> In this list, like its precedents, each imperative serves as a guiding principle to refract future thought and action.

*[W]e don't know our networks and our embedded-nesses as well as maybe we could have. And so, what does that mean to actually start to listen to and hear and respond to whatever sort of local situatedness we find our ourselves within?*

— Anita Say Chan in "Levels of Access: Bandwidth, Translation, and Virtual Spaces"

*I often define accessibility as an ongoing effort to hold space for a diversity of needs in the midst of systemic barriers and traditions of violence. This is a definition that I used before the pandemic, but I think it's very relevant now, too.*

— Carmen Papalia in "Levels of Access: Bandwidth, Translation, and Virtual Spaces"

## **1. Avoid systematized decision-making: protocols and procedures are signposts, not a map.**

In her contribution to this report, Emily Doucet<sup>2</sup> urges readers to consider how protocols and procedures become *de facto* structures. Doucet articulates a need to explore new ways of working at the level of medium and format in order to invent new protocols and practices. Without a process of reappraisal, protocols risk losing their responsive and relational nature.

## **2. Account for distance or proximity in cultural production.**

Close attention to one's perspective and positionality in relation to a subject should precede and shape further work. In a discussion of how journalists document communities to which they do not belong, Karyn Pugliese advocated for the strength of diversity

“going both ways”—creating capacity for additional context and storytelling on the one hand, while maintaining the ability to identify gaps in perspective or understanding on the other.<sup>3</sup> Talking to strangers, for Brett Story, is a way to complicate the notion that filmmaking in public space is inherently exploitative. Story pondered how “the idea of privacy can also be used as a cover story for forms of abandonment.”<sup>4</sup> As a response, she emphatically works with strangers in order to parse how “deep listening” can create intimacy.

*I see [AI] as a window into a possible discussion to say, what if we didn't treat others like they weren't as human as us? What if we didn't treat the earth and the stones and our mined materials like they're less than human, not us? [...] [I]f we're going to make something ethically, let's say it's AI, you need to have an ethical process, an ethical protocol, governance of coding language, software design, use, distribution, compensation, the physical computing device itself, data collection—but then when you zoom in on one of those protocol streams, there's so much to deal with. Like, consultation, identifying stakeholders, raw materials, compensation, construction, running, transforming, welcoming, managing, death cycle [...].*

— Kite in conversation following *Pḥehín Kirī Líla Akhíshoke*  
(*Her Hair was Heavy*)

*I wanted these characters to [...] point us to other forms of life, and being, and non-normative ways of caring and existing and desiring.*

— Pedro Neves Marques in “*A Mordida: Gender, Contagion, and Biopolitics*”

### **3. Other disciplinary knowledges cannot be translated one-to-one onto artistic practice.**

Consider, for example, Kristine Neglia’s assertion that the principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) are unique to First Nations and must not be transposed directly into other communities.<sup>5</sup> Existing data sovereignty and ethics protocols are culturally and politically situated. Because artistic practices often elide or purposefully breach disciplinary boundaries, this fluidity cannot and should not extend to a straight-forward translation of principles and protocols.

**4. Collectors and beneficiaries of data collection must be willing to scale and adapt for context.**

Given that artistic projects will perform a wide variety of slippery, polyvocal, fractured, and complex approaches to knowledge-making—and because best practices for collecting, mobilizing, and owning data in the arts do not exist—arts-based researchers and organizations must be willing to develop protocols, practices, and procedures based on community consultation and relationship-building specific to the contexts they are working in.

**5. Artists and arts organizations working with data should use a question-driven methodology to assess the needs of the contexts they are working in.**

While their principles cannot be uniformly or instrumentally applied to artistic practice, turning to disciplines such as citizen science, journalism, open data, critical engineering, disability justice, and data ethics can provide valuable starting points for these questions, such as: Who owns the data? Where is it stored? How is it available to the public? Should it be available to the public? (If not, how is it protected?) What had/has to happen to make it accessible? What modes of access are in conflict when it comes to engaging with this data?<sup>6</sup>

*I think it's too easy, or doesn't capture enough of the discussion to just focus on how we tell a story—the method—when the bigger question is how media outlets choose which stories they tell, and for whom.*

— Rick Harp in "Journalism's Myth of Objectivity: Accountability, Embodiment, and Neutrality"

*I have a lot of students who are designers or are interested in pursuing artistic practice. And many of them gather archives and assemble archives and frame them and use them in kind of critical pastiche. And part of that work is really asking them to frame how each piece of information, each artifact that they gather, sits within a larger framework. So that's just part of many artistic research methodologies; thinking about: Where does this come from? To what end? What are the frames of input? How is it understood? Are you reflect[ing] on your position in relation to this data and information? Where did you get the power to come in and out?*

— Nora N. Khan in "Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty"



## **6. Don't amplify seen and unseen technological biases.**

Throughout *The Mediatic Edition*, presenters offered multiple perspectives on biases within technology, including racial bias in facial recognition algorithms, inherent power imbalances in media, enforced heteronormativity in technologies of statehood and citizenship, and techno-utopian Silicon Valley ideologies.<sup>7</sup> As artists continue to engage with vanguard technologies, these persistent flaws risk being repeated precisely by those who aim to critique them. Many flaws remain opaquely codified within algorithms, requiring caution and skepticism when using these technologies.

## **7. Engage with technology by asking how it fits, and why. Resist novelty.**

Discussing networks of support and mutual aid, Anita Say Chan rhetorically asks, "What do local instantiations of responsiveness and community look like?"<sup>8</sup> Despite being rooted in community data practice, Chan acknowledges how technology is but one tool available—among many—when building engagement and resilience. Aliya Pabani<sup>9</sup> identifies a similar tension between technologies that purport to increase efficiency and the structural conditions that supersede tech solutions. Contributors across *The Mediatic Edition* identified that technology uptake should be driven by values, not solutions.

## **8. Consider the hidden manual labours that preclude the use of data.**

As highlighted by Caroline Sindere, Amazon Mechanical Turk is but one extreme example of the gendered, invisibilized, and undervalued labour that underlies data infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> In her ongoing project to develop a feminist AI chatbot, Sindere responds by taking comprehensive inventory of each of the constituent parts of a data product. Likewise, participants in John Kim and Ellen Graham's workshop "Reading Open Data: Data Visualization, Citizen Science, and Collective Action" were reminded of the requisite manual interventions of cleaning, sorting, or organizing data that precede its usability—these tangible reminders attest that data is not a singular or frictionless entity.

## **9. The ubiquity of open data can replicate harmful extractive practices.**

As Bianca Wylie notes, one is tempted to equate open data with idealized democratic values. Resisting this tendency, she discusses how data often moves fluidly between private and public hands, landing far from where it was first gathered.<sup>11</sup> Fellow panelists echo this critique in various ways, giving pause to how open data replicates harms: in violent collection practices, in its flattening of context and culture, and in its exposure to racialized surveillance.

