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Code-Switching

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SANTA CRUZ

**CODE-SWITCHING**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

**Keegan K. Farrell**

June 2019

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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
1-Introduction.....	1
2- Literature Review.....	3
3- Overview of the Thesis Project.....	15
4- Conclusion.....	26
Appendix.....	30
Bibliography.....	33

## **Abstract**

Code-Switching  
by Keegan Farrell

*Code-Switching* is an interactive film and game space that uses elements of deeply personal narrative and historical symbolism to illustrate the dynamics of how racism communicates through our actions and language, our systemic and institutional complicity with racism, and how one might negotiate with racism for survival. It is not meant to address a white audience, but is meant to de-center, delegitimize, and problematize the concept of whiteness itself in a society that clings to racist values and policy.

Using dark humor, I address several issues within this work: the racism and sexism I endured from my white father, our society's inability to acknowledge the stories of black sexual assault survivors, the potential of networked technology and data to accelerate systematic oppression through unrelenting automated surveillance, white fragility, the consequences of resisting racist notions in conversation, and the pressure to perform an acceptable blackness for survival.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my partner Andrea, without whom this endeavor would not have materialized into what it is today.

## **Acknowledgements**

*Code-Switching* was made possible with the mentorship and guidance of my thesis committee members Sharon Daniel, A.M. Darke, Lawrence Andrews, and Ronaldo Wilson. I am so grateful for your support and knowledge. I would also like to thank Kristin and Matthew Erickson who helped me with avatar creation and rigging, figuring out how to learn to use Unity, shooting one of my short film vignettes, and with character animation. I also very much appreciate your friendship and faith in my ability to make such a large project. Thank you also for connecting me with Chris Cain who helped me during the most difficult time of creating this project. Chris, your extensive knowledge of Unity, C# coding, and supportive attitude was indispensable in the creation of this project. Thank you also to Greg Sullo who assisted me in mixing the audio for one of the game elements and to Shimul Chowdhury who helped me with texturing. I would also like to acknowledge the rest of the cohort graduating alongside me. I was so inspired by the incredible artistry and talent each of you brought to the program, and without your influence, this would likely be a different project.

## Introduction

*Code-Switching* is an interactive film and game space that uses elements of deeply personal narrative and historical symbolism to illustrate the dynamics of how racism communicates: through our actions and language, our systemic and institutional complicity with racism, and how one might negotiate with racism for survival. It is not meant to address a white audience, but is meant to de-center, de-legitimize, and problematize the concept of whiteness itself in a society that clings to racist values and policy. For the purposes of this work, whiteness is not an ethnicity, but is defined as “a political identity based on domination and oppression of others.”<sup>1</sup> It is critical to destabilize and incapacitate whiteness, particularly within communications and networked technologies, in order to prevent its continued proliferation and deeper entrenchment within these systems.

The significance of the title *Code-Switching* is threefold: it refers to the practice of changing vernacular in relation to the performance of respectability outside of culturally familiar spaces, the act of “flipping the script”<sup>2</sup> to point out manifestations of whiteness as the foundation of structural inequities in America, and using technology that is currently dominated by white men and non-blacks to emphasize a black woman’s perspective. Following the theoretical and artistic traditions of Claudia Rankine, bell hooks, George Yancy, and other scholars, *Code-*

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<sup>1</sup> Karyn D. McKinney, *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2005), 223.

<sup>2</sup> George Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 5.



*Switching* looks at whiteness with an “oppositional gaze”<sup>3</sup>, making whiteness visible, and mirroring<sup>4</sup> my own experiences in relation to it. Using dark humor, I address several issues within this work: the rejection of my blackness and personhood from the white side of my family, our society’s inability to hear the stories of black sexual assault survivors<sup>5</sup>, the potential of networked technology and data to accelerate the efficiency of systematic oppression through unrelenting automated surveillance, white fragility<sup>6</sup>, the consequences of resisting racist notions in conversation<sup>7</sup>, and the pressure to perform an acceptable blackness for survival<sup>8,9</sup>. Using video in combination with game technology has allowed me to explore these topics in a new

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<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 115. hooks states, “By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’ Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency.”

<sup>4</sup> Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” *Afterimage* 20, no.1 (summer 1992), reprinted and expanded in *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 152-70.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson, “Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women: Risk, Response, and Resilience,” (VAWnet: The National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV), 2013), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (May 16, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement,” n.d., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hedwig Lee and Margaret Takako Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Health Implications of Black Respectability Politics,” *Souls* 18, no. 2–4 (October 2016): 421–45.

<sup>9</sup> Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E Marwick, and danah boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 163–79.

way. I use video game technology that often centers white or non-black protagonists<sup>10</sup> to instead tell a different story. I use myself and images of my own body as the protagonist, centering my own perspective of whiteness as the problem.

### **Literature Review/Historical Context**

There are several works that inspire the *Code-Switching* project, provide historical context, relate formally and/or conceptually, or could exist within the same conversation. The works to be discussed are the following: the Racial Imaginary Institute's 2018 exhibition "On Whiteness" (as a whole, but with some analysis of *Aileen* by Mel Chin), the game *Hair Nah* by Momo Pixel, *Maniac Chase* by Steffani Jemison, *Free, White, and 21* by Howardena Pindell, and *Graft and Ash for a 3-Monitor Workstation* by Sondra Perry.

