

Amplified Listening to Race and Gender in Fiamma Montezemolo's *Echo* and Stephanie Dinkins's *N'TOO*

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ABSTRACT

Looking retrospectively and prospectively, this article reflects on what is heard when listening to the women talking inside artworks. Both *Echo* (2014) by Fiamma Montezemolo and *Not the Only One* (*N'TOO*), an ongoing project by Stephanie Dinkins, present sound archives that animate spaces with fragments of dissenting women's voices. Looking back at the impact of inSITE, a curated international art festival in the Tijuana and San Diego region, *Echo* amplifies the sonic remains of art produced in the context of NAFTA. In *N'TOO* a living AI archive is potentiated as a fourth generation in the artist's family, carrying on the histories and subjectivities of three women. *N'TOO* optimistically intervenes in AI's expansionist and biased trajectories by furthering Black and familial subjectivity in a specific context of racial and gender foreclosures. Despite their spare use of sound, both artworks enable amplified listening through the avatar-like objecthood afforded by gallery-based media artworks. This methodology is consistent with decolonizing efforts in Canada and has significance for artists intervening in intersectional, race, and gender studies, border studies, and in settings of computational or interactive technology.

INTRODUCTION

The manufactured voices in the artworks *Echo* from 2014 by Fiamma Montezemolo and *Not the Only One* (*N'TOO*), an ongoing project of Stephanie Dinkins that began in 2018, compel us to listen to *women talking*.¹ In both of these artworks women's voices are technologically operationalized, not to command normativity, as in Siri or Alexa, but to disrupt and dissent from the way race and gender are produced and experienced. In the case of the video artwork *Echo*, a narrator's voice is heard reflecting on how the mythological female counterpart to Narcissus possessed the capacity to alter dominating discourse and return to it a measure of accountability. The *Echo* character is used allegorically to review the impact of widely celebrated artworks that were produced on the Tijuana side of the Mexico/US border in the context of NAFTA and of

intensified low-wage manufacturing in the region. With the artwork *N'TOO*, a chatbot hidden inside an organically shaped sculpture produces voices that call out to gallery visitors with questions and comments generated from the artwork's living archive. Edited and programmed, the composed voices of disembodied women in both artworks are persistent. They not only insert racialized female voices and subjectivities into spaces that have largely avoided and denied their representation (spaces of art, media, and technology) but also present accountable and productive methods for activating or *amplifying* listening, as Jennifer Stoeber has theorized.² This essay considers the outcomes of the listening that is enabled by the avatar-like objecthood³ encountered in these distinct artworks. The reverberations heard and experienced in *Echo* and *N'TOO* recall Beth Coleman's "Race as Technology" in the way they present and produce "individual acts of transgression that reorder the power structure of a system (a particular, a specific locale, a place and time)."⁴ The transgressive voices heard in these artworks manifest the agential capacity of racialized utterances inside technologized and artistic forms. Further, *N'TOO*, alongside the more community-driven incubator activities of Stephanie Dinkins, questions the impact of AI development coming from inside racialized communities.

While it is specific geographies that these artworks address, the utterances of their voices actively resonate beyond their locations. Listening to race in Canada, from where we are writing, requires specific modes of amplification. In *My Conversation with Canadians*, Lee Maracle, member of the Stó:lō Nation,⁵ novelist, writer, academic, and public educator, starts with a domestic and intimate setting for what has so far been a failure at listening. Maracle proposes a one-way conversation:

You are always sitting just out of reach of my kitchen table; you occupy a large space in my mind, and so I thought I would like to have a conversation with you. You are not invited into the text to respond, and for that I apologize.⁶

What follows are responses to some of the questions and positions of non-Indigenous Canadians that Maracle has had to field in public. Some of these reflect Canadians' genuine efforts to learn (such as the question, "How does colonialism work?") while others might fall into a category of "settler moves to innocence" as articulated by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their influential text, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."⁷ One of Maracle's chapters, titled "Response to Empathy from Settlers," responds to the seemingly empathetic settler approach of recognizing Indigenous people as suffering from marginalization. In line with Tuck and Yang, Maracle explains how empathetic recognitions like this center and perpetuate settler power. For listeners—those aiming to learn, as well as those moving towards self-positioned innocence—Maracle's voice is uncompromising. It adopts a methodology of amplifying the specific experience of Indigenous and racialized people as situated inside ongoing colonial violence. Canadians' questions and perspectives prompt Maracle's replies or teachings, but in the book, there are no further invitations to respond. This structure gives Maracle's voice the last word; it hangs in the listeners' ears as a vibrant echo that might interrupt internalized colonial discourse. The augmented listening that Maracle expects is prescient in Canada as we write this text,⁸ and is further articulated by Dylan Robinson, another Stó:lō writer. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson describes how extractivism is inherent when the "hungry" listening of settler ears is taken as the orientation—their hunger for wealth (for example, during the gold rush in Stó:lō territory) as well as for bare survival.⁹ Maracle's and Robinson's refusal of hungry listening in Canada sets out methodological parameters for the way we hear the voices in *Echo* and *N'TOO*. In this text we describe how these artworks enable augmented listening to the voices of those colonized and displaced at the Mexico/US border during

the economic turn to globalism, and those racialized during the rapid expansion of algorithmic and “big data” technologies.