*I came to understand that the mere fact of me speaking, in telling these marginal stories, is a gesture of resistance itself.*

— Eserly Mondesir in "Documentary Practices: Power, Agency, and Representation"

*[T]he map has a voice, but it's one that tells you that everything you need to know is in these grids. I have a lot of trepidation about those types of understandings.*

– Susan Blight in "(Counter-)Mapping"

#### **10. Name and make visible the ruptures brought about by regimes of dispossession.**

Colonial conquest, loss, genocide, and removal of peoples from their lands are embedded in mediated spaces. Susan Blight of the Ogimaa Mikana Project described a few strategies for identifying and thereby interrogating these ruptures. In the case of the collective's work, replacing Toronto's street signage with Anishinaabemowin place names (not direct translations but phrases that articulated an "understanding of the space-time of those places") was a way to render the rupture of settler-colonialism visible. Blight also advocated for land acknowledgments that name colonial violence and erasure—which must be brought into virtual spaces as well as physical ones.<sup>12</sup>

#### **11. Embrace nonlinear ways of making visible.**

Artistic practices have unique capacities to intervene in mediated spaces, as essays by artist Zinnia Naqvi and economist D.T. Cochrane both articulate in this report.<sup>13</sup> Naqvi describes how storytelling offers opportunities both to see the operations of power in context, and to attune ourselves to the impact of narrative on advocacy work. Cochrane alights on listening as part of a kinship framework: advocating for listening with the whole body—as described by Kite in conversation with Kristen Bos,<sup>14</sup>—as a way to reconfigure relationships to mediation and responsibility.

#### **12. Be willing to undertake critical revisions to any set of instructions, best practices, or protocols.**

Be highly suspicious of documents that offer simple solutions to the complexity of our mediated realities and, instead, commit to living principles that respond to developing needs. We see many notable precedents in protocol documents developed in the arts sector in recent years such as imagineNATIVE's *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts, and Stories*, and Carolyn Lazard's *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise in a Practice*. Each refuses to provide a totalizing map for ethical media or knowledge production, but instead places emphasis on the need for best practices to remain fluid, negotiated, and relational.<sup>15</sup>

- 1 Marika Cifor, Patricia Garcia, T.L. Cowan, Jasmine Rault, Tonia Sutherland, Anita Say Chan, Jennifer Rode, Anna Lauren Hoffmann, Niloufar Salehi, Lisa Nakamura, *Feminist Data Manifest-No*, <https://www.manifestno.com>, 2019. Mike Pepi, "Elements of Technology Criticism," *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 9: MEDIATING* (January 2021), 16–17.
- 2 Emily Doucet, "Medium, Format, Protocol" in this report, p. 12.
- 3 Karyn Pugliese in "Journalism's Myth of Objectivity: Accountability, Embodiment, and Neutrality," October 28–31, 2020, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/situated-journalism-accountability-embodiment-and-neutrality>.
- 4 Brett Story in "Documentary Practices: Power, Agency, and Representation," November 4–7, 2020, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/documentary-practices-power-agency-and-representation>.
- 5 Kristine Neglia in "Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty," January 23–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/data-governance-ethics-and-sovereignty>.
- 6 These questions are paraphrased from contributors across several events: "Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty"; "Journalism's Myth of Objectivity: Accountability, Embodiment, and Neutrality"; "Feminist Data Set," January 23, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/feminist-data-set>.
- 7 "Coded Bias: Race, Technology, and Algorithms," October 7–10, 2020, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/coded-bias-race-technology-and-algorithms>; "A Mordida: Gender, Contagion, and Biopolitics," December 2–5, 2020, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/a-mordida-gender-contagion-and-biopolitics>; "Elements of Technology Criticism" workshop, October 19, 2020, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/workshop-elements-of-technology-criticism>.
- 8 Anita Say Chan in "Levels of Access: Bandwidth, Translation, and Virtual Spaces," January 22–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/levels-of-access-bandwidth-translation-and-virtual-spaces>.
- 9 Aliya Pabani, "Grammars of Trust" in this report, p. 15.
- 10 Caroline Sindors in "Feminist Data Set."
- 11 Bianca Wylie in "Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty."
- 12 Susan Blight in "(Counter-)Mapping," January 22–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/counter-mapping>.
- 13 Zinnia Naqvi, "Stories, Letters, Channels" in this report, p. 20; D.T. Cochrane, "Listening and Responsible Mediation," in this report, p. 24.
- 14 Kite in conversation following the performance *Phehiŋ Kiŋ Lila Akhiŋsoke (Her Hair was Heavy)*, January 24–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/phehi-ki-lila-akhisoke-her-hair-was-heavy>.
- 15 imagineNATIVE, *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories*, 2019 (Toronto, ON). Carolyn Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*, 2019 (Recess: Brooklyn, NY).

# Medium, Format, Protocol

Emily Doucet

*Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition* elegantly posed the question: What do (infra)structural critiques of the “mediatic” have to offer the practices of journalism, documentary, and art-making more broadly? Rendering media as adjective rather than noun, the programming framework expanded beyond a simple nuancing of “media” criticism, considering the interdependent structures (and affects) of conceptual categories such as “form” and “methodology.” It is perhaps this systemic understanding of media that offers the greatest insight into the shared tools of critique across media and disciplines. As a respondent for the *Running with Concepts* fall program, thinking along these lines of inquiry has refracted across my own work. Elsewhere, I’ve been thinking about how representations of technology (in art, in literature, in political discourse) index broader currents in ideas about the self, the nation, and temporality. I’m interested in considering not only how technological objects and infrastructures mediate and structure social life, but also how discourse about, and critiques of, technology can foreclose—or open up—possibility for thinking about, designing, and living with technology differently.

In the program brief, hosts Alison Cooley and Fraser McCallum ask: “How can we intervene in and interrogate the conditions that mediate knowledge production and political action?” Noting this cue to think between different registers of our mediatic condition, over the course of the program I noticed a collective examination of the ways that protocols (or “ways of doing”) ossify into structures and an exploration of how different formats might

co-constitute new protocols and practices.

In his outline of a “format theory” for the study of media, Jonathan Sterne notes that “the mediality of the medium lies not simply in the hardware, but in its articulation with particular practices, ways of doing things, institutions, and even in some cases, belief systems.”<sup>1</sup> Arguing that “the format is what specifies the protocols by which a medium will operate,” Sterne goes on to suggest that “studying formats highlights smaller registers like software, operating standards, and codes, as well as larger registers like infrastructures, international corporate consortia, and whole technical systems.”<sup>2</sup> I see this as both a helpful framework for understanding contemporary media ecologies and a compelling political and historical metaphor. Oscillating between, and thereby questioning, these orders of media operations, *Running with Concepts* investigated relationships between the objects, structures, and practices that shape media landscapes. Interrogating the mediatic at these different scales, the program framed “the media” as a series of relations and practices, rather than a singular object or structure.

