

A conversation between Martine Syms & Jenna Wortham

By MartineSyms

This conversation was recorded on January 24th, 2018, over the phone, between Brooklyn and Las Vegas. It was transcribed and later edited for this page. In preparation for their "Dialogue," Martine Syms and Jenna Wortham received a series of questions from the editors of Sublevel, these prompts were tailored to their mutual interests in language, new technologies, pop culture, and the speculative at large...

Jenna Wortham: Hello.

Martine Syms: Hi, how's it going?

JW: It's good. How are you?

MS: I'm good.

JW: Sorry, I'm opening windows in my apartment because it is unseasonably warm here and so rather than freak out about what that means for the planet, I'm just trying to get this open and enjoy it.

MS: Work with it [laughter].

JW: Kind of work with it. How are you?

MS: I'm good. I'm sequestered on mini-residency [laughter] in Las Vegas.

JW: Oh whoa.

MS: So I am just in this hotel room writing.

JW: Cool. And what's in Las Vegas, so far.

MS: Well, it's a place I really don't like, and [both laugh] I continue having that opinion, so I'm just here, being productive. I chose it because I knew I wouldn't do anything but work.

JW: Yeah. That's real. That's smart though.

MS: I went to the Neon Museum yesterday though, which was pretty cool.

JW: Cool.

MS: That's all, being a freak...

JW: [laughter] So how should we do this?

MS: I'm cool to use these questions as a prompt and we can just talk about each one, or...that seems fine to me.

JW: Okay.

MS: I have them in front of me. I went through them the other day, last Tuesday, so I wouldn't be totally like, "Ahhhh." I just wrote these weird little notes.

JW: Yeah, yeah, me too. But my notes are separate so I can't remember which is the first question.

MS: The first one was, "do you think language is common ground for its speakers?"

JW: Do you want to start or do you want me to start?

MS: Sure, I can start. Well at first I was thinking yes. Quite simply, if you speak the same language as someone, there's some level of understanding. But then for a while, my work has been about these working definitions that people have of words or concepts so that you can be saying the same thing, but not at all meaning or thinking the same thing. So in some ways, I feel like, no, it's really not a common ground. Or it is a common ground, but I don't know if that means as much as we think it does.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: And one other thing I'm thinking about is black slang as a kind of like Internet lingua-franca that—

JW: Yes! We're gonna talk about this.

MS: —everyone uses.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

MS: That everyone uses, but they're coming from very different places or uses of it, and I'm interested in how it becomes this default way of communicating digitally. What characteristics of this kind of vernacular fits this form?

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: Whether it's Twitter or text or, you know, there's something about that form that just has found such a home in this vernacular, and it's kind of a weird. My encounter of it depending on who's speaking. I was just talking about this because I was getting my hair done the other day, and we were watching the Golden Globes—this Golden Globes was a lot about feminism and time's up, and me too—and we were watching it and the Oprah speech. You know, we were just kind of talking, I was getting my hair done for a few hours, one thing we talked about was Cardi B. She was talking about someone at work quoting Cardi B's song to her, and we were likening

it to Missy Elliot, when people used to say—I'm blanking on the name of the song right now—but, whenever I would get my hair done and then go to work, somebody would be like, “You got your hair did.” Like in that Missy Elliot song [laughter].

JW: Oh.

MS: And we were talking about Bodak Yellow being a similar experience, obviously functioning very differently in terms of how it circulates, but then if you're a black woman—and in both instances, we're talking about white gay men saying this to us—this ‘common language’ feels different. That was a long... [laughter].

JW: No, it was perfect. I love it. Martine, I love your brain. I love listening to your brain unravel like this. I feel like I should be taking notes. You teach, right? You're such a teacher.

MS: Yeah.

JW: You brought up so many things that I've been thinking about too, especially in regards to the Golden Globes, I think watching the outcome of Oprah's speech—the Oprah for president hashtag, “Oprah 2020”— I think saying X person for president is a type of Internet vernacular and slang that somehow became imbued with political meaning. There was a very quick jump to “Oprah is amazing. Oprah is perfect. Oprah is wonderful.” I think there was this almost performative sense of taking it to the next step, mostly by white viewers and white people, and there was a difference in the way black people were talking about Oprah running for president versus how white people were talking about Oprah running for president. And the truth is that Oprah does not need to clean up America's mess, she is already president. She's doing her own thing. She is creating her own empire. She's got a planet.

MS: Yeah.

JW: But there is a way in which it depends on who's doing the looking and the listening, the reading and speaking. We can be all using the same language, but it has very different meaning for the speakers and the listeners.

But when I first heard that question, I was thinking a lot about how there's so much language that isn't spoken. I thought about dancing, I'm really into movement. I have pretty chronic back problems from being a waitress for a long time—and so every day, when I wake up, I have to think “what are my body's capabilities today?” “Do I have to get acupuncture?” If I want to go out dancing, for example, I have to get acupuncture so I can drop it low.

There are things I have to do [laughter] so that my body can talk, you know? It's a long way of saying too, I've started to really become aware in the last couple years about how much my body talks to me. And if I don't listen, when my back starts to ache a little bit, basically, it's a warning. If I don't heed it then it becomes a yell. Then it's something I really have to deal with.

Yeah, so that's something interesting to think about: what language isn't spoken. There's so much in Internet vernacular and especially black Internet English that is, there is a term from [an essay](#) by Manuel Arturo Abreu... it's the idea that there are words that circulate online that have different meanings and a lot of them are cribbed from black culture or what people think of as black culture, I guess.