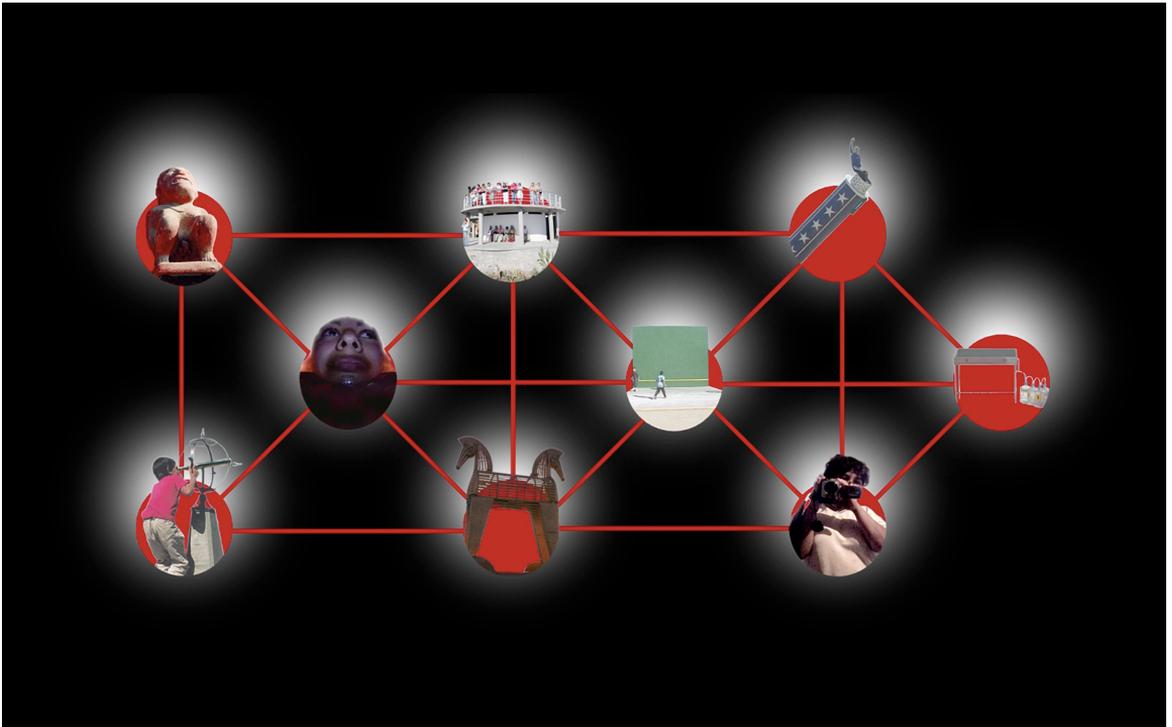


Figure 1. Fiamma Montezemolo, Echo, video still, 2014, used with permission from the artist.

ECHO

The material and active aspects of listening, and re-listening, are key methods presented by Fiamma Montezemolo in *Echo*, a 38-minute video artwork. Screened inside gallery exhibitions alongside critical discussion events, the video presents ways of hearing from people and places in the past. It looks back at the potential and actual social, economic, and political impacts of artworks created for inSITE, a curated international art festival that ran periodically in the Tijuana and San Diego region during the years 1994 to 2008. Whereas inSITE’s various iterations featured a wide range of formats, including performances, gallery-based exhibitions, and pedagogical events, *Echo* focuses on nine specific artworks that intervened in spaces on the Mexican side of the border, where art was not usually found.¹⁰ The material aspects of the video include ambient sounds from the original artworks’ locations, captured as part of the documentation of inSITE, which are layered with Montezemolo’s more current footage. Dirt-filled wind, traffic, and dogs barking are heard, as is the bounce of a ball and the sound of kids who were once part of a long-forgotten inSITE artwork. In the work’s soundscape these are mixed with synthesized tones to evoke some of the technological processes involved in archiving or ordering of past documents. Over this background Montezemolo’s voice comes and goes, narrating a poetic and explanatory description of long-gone artworks, as they were once experienced and later recalled. With this evocative aural setting, the visual footage transitions in and out. Thick vectors dynamically segment past and more current images and finally link the nine artworks in a concluding circuit diagram of interconnections.

Montezemolo has offered her reflections on the Tijuana region through other media artworks.¹¹ The unique contribution of *Echo* is the way the material and immaterial residue of inSITE is agential as understood through Montezemolo's anthropological review. A metaphorical reference to Ovid's *Echo and Narcissus*, Echo has an inherent capacity to intervene by cunningly altering Narcissus's speech from a state of completion to incompleteness. Echo's agency begins after the utterances produced by inSITE artists have fallen on the social and political landscape. A voice ricocheting off surfaces such as the border wall, she is both networked and wayward. Montezemolo's voice in the video describes her method:

Echo is active, reactive, canny.
Echo steals and plays.
Echo dismembers and recycles.¹²

While the video includes recordings of some of the artists who responded retrospectively to Montezemolo's questions, it is not the Narcissus-like voices (artists and artworks) that are privileged. Instead, it is the lingering replies that are of significance for Montezemolo. Photos, videos, documents, and statements from the time of inSITE become views of the locations where the artworks have since been dismantled, repurposed, and disappeared, in ways essential to everyday life in an economically and environmentally demanding geography.