I’d be remiss to frame this discussion within the context of format, without first noting the format of the conference and fellowship program itself. Asynchronous, yet temporally delimited, the programs were streamed via Vimeo and hosted on the gallery’s website. The digital land acknowledgement offered at the beginning of each session also mirrored the shift of focus from media to mediatic, recognizing the infrastructural and mediatic ecology

that facilitates digital programming. The program's structure and its engagement with the mediatic were intentionally linked, playing with the fundamental intersections between form and format.

Embedded in investigations of the ways that history shapes present and future alike, this framing shift from object to format, from methodology to protocol, emerged as a theme across the program. Setting up this motif, the computer scientists, journalists, and activists interviewed in Shalini Kantayya's film *Coded Bias* (2020) outlined how historical and fictional narratives about technological possibility shape the design of new technologies, particularly in terms of race, gender, and ability. Likewise, in the introduction to the collaborative "Elements of Technology Criticism" workshop, Mike Pepi argued that we might also understand the technologically deterministic bent of Big Tech as an aesthetic project, thereby interrogating how beliefs about the place of technology in history shape (and often limit) technological design.

This tension between form, self, and world—as shaped by digital platforms and network technology—intimately structured *Errantry*, the streaming channel presented by research fellow Olivia Klevorn. Discussing the effects of disassociation (or wandering) in digital environments, Klevorn's dense and rich presentation defined disassociation as "atemporal," citing a collapse between present and past. Visually demonstrating the saturation of information suffusing the algorithms that inform what we see online, Klevorn's project interrogated the processes of identity formation and simulated the temporal affect of these experiences—the stream of images, clips, and screenshots, at turns stultifying or soothing, punctuated profoundly by examples of violent language and hateful attacks facilitated by digital

platforms. This formal investigation of the interruption of the "past by the present" was also central to research fellow Matthew Ledwidge's project *An Interface of Anticipated Care*. On the project's website, a grid frames questions posed in the operative terms of form, structure, and temporality I've been discussing thus far. The questions embedded within the grid ask, "What was an image of...," "What was not an image of...," "What was a prediction of...," "What was a reconstruction of...," and upon mouseover, offers poetic and sometimes cryptic answers. Exploring the relationship between affective prediction and urbanism, Ledwidge's experimental script offers form to anecdotal observation. Meditating on the question of methodology in a call and answer format, Ledwidge asks, "What was a reconstruction of methodology?," answering with the suggestion that the "basic codes and conversations began to work and suggested new possibilities for what was possible."

These "basic codes and conversations" could also be referred to as protocols. Conventionally understood as "rules," protocols are also terms of engagement. Situating the protocol as it structures language and interaction in both humans and computers, protocols could be capaciously defined as "languages that regulate how people relate to each other, to their cultural, social, and political environments, and to the technologies that create them."<sup>3</sup> This reorientation from rule to (unevenly) socially determined structures of relation unmoors protocols from their cultural solidity.<sup>4</sup>

This uncertain definition of protocol poetically recalls that which was offered by the Afnonaut, the recurring character in Brett Story's *The Hottest August*, who, when queried, stated that he was "from the future" sent back to "[make] recommendations" about how to "make plans

to change that future.” The relationship between format and protocol—paralleling that between form and practice—was central to the conversation between Story and Esery Mondesir about their respective films. As Mondesir put it about his *Haitian Trilogy*, “my voice is in the form.” Nodding, Story added that “limitations can be liberating under the right circumstances.” In both filmmakers’ works, lingering shots frame the participants’ descriptions of their lives, labours, and loves within the spaces that have shaped them, or in turn have been shaped by them. These formal (and methodological) choices identify the inequities documented as the result of specific structural processes rather than simply as historical outcomes.

All participants on the panel “Journalism’s Myth of Objectivity: Accountability, Embodiment, and Neutrality” similarly explored the relationships between form, methodology, and process. Early in the discussion, moderator Anita Li suggested that “objectivity has been conflated with neutrality,” and the discussion proceeded to explore how institutions and practitioners of journalism need to strive for transparent methodology rather than objectivity. In a similar panel on the podcast *MEDIA INDIGENA*, host (and *Running with Concepts* participant) Rick Harp spoke with Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young, describing the need for a shift from conversations about the “crisis” of

journalism (often framed in terms of increasing job layoffs and declining revenue for legacy media corporations) towards a critique of the kind of stories that journalism tells about itself, asking, “How do journalists know what they know” and “Who gets to decide what good journalism is?”<sup>5</sup> Returning to the culturally determined notion of protocol, these conversations underlined the ways that these practitioners are working between potentially conflicting sets of protocols: journalistic practices that value “neutrality” or “objectivity” on the one hand, and community ethics that are defined in terms of relationships on the other.

These questions of relationality also offer a framework for understanding how the stories told about “the mediatic” shape the very media ecologies and technological systems that we live, work, and play within. These questions loom large as the Canadian government reconsiders regulations on telecommunications and broadcasting and cities such as Toronto reconsider how internet service is provided, among a host of other pressing debates. Returning to these questions of infrastructure in terms of the stacking concepts of media, format, and protocol, as the participants in *Running with Concepts* do beautifully in different ways, draws attention to the tangible effects of these media ecosystems, but also crucially helps to outline the sets of relations—between individuals, states, communities, and institutions—that these systems encompass.

1 Jonathan Sterne, *Mp3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

2 Sterne, *Mp3*, 8, 11.

3 Vera List Center for Art and Politics, “As for Protocols, 2020-2022,” accessed February 7, 2021. <https://veralistcenter.org/focus-theme/as-for-protocols>.

4 My thinking on this is also informed by the way Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about ceremonial protocols: “I don’t like the word protocols. Ceremony is our birthright, straight and queer. Protocols, like laws, are rigid rules. I like the word practices because practices are relationships.” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 142.

5 This conversation was published on June 21 and 30, 2020. A transcript of the conversation is published in Rick Harp, Candis Callison, Mary Lynn Young, “Value and Values in the Interstices of Journalism and Journalism Studies: An Interview with Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young,” *Sociologica* 14, no. 2 (2020): 240.

# Grammars of Trust

Aliya Pabani

Over the past several months, I've been volunteering with the Encampment Support Network (ESN), an ad hoc group of volunteers that came together in the early days of the pandemic. ESN provides basic survival gear to people living in the encampments that came up in Toronto because of the impact of the pandemic on the decades-long housing crisis in the city. As part of that, I produce a narrative podcast series called *We Are Not the Virus*<sup>1</sup> about life in the encampments, from the perspectives of residents. The project came out of the recognition that creating counternarratives where unhoused people provide their own analysis was essential for reconfiguring existing relationships between neighbours, housed and unhoused. In reflecting on *Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition*, I'm considering how discussions from the conference compel us to consider how arts workers build relationships with broader social movements, and the urgent need to strengthen lateral trust across these connections.

I've been thinking about how the pandemic upended existing systems, creating the conditions for new modes of relation. The sudden diminished capacity of institutional structures that normally served to "manage" unhoused people resulted in them choosing to live in public spaces. As a result, the relationships I've made have profoundly impacted my experience of the city; shifts in the weather now make me think of specific people and the status of their various construction projects. Public spaces appear less benign. The possibility of providing community safety in a world without police becomes more tangible as I observe self-organized communities of

people attempting it—albeit with challenges—in the parks. Here, community care is practiced by necessity, while institutional resources are only engaged instrumentally. It's an orientation that should be taken up more broadly, not least in art spaces.