Don't you think that emojis are a really interesting example of how language is, and isn't, common ground? I'm always amazed when I find out that somebody uses an emoji—

MS: Yeah, I know.

JW: —exclusively for one thing and then there are some emojis that, you know, like peach means juicy booty, we all kind of get that. But the one with the grin face, the one with the grill exposed—it's like an oval with a grate—some people use that for grinning. I think of it as a grimace, but a lot of people use it for cheesing, like a cheesing grin which I can't understand—

MS: Totally.

JW: —because I'm so used to thinking about it as an expression of extreme frustration or pain. And that is so bizarre because we all have access to the same thing, but we're looking at it so individually. That's something I've been thinking about a lot.

MS: I really love talking to people about their communication style while on different platforms because I'm always like, “Wait what does this one mean to you?” Amongst certain friends maybe a certain emoji means something else. You're talking about the juicy booty, but I think of the wave as a purely hook-up emoji.

JW: Wait, wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. What are you talking about? What do you mean?

Martine, no, what do you mean? The wave is my favorite emoji.

MS: It depends on who it is, but the wave...no, no, the hand waving.

JW: Oh.

MS: Like a “hey.”

JW: Like a hey. Hey.

MS: Yeah.

JW: Okay. Oh that's cute. I like that. But the wave, that little hand is a really intimate gesture. I use the hang ten one a lot too. For waving, you know?

MS: Yeah, I use that one.

JW: I love the hang ten one. That's really a good one too—

MS: Yeah.

JW: —because, I mean, we're talking about how language is appropriated and how it travels beyond culture and beyond demographics and that hang ten is so specific. A hang ten is really, really, really specific to surf culture, to Hawaii. And I have no problem using it, so I don't know

what that says about me, but [laughter] yeah.

MS: What you were saying about what's unspoken, is the crux of a lot of what I was thinking about for the past two years, maybe a little longer than that now. First very theoretically, then very intensely with my body, through working out and dancing and doing all these movement workshops. I started playing soccer again which I played all growing up through high school and then I stopped for a long time. I joined a team in the fall. And I just did this acting workshop for directors a couple weeks ago that was all about taking feelings and putting them into movement. It was really interesting: There was a group of 16 of us and the woman who ran 'the lab,' as she calls it, would be like, "Okay: anger." And in an immediate way we would all start performing anger, physically, you know? Stamping feet, changing your grimace, getting lower to the ground and I kept wondering, is this quote unquote, "universal" or is it because that's how we see anger looking. I have a nephew that's nine months old and has been learning facial expressions, but I can tell he's just copying what other people are doing. He's like, "oh, when something good happens people make this face." It's a smile. "Something bad happens, they make this face."

As we were doing these movements, there was what I would maybe call a consensus if not universality. There were some words that would get called out that we couldn't do...I'm trying to think of one that came up. Ecstasy? No ecstasy I think we were able to do.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: But there were some that were more like "I don't know. How do you do this one?" And then that same weekend I also went to see Ligia Lewis's performance *Minor Matters* at RedCat. Have you seen it?

JW: No. I'm going to Google it now though. Oh okay.

MS: It's so amazing. I've been wanting to see it for a while but I kept missing it when it was in LA. But what I really appreciated about it was that there's a real athleticism to it and the physical rigor involved in athletics. It's something I've been thinking about a lot. I've been playing and watching a lot of sports lately. There was a harshness to the movement and this incredible visceral moment where all of the dancers were climbing on top of each other, creating structures. And then moving together...

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: It was a really interesting, I guess going back to our question, it was a really interesting metaphor for common ground, they were making crazy assemblages that looked like they hurt, or like there was a kind of pain associated with them, they were kind of clunky, there was a force, but there was this consensus or assembly that happened to move it forward.

JW: Right.

MS: Yeah, it was really compelling. From the beginning to the end I was like, "Oh my God, what are they...? What's gonna happen?" And having the context of this 'lab' that I had just done, I was very moved by it.

JW: Mm-hmm. I was thinking, one thing I wanted to bring into this conversation, is Renee Gladman.

Have you ever read any of her books or?

MS: Yeah. Yeah. She teaches at Bard.

JW: Yeah. I think a lot about it: How movement is a language in a lot of her work, especially in the series she writes about this fictional city, or country, called Ravicka and the Ravickians. There are four books now in the series and they all take place from a different perspective. One is from a traveler who is trying to research the area. One is an artist living in the area. There's so much about how the language and the city and everything, are so insular. And it's difficult to ever know them. In the book I read, *The Event Factory*, the city is always changing too, so the city itself has a language: things are disappearing, things are re-emerging and people are trying to study it and understand what the city is communicating. But the books are so funny because, for example, the movement for asking for soap is very similar to "eff you" so one character never takes a bath. And the town is defined by having yellow air, but a novelist who lives there reveals that "yellow is a mistranslation of another word." The most definitive thing about this city is that it has yellow air, but you don't even know if it actually is 'yellow'. It's just really interesting. I feel like it's a very clever book in terms of rethinking how we know what we know, rethinking language and the way it moves. As well as our understanding and interpretation of what a language, movement, an expression, an emotion, is.

MS: Yeah.

JW: This is why therapy's amazing, because when you were talking about performing anger, that's actually *not* how I express my anger. My anger is either very interior, or explosive. It's so funny that we know what we are supposed to do when someone tells us "anger," but that's probably not at all how we express anger.

MS: What we actually do, yeah [laughter]. So true.

We can agree that this is what it's supposed to look like, but there's a kind of infiniteness and uncertainty to the feeling itself. I think that's really interesting.