#### The Racial Imaginary Institute: "On Whiteness" Exhibition

*Code-Switching* is largely informed and inspired by Claudia Rankine's ongoing work through The Racial Imaginary Institute: "On Whiteness". The purpose of this institute is to have discussions and curate art exhibitions that focus on whiteness, rendering it visible. With the support of a MacArthur Genius grant, Rankine organized the "On Whiteness Symposium", and curated an exhibition with

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<sup>10</sup> Murray, Soraya. *On Video Games : the Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018. Murray theorizes the "embattled" role that whiteness has taken in games, particularly after 9/11 and the post-Obama era. She addresses the dual nature of the way whiteness is depicted in some recent games, as universal, normal, and generic, while at the same time a victimized minority in danger of extinction, a dominant group in fear of losing power.

the same name in 2018 at The Kitchen in New York, complete with a wide range of artworks and performances that engage with the topic of whiteness. One work in particular, *Aileen* by Mel Chin<sup>11</sup>, is a sculpture modeled after the head of serial killer Aileen Wurnos. With a .22 revolver trapped within the mold, the end of the barrel emerges in place of the iris of her right eye. While this piece was not intended to be a commentary on whiteness, within this context, it takes on new meaning. *Aileen* comes to represent the violence embedded in the white gaze, and in this case, bourgeois white women trained as an arm of racist patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

I had the pleasure of attending the exhibit and viewing the symposium remotely. The entire body of work and discussion through this institute propelled my project forward and was the initial impetus for the project *Code-Switching*. While my project doesn't necessarily directly relate formally to any one piece in the show, it is conceptually related, and could possibly exist within the same exhibit and conversation. My work is in part making a caricature of whiteness as oppressive technology through the use of video game technology to tell black stories and center black experience while critiquing the manifestations of whiteness embedded in our interactions. To consider whiteness as a technology is to acknowledge the

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<sup>11</sup> Chin, Mel. *Aileen*. 2015. The Racial Imaginary Institute: On Whiteness, The Kitchen, New York, NY. Exhibition Date: June 27-August 3, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, eds., *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 180. Nakayama and Martin refer to the supportive role white women inhabit within white supremacy as an extension of the white gaze, a position that is learned within the home.

multifaceted ways in which the construction of whiteness operates through individual practices, education and governmental institutions, employment practices and economic policy, media and visual culture, and social hierarchies and enculturation. A key facet of this operating system is its intention to remain invisible, especially to those who are privileged by it, who believe their successes are entirely produced by their own merit, and their misfortunes attributed to lazy and undeserving non-whites.<sup>13,14</sup> The software runs in the background as the foundation of all processes and relations in our society, directing resources to the ultra-wealthy while producing spectacular divisions amongst the proletariat to distract from the unethical and appalling practices of the ruling class.

*Hair Nah* by Momo Pixel

Momo Pixel's *Hair Nah*<sup>15</sup> is what inspired me to use a game as an artistic medium. The inception of *Code-Switching* was heavily influenced by this game because I found it rather cogent to use a video game to center black women's experiences, something that I had never before witnessed. Although it is more conceptually lighthearted, and focused on one very specific experience, it directly

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<sup>13</sup> Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Rev. and expanded ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. Paperback edition. New York: Bloomsbury, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> 11. Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah*. 2017. accessed September 22, 2018, <http://hairnah.com/>.

relates to *Code-Switching* in that it uses a game to center the black woman's experience. *Hair Nah* is an 8-bit pixel game that addresses the strange, yet very common phenomenon of people reaching out to touch a black person's hair. It is such a common phenomenon that the game went viral, and especially black women were excited to see a game tailored to their specific experience. It follows a black femme avatar who loves to travel, but must evade a sea of invasive hands as they reach out to touch her hair. The player is allowed to choose her skin tone, hairstyle, and destination (Osaka, Havana, or Santa Monica) before embarking on her journey. If the player fails to block the hands or spends so much time swatting away hands that her energy is used up, she loses the level.

The key to winning the game is swatting just enough times to remove each hand, without expending too much energy, and protecting her hairstyle. She swats hands in her apartment lobby, in the taxicab, at airport security, and even on the airplane. On the plane, the hardest level, an older black woman watches in dismay as the player is inundated with probing, entitled hands. On her website, Momo Pixel states, "I put the older black lady into the scene to represent a generation who has already been there, done that and tired of it...*Hair Nah* was made out of annoyance. A response to the perverse action of touching a Black woman's hair without permission. The micro-aggression of assumed authority and ownership of black bodies."<sup>16</sup> While it is certainly an exaggeration of reality, it is an expression of a very real truth: the

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<sup>16</sup> 12. Momo Pixel, <https://www.momopixel.com>.

layered tendency of continually experiencing the same type of physical violation spanning one's entire life. Each time it happens recalls every other time it has happened.