## How can we be interdependent?

Since the beginning of the pandemic, disability justice activists have been outspoken about the need for sustained and lasting change to emerge from this moment. In the discussion "Levels of Access: Bandwidth, Translation, and Virtual Spaces," panelists scrutinized the presumption that online spaces are more accessible in light of their proliferation during the pandemic. Sean Lee, Tangled Art + Disability's Director of Programming, shared that he's been approached by more organizations wanting to create new forms of access through initiatives like accessibility checklists. He noted that while these requests are often well meaning, they deprioritize the relationship-building element that's central to any move toward disability justice.

Lee questioned whether these organizations would be able to bring these practices to their spaces once in-person events are opened up again, if they weren't building the kinds of relationships that could bolster any commitments. He referenced Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's assertion that when you're really embodying disability justice, it's messy and complex in a way that can't often be wedged into uncompromising non-profit models, and asked the question: "How do we have interdependence?"<sup>2</sup>



In positioning interdependency as a sectoral necessity—and as a lens through which to respond to *Running with Concepts*—I am also reflecting on its implications for political movements beyond the artistic sector, and the relationships between them. During Susan Blight and Hayden King’s presentation on their counter-mapping work as part of the Ogimaa Mikana Project, King addressed the trouble with maps: on one hand, for example, mapping can help members of a given nation see who’s mining on their territory, in order to push back. On the other, it can instill a way of thinking about land as a commodity. In proposing alternative modes of relation, we need to engage these tools critically, with an understanding of their consequences for non-human beings, and their underlying ideologies.

### **How can we be responsive?**

Due to the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, there have been renewed calls for Canadian cultural institutions to be more responsive to the communities of people they’ve traditionally excluded, and to better support their movements for justice. But is that something institutions can do? Many organizations in the sector operate under significant pressure to suit the demands of granting bodies and mandates, but aren’t resourced well enough to maintain some of the more desirable aspects of institutionalization: process consistency and succession planning, to name a couple. Better-resourced organizations also regularly exhibit self-censorship, bureaucratization, unsustainable leadership, and competitive or territorial mentalities. In both cases, a logic of self-preservation, scarcity, and austerity—sustained in part due to the current funding landscape—undermines the capacity for institutions to create a more stable arts sector.<sup>3</sup>

As a case study, artist-run centres may testify to the ways funding cycles and mandates inhibit change. In his presentation *Blockchain and Decentralization: Alternative Models for Artist-Run Culture*, artist and writer Parker Kay revisited the origins of the Canadian artist-run movement, pointing to the way General Idea’s creation of fake storefront displays led to them receiving state funding—a fiction that provided the legitimacy to become more “real,” at least in the sense of being funded. But, at this moment, less than half of artist-run centres currently receive core-funding,<sup>4</sup> while many run on project-based funding (often the emerging, younger, and less-white organizations), paying out standardized (albeit low) artist fees while staff struggle to earn a basic wage.<sup>5</sup> It leads me to wonder whether we’ve been fighting to fund professional artists at the expense of fighting for the conditions that enable artists to live.

To what extent is operational funding an act of fiction-making for the purposes of passing as legitimate? And how does embodying that so-called legitimacy foreclose the possibility for new modes of interdependency, and new kinds of solidarities to emerge?

### **How can we practice solidarity?**

In a recent interview with *Canadian Art*, photographer and ESN member Jeff Bierk addressed some of the issues that arose when grassroots programs to support unhoused people became reliant on city funding.<sup>6</sup> He said that earlier on, outreach workers had a lot more freedom to cater each response to individuals. The centralization that came with funding meant having to deprioritize personal relationships and the inherently messy, complex practice of holding space for individual needs. While many might chalk this change up to



bureaucracy, it recalls Sean Lee's insights during the "Levels of Access" panel discussion: that networks of care demand flexibility.

The formation of ESN is one example of a new kind of solidarity—between unhoused people and artists—which also recognizes that those two groups aren't mutually exclusive. Due in part to the current dearth of work opportunities in the cultural sector, artists make up a significant portion of ESN's roughly 200-strong volunteer network. Because of this, we've seen meaningful demonstrations of support from the broader arts community in Toronto, with some arts organizations boosting demands for the city to halt evictions and provide aid to encampments in the absence of other viable housing options.

While the show of support was welcome, its framing was instructive. I've seen many well-meaning statements about "the arts community" stepping up to support unhoused people. I've seen calls to expand eligibility around government support for artists that stop *just short* of recognizing that many ineligible recipients of disability benefits are artists too. Since the early days of the crisis, Toronto carpenter Khaleel Seivwright has provided dozens of basic wooden shelters to encampment residents. For many, it meant they could spend slightly less time trying to survive and slightly more time making art. I've met people who use these roughly 4ft x 8ft boxes as studios, packing synths and mics inside to record music, or spending hours working on a painting.

These examples show that on the one hand, arts organizations need to re-examine their internal biases about class and disability among their communities,

while on the other, we need to respect the resiliency of artists in precarious situations and take these lessons forward in our advocacy.

### **How can we build trust?**

Parker Kay argued that it is the role of the artist-run centre to reflect society in real time, pointing to the growing disconnect between newer artist-initiated activities like DIY/project spaces and the government-funded artist-run centre system, with the former failing to meet the criteria for non-profit status, due in part to their choice to be more flexible, relying on commercial revenue to subsidize rent and out-of-pocket expenses. He proposed another way: in his engagement with blockchain solutions provider Circle-Free, he was able to identify areas where decentralized blockchain technology might influence the structure and operations of his art space, Pumice Raft. Proposals included allowing the public to trace the distribution of incoming grant money without any administrative labour, facilitating board governance by assigning unique keys for each board member, and creating smart contracts where funds could be disbursed instantly when a sale is made.

While acknowledging my limited understanding of the technology—and that the project is still in its nascent stages—I wonder whether the framing of blockchain as a way to "create more efficiencies within artist-run organizations" is yet another instance of privileging systems over relationships.<sup>7</sup> Efficiency is not a radical value, and besides, the small efficiencies of automation aren't worth the environmental impact of the computational power required to support such transactions.<sup>8</sup> Blockchain is often described as "trustless," which is inaccurate given that the

system still relies on trust—not between individual actors, but in the system itself.

Many panelists throughout *The Mediatic Edition* gestured at how the values of a given community are encoded into the technological systems they produce, for better or worse. Critic Nora N. Khan discussed how political ideologies get disappeared into tools, referencing Hortense Spillers's notion of the "slippery grammars of capture," or the way the functioning of a technical apparatus can be obscured with "duplicitous language or doublespeak."<sup>9</sup> Khan's curatorial practice involves thinking through how to translate this language to wider audiences to build a sense of agency, again emphasizing the centrality of relationship-building in any effort to employ tech in service of community goals.