JW: Uh-huh.

MS: In Renee's work, or other work that I've been looking at, there is...instability.

I'm working on this new project and I'm going through all these old notebooks and it's cracking me up. There are some parts where I wrote about my anger response, and it's to be distant, standoffish, and cold. Which is a really hard thing to try and perform: I'm being angry, and Erin's like, "You're not moving" [laughter].

This is me being angry.

JW: This is what it looks like.

MS: Yeah, exactly.

I'm also thinking a lot about repetition as a device that creates instability, but also creates stability in how it's used aesthetically. Like what you're saying about *Event Factory* or the Ravickians. How when we're within a narrative, repetition is a requirement for you to follow the story, for there to be a character, for there to be a location you have to keep saying that so everyone can follow you. But then you can change it or open it up like, "yellow is not the right word." So now I don't even know that what I thought this whole time was true, and I'm really interested in the kind of affect, that that produces.

JW: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

MS: These are works that are presenting me with an experience that I can relate to, or that resonates with me, is all I'm saying.

JW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. We can go to the next question which is—I wonder if we'll have a similar answer to this, I feel like maybe we will—"What is a contemporary phenomenon around language that you think is interesting?"

MS: Shall I start [laughter]?

JW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS: Okay. I've been doing a [radio show](#) for the past six months. I think about six months.

JW: Uh-huh.

MS: It's a talk radio show.

JW: Cool.

MS: I started it thinking I wanted to get better at editing audio. It was really simple: I'll just do the thing every month, so I'll have to edit all this audio. But it's made me extremely attuned because I do craft it, it's very edited. I could let it play out more but I shape it. It's made me really attuned to Californian speech patterns because that's what I'm editing. It's in LA and we're driving around, I record somebody picking me up and we go for a drive, maybe we'll go get food or go to a specific place and talk in the car about driving and navigating. But the way that people talk... I grew up in Southern California. I talk this way.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: I lived in Chicago for a really long time though, and it changed my speech pattern because I had to talk differently in order to be understood. People would literally not understand what I was saying or they would cut me off, I wouldn't be able to finish my sentences. Various things have changed the way that I talk, but in this environment, listening to myself and listening to everyone else I'm like, "Oh my God, why does everyone talk so fucking slowly [laughter]?"

The spaces between words, or the pauses, are so specific. Both of my parents were from St. Louis, so I always knew I had an accent when I would go there with my family and other people would be like, "What is your accent?" But listening to hours of tapes of Californian speech

patterns has been very interesting to me, and I interview a lot of women, so the feminine, what sounds feminine as well...

There was one *New York Times* article about this once, and *This American Life* did an episode of it too.

JW: Yeah.

MS: I've been very interested in this kind of communication. Like directing, when I'm on a set or if I'm working on a job, I completely change the way that I talk to sound very definitive. My natural way of speaking is really loose. I don't finish my sentences. But whenever I get a work thing, I'm like, "Yes." "No." "Go over there." "This is what I want."

JW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

MS: I project absolute certainty and there's no way you can misunderstand what I'm saying right now. So I guess I've been thinking a lot about that. Then the nature of the show is a lot of navigation talk, you know, like that joke on Saturday Night Live that's like: "101 to the 105..."

JW: Yes!

MS: "...and then you take the 40..."

JW: The Californians. "Then you turn left." Yeah, yeah. Yeah. It's the best skit because it's real. I was in California and a friend was texting me—I was there during the fires...

MS: Yeah.

JW: ...the Santa Ana winds and the wildfires, and a friend was like, "Here's how you're going to get to the airport." She basically sent me two pages of directions, and then was like: "Unless..." and, "do this, do that, do this." I was cracking up. She had never heard the Californians and I was like you have to watch this skit because you are really doing this thing right now.

MS: That's how I found out about it.

JW: Really? Oh my God, that's so good [laughter]. But I think that skit appeals to me because it is so accurate but at the same time, that's a way of communicating knowledge and care. LA in particular is a city that defies logic. I don't understand how things work there. I mean, New York is similar, in the sense that it's a complex and dense and computationally very *advanced* city. But if you don't know your way around LA, if you don't understand how the roads work, it is actually really detrimental to the experience of your time there. So there's something about just giving directions that is a form of care-taking to me. Which sounds bizarre to say out loud but, um [laughter], but I don't know.

MS: No, but it's true. It's the difference between an hour and four hours sometimes, quite literally.

JW: Yes. absolutely, it's like someone needs to help you understand how this city functions and

operates on its own temporal patterns. So...

It's interesting because I speak very informally too and I've been encouraging myself to do it more, but it's really hard. As someone who investigates for a job, I don't *always* want to have the answers. It's different for you because you're entering a space saying, "I'm trying to express something, and this is how it's gonna happen." That makes total sense. I want to pitch pieces and I want to be very clear about my intentions, but I also am like, "I don't know where this is gonna go." I want to be more open-ended and not feel like I need to...

MS: Oh yeah me too.

JW: ...which is interesting...

MS: Yeah. Yeah, I notice the switch. I guess I'm gendering it. I'm gendering it right now just in terms of my professional experience, but I noticed a difference in the way that I'm treated [laughter] so I made the decision that I'm gonna sound like: "Don't ask me any questions." "This is how it's gonna go."

And now, I'm trying to be like, can I just be myself? How is that gonna work?

JW: Yeah, that's super real.

When I first read this question I was thinking about a show called *The Magicians* which I feel like you probably watch. Or you would like it.

MS: I haven't been watching any TV shows [laughter].