I was used to seeing black people in games mostly as auxiliary characters, or as fulfilling some sort of stereotypical role. I had never before seen a game with a central aim of directly addressing contemporary issues black women face, and from a black woman's perspective. It was then that I decided to experiment with this medium and communicate my own story and concerns through the use of video game design systems. I wanted to evoke the same exhausting labor of defending against microaggressions while focusing on the consequences of responding in ways that do not accommodate racism. I didn't realize how much I wanted, and needed, a game like *Hair Nah* until I played it. And then I realized I could contribute to this need, as a cathartic release for me, but also another way black women can see a reflection of themselves and their concerns reflected in games, while using the playable system to critique whiteness. Kishonna Gray et al observed this need within games, stating that "...*Hair Nah* exemplifies the yearning for disruptive and transformative games. It also demonstrates the ways that games, online technology, and game culture have the potential to disrupt the hegemonic structure of gaming and address physical inequalities using digital tools."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, "Introduction: Reframing Hegemonic Conceptions of Women and Feminism in Gaming Culture," in *Feminism in Play*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 8.

*Maniac Chase* by Steffani Jemison

Steffani Jemison's piece *Maniac Chase*<sup>18</sup> is a 2 minute and 40-second-long video of black people running through an urban landscape. They are all dressed in a white shirt and denim. At one point, they run through a gate, only to run through it again in the opposite direction. Later, they are seen running behind large columns, during which time you can only see them if you look closely and at the right moment, as the columns obscure the view. We watch them hop over park benches in areas where it would seem unnecessary. To quote the statement next to the piece, "Jemison conveys the runners' endless physical and psychological labor as ultimately unchanging over time. Combined with the use of black bodies and a deserted setting, the film seems to argue against the widespread belief that life for African Americans is constantly improving."<sup>19</sup>

This piece connects to the concepts called upon in two of the video vignettes within *Code-Switching*, "Model Minority" and "Social Media Suicide", and the largest playable element, "False Parallels". "Model Minority" and "Social Media Suicide" refer to the constant state of surveillance and scrutiny that African Americans experience in academic or professional settings (cite presumed incompetent) and within the digital sphere. "False Parallels" underscores the relentless psychological labor performed by black people when confronted with

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<sup>18</sup> Jemison, Steffani. *Maniac Chase*. 2008-9. The Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>19</sup> Jemison.

expressions of whiteness<sup>20</sup>. Decisions on whether to resist or acquiesce have different consequences, and resistance requires the performance of “choreography”: a dance, entertainment, some sort of appeasement to neutralize the attack triggered by her resistance. The avatar is chased by all of the white non-player characters (NPCs) when racist notions are challenged. Even when the avatar is just minding her own business, the NPCs approach her when she is within range to force her to receive their unsolicited, racist perspectives. The avatar cannot move until they make a choice about how to respond. The only way to escape this space is by taking the elevator, lifting the avatar out of the situation, taking her back to the revolutionary space that is her home<sup>21</sup>.

*Free, White, and 21* by Howardena Pindell

Howardena Pindell’s confrontational video *Free, White, and 21*<sup>22</sup> is a deeply personal narrative piece combined with poetic imagery detailing the racial abuse and sexism she has experienced. She sets the stage by describing an incident in which a white babysitter washed her mother’s skin in lye, permanently scarring her skin. She begins with this story to highlight the intergenerational nature of such racial abuse,

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<sup>20</sup> Lee and Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Health Implications of Black Respectability Politics”.

<sup>21</sup> Nakayama and Martin, *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, 180. Nakayama and Martin cite bell hooks’ assertion in *Black Looks* (1992) that the black woman’s home is a “revolutionary site of resistance to white supremacy” functioning as a “refuge” from “the terror of the white gaze”.

<sup>22</sup> Pindell, Howardena. *Free, White and 21*. 1980. Museum of Modern Art, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA.



demonstrating that over time, not much has changed. She then describes several instances of racism she has endured throughout her life, both interpersonal and institutional, from kindergarten through adulthood. She was tied to the bed for hours during naptime by her kindergarten teacher after requesting to use the restroom. As she recounts this story, she wraps her head in a white cloth, covering her face. In high school, when she asked to be put into an accelerated class due to her high scores, she was denied access and told that “a white student with lower scores would go farther.” We then see a side profile of Pindell in white-face, saying “You really must be paranoid. None of those things ever happened to me...” mimicking the reactions of white people who are in disbelief when a person of color shares their experiences of racism.<sup>23</sup> In college, she was prohibited from running for office because the house mother was convinced that it would be “highly inappropriate” for a black woman to represent the university. We see another profile of her in whiteface, stating “you ungrateful little...After all we’ve done for you...” After graduate school, she was offered an interview at TimeLife because of her Yale education. While she was

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<sup>23</sup> hooks, bell. “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination.” In *Displacing Whiteness*, by Rebecca Aanerud, T. Muraleedharan, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, and bell hooks, 167. edited by Ruth Frankenberg. Duke University Press, 1997. hooks refers to classroom situations in which white students are “in disbelief” and angered to hear black students’ experiences of whiteness. Even as these students believe themselves to be anti-racist, she says, “Many of them are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful. Even though the majority of these students politically consider themselves liberals, who are antiracist, they too unwittingly invest in the sense of whiteness as mystery.”

waiting to be interviewed, she witnessed secretarial candidates being discriminated against by race, only to be rejected once the interviewer realized she was black. The whiteface appears again, discounting her experiences, unless they are present in her artwork, saying that “that’s the only way we’ll validate you, and it’s gotta be in a way that we consider valid.” It seems as though she is critiquing racism within academia and the art world. “If you don’t want to do what we want you to do, then we’ll find other tokens,” she says. She then describes a time she was sexually propositioned at an all-white wedding by a much older man. She is seen peeling a thin sheet mask from her face. She cannot peel away the burden of her skin color. The image changes to a profile of her head wrapped in a white cloth, slowly unwrapping the cloth from her head. Once again, covering herself in white cloth does not compensate for her blackness, a wrong she has committed by default simply for existing as she is.<sup>24</sup> We then see her in whiteface again, after she covers her head with some white pantyhose, saying once again how “ungrateful” she must be. She says, “I’ve never had an experience like that, but then again, I’m free, white and 21.” In Pindell’s writing, she describes the white pantyhose as the more “polite” form of the KKK hood, more suited to the established aesthetic of white womanhood.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Pindell, Howardena. “Free, White and 21.” *Third Text* 6, no. 19 (June 1992), 31.