Echo reflects on two chronologies: the years during which inSITE artworks were produced and presented (1994 to 2008), and the time of the video's production (2014), when Montezemolo linked documentary footage with contemporary interviews and recordings. For both time periods the economic, political, and industrial context of inSITE looms large. *Echo* highlights how the creation of the international art festival was set in the context of rapid intensification of the manufacturing sector, attendant low-wage labor conditions, and border militarization, all of which also created the conditions for an epidemic of violence against women. Femicide became internationally ubiquitous as a grim subject representing the region during that era.¹³ Not just a recognition of the impact of NAFTA-related policies on the Mexico/US border region and its representation, *Echo* critically reflects on the recuperation of art production in the NAFTA era. The NAFTA project was carried in part by a plethora of cultural programs and ambitious travelling art exhibitions to promote hemispheric relations.¹⁴ As if anticipating Richard Florida's manufactured "creative class," which purported to ensure urban economic development in sites amenable to creative producers, transnational curatorial projects like inSITE directed artists, curators, and audiences to the Tijuana and San Diego region.¹⁵ For the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the connectivity that NAFTA made possible for artists demanded a more critical counterpoint. Gómez-Peña recalled,

The border region [in the inSITE years] became an Art Expo, grant-writing replaced critical art and thought, and "the border paradigm" replaced multiculturalism as the chic discourse and subject matter for biennials and international festivals. A burgeoning Mexican "Naftart" market offering a maquiladora (assembly plant) type of art was created strictly for foreign consumption. It caught the attention of collectors, impresarios, and cultural ventriloquists in the US commercial art circuits, ever hungry for new flavors and exotic cultures. Of course, the more acid, critical, and outrageous voices were left out of the binational fiesta.¹⁶

In *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era*, Amy Sara Carroll questions whether and how art in the region challenged or carried the prevailing rhetoric of, in Carroll’s words, “the most fantastical inter-American allegory of the turn of the millennium, NAFTA proper.”¹⁷ Chronicling events and artists, including art from all of the inSITE iterations, Carroll reflects on the complicity and contrariness of artists in producing nationalistic mythologies, such as Mexico’s readiness as a partner in globalized economies—including global art markets. While inSITE generated unprecedented international discourse about globalization and NAFTA, Carroll’s historicizing draws attention to how the impact of the art production was as ephemeral as the works themselves. Carroll credits Montezemolo’s *Echo* as a methodological model for reviewing the contributions of inSITE via their specificity, “as if they were messages in bottles cast into the sea of the festival at large.”¹⁸ The remaining sonic traces, highlighted by *Echo*, are thus inscribed onto the history of the region in spite of the artworks’ absence at the time when *Echo* was produced. The traces are heard not just through the artists’ narration but also by way of local women’s dissenting and decolonizing voices. Two works which we discuss in our analysis, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Proyección en Tijuana* (“Tijuana projection”) from 2001 and Itzel Martínez del Cañizo’s *Ciudad Recuperación* (“recovery city”) from 2005, originally featured local women’s voices as key elements in highly visible productions. *Echo* enables the impact of these particular voices to linger, and be differently heard, long after inSITE’s globalized art production had vacated the region.



Figure 2. Stephanie Dinkins, Not the Only One (N'TOO), exhibition view, courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

NOT THE ONLY ONE (N'TOO)

In exhibition venues the sculpture *Not the Only One* by Stephanie Dinkins appears as a speaking, though otherwise inert, golden-colored and organically shaped 3-D printed sculpture. Its interactivity is activated when the audience is in proximity and engaging its chatbot with questions and comments. Three faces embossed in relief on the object's surface peer out in a manner that resembles death masks—but this is an erroneous reading, since the faces represent living women who have contributed to the work's data archive: the artist, her niece, and her aunt. There is also a liveliness to the way the artwork's technology continually regenerates the family's data to produce new utterances and exchanges with the audience. Feeding the chatbot is a dynamic, yet discrete, archive made up of the three women's experiences. It includes their oral history generated from shared interviews, as well as cultural and creative productions from their lives, such as their favorite television shows, books, and music. According to Dinkins, as questions from the audience spur on its algorithmic processing, *N'TOO* has come to function as a fourth generation in the family that carries on with its own erratic subjectivity.¹⁹ Not just a voice-activated AI system, *N'TOO* is a lively archive that somewhat thoughtfully participates in a family's unfolding story.

Could projects like *N'TOO* serve to address generational difference and loss by bringing younger generations closer to their elders' legacies? In a 2018 *New York Times* article about leaders in AI development, Dinkins enthused over the expanded opportunities for re-envisioning history and race afforded by machine and deep learning:

A.I. presents the challenge of reckoning with our skewed histories, while working to counterbalance our biases, and genuinely recognizing ourselves in each other. This is an opportunity to expand – rather than further homogenize – what it means to be human through and alongside A.I. technologies. This implies changes in many systems: education, government, labor, and protest, to name a few. All are opportunities if we, the people, demand them and our leaders are brave enough to take them on.²⁰

In this way *N'TOO* is intended to intervene methodologically in the knowledge production capacity of data-driven technologies. By forwarding Black familial subjectivity in a specific context of racial and gender foreclosures in tech development, it makes claim to community-based data sovereignty within technology's expansionist trajectories.

California's Silicon Valley, like the Mexico/US border region adjacent to San Diego, situates another manifestation of Florida's strategy for prescribed creativity and innovation. Florida's model linked the presence of artists and other creative producers with economic development, as exemplified in his correlation of Silicon Valley's economic boom with San Francisco's high "creativity index."²¹ High rankings of Florida's creative quotients for San Diego as well as San Francisco signify how cultural extraction and discriminatory racial biases are associated with economic expansion in those centers, whether by way of NAFTA or data-driven technologies. A production of surplus value through behaviors and thoughts—treated as raw commodities—is then relied on for the policing of borders, racialized populations, and otherwise unruly citizens. In this context, how ethics in the tech sector is understood has surfaced as an area of concern across a wide range of publics, users, and producers.²² Shoshana Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism* and Joy Buolamwini's *Coded Bias* have increased mainstream awareness of how facial recognition and ubiquitous uses of networked devices extract with impunity predictive signals from personal archives, with limited accountability to racialized and differently gendered users.²³