JW: Okay. If you need a break on your residency, I highly recommend checking it out. It's also a book. You'd love it. It's a Lev Grossman series called *The Magicians* that was picked up by Syfy a few years ago and now it's third season and it's kind of...it's funny, right, because the show is a little bit, um, corny in the way that there's all these special effects and nerds doing magic with their hands, you know. But...

MS: Sounds good.

JW: Yeah, it's so good. But I love it, because, well, for one thing—the books communicate this a little bit better than the TV show, but anyone who can qualify as a magician...basically, it's an adult *Harry Potter*, these kids find out that magic is real and they go to a school called Brakebills and then all this other real world shit that starts to happen around them...but, the thing I like most about the show is that anyone who's a magician is proficient in hundreds of languages because spells come in lots of languages so they have to be able to read, for example, dead Turkish languages in order to figure out how the old studied this thing. And a lot of times, the characters will be speaking, they'll switch between these different languages and they'll show stuff on the screen, and the show doesn't translate it. I find that to be really, really, really empowering because we don't subtitle English, and I think it's really cool that they don't subtitle someone speaking in signs, for example. They started doing it in the last season, but the editions I watched did not have subtitles and they were speaking Arabic or doing sign language, and I was just like, this is baller.

I like the idea—

MS: Yeah.

JW: —that it doesn't privilege one language, or make assumptions about who's watching, and what they need translated. The other thing I like most about the show is, how physical it is. They get tired of doing magic. It's hard for them to make the shapes with their hands. You see them constantly stretching cracking their knuckles and rolling out their wrists. I don't know if that's from the books, I think it's neat though. Like yeah, you're right, making, form-forming, bringing something out of thin air into the world with your hand, should be a lot of work. Anyway, just something that popped into my mind.

MS: No, that's great. I love that. I say that to students a lot. I was teaching a crit class last semester and people use different languages in their work, but then felt like they had to translate it while in the crit. And I'd say "You don't have to tell everybody the English translation." We're still going to get something from it. And I definitely felt that way while traveling. My most recent experience of that was in Seoul in South Korea. I don't speak Korean and I feel like you can get around, you can still communicate with people. Like you were saying—you're gonna have a different experience—I'm going to have a different experience in Seoul than somebody who speaks Korean, but I can still have an experience that is very rich. I can still meet people and move around space and encounter images and sounds.

It's the same thing as not privileging...what am I trying to say? It's being open to the encounter, not knowing, and not privileging any one type of information, or gaining knowledge, over another. You can access or learn in multiple ways and it's not all going to be spoken, a lot of it is not spoken.

JW: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely.

"How is our conversation affected by the space, time, distance between us?"

MS: Well, what I wrote here is really funny which is that, again, I'm reading these journals to write part of this script, and I wrote something to the effect of—I'm talking about the Internet—the line was like, "I've been meeting strangers all my life"...online. But I was thinking about how I've known of you, and your work, for quite a while, I would say a couple years before we met this past summer.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: But I always love when you meet somebody you only knew online, and it's just like no beat. I hate it when I meet someone and we both know each other online, but there's this weird pause of like, "And you are?" "And what do you do?" "And who..?" And you're like, "come on, man. We *know* each other" [laughter].

JW: Yes.

MS: Quit playing. Why are you pretending right now? Why are you trying to...

JW: Quit playing to my face. Exactly.

MS: Yeah, yeah, so I love that it was just like, “Oh, what's up?”

JW: I know. I love that too.

MS: I love when that happens because it's the same thing about not privileging one experience over the other.

Don't get me wrong. On record: I do believe people need to meet each other face-to-face, to have deep relationships, and spend quality time together. But I've met so many very close friends that I initially didn't know, we did not meet in quote unquote “real life.” We met on the Internet. Um, which I guess *is* my real life but, yeah.

[crosstalk]

JW: I have a lot of relationships that...I'm sorry Martine, what was... what was that?

MS: No, go for it. Go for it.

JW: Oh no. Well, it's kind of funny because there's a little bit of a delay, and that's also... Sometimes you'll pause, and I'm like oh, okay. And then I'm like, oh wait no, she's not done... If we were face to face it would be easier, I would be able to see more cues.

MS: Right.

JW: But I don't know. I love having relationships that just exist online. I have so many DM-specific relationships and I used to feel the need to try and translate them into real-world components or that they had to have this analog element in order for them to feel more...I don't know... that they needed to migrate out of one space, and into another in order to be more valid. And now I have so many chat room friendships and I have so many group chats that I'm in where I don't even try...Sometimes people will suggest we all meet up and I'm like, “I'm kind of good though. I love our relationship.” If I can go, I will, but I don't feel like I'm missing out by not having that.

MS: Yeah.

JW: But then it is really wonderful when we do all link up, and there is such intimacy and familiarity that I think really benefits from having that interstitial, never-ending, lazy river of a conversation. That makes me really happy. That's the thing I'm always sort of surprised by too, you know, in relationships. I don't think I used to talk this much to people I was dating, but now I sort of love it. I always want to see what you're doing, what your day is like, what you're looking at online. I'm like “show me everything.” We should always be in communication even when we're not together and I feel really— I don't know. It's, it's a strange feeling, but it's also good.

I just love being able to talk to people all the time online. And then sometimes you don't, sure, but yeah.

MS: Yeah. I have been increasingly the opposite [laughter].

JW:

Really?

Well, yeah. I mean, I also think you're probably having a lot more interactions with just yourself. Part of me being okay with relegating some of the relationships to texts is that I needed to think more, I needed to be inside my own head more.

MS: Yeah.