Pindell's piece reads almost as a conversation between her and a white woman (often as black women are asked to "prove" their experiences of racism<sup>26</sup>) demonstrating the differences between the experiences of women of different races, and the faults of the feminist movement at the time that was dominated by the interests of white women. Pindell states, "There were no positive images of my people in the media or magazines unless we favored European features; we were portrayed stereotypically to make others laugh, to make them comfortable and safe."<sup>27</sup>

This piece relates to my video vignettes, particularly "My White Father" formally as well as conceptually. Both pieces contain direct accounts of very personal experiences of racism and sexism. While *Free, White and 21* describes experiences of racism and sexism perpetrated by the outside world, "My White Father" tells true stories of racism and sexism within my family, disputing the myth that the existence of interracial families symbolize the achievement of racial harmony in America.<sup>28</sup> This recalls a recent window-shopping experience I had in an upscale outdoor shopping mall while visiting Palm Desert. As I looked around me, I frequently saw these advertisements that told the same story: images of multiracial

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<sup>26</sup> I can relate to this experience of gaslighting as I have endured accusations of oversensitivity, "playing the race card", or "making everything about race" as if the fact that I noticed racism is the problem, rather than the persistence of racism in all areas of my life.

<sup>27</sup> Pindell, Howardena. "Free, White and 21," 34.

<sup>28</sup> Jin Haritaworn, *The Biopolitics of Mixing: Thai Multiracialities and Haunted Ascendancies* (Farnham ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

people laughing and smiling alongside a single white woman, as if they were a close-knit group of friends. Biracial black women and racially ambiguous children are advertising clothes while subliminally advertising some fantasy of the arrival of racial harmony an end to racial inequality. As I walk through the store, I am swiftly reminded that this message of harmony is not intended to comfort me, a black woman, as the retail staff closely monitor my movements for the sake of loss prevention. Despite my image reflected on the walls, I am not the intended customer. I should not have access to these overpriced garments. The persistence of these images suggests growing diversity in representation, selling a fantasy to white America of a post-racial society they want so badly to believe in, even as our country grapples with a rise in racially motivated violence, political discord, and a resurgence of overt white nationalism.

“My White Father” complicates this fantasy, telling a real story of racism and sexism from white father to black daughter...a daughter who never met her white grandmother because of her racism, and who was hardly acknowledged by members of this side of the family. He reinforces my arrival unto the world as a sexual object. His response to my sexual assault, uncaring and without obligation to protect his black daughter, reflects the same sentiment of America’s justice department, a tradition based on the inability to listen to or believe black women’s stories of sexual assault, as black women were considered a “rite of passage”<sup>29</sup> for white men to

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<sup>29</sup> Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Hardback edition (New York: Bloomsbury, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 43.

explore their sexuality, promiscuous by nature<sup>30</sup> and therefore incapable of being violated.

*Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* by Sondra Perry

Sondra Perry's piece *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*<sup>31</sup> is a bicycle workstation with three monitors. It plays a video of a 3D graphic avatar made from Sondra's likeness speaking directly to the viewer, with calming background music she found on YouTube. Intermittently throughout this 9-minute performance, her avatar disappears to show what looks like ocean waves that are textured with the image of her flesh. In this video, her avatar comments on the health consequences for black people believing in the myth of meritocracy in America. The avatar states, "productivity is painful and we haven't been feeling well. Just being who we are is extremely risky."<sup>32</sup> This work was a great inspiration for *Code-Switching*, as it demonstrated the ways that black artists are using newer technologies in their art-making practices to reclaim our own subjectivity and criticize/make visible even the subtler instances of the ways in which the technology of whiteness permeates our lives.

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<sup>30</sup> Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, 52. Yancy recalls Dorothy Roberts' cataloguing of stereotypical perceptions of black women, particularly the Jezebel. He states, "Despite their intellectual accomplishments, black women are seen as 'prostitutes', deemed vulgar and immoral and reduced to their 'sexually insatiable' black bodies."

<sup>31</sup> Perry, Sondra. *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*. 2016. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>32</sup> Perry, Sondra. *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*.

The work is formally related to *Code-Switching* in that both Perry and I use avatars molded after ourselves, but the digital tools fail to represent us. Within the piece, the avatar discusses the inability of the software to capture her body type. For my avatar, the program was unable to accurately render my hair-type. Nevertheless, we both use this digital space that fails to represent us to communicate our perspective, while also addressing the ways in which new technology is not meant to serve the needs of our demographic and is often used to surveil and police us. In this way, we are both addressing the ways in which networked and data technology can and are functioning as another arm of the technology of whiteness. Additionally, we both utilize this medium in order to subvert and examine technological systems that are dominated by white males to instead communicate a black feminist perspective. We are both in dialogue with the myth of the meritocracy and post-racial society while calling attention to the extra labor black people are expected to perform in order to simply be tolerated in American space, and sometimes to no avail.

