You are standing in a line that bends and curves. You reach the front of the line and lean your body against the service desk; a moment of rest. The clerk greets you curtly, you smile. She asks for your name, your email, your date of birth, and your place of residence. You comply. She asks for your phone number. "I don't have one." Your request cannot be processed without one. "But I don't have a phone right now." A long, silent moment passes. The line leading to her desk is still bending and curving. You make something up, the computer accepts it, your request has been processed and you await results in the coming 10 business days.[1]

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shadow work engages the formal and informal and mundane and arcane ways that classification systems attempt to contain the messy realities of our lives and, by extension, shape our conditions. Confronting a seemingly omnipresent datafication, Imogen Clendinning, Allan Pichardo, Swarm, Tamil Archive Project (Krish Dineshkumar, Nithursan Elamuhilan, Vasuki Shanmuganathan), and Hexstudio & Zoe Osborne experiment with augmented reality, algorithms, net art and poetry to present propositions for new, "life-giving" languages.[2]

Across history, we have been storing and sorting information: through story, through writing, through image (and beyond). In every archive, every used bookstore, every late night deep dive internet search, I am always searching for you, for us. But right now I am thinking about the ever expanding turn towards digital datafication and the colonial infrastructure that undergirds it. I am thinking about the unending drive "to see, to know, to translate, to make equivalent to" and ultimately to make potential commodity or extractable resource.[3] I am returning to Jasbir Paur: the settler colonial project is not simply one of attempted elimination but also an attempted control of lifeworlds and labour.[4]

In the industrialized workplace (and later the deindustrialized workplace), classification systems and standards took control out of the hands of workers and put executive decision making into the hands of managers. An ongoing alienation — "until the technician could no longer separate himself from the machinery routinizing the day's labour."[5] At the border, the urge to classify and quantify enacts a 'calculability of life' wherein which "certain lives are deemed not worth living, certain lives are deemed not worth saving, and certain lives are deemed not worth being born at all."[6]

The echoes and reverberations of colonization. And our undamned hope. We used to talk about it on the phone. "Can you distract me from all the disaster?"[7]

I met Imogen on frozen Lake Nipissing. We talked about the melting ice, infrastructures of the web, and disparate connectivity. Resisting the immediacy of ubiquitous computing, "siliconsoul" (2023) is an extension of her experimentation with solar powered net-art. On cloudy or smoggy days, users are met with a landing page reminding us that the internet's signal is not guaranteed; an encounter with the past, present or future?

The project is a love letter to the mineral in microchip, like the one in your pocket. Tracing the microchip back to the sand that's used to manufacture it, Imogen invites us to create more tactile relationships to the natural environment.

"The earth is embedded in our virtual worlds" said Imogen.

We waded in the water and we waited by the water. I thought it was all possible. The water kept creeping up, seeping in. As it does.

I met Swarm on Tumblr. We were learning how to find and build the worlds we wanted to be a part of. Swarm's world is expansive. Her practice revolves around instigating a cultural shift towards a new attitude about the universe and everything in it. Attuning to the journey of photons (light particles) from the centre of the sun, through space and time, and eventually to where they meet us here, Swarm describes her work as taking thousands of years to create. "We're All Here in Time" (2023) considers the possibilities of working with the universe.

We meet Allan by the ocean. Like Swarm, he urges us to look to the stars. Allan is a hacker. Working in the shadows of the machine, he is repurposing software to upend the exploitative relationship between technology users and the systems that exploit us for data. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" (2021) is one example: "I reverse-engineered Google's sound search algorithm… to connect our current [African] diasporic music to the music of our ancestors." [7] Entering Allan's virtual reality, the sounds overlap, intertwine and offer a new cartography - one that remembers.

"Portals, Not Homes" (2023) is a collective query into memory: How do we carry our memories of mass global displacement? A collaboration between Krish Dineshkumar, Nithursan Elamuhilan, Vasuki Shanmuganathan (Tamil Archive Project), Hexstudio & Zoe Osborne, the immersive installation is both a nostalgia-imbued resting place and a musing on how we hold our narratives of home across generations and geographies. The artists invite us into a world that is at once imagined, lived, and created.

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Light is still creeping through my window. Every summer solstice is so bittersweet. In the winter, I spoke with Ladan Siad about technologies like AI and how they are woven into broader structures of oppression: colonialism, racial capitalism, border industrial complexes, ableism, queer and transphobia, the list goes on. Ladan is an interdisciplinary storyteller and designer who explores the worlds that are possible when radical change flourishes. I asked them how we can — as Ruha Benjamin puts it — intervene with "the deadly status quo". Their answer was succinct. "These days I have been dreaming"[8]

Lately each time we speak you tell me you don't want to let go. You tell me you wish you could grasp at each word, hold onto something.

At the start of the pandemic, our world was connected through WhatsApp but since the protests started, WhatsApp hasn't been working the same. I keep thinking about the satellite connecting us, how our voices carry across the oceans (most of the time). I close my eyes and we speak and I am transported to a place where the impossibility of us seeing each other ever again does not exist. Where the border does not exist. I imagine that you, on the other end of the line, have closed your eyes to enter that world with me.

Later, I ask you to close your eyes and tell me: what power structures are still in place now?

"Gravity, lol."

We are coursing towards elsewhere. Together <3

To: _____

From: Mitra Fakhrashrafi

[1] Anecdote adapted from an experience with a US tax preparer, recounted by Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star in Standards and their Stories (2009).
[2] Kaba, M. (2018). Foreword in Samudzi, Z., Anderson, W. (Ed.) As Black As Resistance. AK Press.
[3] Garneau, D. (2012). Imaginary spaces of conciliation and reconciliation. Reconcline This!: West Coast Line #47, 46(2).
[4] Sheehi, S. (2023). Defiantly Driving. In R. Nazzal, Driving in Palestine. Fernwood Publishing.
[5] Ellul, J. (1964). The Technological Society. Vintage Books.
[6] Murphy, M. (2017). The Economization of Life. Duke University Press.
[7] SZA. (2022). Ghost in the Machine. SOS.
[8] Fakhrashrafi, M. (2022). Hypercity: in conversation with Ladan Siad. Long Winter blog.

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