JW: Especially in a city like New York, that's just so dense with people.

MS: Yes, oh my God.

JW: I was constantly moving from face to face to face. I'm just so much more in tune with, you know...I had to read this morning before I got out of bed. I had to think. This is going to sound terrible, but if I'm always making content for other people to consume, then I'm never making time for myself to consume and digest.

MS: No, 100%.

I think that's a big part of it for me as well, I love a deep, immersive contemplation of a subject, you know? And I just start to feel like there was a lot of talk but I wasn't getting anything from it. And that's not true of everyone. But in my primary engagement, I would get all these tidbits of information, but not really know what the thing was about. I think the term is "ambient awareness" and I didn't like it. If I'm interested in something, I want to really get into it and learn about it.

JW: Yeah.

MS: Exactly. And also the pace...as somebody also making stuff, I was feeling an urgency to everything...

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: ...the push of "I did a thing last week, what's the next thing"... I wanted to get rid of that feeling as well.

I was like, I don't think I should tell the whole world...

JW: Yeah.

I think that's a big part of it too, as someone who's trying to produce original thinking and original art and original aesthetics, that makes total sense to me.

I agree that the climate of social media doesn't help the feeling of needing to turn things out. It has definitely sped up the pace of expectations, of presence, of just being present, of having thoughts, of having seen something. You know, it's like I'm still digesting things I saw months ago. I don't have anything to say about it yet. I'm learning to respect that pacing and I'm learning to resist it because I still spend so much time on social media. The answer for me, is not to let go of technology that has a pace my system can't keep up with, but to practice internal

refusing.

For example, today's the Women's March or the anniversary of the Women's March and there are a lot of people posting about their feelings from a year ago and I was in a panic earlier, because I didn't prepare anything. It's like I'm in school, there's a constant anxiety, right? There's a test. I didn't study for it. It makes me feel that way sometimes. But I'm also understanding that as much as that feeling can arise, I can cultivate this other feeling such as, "Yeah, I'd love to read all these things. I don't have anything to contribute and there's no value or judgment based on that. But I can just really appreciate..."

Also, this is something I wrote that I wanted to bring up to you: I think there's a really interesting phenomena happening online where people are treating Instagram more like LiveJournal, like a blog with pictures and I think it's awesome. I have been waiting for this moment. I wish it were not on Instagram, I wish it were on a different platform.

MS: [laughter] I want to bring back the blog.

JW: I'm so happy that blogging's coming back. Long live the personal blog.

MS: Me too.

JW: Because I always want to know what people are feeling. I love it.

MS: Yeah, LiveJournal was my formative Internet experience. I'm just trying to get back to my first love.

I like figuring out different ways of using technology. But I also think a lot about my intimacy with technology. I'm really good at the computer [laughter].

At setting up my computer and the tools that I use. I'm really fast and I know all the right shortcuts and key commands and I...

JW: Key commands are hot. Hell yeah. Key commands are awesome.

MS: Yeah, I love that. I spend a lot of time editing video, and there's also a render time which is basically the break between really intensive periods of working. I used to have a really crappy computer, so rendering could take me an hour.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: So I'd have these intermittent hour breaks, and I like that type of pace, from intensity to complete slow down, almost to a stop. I've been thinking about it because right now, I'm trying to make an, um, an AI basically—

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: I'm trying to clone myself.

JW:

Cool

MS: And I've been thinking a lot about the idea of the cyborg which is obviously an archetype. It's been an archetype for technological anxiety I suppose for...

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: ...I want to say it was a post-war term coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. I've been thinking about that anxiety itself as it becomes embodied, and what that means in terms of how one uses technology, not just the Internet but also all the devices, and how they change.

JW: Yeah.

MS: All those things. I've been thinking about it as a kind of intimacy, you know? There's this one meme where somebody's lying in the bed with their computer, and it says something like, in 20 years we're all going to be really fucked up. It's already happening to many people I know, myself included. All these kind of physical ailments, due to these weird...

JW: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MS: ...positions of laying on your bed with your computer on your stomach or something.

JW: Oh. Or curled up here with your head on your hand or whatever.

MS: Yeah.

JW: We think of certain things as technology and certain things as not. I think about how we don't look at a television necessarily as "intimate" technology, but it's actually very, very intimate. We spend so much time with it. I think about people who watch TV or people who are watching anything on a screen. I don't know. When we think about what technology is, we think of something really specific and not about advanced infrastructure, for example, or a subway system, or...

MS: Mm-hmm.

JW: It's funny the way certain things are seen as technology. When I think about technology, a lot of times I'm thinking about invisible technology, like algorithms or the broader notion of social media. Because I think that's where I can feel the effect on my life the most. Or maybe I'm noticing a reaction to it or my curiosity around it whereas with other types of technology, even the heat in my apartment, I'm just like, "Yeah, that's great. That's a fine thing to have." I don't know. I'm thinking a lot more about the way we resist or think about what does matter when it comes to a certain type of technology.

MS: There's this really incredible book by Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, it talks about some of these infrastructural technologies, one idea that really stuck with me was that the size of a credit card is a global standard. And how there are commercial standards that get made for trade, that then are adopted everywhere for the sake of selling stuff, but they become intertwined with our lives...

JW: Yeah.

MS: I think really broadly about those ideas, like where do you feel it or where is it visible? Where is it invisible?

Technology is shaping us and that's why I'm really interested in the notion that we panic over like being part-tech. Whereas I'm like: we already are.

JW: Oh we already are. We are. Oh my Gosh.

MS: You guys know that, right? We are.