### **Overview of the Thesis Project**

The exhibition of the project *Code-Switching* necessitates a large screen with speakers on either side and a custom keyboard on a pedestal along with a mouse. The keyboard is blank, save for the arrow keys printed and the letters PERFORM printed in the center row, indicating usable keys without the need for instructions.

Within *Code-Switching*, there are seven parts: three videos and three 3D game components connected by a home screen. Throughout both the video segments and

3D game space, I am positioned as the protagonist. It was important for me not to generalize my experience to all black folks or POC, which was the main impetus for speaking on my personal experience and viewpoint. However, anytime whiteness is portrayed, it exists only to illustrate my perspective of the toxicity of the technology of whiteness and the affective experience derived from its constant imposition. Instead of portraying whiteness as universality (as is common practice in this country), I place a black feminist perspective as the norm, viewing whiteness with an oppositional gaze.<sup>33</sup> In this way, I present the reality that whiteness is not innocuous, but a constant force upon non-whites imposing the threat of social or financial ruin, legal entanglements and/or slavery, and even death.

#### Video Elements

The home screen plays several videos at random, doing everyday things like braiding my hair, sleeping, cuddling with my dogs, or brushing my teeth. The viewer can toggle through these videos using the M button. These moments are less “constructed”, with lower production value, meant to reflect real moments in my home-life. In my home, I am not expected to “perform” like I would in the outside world, where I am expected to “perform” an acceptable expression of black womanhood. This section, when considered alongside the other elements of the piece, are meant to communicate the idea that the traumatic elements of the piece are just as every day, normal occurrences as what is pictured in the home screen videos.

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<sup>33</sup> bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 115.

The PERFORM buttons each pertain to a different section of the piece. P, E, and R take the viewer to one of the three videos “My White Father”, “Model Minority”, and “Social Suicide,” respectively. Each video is a minute or less and automatically routes back to the home screen on completion. The viewer has the option to leave a video by using one of the directional keys to return to the home screen. The 3 video segments connected to the home screen are very obviously constructed and performed in a very specific way to communicate certain aspects of my experience.

### *My White Father*

“My White Father” addresses the racism I have experienced from the white side of my family, while also connecting to slavery’s legacy of relegating black women’s bodies to the public domain, therefore ineligible for protection from sexual imposition. In this segment, I am describing various racist and sexist interactions that I have had with my father. I recount racist characterizations he makes about my appearance and his insistence that I alter my dress “so that men can see my shape”, establishing my existence as a sexual commodity. Lastly, I describe his uncaring response to my sexual assault. Instead of supporting my decision to report my assault, he suggested I buy a gun, neglecting to consider the dangers this could pose to my life. In this portion of the segment, my voice becomes obscured, referring to our society’s apparent incapability of hearing and responding to violence against black women. This idea stems from the legacy of the U.S. legal system often not



believing black survivors of sexual assault.<sup>34</sup> I can attest to the continuation of this legacy into the contemporary moment as, in my own situation, the District Attorney decided not to press charges against my abuser, even after police recorded a phone confession. Instead, the DA found it necessary to interrogate me about the consensual sexual activities I engaged in.

This segment also speaks to the origins of the #metoo movement, started by Tarana Burke to bring attention to the pervasiveness of sexual violence against low-income women and women of color. This movement has recently galvanized affluent white actresses who have used the movement to target high-profile sexual predators. This is a noble cause to bring attention to abusive power dynamics within the entertainment industry and has brought much-needed visibility to the movement. At the same time, criticism of affluent white women's use of the movement in this way has suggested that attention has directed away from the marginalized groups it was originally founded to defend: groups with less agency in defending against sexual violence. Low-income women and women of color are particularly more vulnerable to state-sanctioned sexual violence in a way that bourgeois white women have not been made to endure in the contemporary moment.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Yolanda Wilson, "Why Black Women's Experiences of #MeToo Are Different," *The Louisiana Weekly; New Orleans, La.*, June 18, 2018. Wilson cites recent reports of black women put in compromising positions by police, such as the moment a Baltimore woman was subjected to an anal cavity search in public after being stopped for a broken headlight.

### *Model Minority*

In the segment “Model Minority”, I am sitting inside of an office environment. I am dressed professionally, nervously “working” with the knowledge that I am being watched. As I work, I say to the camera pleadingly “Aren’t I so good? Look how good I am! Look how I can behave!” As I say these things, we hear canned laughter at my attempts at respectability. There are quick clips between frames showing me dancing in my office wear, dancing the charleston, twerking, etc. This segment directly references the labor of respectability and the performance of an acceptable blackness, that exists in a space of knowingly being scrutinized and surveilled. In short, black people are put in a position where they are expected to resist derogatory stereotypes through the practice of “vigilance”<sup>36</sup> and respectability in an attempt to avoid discrimination, but these practices do not guarantee successful evasion of racism. In *Look, a White!* George Yancy refers to the inherent problem of simply existing as a black person in America. He states, “The negro has always already done something wrong by virtue of being a Negro. It is an anterior guilt that always haunts the Negro and his or her present and future actions. After all, this is what it means to be a Negro-- to have done something wrong.”<sup>37</sup> This “guilt” and pressure to exhibit

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<sup>36</sup> Lee and Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Health Implications of Black Respectability Politics”, 438. Lee and Hicken contend that, as images of police violence against innocent Black Americans become more and more ubiquitous, there exists increased pressure to exhibit certain levels of respectability to avoid racial discrimination in all areas of life. Vigilance suggests that Black people are constantly prepared for potential threats of discrimination, whether large or small.

