

Ocracy:

A Peculiar Encounter Between Two Peculiar Cultures

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Integrative Project

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Introduction

A glossy purple woman with a bike rides through a desert landscape. She's as carefree as can be as her long arms and freakish hands turn the pedals round and round while her feet control the handle bars. The tire of the bike catches skin from a discarded fruit on the ground, and the figure launches forward into the air. Her body turns into a fleshy ball as she rolls down a hill and breaks into the hollow of a fallen tree. Busting out on the other side of the log, this purple woman on the ground looks up to see a serene sky with gently swaying trees. Outside of her field of vision, something moves in the ground. It is a long, purple, glossy arm on top of a rock, wriggling like a snake without a head. Her arm has detached from her body in the process of her fall. As she caresses the negative space where her arm used to be, a twig breaks behind her. Behind a rock, a yellow figure with large eyes and countless twitching fingers stares at her. Still paralyzed by her present circumstances, our main character watches as the yellow figure uses one of his many hands to grab her squirming arm and run away with it.



For my project, I created the first segment in a three-part stop-motion animation depicting an encounter between two fictitious groups in order to explore multiple forms of culture shock. A long-armed, purple woman from a society characterized by overcomplexity and individualism accidentally encounters a society of many-handed people that evolved based on their own socio-cultural focus on efficiency and cooperation. This project comes at a time of increased fear and change in how we interact with individuals in our communities and around the world, which conflicts with the need to work together to solve current global issues like COVID-19 and climate change.

Contextual Discussion

Cultural Relativism

The imperialistic history of the U.S. and Europe is known to virtually anyone who has studied basic national or world history. When I learned about the beginning of American history, the violent resource extraction and genocide of those that already inhabited the land were framed in a positive light, at least for us. We're now in a time of increased acknowledgment of imperialism and colonialism from the other side, and in that the depth of the impact of Europeans, even in places that they never claimed as their own. Language, currency, fashion, economics, and general ways of being found in Europe not only spread around the world, but were stressed to be superior.

A growing counter-force to this European supremacy is the concept of cultural relativism, popular in sociocultural anthropology. This theory states that no culture is inherently better than

another, that each have their own strengths and weaknesses, which contradicts the ideas that have justified the killing and erasing of countless cultures since millennia. By dismissing or erasing a culture in favor of American or European, commonly referred to as “whitewashing”, the positives of that culture not present in the West could be lost in exchange for our negatives.

An individual who famously fought against European occupation, writer and politician Amilcar Cabral described the importance of culture and the importance of keeping culture alive in his book *In Unity and Struggle*. Cabral vocally spoke out against Portuguese rule in his home of Guine-Bissau, specifically about the role of culture as a weapon for or against a people. As a byproduct of a society, he describes culture as “a fruit of people’s history” (Cabral 1979, 141). Culture is a living thing produced by the act of the interaction between individuals and groups. This fruit can then be used to feed them or taken from them by another.

Anthropologists Monaghan & Just humorously point out that some things that Americans and Europeans think to be normal are actually strange and illogical to other cultures, (Monaghan & Just 2017). In their book, Monaghan describes an experience hiking in the mountains with native people of Oaxaca, Mexico. The local guides find a bee’s nest full of honey, and bee larvae, which they happily eat. Monaghan openly expresses his disgust, which is mirrored when he offers onion soup to his guides when he invites them to dinner at his home. In response to his beloved onion soup, his friends tell him, “onions make you stupid and your eyes water!” (Monaghan & Just 2017, 38). A very true statement.

Sociologist Horace Miner subversively critiques very common American norms and customs by writing about them with the sense of othering that other cultures are written about in order to highlight the fallibility and absurdity in those practices (Miner 1956). He

decontextualized the critique of American culture by referring to them as the “Nacirema”, which the reader may discover on their own to be American spelled backwards. The name change and the intentionally obscured language used by Miner allowed for the audience to be appalled and dumbfounded by the practice of brushing your teeth and shaving your face when taken out of context. Miner makes a beautiful use of creative writing to show us how biased we view practices that we don’t understand the history and context of.

The famous writing of sociologist Horace Miner, *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*, largely inspired me to create *The Nacirema*. Miner describes a tribe in North America that possesses morbid obsessions with the mouth and body in the same disdainful way that his contemporaries wrote about other cultures. He describes the horrifying and absurd aspects of this culture in a way that it would be difficult to believe that a group like this exists, but all of the customs of the “Nacirema” tribe actually describe American customs. Miner wrote his essay in the 50s, so I recorded a reworked version that more closely reflected contemporary American customs with the same verbal tone as in ethnographic films.