N'TOO, along with previous projects by Dinkins including *AI.Assembly*, *Project al-Khwarizimi* (PAK), and *Conversations with Bina48*, implements creative participatory methods to deliberately occupy sites of AI development. BIPOC youth and women participate in these creative projects as counterpoints to the biased data sets generated and purveyed by tech monopolies. Dinkins's works inhabit spaces that have recently opened for do-it-yourself methods, maker labs, community-based coding boot camps, and an abundance of open source and collaborative cloud-based platforms. Participants in these spaces take up opportunities to creatively intervene in AI's development on what appears to be their own terms. But are autonomous methods and projects really possible in machine learning environments? The contradictory ways in which creative projects that emphasize openness, access, and diversity may be relying on biased data sets, or even developing methods for data scraping or crowd-sourced piecework labor, are known. For example, Jer Thorpe's initial optimism for making art with big data resulted in the perpetuation of data scraping methods that he fundamentally regretted. Thorpe's media work, *Just Landed 2009*, began as an aesthetic consideration of human mobility that the artist had produced using data available from Twitter. The data scraping approach that fed the project, Thorpe later learned, became a model for advertisers who then expanded the practice to scrape personal data from non-consenting social media users. The experience led Thorpe to issue a challenge to artists involved in technology, to ask themselves, "How am I complicit?"²⁴ Thorpe's warning contrasts with Dinkins's question to participants of *AI.Assembly*, "What does AI need from you?"²⁵ For Dinkins this line of dialogic questioning is intended to encourage Black and allied academics and creators gathered together in *AI.Assembly* to take a contributory position in machine learning fields. With such an additive perspective Dinkins proposes questions such as "How can small data break the mold of 'big data dominance' to become resources and sustaining processes for underutilized communities?" and "Can community knowledge, craft, and the vernacular be enlisted to shape AI ecosystems that are supportive of a multiplicity of ways of being and life more generally?"²⁶ The deliberate focus on small-scale and relational methods in much of Dinkins's works may address the current and future need to diversify not just the data sets and the algorithms that process them, but also, and more significantly, the individuals or groups directing the industry. Still, creative uses of AI technologies, whether on a small and relational scale or as "big data," must face the possibility of unwittingly perpetuating, as Thorpe experienced, extractive surveillance tools. Yet another consideration by the groups and interests garnered in Dinkins's works, is the way surveillance technologies exist in a lineage of racial monitoring and control operationalized by the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent discriminatory systems of control.²⁷ Through venues that support Black and diverse developers, like *AI.Assembly*, Dinkins's projects offer a potential platform for challenging the larger questions of exploitative use of extractive data mining and surveillance capitalism.

In engaging with technology on her own terms in *N'TOO*, Dinkins performatively turns the script to the ontologies of subject and object brought about by chattel slavery. Uri McMillan, in an analysis of Black women performance artists, traces a genealogy of others who have problematized subject-object relations through dissenting vocalizations in performance art and at times in technology. Beginning in the nineteenth century with Joice Heth's "dubious and touring performance" as George Washington's nursemaid,²⁸ and extending to more contemporary works by Lorraine O'Grady, Adrian Piper, and Nicki Minaj, McMillan draws out the effectiveness of the ways these figures perform objecthood: "performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places."²⁹ Joice Heth is particularly referenced in *N'TOO* for the ways she

performed multiple generations within the mediated environment of P. T. Barnum touring shows, including unruly vocal outbursts. All of the Joice Heth performances, but particularly her persona as a manufactured machine, were animated to produce race and otherness in ways easily apprehended by the intended white audiences. Recognizing these automaton avatar performances that Heth endured as “strikingly brute form(s) of objecthood,”³⁰ McMillan takes pains to counter them with evidence of her public outbursts and unruliness. Evidence of Heth’s out of order talking is also extant in published reportage, though it is easy to overlook, McMillan finds: “In contrast [to focusing on the given narratives of Joice Heth’s existence and work], a focus on Heth’s speech shifts attention toward the meanings transmitted in embodied forms of knowledge, so often obscured in favor of the supposedly more stable textual documents of the archive.”³¹ By reviving the accounts of Heth belligerently challenging audiences through verbal address, McMillan enacts listening to women talking as resistance to a given record of post-abolition slavery. Heth’s outbursts could be recalled in the deliberately inchoate utterances that *N'TOO* produces for audiences. Though possessing an archive from which to coherently represent a family’s experiences, the chatbot instead generates its own summary or reordering of the information, often to the audience’s bewilderment. As McMillan argues, the objectification in entertainment of Black subjects performing as automatons was enabled through the limits of the human subject as scripted by a society invested in perpetuating slavery despite abolition. *N'TOO* productively activates an avatar that is aware of its position in a trajectory of racialized objecthood and slavery. In doing so, Dinkins embraces automaton performance, imbuing it with not one Black body but with intergenerational knowledge that compels audiences to interact, and thereby participate in the production of a family’s future.³²