<sup>37</sup> Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, 2.

respectability translates into the digital sphere as well, as young low-income and people of color manage their digital representations online as they look for ways to curate their image for potential employers. As the lines between professional and personal networks blur, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain an image that reflects the desires of the dominant gaze. Pitcan et al discovered in their study of young low-income people in New York that “The larger the gap between our participants’ home lives and the hegemonic norms that determined respectability, the greater the potential that curated images could be shattered by networked digital media...The logic that job-specific skills and merit will lead to success is challenged in a context in which the personal (social media) can easily be accessed and used to judge the professional.”<sup>38</sup> The concepts in “Model Minority” and “Social Media Suicide” are very much linked, as they both address respectability, surveillance, and the anxieties produced by the white gaze.

### *Social Media Suicide*

In this segment, hands in white gloves appear in the frame holding a gun. The gloved hands force the gun into my hands, as I take aim across the frame. The camera pans back again to show that I am aiming the gun at myself.

“Social Media Suicide” aims to provoke thought around the possibility of a function of the internet and networked technology as an extension of racial and

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<sup>38</sup> Pitcan, Marwick, and boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World”, 175.

political oppression. While there is evidence that it can provide professional and social advantages, it simultaneously increases the vulnerability of marginalized groups that have a history of being targeted for surveillance and abuse by government and agents of white supremacy. Ultimately, the main concern is with the potential of social media and other emergent technology to preserve this “legacy of abuse”<sup>39</sup> that affects traditionally marginalized groups at the same time that it claims to give them voice and freedom. In essence, by using these communications “tools” to more clearly and accurately represent myself (and likewise, a realistic image of blackness), I am also potentially subjecting myself to surveillance or implicating myself in some way unbeknownst to me. It is a crucial fact that our data has real value- both industry and the government have much to gain if they can access and control the flow of data. This power has life or death significance because this information can be used to target individuals, and such targeting has, during the civil rights era and presently, resulted in state-sanctioned violence and incarceration. Connecting to these networks gives one the freedom to publicly express themselves and form communities, but also to announce their actions and whereabouts, to be monitored and analyzed, and potentially pacified using a body of potentially incriminating evidence that the user has voluntarily built against themselves.

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<sup>39</sup> Metahaven, “Captives of the Cloud: Part I,” *E-Flux Journal* #37 (September 2012), 1.

## Game Elements

The three mini-games, “Whitehead”, “Fragility”, and “False Parallels” can be accessed individually via the F, O and R buttons, respectively. However, they also have a natural sequence in that the directional keys take you from “Whitehead” to “Fragility”, and finally to “False Parallels”. Once inside the game world (and contrary to the video segments), the viewer must progress through the game, and cannot return back to the home screen without finishing the level. In a sense, the player becomes trained to navigate these systems as they experience them. If they press a button that places them in a situation they have already experienced, they must remember how they previously completed them in order to progress to the next stage. Much in the same way, people of color and white people alike are enculturated into their respective roles within established racial dynamics and hierarchies in very specific ways: white people are trained to perpetuate a culture of exclusion, while people of color are trained to experience constant racialization along with the knowledge of assumptions that are to be made about them based on outward perceptions of their bodies.<sup>40,41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, eds., *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*.

<sup>41</sup> In my own experience, my mother prepared me for racial discrimination as a child. She told me that people would treat me differently because of how I look, and that I must work harder and be more obedient than my white peers in order to achieve success. As soon as I could read, she was giving me novels by authors like Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The children’s book *Black Misery* by Langston Hughes helped me to understand the ways in which racism manifested in my school, while also letting me know that my experiences were not the result of paranoia or oversensitivity.

## *Whitehead*

The scene “Whitehead” displays a caged klansman’s head on the white house lawn. In response to user input (any one of the PERFORM keys), the hood is pulled back to reveal the heads of politicians who are known to have supported white-supremacist policies such as Abraham Lincoln, Bill and Hillary Clinton, or Ronald Reagan. The imagery in this piece is referencing a very specific historical moment when in 1812 Cuba, Black revolutionary Jose Antonio Aponte was decapitated for daring to plan a rebellion to free the slaves. His head was placed on display in a cage in front of his house. As Seph Rodney explains, “This public execution was a warning: the colonial powers sought to kill an idea.”<sup>42</sup> In essence, I am also trying to “kill an idea,” but rather the opposite one. By instead placing the klansman’s head in the cage and placing it in front of the white house, I express a desire to kill racist terrorism and ideology, the ideas that rightfully deserve to be caged. As I express this desire, to expose whiteness and the operation of white supremacy through these policymakers, there is an immediate backlash or defense from the technology of whiteness.