JW: Yeah, we are. Or somehow it's like we're only augmented if it's affixed to us. I've been thinking a lot about how the technology in *Black Mirror* is so 'wetware', it's so visceral the way it goes into the body: It's a pin that's stuck to your temple or a giant needle going in the side of your head. They make such a big show of the physicality of being implanted with technology. And I'm kind of like, um, it has already happened because we don't leave home without some form of technology whether it's a key card or, you know, all these things that function in different ways to already meld us with some form of machinery. So it's interesting how in a show like that, there's such a display of the melding, you know, the melding process.

MS: Mm-hmm.

JW: It is always amusing to me. It makes me feel that that type of television show, a dystopian look at the ramifications of technology, is more horror than sci-fi in a weird way.

MS: It's that gruesomeness, yeah.

JW: It's the gruesomeness and it's the same moment as in the *Annabelle* movie tropes, or *Hostiles*, the first thing that sets the horror in motion, right? You buy the doll and bring it home, or you get on the wrong bus, or you turn down the wrong road, or you get the thing in your arm... I don't know. I kind of cracks me up.

MS: So true. Yeah.

MS: [crosstalk] it feels so 'Dad' to me.

JW: It feels so what to you?

MS: 'Dad.'

JW: Yeah.

[laughter].

JW: But it's weird because the most recent season of *Black Mirror* is funny because it treats the people and what happens to them, as an outgrowth of progress. I feel like the show is trying to make more of a commentary on capitalism and unregulated companies than on the people

who...you feel bad for the people who don't know any better.

I don't know if you've seen a lot of the episodes but it feels like...

MS: No, I haven't watched it.

JW: Okay. I'll just give you a loose example, no spoilers, even though I love spoilers. But there's...

MS: Yeah, I don't care. You can spoil anything.

JW: Yeah, I know. I love spoilers. I don't care at all. It doesn't ruin anything for me, knowing how things end.

MS: No, me neither.

JW: Okay, cool. There's a scenario in which a company with medical technology that allows people to, well, do all sorts of things really, but they can transport people's consciousnesses. They can put them into other people. They can put them into teddy bears. They can do these things. And the company, of course, is finding these people that are in desperate situations and offer them technology for free. That's a pretty recurring theme throughout most of the episodes.

MS: Okay.

JW: There's some devilish-type person, and it's like "If only there were a solution." And they say "I have one. It's free of charge." And these people are so desperate they're like, "Okay."

MS: Yeah.

JW: Then it all goes to hell. But it's interesting to watch that shift happen where it's no longer—it's not really the technology and it's not even the people, who are desperate, right? Because desperate people make all kinds of decisions. It's sort of these larger shadowy corporations that are taking advantage of the human condition for the sake of a profit. I found that to be a really interesting turn. Um—

MS: Yeah, I'll have to check it. People keep telling me about the "Black Museum" episode. So.

JW: Yeah, I bet you'll enjoy it. It gets a little obvious, I mean, it's like reveng-y, revenge porn-y, but, yeah. It's good. It's good [laughter].

JW: Okay. So should we...we are kind of taking our time with the questions.

MS: Yeah.

JW: Are there one or two that really jump out at you that you want to talk about?

MS: Um, I guess maybe, I'm interested in this: "when does language turn into an image?" I feel like we kind of touched on some of the other things. And obviously, I'd love to hear about "how

you're using language in your work.”

JW: Mm-hmm. That's a good question for you too, so okay. Um, well: “when language is turned into an image, what is the potential in that and what is the risk?” This was the hardest one for me. I don't know what that means, “when language is turned into an image.” What does that mean to you?

MS: Well I was thinking about it in terms of typography, immediately, or a kind of language that is already an image. That already has a form to it. It's funny because I am super into typography [laughter] so from an anthropological framework, I'm really interested in how certain tastes or styles come into prominence and why they get used and what they start to signify. The Neon Museum was literally all types, all signs, and the way the tour guide would describe them was like “in the '40s everything in Vegas was desert themed so we have a lot of North African influenced signs.” He talked about how at first it was all “Wild West” themes, and what that meant, and how the language was pared down on the signs, and which kind of typefaces they would use to conjure that theme. Also, I don't know why I was so surprised, but he was bringing in a lot of the theory from *Learning from Las Vegas*, the Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi book about ‘the decorated shed’ and the ‘duck’ which is a sign in shape/form and I was thinking about how language has a form that's easy to forget, but its shape is bringing a lot of information, about to how you're supposed to read something. Like when something is really letter-spaced, and it's in a sans-serif modernist typeface, it reads as “high end”...

JW: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

MS: ...You know? “Luxury.” And I'm always really fascinated by those codes and the repetition of them; you see it associated with, whatever, Marc Jacobs or whoever... Equinox...

JW: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Oh “that's what luxury things look like.” I don't know. That's what I was thinking about.

It betrayed my interests [laughter].

JW: No, but that's why it's a perfect question for you.

MS: Yeah [laughter].

JW: No that's a really cool. That's a neat way to think about it.

While you were speaking, something that came up for me was, signaling. I'm observing a lot of signaling happening both in physical and not physical spaces that I move in. People signal to each other with images something they're trying to keep hidden, about themselves, about where their politics are, about their virtue and whether or not they can be trusted. Also, living in pretty gentrified areas, or the historically black areas in Brooklyn and watching how restaurants signal what type of clientele is welcome and what clientele is not welcome. I was thinking about the language of protest and refusal and things like that that become images that get passed around. I was rereading *The Sovereignty of Language in Black Culture* by Kevin Quashie, in the book he talks a lot about the images of the Olympic athletes raising their hands in protest.