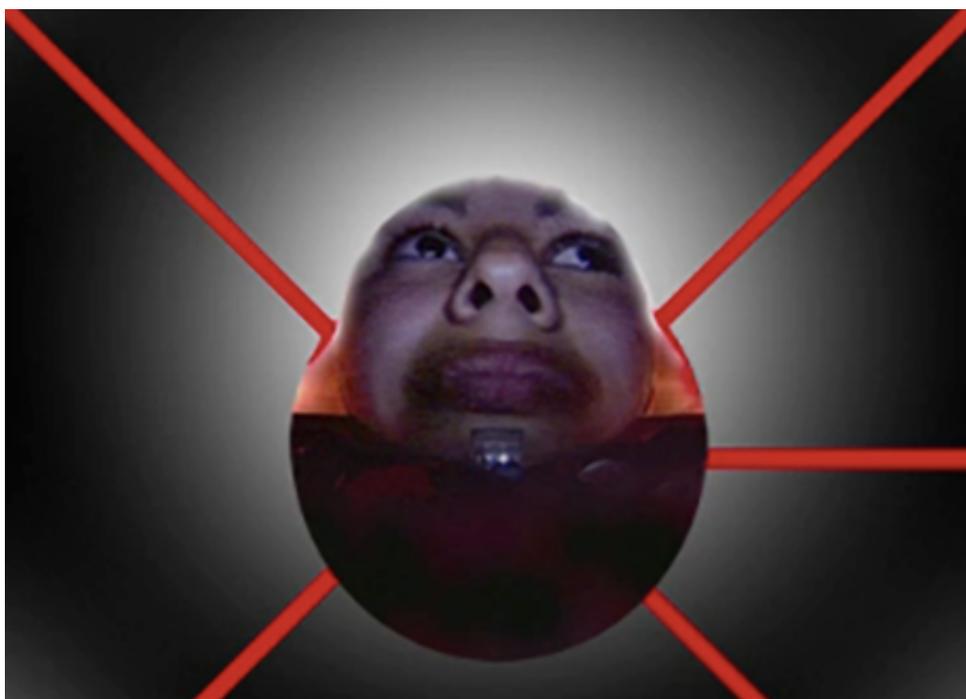


Figure 3. *Fiamma Montezemolo, Echo, video still (detail), 2014, used with permission from the artist.*



Figure 4. Stephanie Dinkins, Not the Only One (N'TOO), courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

AMPLIFIED LISTENING

“There is no story without law, politics, power, and sociology worth telling.”
(Lee Maracle)³³

Disembodied and prone to glitches, the voices of *Echo* and *N'TOO* pull the listener in close to hear their ambient and expectant words. Not unlike Maracle’s one-way kitchen dialogue, they hold us in the act of listening. This act involves trying to make sense of familiar but partial fragments and deciding how or whether they need to be completed or changed. The use of embodied avatars and archives in these works borrows from the disciplines that Montezemolo and Dinkins bring to the art. Montezemolo’s concurrent practice as an anthropologist enabled *Echo*’s questioning about the socio-political context and impact of an international art festival on the social life of residents of the Mexico/US border region. Dinkins’s leadership in the development of anti-racist AI projects, often in familial or community contexts, extends *N'TOO* toward the promotion of community-grounded tech development programs.

The questions that Montezemolo asks of inSITE are deeply informed by her work as an anthropologist. Given the economic and racial inequity of the binational sites in which inSITE artworks appeared, fundamental questions about the impact and complicity of inSITE in the expansion of neoliberalism hover. In a conversation with fellow anthropologist Néstor García Canclini about the years leading up to and including inSITE, Montezemolo reflected on accountability in both art and anthropology. As the two spoke of the cultural context for NAFTA

and inSITE, they considered the contribution of their shared disciplines. For anthropologists, mused Canclini, the research questions are, “What have I revealed? What did I discover in this aspect of social life?” In contrast, he surmised that the artist’s task was to challenge—to produce shifts in the visualization and representation of society itself. Montezemolo then mused that a retrospective ethical review of inSITE artists’ work was needed, much as anthropologists’ colonial legacy demanded personal as well as disciplinary accountability,

A piece on the after-effects of an artwork [like those included in inSITE] seems called for. That is the ethical aspect I was talking about. It leaves me perplexed. Of course, this also happens with the anthropologist. Staying for more months or years does not spare the anthropologist from similar questions that arise in his or her “heart of darkness,” as Conrad said.”³⁴

Montezemolo, while residing in Tijuana, had earlier used Ovid’s *Echo and Narcissus* as a critical frame in a review article that she wrote about inSITE_05. Her review suggested that despite the festival’s strong mandate to develop awareness of the conditions of those living in the region, every artist’s encounter with participants as the “other” in artworks constituted a self-referential (Narcissus-like) search for identity (“cualquier otro es en parte una excusa para esa búsqueda sin paz que el hombre hace de y en sí mismo”).³⁵ Were the artists themselves, Montezemolo asked, not also a product of the migratory, psychiatric, emotional, political experiences that they had chosen as specific sites for their work? If so, how was *Echo* holding them and their work in a state of unfinished representation? Besides obliquely considering the artists’ motives and positionality, *Echo* reveals some of inSITE artworks’ failed objectives.³⁶ Although there is a plethora of documentation and commentary on inSITE’s ambitious programs and presentations,³⁷ *Echo* stands out for its creative use of limited but critical evidence. Its method of returning to the geography nearly ten years after some of the works were installed is singular. As Carroll noted, *Echo* brings an intimacy to the inSITE archive³⁸ and this is achieved through close attention to ephemera and geography, as well as through the amplification of women talking.

In Itzel Martínez del Cañizo’s *Ciudad Recuperación* (“recovery city”), which was produced for inSITE_05, youth in addiction recovery were given control of the camera so that they could picture an ideal city. Their visions for the city were contrasted with footage of upper middle-class women who also commented on what they imagined for the city. *Echo* includes del Cañizo’s voice reflecting on how the intention of her practice of interventional video was—true to Canclini’s expectation of artists—to transform society. In her reflections, del Cañizo describes how another Tijuana-based project from the time, *Que suene la calle (Let the Streets of Tijuana Be Heard)* (2005), had caused one of the women participants to be devastated by the national rebroadcast of the video on television, years after its production. The display of the participant’s adolescent troubles in public had been retraumatizing and threatening to her improved circumstances. Both projects specifically intervened in the lives of vulnerable Tijuana youth and women to assert social change as imagined possible by the artist. *Echo* lets del Cañizo’s voice review her fundamental intentions through a recall of the voices of her participants, both during the Tijuana projects and long after they became echoes. Their testimonies of consequence hang in the air for the listeners to consider. Another woman’s testimony, this time from Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Proyección en Tijuana* (“Tijuana projection”) created for inSITE2000, recalls that her participation in the artwork was indeed transformational. *Proyección* was a live event during which women participants had an opportunity to speak publicly using the artist’s innovative head-mounted camera and microphone.