Responding to how the logics of competition in film and television inhibit collective practices, documentary filmmaker—and *Running with Concepts* participant—Brett Story recently outlined an alternative structure for building interdependence.<sup>10</sup> Instead of continuing to compete for scarce resources through existing funding models, she proposed that documentary artists should create collective structures modelled after community land trusts. She argued that in collectivizing resources like equipment, funds, and even skills, risk could be redistributed, and artists—especially those who have been traditionally

excluded—could have the opportunity to make ambitious work without being burdened by the risk of failure. Trusts could span generations, and members who achieved greater success (in the conventional sense) could give back to the trust through mentorship.

In Story's proposal, I find a productive response to some of the challenges afflicting art production, and its broader societal role. In the land trust model, opportunities for succession, mentorship, sustainability, and equity remain open as promises. The model has the capacity to be more responsive, because it doesn't rely on a hard distinction between those administering the good and those receiving it—so long as we can sustain it with strong relationships. In order to become meaningfully interdependent, we need to find ways to leave behind models that make us more accountable to funding bodies than to our commitments. And when the two are fundamentally incompatible, we need to build our own networks of support that forgo established pathways.

1 Aliya Pabani and Allie Graham, *We Are Not the Virus*, <http://wearenot-thevir.us/>.

2 Sean Lee in "Levels of Access: Bandwidth, Translation, and Virtual Spaces," January 22–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/levels-of-access-bandwidth-translation-and-virtual-spaces>.

3 In *Towards Braiding*, Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti describe two distinct, conflicting sensibilities that often come into conflict in organizational attempts to "Indigenize." While the "brick sensibility" tends to privilege individuality and hierarchy, the "thread sensibility" emphasizes relationality and interwovenness. Modern institutions, they write, are ordered by brick sensibilities, which render thread sensibilities unintelligible. Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa

Andreotti in conversation with Sharon Stein, *Towards Braiding* (Guelph: Musagetes, 2019): [https://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Braiding\\_Reader-Web.pdf](https://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Braiding_Reader-Web.pdf).

4 Leah Sandals, "Artist-Run Centres Impacted Differently by COVID-19 Crisis," *Canadian Art*, May 28, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/news/artist-run-centres-impacted-differently-by-covid-19-crisis/>.

- 5 Media Arts Network of Ontario, "Sustaining Collectives and Emerging Organizations in the Arts," May 19, 2020: "The expectation of significant unpaid and underpaid labour from arts workers is built into the current project-based funding model for emerging and unincorporated arts organizations. Relying on project grants, they receive support to compensate artists for their labour at industry standard rates, but are not supported to adequately compensate their own staff, whose skills comprise the essential labour of care necessary for the success of any program." <https://mano-ramo.ca/may-19-sustaining-collectives-and-emerging-organizations-in-the-arts/>.
- 6 Yaniya Lee and Leah Sandals, "Mutual Aid during a Pandemic: Why Artists Helped Form Toronto's Encampment Support Network," *Canadian Art*, December 10, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/mutual-aid-during-a-pandemic-why-artists-helped-form-torontos-encampment-support-network/>.
- 7 Parker Kay, *Blockchain and Decentralization: Alternative Models for Artist-Run Culture*, January 23–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/data-infrastructures-blockchain-and-collaborative-platforms>.
- 8 Jesse Frederik, "Blockchain, the amazing solution for almost nothing," *The Correspondent*, August 21, 2020, <https://thecorrespondent.com/655/blockchain-the-amazing-solution-for-almost-nothing/86649455475-f933fe63>.
- 9 Nora N. Khan in "Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty," January 23–27, 2021, <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/program/data-governance-ethics-and-sovereignty>.
- 10 Brett Story, "Artist-run Documentary Studios: A New Form of Trust," *Documentary Magazine*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.documentary.org/feature/artist-run-documentary-studios-new-form-trust>.

# Stories, Letters, Channels

Zinnia Naqvi

As I think about this past fall, I can't help but sense a chill in my spine that reminds me of the anxiety and uncertainty that filled most days of 2020. That year will be remembered as one of accumulating chaos that tested many aspects of human resilience. While sitting at my desk, I keep trying to hold the events of the year at bay in my mind, hoping to trudge along with my work in a vastly altered reality.

In many ways, the fall program for *Running with Concepts: The Mediatic Edition* highlighted the collective anxiety of this moment, which combines the realities of natural disaster, capitalism, disease, technological surveillance and many more. Although many of the works in the program were made prior to the pandemic, they all touched on the ways these different crises intersect. In a time when humans are mandated to physically distance, through this program I saw examples of how we can use digital modes of storytelling to bring together a plurality of perspectives on pressing global issues.

The programming offered a series of reminders, lessons, and proposals for approaching media literacies through narrative: pay attention to context, examine the power structures that dictate how we tell stories, recognize how those same power structures play out in the forms technologies take, and embrace the generosity that storytelling offers audiences—a generosity of change and transformation. These storytelling strategies are not new, but they are important to re-examine at this moment. How people access or interact with media has changed drastically. As the information we consume now comes in many forms, media

literacy and criticism are more pertinent than ever.

The panel “Journalism’s Myth of Objectivity: Accountability, Embodiment, and Neutrality” tackled what many would consider the crux of journalistic ethics: the idea or myth of objectivity. Moderator Anita Li gave a definition of objectivity to open the panel, and asked: Who has the privilege of being objective? How does one truly cover a story in an objective or neutral way, when we are always approaching subjects from our personal position of bias? Carol Linnitt of *The Narwhal* offered a pivot from “objectivity” to what she described as “context-rich” versus “context-free” reporting—taking into account how integral the context of the story is to understanding and unpacking it: “For us that means we’re looking closely at a way a story is complicated and the various ways that actors are entangled in a story, entangled in a place, and in a situation that is oftentimes still unfolding.” This sense of entanglement really sums up how many of the works in this program have approached their subjects, by showing how different actors come together to create the fabric of a crisis and how its effects continue to unfold.

In Brett Story and Esery Mondesir’s conversation on documentary practices, the two used the forms of their filmmaking to speak about politics. Mondesir quoted bell hooks’ essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” which reminds him “that it’s not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak.” He took this as a prompt to speak about his own life experiences in his work, seeking out other individuals with shared

experiences as Haitian refugees. In doing this, he approaches his subjects from a place of empathy and understanding.