MS: Yeah.

JW: And how that becomes something that's hard to express in words because it's universal... You know exactly what is happening in that image. That is a type of demonstration that is being replicated in lots of different ways right now. I'm thinking a lot about how we are using images to communicate where we are geo-spacially, geopolitically, geo-emotionally in space right now.

MS: Yeah, absolutely, I'm thinking about that as I'm trying to make this bot talk in a really specific way and part of my interest, as I was talking about earlier, is quote unquote "feminine speech". But I'm also thinking about my friends, and how we have a code for everything, and everybody. Especially when I was younger, in middle school or high school, and sometimes that would function with language, we would be speaking in Spanish, or sometimes it would be this flip between an image and a word. So you could kind of make anything the code, but I like this idea of 'encoding.' It's so true about the signaling, and how that happens a lot of times non-verbally or not even linguistically. Or, you know, going back to the Golden Globes for a second, the kind of coded language that people were using wasn't very coded but—

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: —the subtle messaging of incorporating these hashtags or these ideas or speech patterns. When you're in an environment, how do you project how you want to be read? I guess that's why I'm so interested in clothing too and that comes with my work a lot. You can call it fashion, I guess, or "garb." I think clothing is a key part of signaling belonging or exclusion, or that you're a part of something. The way you wear something, its fit and styling, or wearing something in a quote unquote "improper way" as a way of telling somebody where you stand.

And obviously, that happened in various different histories like gay, queer signaling or, I was really interested in *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, and I just finished reading this other book—*Lovecraft Country*—that's all about using that, how you signal that place belongs to you, as a basis for a sci-fi story.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: Yeah, that's something I'm really interested in as—I'm looking at our questions—a "degraded language" or degraded is not the right word, but how it evolved or how it got so far. That's why I was thinking it was like middle school code, it was absurdist in a way because it would be the first thing you could think about somebody, reduced them to that thing, then maintain that as your image: you start to call somebody 'apple' or something like that and it would not make any sense to anyone else, it barely made sense to you guys, but it worked and you'd try to work with it that way.

I'm interested in that transposing of language-image-text-picture.

JW: I think there are parallels between that kind of freedom you experienced in middle school having the time and energy and excitement around playing and trying to get language to take on new meaning, and what is happening now, too.

The "degraded language" question is really interesting to me because I believe there are more types of literacy than we give credit for. Even knowing key commands is a new type of literacy.

I'm excited about the new languages that we are learning because of technology, and what it means to look at a meme and understand it right away, and what it's riffing off of.

MS: Mm-hmm.

JW: A lot of the humor that's specific to social media and the jokes and references that we see online are a version of what you did with your friends, which a lot of people probably did. I think I did it too. You know, we were kids. There is a sort of imbued historical contextual information in getting that why something is funny or understanding where it comes from.

MS: Yeah.

JW: That really excites me because it makes me feel our brains are faster and that they're adapting and learning and it makes me excited, creatively. I feel like there's going to be a lot of that creative energy going into very specific outlets and I wonder what it will look like when those outlets are left.

MS: I'm so excited for that.

JW: Me too. And it's coming. It's here.

Think about how gross Twitter and Facebook look. Every time I open Facebook, I'm like ugh. I hate it [laughter]. It looks like an old record store. It just looks so busted. Twitter's kind of the same. Except it's continuously refreshing—it's like a water fountain, so I always want to drink a little bit, it's interesting.

But I feel like they're both getting so dated, so fast, and I'm excited to see what else emerges from that.

MS: Definitely. I'm redoing my website right now and I keep saying where's the blog gonna go [laughter]?

JW: Yeah.

MS: What does a blog even mean right now? What does it look like? I'm really thinking about these pre-form, all type, all format, right? Like gif, video, sound, tech, and then how does chronology work? How does—even from a like design perspective, we're really laughing about what that could possibly mean because it's still so fluid.

The way I want to communicate is not being served by the existing platforms.

I feel that so strongly right now, it in many ways: all the tools, my computer, my phone, have not caught up with me yet. We were together, and now I'm somewhere else, and the tools aren't there yet. But that's a great thing, you know? I felt the same way about Vine, or the Vine creators...

JW: They came up with new language. Yeah.

MS: Yeah, they changed fucking cinema. They changed film-making.

JW: Completely.

MS: It blew me away. I'm excited for that to happen in many other ways. And I'm trying to work on it too, you know, I want to be a part of that, to participate in it. But, yeah, I feel like the tools aren't serving me anymore. They're not serving my cyborg brain.

JW: Yeah, my brain is getting tired. I think that's why I've been reading a lot more, seeing a lot more work on screen like cinema, art, anything. I just want to see stuff because I'm ready for the Internet to evolve again. I'm ready for the creative capacity of the Internet to lean forward a little bit more. I've seen a lot of this stuff, what else is out there? So I've been trying to engage in a totally different way.

MS: And lastly,

JW: Yeah.

MS: “How do you use language in your work [laughter]? How has it been changing?”

JW: For me, the obvious thing is that now I have [the podcast](#) so I, I end up talking a lot more for a job. And that is really interesting. I've learned new skills, like being able to think out loud. We treat each conversation a little bit like we treat an essay. So structurally, I had to learn how to organize. I can describe my brain as a filing cabinet that's open and then someone hits the anti-gravity button. I really have to focus sometimes to talk to people. I don't feel like I make sense sometimes when I talk freely or when I free associate, so I had to really learn how to organize and it requires a different kind of calisthenics. It requires a very different kind of mental calculus, almost like being back in debate club or something.