A round and cropped projection of each woman's face and voice was projected live from the apparatus onto the external surface of the OMNIMAX theater at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. For one woman, the artwork's methods offered an opportunity to address the silence of her own family-based trauma. She described how she planned and delivered her statement, and later followed it with effective and transformative therapy that she had initiated on her own. In contrast, another participant recalled somewhat ruefully how she thought that Wodiczko had focused on her facial scar and had unduly prioritized abuse stories. Her comments suggest that the use of women's testimony in the context of inSITE could be measured against Alice Driver's formulation of "ecotestimonios" in the border region—creative markers that are both personal and networked to specific and symbolic features like geographies.³⁹ They could be the pink crosses that are found dotting the streets and empty lots in cities like Ciudad Juárez, or documentaries that enable women to speak specifically about their perspectives on circumstances or causes of gender discrimination and violence. These locally responsive and geographically sited artistic markers function not just to make memorial utterances or abuse testimony, but also to provide public evidence and grounded analysis of gender-based violence inside Mexican border cities where law enforcement fails. *Echo's* isolated utterances by women who are reflecting on their inSITE experiences sound a little less like evidence for public accountability, and more like audible and persistent gossip in the wind. Still, the women's voices quietly and effectively situate artists' desire to author forms of social transformation as something ethically unstable albeit recurring—not just through inSITE's multiple iterations, but also in the expansion of social art practices.⁴⁰ *Echo* returns to the artworks the ethics and accountability of situatedness.

Tijuana's sunburnt OMNIMAX globe remains at Centro Cultural Tijuana, long after Wodiczko's ephemeral live art project was completed. Extant photos of the orb with women's faces projected onto it are eerily similar to *N'TOO's* rounded and embossed shape. Each one inanimate and circular, they project living testimony through disembodied sounds that we register as women talking. Revealing the complexity in representing women's voices in specific geographies, they also point to the function of subject-object instability in art. Following McMillan's theorization of an embodied and dissenting avatar, both artworks are listening specifically for utterances of dissent or unruly liveliness that embody the seemingly unpeopled archives of defunct art festival sites or AI data sets. Holding its own archive, *N'TOO* is not only driven by the fear of oblivion but by the exclusionary politics of archives and data sets. By recording personal family history into an AI system, Dinkins is not only a subject of the archive but also an enabler of it as a site of resistance and activism. In *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, Kate Eichhorn reminds us that "the archive is not necessarily a destination or an impenetrable barrier, but rather a site and practice integral to knowledge making, cultural production and activism."⁴¹ Eichhorn contextualizes this resistance with neoliberalism's austerity:

If we have become more interested in the archive both as subject of inquiry and creative locus for activism and art during the past two decades, then such interest is owing in part to the archive's ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism—not history itself but rather the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally and, more important, the conviction that we might, once again, be agents of change in time and history.⁴²

The convergence of advanced computational systems and neoliberal economics in accelerated forms frames Dinkins's practice. In 2014 Dinkins took up a conversation with Bina48, the first

Black female robot. It had been created for Bina and Martine Rothblatt of Terasem Movement Foundation. The resulting video-based artwork, *Conversations with Bina48*, replays face-to-face encounters in which the bot is asked about things such as racism, faith, family, human-robot relations, and even robots' rights. Dinkins is seen positioned at Bina48's eye level, closely watching and mimicking the robot's gestures while exaggerating her own tone and inflection in a kind of dialogical cognitive modeling. Contributing in this way to Bina48's function launched what Dinkins described as "a rabbit-hole of questions about the future and an examination of the codification of social, cultural, and future histories at the intersection of technology, race, gender, and social equity."⁴³ Based on Bina Rothblatt's recorded memories and modeled after her appearance, Bina48 serves both as offspring for a same-sex, interracial couple, and as a promise for a kind of immortality.⁴⁴ *N'TOO*, in contrast, offers an interactive memoir of family as a form of resistance rather than escapism. Supporting Eichhorn's feminist vision, *N'TOO*'s archival impulse contrasts with the individual desire for transcendence manifest in Terasem's Bina48.

In reflecting on her own family history, Dinkins holds on to memories of her grandmother's garden to situate her politics and her practice as artist and producer of knowledge. The garden "made space" for Dinkins's family back in the 1940s when the family relocated from the South to a mostly white borough of Staten Island.⁴⁵ The garden soon became a site of reunion and sharing, where Dinkins also learned to be an artist. Inspired by this family experience, Dinkins invited women's voices from her family to form an AI system that could function as a living archive of a Black American family, a repository that could keep family history alive. Voices such as these also comprise *Secret Garden* (2021), an artwork that functions as an immersive website and gallery exhibition. In its gallery form, visitors enter a room where they are surrounded by a dynamic and responsive projection featuring six Black female avatars in a lush garden environment. There are six women talking who are heard variously recounting experiences from pivotal moments for Black Americans: transatlantic displacement during slavery, precarious but resilient land ownership during Jim Crow, the use of gardening for sustenance and cultural survival, and moving forward futuristically to a Black women's subjectivity inside an AI system. Dinkins describes in the trailer how listening to women talking is the primary methodology behind the work: "*Secret Garden* was imagined as a space of listening. We're giving you something to look at, but really the task is to get folks to listen. And what we really, really wanted was for people to listen congregationally."⁴⁶

In keeping with a practice of inserting, "community knowledge, craft, and the vernacular to shape AI ecosystems,"⁴⁷ Dinkins invites people to develop their own *N'TOO*. Something like a gardener, and another woman talking, Dinkins includes instructions on how to build/grow robots:

How to make a robot from scratch:

Getting Started:

Learn TensorFlow

Test deep writing neural network using Toni Morrison's *Sula* as data

Interview source subjects (create data)

Test deep writing networks (algorithmic) options

Make algorithmic output make sense

Record more interviews

Record more interviews

Develop more incisive questions

Record more questions

Recruit POC programmers, technologies to join team
Master TensorFlow⁴⁸

These words, pictured on Dinkins's website alongside the descriptions of *N'TOO*, offer a poetic online intervention in deliberate contrast to the "concealment and obfuscation" of surveillance capitalism.⁴⁹ They both invite interventions into AI development by racialized and otherwise excluded people and communities, and anticipate that diverse and community-based involvement will transform the trajectory of data-driven and surveillance technologies.