My translation of Miner's writing into stop-motion replicates the creation of assumptions in the audience's mind about the Nacirema through decontextualized information, in order to turn those assumptions on their head. American viewers would easily recognize nail polish, a man shaving, or the dentist, so I paid careful attention to visually and auditorily abstract these rituals and rites by depicting them in the same decontextualized way as the narration. The other risk was to unintentionally provide information that would tie the Nacirema to a specific culture or region. Animated collages made from National Geographic magazine depict the rituals and rites described in the narration, but the skin of all the people were painted purple due to the lack of racial or regional connotation associated with that color in the U.S. To accompany the narration, I juxtaposed simple tracks of drum beats and chanting to create non-culturally specific music. The collage element of both the visuals and the audio reflect the fabrication and subjectivity in these ethnographic writings, photographs, and films that shape how we form conceptions of other cultures.

The concept of culture often relates to the idea of culture shock and alienation in one's changing environment. The Israeli expatriate couple Michelle and Uri Kranot's stop-motion animation *Hollow Land* combines flat clay and painted backgrounds to tell the story of a husband and pregnant wife searching for a true sense of home and comfort (Kranot & Kranot 2013). The short film starts with the pair getting off of a large ship and heading to an island via their porcelain bathtub. When they get to land they receive toilet plungers to put on their heads and discover that this new region is not what they had hoped to find. The consulate at the island's shore lifts a screen to reveal that the picturesque beach scenery behind him was actually a facade

hiding a dreary city. This shock is reiterated in various scenes throughout the film until Berta gives birth to their baby in a hand-drawn scene that stylistically departs from the clay and paper stop-motion. The couple decides that the baby should not be born into that society and the film ends when they decide to go back out to sea once again by way of their bathtub. Immigration as an alienating experience is a large theme of the film, conveyed through the expressionless faces of the main characters and often grey, textured visual elements.



An American “Kludgeocracy”

In an anonymous article in the *Wilson Quarterly*, a publication which focuses on literary and political reviews, the author discusses the ideas of political scientist Steven Teles from Johns Hopkins University. Steven Teles coined the phrase “kludgeocracy” based on the programming term “kludge”, used to describe the inefficient way that government and political entities go about handling public matters (Anon 2014). They argue that this overcomplexity in these institutions creates a sense of detachment from the public, as well as opportunities for business and special interest groups to combine with the government to spend more of taxpayers’ money out of sight from the public. The systems put in place that appear to help the citizens in fact are merely guises to get funds stopped up in the money flow. Public education, incentivized savings, and disaster relief from Hurricane Katrina were all given by the author as an example of “kludgeocracy” in the American system. The title of the article “A Rube Goldberg Government”, references the illustrations of comic artists and engineer Rube Goldberg, known for his overly-complex machines. The author draws a comparison between these silly machines and larger American society, but the over complexity in government can be harmful. The current events of COVID-19 and the distribution of masks, ventilators, and stimulus checks increasingly appear to illuminate the flaws in the complex systems in place.

Equally reminiscent of the contraptions of Rube Goldberg, the machines of Argentinean-Israeli video and installation artist Mika Rottenberg communicate an unnecessary amount of complexity. In her works, Rottenberg discusses labor, manufacturing, and hyper-capitalist social norms through female bodies of various sizes, shapes, and colors. In her

artist statement, Rottenberg describes her work as “weaving documentary elements with fiction into complex allegories for human conditions and global systems” (Rottenberg 2005). The “complex allegories” often manifest themselves in her video work as female actors using their bodies to turn materials into familiar products, the manufacturing and labor process is often recognizably untrue to how those products are actually made. Her actors are almost exclusively women that already sell their presence for money, often in a fetishistic context. Rottenberg requests these women because of marked differences in their bodies, such as extreme height, weight, muscle tone, or flexibility. In her piece, *Mary’s Cherries*, Rottenberg depicts a woman cutting her abnormally long red nails. She passes off these nail clippings to another woman riding on a stationary bike of sorts, which she pounds into maraschino cherries. Under a blacklight, the nails of the woman grow back almost instantly, then the whole process can be repeated to produce another cherry. The audience likely knows that maraschino cherries, depicting their sense of artificiality, are not made from human nails with red polish.



Rottenberg's films involve adult themes and contexts, but the logic of these videos, especially *Mary's Cherries*, rests on a child-like logic. This child logic and focus on inefficient labor on over-complex machines. Rottenberg recognizes that logical, illogic relates to manufacturing, hyper-capitalism, and economic institutions. She also acknowledges that the illogic becomes much more apparent when multiple cultures and approaches to life come in contact with one another, which I brought over as a major theme in my piece.