Once the user presses a directional key, a white man enters the scene to remove the head from the cage. The scene then transitions to the next segment called “Fragility”, illustrating the defense undertaken when whiteness is challenged or made

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<sup>42</sup> Seph Rodney, “The Deathless Aponte and Black Freedom,” Hyperallergic, April 10, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/436753/the-deathless-aponte-and-black-freedom/>.

visible and scrutinized for what it is: a form of identity politics that underscores the very fabric of our society.

### *Fragility*

This is referencing Robin DiAngelo's term "white fragility."<sup>43</sup> The fragility she describes is a direct result of what she attributes to the inability of whites to withstand "racial stress", something that people of color are socialized to endure regularly. In an act of white solidarity, the white male avatar comes to the klanhead's defense. He pulls the hooded head from the cage and lovingly caresses it, consoling it, moaning with pleasure. This scene is meant to inspire discomfort and disgust in the viewer, as the man engages in a masturbatory reestablishment of "racial equilibrium."<sup>44</sup> In much the same way, this act is illustrating the ways in which some whites feel the need to defend other whites when they are implicated in racist behavior, or fight against any policy that helps to ameliorate social disparities.<sup>45,46</sup> As whites are taught to see themselves as raceless, when their whiteness is made visible to them in a way that implicates them in racist collusion, there is a visceral emotional reaction, inducing a "white identity crisis."<sup>47</sup> DiAngelo has also outlined several rules of

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<sup>43</sup> DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 57.

<sup>44</sup> DiAngelo, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*.

<sup>46</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Rev. and expanded ed (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, 5.

engagement when it comes to addressing whiteness and racism.<sup>48</sup> I have observed confirmation of these rules of engagement in my own interactions with whiteness when pointing out microaggressions as they happen. It is odd, but it seems as though these rules are unspoken, they have been trained to my psyche, as years of dealing with the consequences of resisting whiteness have made clear what the rules are if peace is to be maintained in predominantly white environments. Something as simple as asking someone not to touch my hair can trigger emotional and defensive responses in white people.

### *False Parallels*

In the next scene, “False Parallels”, we see an environment full of people carrying this head, this ideology, with them. “False Parallels” is a game that forces the player to have uncomfortable conversations with white NPCs that have racial undertones. It illustrates the consequences of disagreeing with or defending against racist notions in conversation, and the steps taken to perform an acceptable blackness for survival. The viewer plays with an avatar formed from my body. The avatar moves through a predominantly white environment, and it is snowing, although the sky appears to be clear. As the avatar moves through the space, she is approached by white NPCs who express sentiments that are cloaked in colorblind racism. Whether the player wants to have these conversations or not, they are forced to hear these

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<sup>48</sup> DiAngelo, Robin, “White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement,” n.d., 3.



things. They must decide whether to choose this battle or leave white supremacist notions uncontested to avoid coming under attack. Much of the dialogue around identity politics in the white imagination utilizes “false parallels”<sup>49</sup> to argue against any potential corrective endeavor undertaken to undo the effects of slavery and systemic racism. Citing Michael Schwalbe’s work studying men’s movements, McKinney states, “one draws a false parallel when equating the experiences of a less powerful group with those of a more powerful group to suggest that their reactions or behaviors in a given situation can be judged by the same standards.”<sup>50</sup> Using the idea of reverse racism (a false parallel) suggests that whites are victimized by “racist” people of color, while simultaneously ignoring the actual economic victimization afforded to them by wealthy elites.

### **Conclusion**

*Code-Switching* is a piece that serves multiple purposes and while addressing multiple audiences. The primary purpose of the work is to serve as an expression of my personal experiences and the ways in which I view the world and some of the ways in which whiteness infringes on my experiences. The piece moves between didacticism and opacity as it is very obvious and literal in some areas, while leaving some mystery with regard to some of the historical symbolism. For example, much of the video and game elements have very obvious meanings while at the same time

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<sup>49</sup> McKinney, *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism*, 145.

<sup>50</sup> McKinney, 145.

leaving more room for deeper engagement with the work within the written thesis, or as a part of one's personal relationship to the situations depicted in the work.

For this piece, black women in particular are my targeted audience, however I recognize that the majority demographic on campus is white, and I expected that few would find that they personally identify with the experiences depicted within the work. The location of this work ensures a considerable non-black audience, and the work speaks to that in the way it seeks to hold a mirror to the technology of whiteness. The work addresses black and non-black audiences simultaneously, but in different ways. Similarly to how I felt when playing Momo Pixel's game *Hair Nah*, I was told by black women that it was refreshing to see representations that mirrored some of their own. One woman explained that the "dancing" part of false parallels mirrored her experiences of having to perform for white audiences, but she pointed out that white audiences may not understand the significance of the dancing in the same way that black viewers would, as they do not have the same experience.