As an artist and filmmaker, I often employ a similar practice to Mondesir's in my own work. I am drawn to seek out subjects that are close to me and my experiences. I was however very moved by Story's approach to the stranger as protagonist—perhaps because I watched these programs at a time when brief and spontaneous encounters like the ones that compose Story's *The Hottest August* (2019) are so few and far between. Story talked about how she came to filmmaking as an activist, and how she rejects the formal standard of social impact filmmaking in documentary. She said:

*I feel much more comfortable using this language of political filmmaking because it suggests a sort of orientation to the world and orientation to the practice, and an interest and consideration of power at every level of the work, of trying to make meaning, and make creative choices, and use art to go in and say something about the state of the world.*

Both filmmakers reject the traditional techniques of documentary filmmaking, and the role of the expert in speaking about their subjects. Story also punctuates her film with an omnipresent narrator, a gesture which borders on the realm of science fiction, and offers reflection and distance to the audience—who are otherwise placed in direct conversation with inhabitants of New York City. Our understanding of the implications of climate change are formed affectively, through the relational web of experiences we are shown throughout the film. In both films, there is a move away from presenting a single thesis, but rather an interest in showing the many sides to a story. This

opens a kind of activeness for the viewer, allowing us to consider our own position in relation to the people on the screen.

In the film *A Mordida* (2019) by Pedro Neves Marques, the director uses the genre of science fiction to pull together multiple political events in recent history. A viral outbreak caused by genetically modified mosquitoes causes civil unrest in Brazil, while three lovers (a cis man, a cis woman, and a trans woman) attempt to escape the reactionary politics of a conservative government.

The parallels to the current political context are undoubtably clear. Made in 2019, Neves Marques' film drew on national efforts to fight the Zika virus in the mid 2000s, where a language of propaganda was used to weaponize people against the virus. This weaponization resulted in increased militarization, which as Sonia Corrêa stated during the discussion on the film, was put in place in the name of public security and has resulted in a "militarization of social life." Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and the figures in his regime are considered "worldwide crusaders against gender ideology," which has led to a rise in homophobia in the country and the maltreatment of queer and trans people. Corrêa contextualized this political shift, explaining:

*I think it's a very core element of the ultra-rightward turn that we are witnessing in the world. We can say of trends towards fascism [are] exactly that—that you're always searching for vectors: for those that can be accused of being responsible. It is a warlike mode of thinking—about threats and natural disasters or diseases—[threats can] very easily shift from a mosquito, or an animal, like the mice, to people.*

We have seen under right-wing figures around the world how a culture of hate is as infectious as any disease—and in many cases, more so. Solutions are evasive: technology can expedite the production of a vaccine, but deeply embedded cultures of hate and bias can take generations to unlearn.

What happens when accepted social values become fossilized into objects we use and perceive as neutral? With a focus on artificial intelligence, *Coded Bias* (2020) by Shalini Kantayya shows how technology has inherited the biases of the people who build it—running on codes that reinforce binaries entrenched over the course of the twentieth century. In structure, this film was more rooted in traditional documentary than the other works screened in the *Running with Concepts* program, however its relationship to technology as a mediator of everyday life is clear. As Kantayya points out: “Everything we love, everything we care about as citizens of a democracy is going to be totally transformed by artificial intelligence.”

Beyond chronicling the historical bias in the function of these technologies, the film also demonstrates how facial recognition technology can be used to further disenfranchise people, and how technologies are tested out on working class people to observe and mediate their behaviour. As Meredith Broussard stated in the conversation on the film, it is not simply a matter of tweaking the technology to improve inclusivity. She says, “There is no machine that will get us away from the essential problem of being human.” In saying this she affirms that none of us are immune to error and prejudice.

Kantayya points out that in making *Coded Bias*, building awareness and promoting policy-making were key—

“data rights are civil rights”—and that laws need to be made to protect people, especially Black and racialized people, from being harmed by these technologies. But something else that Kantayya said really stuck out to me: “The biggest enemy we have is not Amazon, it’s our own apathy.”

This brings me back to the impact of storytelling. When it comes to the scope of large-scale crisis, we tend to point fingers at large companies, government bodies, or societal structures that disenfranchise certain populations. They are large and, in a way, invisible entities because of their scale. But through the telling of personal stories, the shifting of an individual perspective can have incredible impact, creating lasting change. The transformative power of stories, and the invitation to change that storytelling provides, does not necessarily move in a single, predictable direction. Just as stories are plural forces for voicing individual and collective realities, they move through and among diffuse networks, with variable effects.

In 2018 I co-led a workshop at articule in Montreal on letter writing, in which we explored the individual act of writing a letter to a political representative and the impact it may have in changing legislature. Sometimes it can feel like each letter is a tiny drop in an ocean of unrest. But you never know the impact a single letter or story may have on another human. And even more so, the impact that letter or story may have on the author who takes the time to put pen to paper. The act of writing, filming, acting or producing a work which has a goal for political or structural change empowers the creator to embody that knowledge and disseminate it in relation to their own experience of moving through the world.

What we've seen in this program, and through countless examples in our everyday lives, is that advocacy work requires sharing knowledge and resources. Even as we are isolated at home, this has invaluable potential for change. Taking moments to thoughtfully consume media and consider how issues intersect, alongside other actions, allows us to better understand our own position and stakes in these causes. Digital modes of storytelling allow for these stories to be thoughtfully disseminated through the platforms that have brought us comfort and connectedness this past year. They help us recognize that our voices, votes, and energies matter and can be used to channel change, on a large or small scale.



# Listening and Responsible Mediation

D.T. Cochrane

In 2019, Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) was \$2.3 trillion. GDP is calculated as a measure of total economic activity within a country's border. Adjusted for price changes, this figure ended up 1.9% higher than the value in 2018. This means, we are told, Canada was 1.9% more productive in 2019 than the year before. These numbers get translated within government communications and the mainstream media, becoming an expression of well-being.

In the above paragraph, there are several synonyms (or near synonyms) of mediate, the adjective inflecting this year's edition of *Running with Concepts*: calculation, adjustment, telling, translation, expression. All these terms describe processes that are necessarily transformative, even when those processes are framed as neutral relays.

When we read mediation back into the opening paragraph, we see a sequence of transformations. The numerical inputs to GDP are transformed to create its value. That value is transformed to account for changes in price. The value gets transformed in tales of Canadian productivity and well-being. The question this raises for me, coming out of my engagements with the works of *Running with Concepts*: How do we take responsibility for our mediations and their effects? I want to draw on the concept of listening—as discussed in the conversation between Kite and Kristen Bos responding to Kite's performance *P̄heh̄iŋ Kiŋ L̄ila Akh̄īšoke (Her Hair was Heavy)*—to think about being a responsible mediator.

Let's return to GDP to think about some of the linkages that Kite articulates between extraction, kinships, and listening. GDP is intended as a calculation of market transactions. Market transactions are theorized as total accountings of value; once a transaction is completed, the relationships among buyer, seller, and object are completed. In other words, market logic replaces responsibility with transaction. Some portion of Canada's GDP includes the uranium that was mined and sold in 2019. By market logic, Canada's responsibility for that uranium has ceased, regardless of where it goes or what it becomes. Contrast that with a question raised by Kite: "What does it mean that we've mined uranium and processed it in a way that it needs to be cared for [on a geological scale] of time?"