Methodology

In my past four years at Stamps, my work slowly shifted from intricate allegorical digital collages to animations about pimple popping and a couple that plays Dance Dance Revolution to keep their love, and themselves, alive. Animation allows me to explore my interests in cultural anthropology more in line with my personality and fascination with storytelling. My animation *The Nacirema* played with how context influences perceptions of humor and disgust in terms of culture, and I knew that I wanted to follow this lead for my Integrative Project. Despite the absurd thread that runs through my work, I take a logical approach to figuring out decision making in my work. In creating an animation, it often feels like designing the loops and corkscrews on a roller coaster track in hopes that the viewer's ride unfolds with interest the whole way. Combining the motifs of two of my earlier projects, I knew that I wanted to have the piece focus on purple people with absurdly long limbs. The rest of the story, I had to figure it out, fast.

I expected that when building a world and figuring out a plot by myself, the endeavor would feature points where I had no idea how to approach a fork in the road in my story. I felt like I was going about the process of story writing so strangely, because all I knew was that there were people with long arms, and people with many-arms. My job for myself was to make something compelling happen based on the little information I figured out about my piece; I honestly didn't even know the goal of the animation other than I wanted it to be a commentary on some aspect of American culture. In the many times, especially early on, that I had no idea was going to happen next in my animation, then I would just write. I put all my expectations of myself and my piece aside, and made a list of all the possibilities. When I didn't know what environments either group would be in, then I made a list of all of the types of environments I could find in the world. Scarcity and isolation affect both the long-armed and many-handed societies, so I wanted to have the physical environments reflect this. The long-armed people live in a dry, desert-like place dotted with fruit trees they squeeze what little juice they can out of. The many-handed people had to live in a contrasting landscape that at least initially seems barren and cold, but eventually reveals itself to be a cave system filled with beautiful gemstones and foliage.

Drawing from my research and previous projects, I fleshed out more of the world of my story. Inspired by the description of culture as a fruit and desire to have diversity in my fictional societies, I decided to have the people in this world change colors as they age, similarly to how fruit ripen. In the long-armed society, babies start green, turn blue in their teen years, and become purple as adults. The many-handed individuals go through a similar ripening process, but go from yellow to red with age, which complement the colors of the long-armed people. The

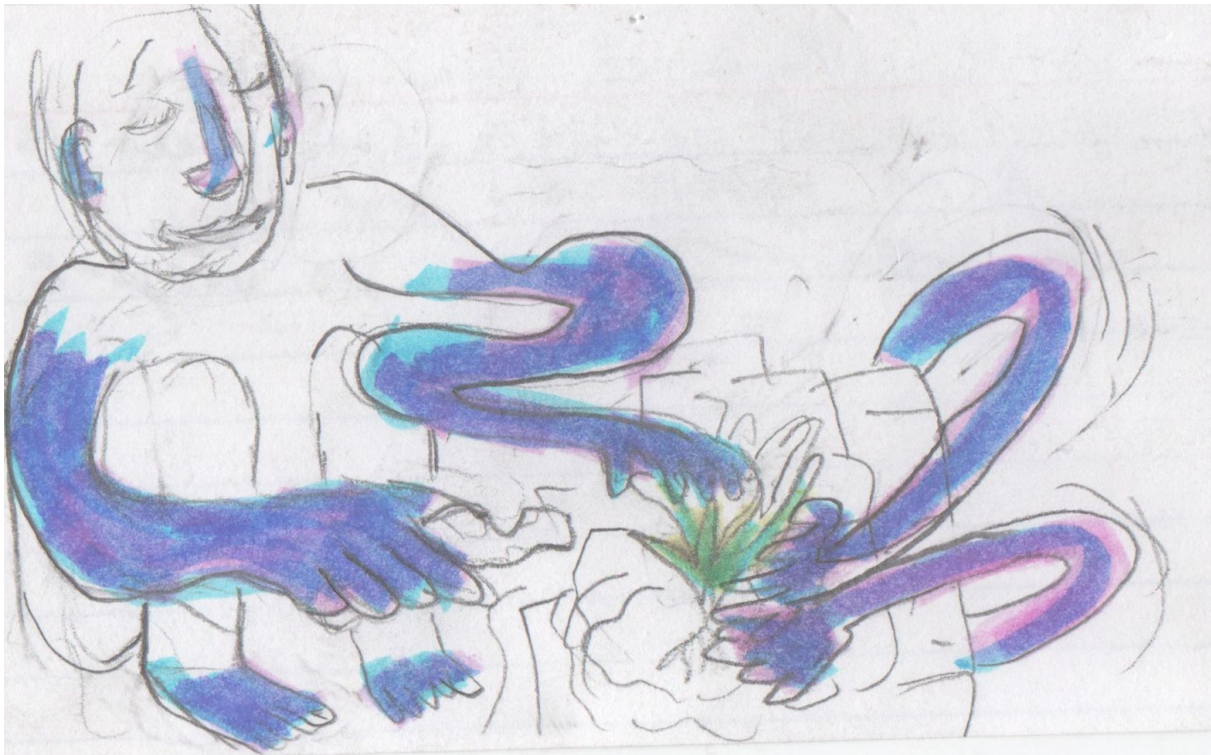
hairstyles and outfits of the long-armed group typically consist of curls and loops around the body, with the other group displaying straight and functional alternatives.