In observing the non-black gallery visitors who engaged with my work, most praised the work exuberantly, in a way that sometimes appeared to be an effort to convince me that they were not racist. Overall, I definitely think the project succeeded. There were always people interacting with the piece, spending more time with it than I expected. Visitors would crowd around it waiting for their turn to play. I often found people laughing at the moments I thought appropriate, and their reactions (finding humor, but feeling uncomfortable, anxious, or exhausted) were most often aligned with my intentions. However, at one point, I did encounter one

especially triggered older white man who panicked during the “My White Father” segment, frantically pressing buttons in an attempt to escape implication. As I came by to assist, he frustratingly proclaimed, “I tried pressing the buttons, but she just keeps carrying on!” I realized then that the man did not recognize me as the woman in the video, as I was wearing a different hair style. Once I helped him to exit the video, he pressed the same key as before and found himself watching “My White Father” yet again. At this point, he was too angered to remain with the work, and walked away from the piece. I was aware when making the piece that some anger and disengagement from triggered conservatives as well as those who may struggle to receive a black woman’s perspective would be within the realm of possibility, but I was not expecting to view these reactions so explicitly. While I did find this inflammatory reaction to be quite amusing, I immediately remembered the ways in which such reactions actually prove to be dangerous for anyone who isn’t a white male. His reaction arose from the same energy that punishes any who pose a threat to white patriarchy, defending it with political and economic power or white supremacist terrorism.

The key facet of this work is the idea of performing an acceptable blackness. Acceptable in this case is defined as non-threatening (not defiant toward racist systems and practices and keeping anti-racist views to oneself) and gladly accepting the role of a recognizable black caricature. I recognized this expectation of “acceptable blackness” early in my life as a child actor. I was almost always auditioning for roles in which I was expected to perform blackness in a way that was

defined by whiteness, that would cater to the white imagination. This expectation has continued throughout my life in academia and within the workplace. Unwittingly, society sees upon my face a minstrel mask as my cultural experiences and vernacular are reduced to stereotype for their viewing pleasure. Only some parts of my blackness are acceptable (barely), and I must always be smiling for their comfort so that they are not too disturbed by my blackness, yet satisfied by the theatrics of my labor. My role, as defined by whiteness in the “post-racial” moment, is to serve as the symbol of diversity and inclusion without threat to the system, existing only to make the whiteness of the space less jarring and blinding, proof of our society’s forward progress. While sustaining the illusion of inclusivity, the expectation is that I labor to perform a blackness that must be obedient and abbreviated, reduced to the most favorable and palatable components for the safest possible consumption by a non-black public. *Code-Switching* dissects this expectation, disparaging the contradictions in the technology of whiteness’ claims of meritocracy and justifiable dominion.

## Appendix

### Extended Discussion of Networked and Data Technology

The government has engaged in extensive surveillance and data-collection activities on the black community since the slave trade. However, some of the most notable historical context begins with the surveillance of black activists during the civil rights era in the 1960s, and as early as the 1940s when the FBI began spying on major black writers like Richard Wright, and later, James Baldwin.<sup>51</sup> Such spying was concerned with political ideologies that were in direct conflict with entrenched white-supremacist hegemony. It is impossible to fully participate in the benefits of the networked society without being identified, raced, and categorized because of physical likeness. As Jessie Daniels states, "...the Internet's visual cultures- from Facebook to YouTube to avatars to video games insist on visual representations of the embodied, gendered, and racialized self online".<sup>52</sup>

In dana boyd and Kate Crawford's paper Six Provocations for Big Data, they not only comment on the speed and efficiency with which surveillance is currently carried out relative to the past, but the lack of diversity in the structure of who is creating the algorithms, who has access to the data, and who may analyze it.<sup>53</sup> When

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<sup>51</sup> Campbell, James, "Black Boys and the FBI," *TLS*, no. 4574 (November 30, 1990): 1290.

<sup>52</sup> Daniels, Jessie, "Visualizing Race and Embodiment in Cyberspace *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. By Lisa Nakamura . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. (Paper).," *Symbolic Interaction* 33, no. 1 (February 2010), 141.

<sup>53</sup> Crawford, Kate, "Six Provocations for Big Data," 2011, 12.

historically marginalized populations are scarcely represented in tech companies, and the algorithms that aggregate data on civilians are being used by a predominantly white government with histories of abuses to determine who or what is considered a threat, there is no doubt that bias is coded into the system. In an address made at Personal Democracy 2016, danah boyd boldly expressed this sentiment: “At the end of the day, I don’t care what your politics are. If you don’t actively seek to combat prejudice and discriminatory and biased data sets built into systems, you are building prejudicial systems.”<sup>54</sup>

I would caution against fully encasing the economy within digital networks because it limits the avenues within which people can enter workforces, remain in them, and prevents those with limited financial and educational resources from participating. Additionally, those who may wish to resist intense surveillance and loss of data control may find themselves on the outside of an economy that is becoming increasingly embedded in the network. Wilson III and Costanza-Chock elucidate this point succinctly: “...the greater the proportion of people in a population included within and enjoying the benefits of a network, the more quickly the costs of exclusion grow for those excluded from that network.”<sup>55</sup> This is even more concerning for

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<sup>54</sup> “Danah Boyd | Be Careful What You Code For - YouTube,” accessed December 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWBZNxPzoUY&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, Ernest J. III and Costanza-Chock, Sasha, “New Voices on the Net? The Digital Journalism Divide and the Costs of Network Exclusion,” *Race after the Internet*, 2011, 258.

populations of people that have been historically surveilled even before the digital revolution because they are able to be more efficiently watched and categorized, without knowledge of the specifics of their categorization. Ultimately, social, economic, and geographical mobility is at stake for these populations who are at the mercy of “digital dossiers”<sup>56</sup> and are powerless to challenge the powers that exploit this data.

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<sup>56</sup> Pasquale, Frank. *The Black Box Society : the Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England :Harvard University Press, 2015, 4.

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