## Listening and Kinship

In a collaborative essay, Kite writes, "Indigenous epistemologies are much better at respectfully accommodating the non-human."<sup>1</sup> From that position, Kite advocates for Lakota epistemologies to inform decisions that take responsibility for the uranium and its harmful by-products. Key aspects of respectful accommodation, as articulated in the conversation between Kite and Bos, are listening and kinship. Kinship currently has prominent promulgation in the humanities and social sciences by Adele Clarke, Donna Haraway, Kim TallBear, and others.<sup>2</sup> Kinship is established and sustained through the circulation of care, responsibility, and accountability. As such, it offers an antidote to transactional market logic. By centring responsibilities



to both the human and the non-human, kinship makes us aware of the proliferation of material and expressive affects that our mediations have. Listening is a fundamental component of kinship. Kite notes that for her kin, the Lakota people, listening is done with the body. It is a way of attuning oneself to others and sensing their needs.

What does the uranium need? What do its radioactive by-products need? How do these needs affect us and our kin? What responsibility do Canadians have for those by-products, since we dug up the uranium and sold it? When we listen to those by-products, what do they tell us? Well, we know they can tell us that they are poison and harmful to humans. The experience of Port Hope, where radioactive waste from the Eldorado Nuclear plant was used in building materials, underscores the need to listen most closely to those by-products.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in listening to the waste, and hearing the costs it would impose for being ignored, we never revisited our economic accounts.

I will try to use the word “listen” in a manner that follows Kite and Bos’ discussion. Kite is not speaking metaphorically. Rather, she is expanding listening and displacing it from the ears. For example, picking up on people’s body language is an important part of listening. I would not say I am particularly skilled at this, yet I have had the experience of sensing someone else’s body language without touching or seeing them. This is what I think of when I think of “listening with your whole body.”

As an economist there has been little demand for me to listen with my whole body. Both my social background and scholarly training make me uncomfortable when confronted with embodied knowledge-formation like Kite’s performance. Yet,

the dominant practices of economics, which centre quantification as *the* expression of existence, are being challenged from numerous quarters. The calls for greater economic pluralism are creating opportunities to listen to economic life in different ways. Artists are particularly well-suited to expanding the ways we know “The Economy” through conscious acts of listening and knowledge production. We need research across the boundaries of what we know, moving into the domain of pure speculation.

While money is the defining entity of our economies, and it obviously lends itself to quantification—such as the calculation of GDP—the many practices and desires that move money exceed quantitative understanding. Despite this overflow, economists have largely eschewed even attempting to understand the innumerable other aspects of economic life. Bruno Latour, with Vincent Lepinay, observed that economists tried to imitate physicists “through an entirely artificial effort at distancing.” However, they continue, “the very thinkers they tried to imitate would give their right hands to find themselves at last close to particles.”<sup>4</sup> Bringing into economics a plurality of listening practices, in order to grapple with other aspects of economic life, would vastly improve the discipline.

### **Listening and/as Extraction**

Listening is an underappreciated form of mediation. We want to think our senses give us unmediated access to the world. But anyone who has taken a mind-altering substance, or zoned out while someone is speaking, knows that our senses play an affective role in translating the world. As an affective process, listening creates excess, which can be generative if it leads us to affirm new ways of being. It can

also be destructive if it eliminates other ways of being. However, some ways of being ought to be destroyed because they compound destruction; refusing to listen can be a way of refusing to participate in harm. For example, when white supremacists speak, we do not need to listen. But we may insist that they listen. When former violent white supremacists have diverted themselves away from their destructive supremacism, to whom, or to what were they listening?<sup>5</sup> The affect of listening defies a priori categorization. While our senses mediate what we experience, that product gets further mediated as it encounters, augments, and mutates our knowledge.

I took an appreciation for the importance of non-normative listening from the conversation titled “Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty,” among Adwoa Afful, Nora N. Khan, Kristine Neglia, and Bianca Wylie, moderated by Tiara Roxanne. An issue that the discussants frequently invoked was the risky nature of digital connection. Afful noted that online communities often serve as sites of affirmation for Black youth who feel excluded from other community spaces in Toronto. Such sites are places where Black youth can listen and be listened to. Yet such sites also create data that is subject to surveillance by governments and/or corporations. Surveillance is a form of listening. We must always question who is listening, who is being listened to, and why. When Black communities speak about a lack of government services, government should listen. But should corporations listen in when Black youth are sharing information about themselves? The corporations are not listening to Black youth for the same reasons Black youth are listening to each other. The youth are responsible to each other. The corporations are responsible to their bottom lines.

We were listening to uranium when we created atomic weapons and then atomic energy. Those creations brought much destruction. However, some propose atomic energy as a necessary part of addressing the climate crisis.<sup>6</sup> Canada’s reserves of uranium could become much more valuable if the world builds more nuclear power reactors. If nuclear power is needed for a just transition, how does Canada responsibly trade uranium? Listening to the kin of uranium must be part of taking responsibility. That includes the peoples from whose lands the uranium is taken and the peoples on whose lands the radioactive by-products are stored.

Some will say that listening is all the government ever does, pointing to myriad studies and commissions that produced little change, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Canada’s Indian residential school system.<sup>7</sup> However, even when understood non-normatively, I do not think this constituted listening by Canada, in the way that its surveillance of activists constitutes listening. Canada’s purpose with the TRC was to reduce liabilities that stemmed from the residential school system for as little cost as possible. That included undertaking a public relations exercise. This is not to suggest the commissioners did not listen. The contents of the report make it clear that they did. However, after the commissioners carefully produced their set of recommendations, it became clear that Canada was not actually taking the sort of responsibility that listening entails. Conversely, the surveillance of activists, including Indigenous land defenders, has a clear purpose: preservation of the status quo. Canada’s responsibility remains strictly to itself as an elite-dominated settler-colonial state. Despite Canada’s own courts recognizing

the underlying title of Indigenous peoples, the government continues to excuse its violation of that title on the grounds of “national interest.” In an unequal country, the national interest is dominated by the wealthy and powerful. It is for the same reason that we cannot depend on the Canadian government to, of its own volition, take on responsibility for the uranium it has sold and will sell.

### **Listening, Diplomacy, Expertise**

The fraught nature of listening—and being listened to—also came up in the discussion among Susan Blight, Hayden King, and Nicky Recollet, moderated by Heather Dorries, titled “(Counter-)Mapping.” The discussants noted that land use maps, which are important for recording how Indigenous communities exist on the land, have been used in harmful ways by resource companies. Recollet stated that she will not draw lines on maps to demarcate sacred sites because that is taken as a sort of permission that makes everything else available for extraction. In this case, the corporations are listening to community members but, as with digital surveillance, their responsibility is to the corporation’s bottom line. My original question was: How do we take responsibility for our mediations and their effects? To this must be added: To whom (or to what) are we responsible?

I opened by describing how the accounting that becomes GDP involves a series of mediations. Accountants and statisticians have necessary expertise that makes this constitution of GDP possible. They are trained to listen in a certain way, which equips them to translate an untold number of entities into a quantitative form. Their methods, their inclusions and exclusions, are continually challenged, debated, and adjusted. There are numerous problems

with the current calculative practices of GDP. However, the over-arching problem is the authoritative presentation of this number as *the* expression of economy and well-being. Instead, we need more and different experts—including artists—listening to more and different entities, who can then explain to those of us who may be incapable of listening as they do. This will expand the scope of responsibility.