And it's interesting because—and maybe you've found this with your radio show too—people who listen to you speak, they feel a different thing. It changed my relationship to the world so much because there is an intimacy that others feel they have with me, that I don't have with them. And to feel that one-sided attention has been interesting—and it's because of the language I'm using, so there is something really profound about it. I make deliberate choices when I speak on the show to say like, “Yeah, I don't know how this works for now.”

It feels really important for me to talk about my background and my parents and growing up lower middle class, to talk about the realities of who I am and how I got where I am because I don't want anyone listening to think that there's something privileged about me or my language or the fact that I'm using this language on this show.

MS: Yeah.

JW: How about you?

MS: Yeah, I definitely relate to a lot of that. I was doing so much public speaking for a good two, three years— multiple times a month—at colleges. I felt like I was a weird band that toured at colleges all the time and it was remarkable but left me feeling a bit crazy because when you're just talking to people on stage it's like... even if you have kind of crafted this talk, and it is structured, there are parts of it where you're just talking. It's just so intimate, but it seems a bit too intimate for a one-sided conversation.

JW: Yeah.

MS: But that was a big way I was using language, thinking through ideas, and it was coming from teaching and from being very much a part of community-oriented spaces. I grew up really involved in a local media art center called Echo Park Film Center where I was teaching classes. It was very formative of how I make sense of things, by talking them out. Even when I'm writing something, I usually talk it out, I record it, and then I'll transcribe it. It's just the way that I think. So on a process side, I'm still using speech a lot, and using my own speech patterns and, like I was saying, not trying to change them. Then bringing images into that and speaking directly to images and really forcing this kind of like: I'm looking at something and I'm gonna write about it or I'm gonna talk about it and I'm gonna use that material to generate more images. Going back and forth between the two as a really, uh, generative part of my practice.

And then on a presentation side, I used tech which I was feeling kind of self-conscious about, but then I was like no it's such a part of my interest in the world. I have the habit of reading every sign I see that I've done since I was a little kid. You know? You're walking down the street and you're like "hotel, hotel, chevron"—this is me looking down the strip right now [laughter].

JW: That's so funny.

MS: That encounter of the city is super typographic. Using type — typography and language — directly in space and directly with images, is something I've been really interested in, and kind of trying to push, and bring back to the body.

JW: Yes.

MS: Like you were talking about, like that just becomes such a primary vessel for me in the last two years, and I've really been just going full force which has been super fun and weird and not my comfort zone at all. I'm much more comfortable in my head.

JW: Mm-hmm.

MS: But being really physically present and rooted and seeing what is coming out of movement has opened up my work in a way that I'm like so hyped on. And so now bringing that back to these questions of language... I've been doing voice lessons...

JW: Oh my God. I'm dying to take them.

MS: You should!

JW: I want to.

MS: It's so crazy.

JW: Yes, I'm gonna do it. You're inspiring

[crosstalk]

MS: It is just making sounds that you never make and sometimes we'll take one speech pattern like, "Oh my God," —something like that— and just keep dragging it out for 10 minutes. It becomes kind of abstract and concrete or meaningless or it takes on these different shapes that you start to recognize the intonation of, or the dynamics of... it's been really cool to quote unquote "write with." I've been trying to write with that. And I would say the wildest thing is how you can change the way you sound by moving your body. It's obvious and we know this and we do it, but it's been taking me somewhere else.

I recommend it.

JW: I'm going to do it [laughter]. I had a lot of these, I guess, 'interrogations' when I was younger. It was like really taking psychedelics and so now I don't really do it as much so I need like another way to deal with that. So I'm gonna do it. And the next time we're in the same city we should take a movement class together. That would be really fun.

MS: Yeah there's two I go to in LA and then I don't know anything in New York, though—

JW: Okay.

MS: Let's do it. I'm down.

JW: Cool. Um, I want to end with a recommendation for each other.

MS: Oh, okay!

JW: While you were talking about the intonation and saying a word over and over again, um, you might have seen this movie, but there's this Canadian horror movie called *Pontypool* that you need to watch.

I feel like it will really, really, really resonate, but it's basically, I don't want to spoil it for you because actually has a really good twist, but basically, something starts happening with speech... speech gets "infected."

MS: Um, cool.

JW: So it's a horror movie. Where you can't talk.

MS: 2008, Canadian horror film.

JW: Exactly.

MS: Cool. Excellent.

JW: It's really scary though. I will tell you that [laughter]. I love scary shit, but that movie actually scared me in ways that I haven't been scared before, so just FYI. It's scary.

MS: Should I watch it alone in a hotel room in Las Vegas, at night?

JW: Yes, nothing bad happens in Las Vegas. Watch it while the sun is out. It'll be fine. But yeah, definitely [laughter].

MS: Okay, and I have a recommendation. I don't know. You may have read it already. But what you were talking about in Renee Gladman's work also reminded me of this book: *Dance Dance Dance Revolution* by Cathy Park Hong.

Have you read it?

JW: Oh cool. No, but I remember you saying this before, so I'm glad you brought it up.

MS: Yeah. Because her work also deals with a kind of translation, and working definitions and in this book specifically, everyone speaks this different language it's a combination of multiple things and it's sort of... I don't know, it just reminds me of what you were talking about in terms of degraded language.

And the way that it's written is so like impeccable that as you read the book, you start to understand the language. And that just blew my mind, from a writing perspective.

JW: Cool.

MS: Well thank you. This was great.

JW: This was really fun. You're so smart. I love talking to you [laughter].

MS: Same, same. The feeling is completely mutual.