CONCLUSION

When virtual assistants are activated on our phones and in our cars and homes, what we hear are automated women's voices, speaking in ways that come off as commanding and indifferent. Like so many manufactured voices in personal electronic devices, the virtual assistant expects our cooperation. Against this surrounding of ambient demands, this essay has turned up the fragmented and manufactured voices in *Echo* and *N'TOO* to show how each disrupts and dissents from the ways that race and gender are produced and experienced through sound and listening. Together these works propose methodological approaches for addressing systemic racism and colonialism through art. By way of the specific sites of inequity these artworks compel audiences to make sense of incomplete utterances—a condition of women talking through and against the given production of race and gender. Much as in Lee Maracle's kitchen, both artworks expect us to listen and process what is hard to hear or hard to apprehend. This includes the instrumental and lingering impact of artists engaging in social development and the way generational knowledge in racialized families demands accountability in tech development, as well as the way systemic racism is experienced and articulated.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We are borrowing this phrase from the novel of the same name by Miriam Toews. *Women Talking* highlights the specificity of dissenting speech in a space of oppression as experienced by illiterate Plautdietsch-speaking women in a Mennonite community in Bolivia. Describing an exceptional circumstance that is loosely based on alleged events, the novel speaks about the way dominant power—in the case of the book's story, patriarchal and religious dominance—is subject to the insurgence of women talking. It is the pattern of dissenting voices—even beyond ascribed

gender—against pervasive oppression in the novel that reflects creative methodological possibilities for us. Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

² Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 280.

³ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Sexual Cultures (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

⁴ Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (70) (May 1, 2009): 191.

⁵ Stó:lō Nation is a Coast Salish Nation, as are the three host nations of Vancouver, where we are located. We acknowledge the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

⁶ Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians* (Toronto: BookThug, 2017), 7.

⁷ In this chapter, Maracle addresses Canadian tendencies that could fall under the descriptions, “conscientization” and “at risk-ing / asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples,” which comprise some of the “settler moves to innocence” that have been formulated by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, no. 1, vol. 1, (September 8, 2012), 4; Maracle, 127–132.

⁸ At the time of writing this essay, public announcements from First Nations of unmarked grave sites adjacent to sites of former Indian Residential Schools (IRS) made listening and “amplifying Indigenous voices” an appropriate response for non-Indigenous Canadians. The urgency of this work was articulated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008–2015), *Calls to Action* #71–76. Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs, “Missing Children and Burial Information,” Guide, April 23, 2018, <https://www.rcaanc-cimac.gc.ca/eng/1524504992259/1557512149981>. On June 30, 2021, the day before Canada Day, multiple mainstream Canadian broadcasters adopted “A Day to Listen: Amplifying Indigenous Voices” as programmed by the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund, <https://downiewenjack.ca/a-day-to-listen/>.

⁹ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

¹⁰ The nine artworks examined in *Echo* are iconic in the inSITE legacy: Gustavo Artigas, *The Rules of the Game/Las reglas del juego* (2000), Marcos Ramírez ERRE, *Toy an Horse* (1997), Christina Fernández, *Arrivals and Departures/Llegadas y salidas* (1997), Thomas Glassford and José Parral, *La esquina/Jardines de Playas de Tijuana (The Corner/Tijuana Beach Gardens)* (2005), Silvia Gruner, *Godesses* (1994), Itzel Martínez del Cañizo, *Ciudad Recuperación (Recovery City)*, 2005, SIMPARCH, *Dirty Water Initiative* (2005), Javier Téllez, *One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)* (2005), and Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Tijuana Projection/Proyección en Tijuana* (2001).

¹¹ *Rastos/Traces* (2012) presents durational video footage of the Tijuana side of the border wall while Montezemolo’s voice is heard reflecting on its subjectivity. *Bio-cartography of Tijuana’s Cultural Scene* (2006) is presented as a digital archive with Montezemolo’s analysis of the conditions of art curation and production in Tijuana at the time.

¹² An excerpt from the English subtitles used in the spoken Spanish sections of Montezemolo, *Echo*.

¹³ With the economic development brought on by the signing of NAFTA in 1994, the growth of maquiladoras in the region furthered much-needed social mobility opportunities to a burgeoning female workforce while unleashing targeted and brutal gender, racial, and economic violence.

Traumatic representations from the region circulated widely through journalism and creative media, including countless documentaries and artworks focusing on feminicide in particular. The widespread circulation of the English term to describe conditions in the border city Ciudad Juárez prompted Marcela Lagarde to use the Spanish term “feminicidio” to emphasize the patriarchal function underlying the violence. Nathalie Hallberg, “El feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez, México” (University of Stockholm, 2012), <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:536001/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

¹⁴ Notable was *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* at the Metropolitan Museum (New York) in 1990. It deployed discourses on 1920s Mexican nationalist art to promote transnational relations now in the context of NAFTA. “Will for Form,” a foreword text for the exhibition catalogue penned by Octavio Paz, not only confirmed the project’s alliance with the privatization of cultural sectors that was being enacted by President Salinas, but also defined Mexico as a cultural and economic bridge between North and South America. Octavio Paz, “Will for Form,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries / The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. (New York: The Museum; Little, Brown, 1990). For a historical overview of cultural policies in the Americas see Claire F. Fox, *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Ingram Digital E-Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 11–12.