The importance of expertise also emerged in the “Data Governance, Ethics, and Sovereignty” conversation. Wylie noted that many of us are oblivious to the actual and potential harms of existing IT infrastructure. Mitigating and undoing those harms, while drawing out the generative and affirming aspects of digital technology, requires experts who can listen to the infrastructure and translate it for us. However, this act of listening and translating will always be contingent since, as Neglia observes of Indigenous nations, there will be different worldviews that demand different forms of responsibility and attention.

All the discussants expressed the importance of allowing sovereign communities to move in parallel and in dialogue with each other, without relations of dominance: in other words, diplomacy. Diplomatic listening, which is responsible to both sides of the dialogue, can be critically understood via the concept of “gossip” as discussed by Emily Fitzpatrick in her presentation *Digital Camouflage: A Cyber-Feminist Survival Guide*. Fitzpatrick suggested that gossip offers a form of community encryption for data sharing. Consider how diplomacy sometimes requires the clandestine passage of forbidden information. An expert diplomat, like a great gossip, knows which details need to be redacted to protect those

who might unnecessarily come to harm. This sort of selective omission is similar to Recollet's refusal to draw the line. She has expertise. She has listened. She can share. But she will omit.

The "(Counter-)Mapping" discussants also described listening to the land. Blight made a striking contrast between the mapping by colonial agents and mapping by her people, the Anishinaabe, that we can think of in terms of listening. Blight noted that colonial maps imposed a grid that enforced "Imperial order" and was considered to be "authoritative." Of the Anishinaabe, Blight said, "I don't know that we understand land in an authoritative way." Blight modelled the non-authoritative perspective by refusing to be authoritative—even about being non-authoritative! The colonial mapmakers listened to the land in a specific, geometric manner that allowed it to be linearized. Conversely, the Anishinaabe of Blight's telling recognized that the land would have many things to say. The act of listening is not, in itself, just. Even taking responsibility is insufficient. The colonial maps were made with responsibility to the colonial project. The Anishinaabe maps, however, were made with responsibility to the community and to the land.

## Listening and Kinship II

Kite and Bos' connection between listening and kinship suggests kin-making as a way to expand the scope of our responsibilities. We all deserve to be listened to by our kin and we all must listen to our kin. This will help us to mediate responsibly. By making kin we accept greater responsibility.

We need multiple kin to uranium and its by-products. Those who take responsibility to listen to the uranium in an expert, but non-authoritative way, can demand recourse from those who tried to ignore the harms that uranium never asked to cause. The Canadian government has primarily listened to the uranium as an object of monetary value. Limited to this mode of listening, the government treated transactions as ending its relationship with the uranium; uranium was not its kin. Although it has tried to ignore the uranium and its by-products as they harmed others, our experiences with asbestos, tobacco, and other mass-produced poisons suggest that uranium and its kin will demand other kinds of listening and taking of responsibility.

No one can be kin to all beings. But with interconnected networks of kinship, we can endeavour to achieve a universal care, responsibility, and accountability that accounts for—and fosters—our many different ways of being.

- 1 Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite, "Making Kin with the Machines," *Journal of Design and Science* (2018): <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfafd97b>.
- 2 See Adele E. Clark, and Donna Haraway, eds., *Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018).
- 3 Penny Sanger, *Blind Faith: The Nuclear Industry in One Small Town* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1981). Available at <http://porthopehistory.com/nuclearindustry/blindfaith.html>.
- 4 Bruno Latour and Vincent Antonin Lepinay, *The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde's Economic Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2010): 29.
- 5 Christian Picciolini, *White American Youth: My Descent into America's Most Violent Hate Movement—And How I Got Out* (New York: Hachette Books, 2018).
- 6 The podcast *Decouple* by Dr. Chris Keefer offers a sampling of this pro-nuclear socialist perspective. <https://anchor.fm/chris15401>.
- 7 For an ongoing record of Canada's lack of action on the TRC's 94 Calls to Action, see the Yellowhead Institute's "Calls to Action Accountability" from Eva Jewell and Ian Mosby: <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/trc/>.

# Biographies

**D.T. Cochrane** is an economist currently living in Peterborough, with his partner and two children. He is an economic research consultant with the Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade and a postdoctoral fellow with the Blackwood Gallery. In 2020, he began a postdoctoral fellowship on “Innovation and Rentiership” at York University with Dr. Kean Birch. He was previously a postdoctoral fellow in “Reconciling Sovereignties” at Osgoode Hall Law School and Ryerson University with Drs. Shiri Pasternak and Dayna Scott. He has worked as an economic researcher with the Manitoba and Ontario New Democratic Parties, as well as with Mining Watch Canada. He has a PhD in Social & Political Thought and Masters’ and Bachelors’ degrees in Economics.

**Emily Doucet** is a writer, lecturer, and early career scholar. She earned a PhD in Art History from the University of Toronto in September 2020. In addition to teaching in the Art History department at the University of Toronto, she works with the Indigenous Creation Studio at University of Toronto Mississauga. Both inside and outside of the academy, she is interested in thinking about the relationship between new media, technology, and collective thinking about the future. She writes regularly on historical and contemporary visual culture for a variety of print and digital publications, including *Border Crossings*, *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art* online, and *Public Parking*, among others.

**Zinnia Naqvi** is an interdisciplinary artist based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal and Tkaronto/Toronto. Her work examines issues of colonialism, cultural translation, language,

and gender through the use of photography, video, writing, and archival material. Recent works have included archival and re-staged images, experimental documentary films, video installations, graphic design, and elaborate still-lives. Her works often invite the viewer to question her process and working methods. Naqvi’s work has been shown across Canada and internationally. She received an honorable mention at the 2017 Karachi Biennale in Pakistan, and was an Artist in Residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario as part of EMILIA-AMALIA Working Group. She was a recipient of the 2019 New Generation Photography Award organized by the Canadian Photography Institute, of the National Gallery of Canada, in partnership with Scotiabank. She earned a BFA in Photography Studies from Ryerson University and an MFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University.

**Aliya Pabani** is a Toronto-based artist and audio producer. Previously, she was host and co-producer of Canadaland’s arts and culture podcast, *The Imposter*. She’s also produced audio work for BBC 4’s *Short Cuts*, the Toronto Biennial of Art, and her piece “Singing on the Line” will be featured in the Barbican’s upcoming Soundhouse “Cinema for Listening” program. Pabani is a co-founder of POC in Audio, a searchable database of hundreds of POC audio makers from around the world. She’s currently working on *We Are Not the Virus*, a documentary podcast with the Encampment Support Network that draws on the four elements—earth, water, wind and fire—to explore different facets of life in Toronto’s encampments through the stories of residents.

# Acknowledgments

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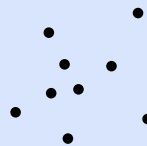
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