Once I had figured out that I wanted the piece to center around a long armed-person accidentally meeting a society of many-handed people, I wrote a list of ten ways that they could meet the other group. From this list of ten, I took each possibility as a prompt for free-writing, giving myself ten minutes each to type in white text on a blank document all the implications of the different ways these two strange groups would encounter one another. This method let me play with narrative and make leaps in figuring out my piece, but it only took me so far.

Storyboarding is an essential part of the animation process; it forces you to get the imagery in your head onto a visual format and put it into a timeline. I approach storyboards with

a pretty low-stakes sketchy method, since I know that they're just a tool for myself and aren't going to be shown to a panel of executives. These give me the first insight into what extra imagery or events need to happen in order to get across my ideas. I start with a blank stack of index cards and add drawings little better than runes in the order of the key events. Index cards allow me to play with the events in any order, so I went back and forth between my free-writing and storyboarding to get to a place of satisfaction. The scanned cards are then put into a digital format, to replicate what they would be as a rudimentary animation.



Simultaneously while working on my storyboards, I began to physically make the components for my ever-forming story. I have a habit of over-planning, so I made sure to get out

of my head and learn from in-camera experiments. From *Hollow Land*, I got the idea to mix clay figures with collage environments. Flipping through countless magazines for material for the physical paper elements and digital collage background filled my subconscious with interesting compositions, events, and people. With my toolbox full of candy-colored clay, I began to sculpt many arms, hands, feet, and bodies according to my storyboards and plans. The malleability of clay allowed me to change my figures along with the changes in my plot.

Over the course of a week, I converted a cabinet from a thrift store into an animation multiplane in my basement. Under the camera attached to the cabinet, I tested the movement of the clay and the compositions from my plans. Shooting through multiple layers of glass allowed me to utilize foreshortening in the creation of my scenes and figures. For the shot that a blue man opens his mouth to drink the squeezed fruit juice, I divided his head, torso, arms, and legs between four layers of glass to replicate the aerial shot that I had imagined in my story board.



Many hours were spent in these experiments going between the camera and my sculpting supplies to replicate my version of life for my puppets without wires poking out or unnatural

shadows. that My list-making, storyboarding, and physical-making processes chased each other around as I chipped away at my project.

Creative Work

Each shot of the piece hopefully creates in the viewer at least a mild sense of shock and surprise based on its relationship to the shot before it. The first sequence of the piece introduces the audience to the world of the long-armed people. A strange pink fruit is grabbed by a blue hand that is revealed to be attached to an unusually long arm, which then passes it to a purple long-armed person. This person then gives it to another long-armed person who squeezes beads of juice out of it and down their flesh. The juice continues through a series of different colored long-armed bodies jumping rope with their arms and mining garbage from the ground. The events with the fruit lead us to a figure riding a bike with her feet as the pedals, and she unknowingly becomes the main character of the piece when her tire hits the tossed fruit skin on the ground.

In *Ocracy Part I*, the main character encounters unexpected, often shocking scenarios that lead one into the other. Falling down the tree catapults her away from her home and into a new land, with part of herself literally becoming lost in the process. As she realizes this, she also realizes that she's not alone, met with a terrifying creature very different from anyone she's seen. All of these events further a sense of shock as she assesses her constantly changing situation. Later on, when she meets the many handed people and becomes comfortable in her relationship to them and her own body, the theme of shock is put in contrast to a feeling of comfort. The piece ends with a return to home with a few of her new many-handed friends. Once back with

the other long armed people, she experiences extreme discomfort as the long-armed people reject her and the many-handed visitors.

Conclusion

In all the ways that I imagined the end of my Senior year and Senior exhibition, I didn't expect it to happen during a global pandemic. The effects of the closure of school facilities and the country resulted in focusing on the delivery of the first part of the piece for an online exhibition. I continued to work on my project about a sense of social isolation and moving into a jarring new terrain surrounded by exactly that around me. A motif of the piece is a fruit that happens to look a lot like the images of COVID-19 under a microscope. This first part will end a pivotal moment in the animation in which the main character gets her arm stolen by a figure with many hands, which feels exceptionally timely when everyone is instructed to keep six feet apart from each other and touching someone's hand unless you live with them has quickly become taboo. Because life post-graduation will foreseeably be a life still in quarantine, continuing my increasingly relevant project at my home will give me a sense of normalcy and artistic fulfillment.

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