¹⁷ Carroll, 284.

¹⁸ Carroll, 255.

¹⁹ *Stephanie Dinkins: Oral History as Told by AI*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLLdiEMOmGs>.

²⁰ Yves Béhar et al., “Five Artificial Intelligence Insiders in Their Own Words,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/business/five-artificial-intelligence-insiders-in-their-own-words.html>.

²¹ Florida, 157.

²² A recent event that brought together various disciplines including history, computer science, anthropology, internet studies, and African American studies to address ethical issues in AI was *2020 Artificial Intelligence and Ethics: A Panel Discussion with Stephanie Dick, Paul Dourish, Safiya Nobel, and moderator D. Fox Harrell*, MIT STS Program, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjYvx_xidF4&t=179s.

²³ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020); and Shalini Kantayya, *Coded Bias*, ([New Jersey]: 7th Empire Media Chicken & Egg Pictures, JustFilms - Ford Foundation, 2020), documentary.

²⁴ Jer Thorpe, “Tech and the Fine Art of Complicity.” Knight Foundation, February 21, 2018, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/tech-and-the-fine-art-of-complicity>.

²⁵ Stephanie Dinkins, “AI.ASSEMBLY – ‘What does AI need from you?,” accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/aiassembly.html>.

²⁶ *Stephanie Dinkins: Oral History as Told by AI*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLLdiEMOmGs>.

²⁷ For more on the history of racialization through technologies of surveillance, see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

²⁸ McMillan, 24.

²⁹ McMillan, 7.

³⁰ McMillan, 51. By way of a context, McMillan earlier brings into focus the conflation of the duplicitous nature of nineteenth-century automaton entertainment and the concurrent popularity of blackface minstrelsy. McMillan, 48–49.

³¹ McMillan, 59.

³² In the presentation “Oral History as Told by AI,” Dinkins described how projects like *N'TOO* and *Project al-Khwarizmi*, which rely on oral history, raise issues of data sovereignty for Black communities that must be addressed with the people and communities involved as a component of the projects themselves. *Stephanie Dinkins: Oral History as Told by AI*.

³³ Maracle, 143.

³⁴ Canclini’s formulation of postmodern cultural hybridity worked to theorize potential Mexican cultural contributions in the shared and potentially hybridized economic and cultural union with the US and Canada that NAFTA promised. In retrospect Canclini reflected on how any potential for hybridized postmodern culture at the border was overshadowed by the reality of how NAFTA had produced a disintegration of governance, particularly in the zones for low-wage manufacturing on the Mexico side of the border. Fiamma Montezemolo, “Tijuana: Hybridity and Beyond: A Conversation with Nestor Garcia Canclini,” *Third Text* 23, no. 6 (November 2009): 748.

³⁵ Fiamma Montezemolo, “Eco, Narciso y los procesos fronterizos,” *Letras Libres*, 2005, <http://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/eco-narciso-y-los-procesos-fronterizos>.

³⁶ *Echo* describes artworks that produced artist-initiated services for communities as ways to distribute artists’ ingenuity more equitably in the face of deprivation. SIMPARCH’s *Dirty Water Initiative* was a DIY water filtration system that was designed to provide clean water using solar purification and using low-cost or found materials. *Echo* reveals how the system was impossible to maintain, despite the creators’ aims to produce a free and sustainable solution.

³⁷ Even in 2019, Jennie Klein reviewed several projects from inSITE_05 with the analysis that the featured works, including SIMPARCH’s *Dirty Water Initiative* (see note 36) had offered a “model [that] is about long-term and thoughtful engagement with the community.” Jennie Klein, “Sustainable Practices on the US-Mexico Border: inSITE_05, Intervention, and Precarious Communities,” in *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas*, ed. Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, Contemporary Performance InterActions (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), 197.

³⁸ Carroll, 255.

³⁹ Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 118.

⁴⁰ As evidence of the expansion of social practice since the inSITE years, all of the 2021 Turner Prize shortlisted artists are practitioners of the genre. Kate Brown, “For the First Time Ever, the Turner Prize Shortlist Is Comprised Entirely of Socially Engaged Art Collectives,” *Artnet News*, May 7, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/turner-prize-2021-shortlist-art-collectives-1965935>.

⁴¹ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (2014; repr., n.p.: American Literatures Initiative, 2014), 3.

⁴² Eichhorn, 6.

⁴³ *Lecture in Photography: Stephanie Dinkins*, MoCP, Columbia College Chicago, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/398133212>.

⁴⁴ Terasem's *Lifenaut* project offers its subscribers the service of transferring consciousness to robots through networked databases. The organization's "spacecasting" service further promises perpetuity by broadcasting "bemes" of personalized data to satellite storage in space. LifeNaut, <https://www.lifenaut.com/>.

⁴⁵ *AI, Small Data and Oral Histories: Stephanie Dinkins at Eyeo 2019*, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/354277038>.

⁴⁶ Stephanie Dinkins, *Secret Garden*, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.onx.studio/secret-garden>.

⁴⁷ *AI, Small Data and Oral Histories: Stephanie Dinkins at Eyeo 2019*.

⁴⁸ Stephanie Dinkins, *Not the Only One (N'TOO)*, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html>.

⁴⁹ Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action," *New Labor Forum: A Journal of Ideas, Analysis and Debate* (blog), January 22, 2019, <https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2019/01/22/surveillance-capitalism/>.

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