

**Palavras na Minha Boca (Words in My Mouth), 9398-BR**  
**Project Statement - Darren Lee Miller**

**Opening Statement**

In 2017, controversy erupted when an exhibition at Santander Bank's cultural center in Porto Alegre, Brazil was closed within a month of its opening. The exhibition, "Queermuseu," or Queer Museum, reopened in August 2018 in the Parque Lage school, a renowned art academy in Rio de Janeiro. On one side, protesters said the exhibition was blasphemous. On the other side, Brazil's artistic community called the protest and resulting closure, "dangerous censorship." Even once the exhibition was back on display at a new location, curator Gaudêncio Fidélis found himself on the receiving end of jeers and taunts from protestors who regularly picketed the show (Londoño A4). While I certainly support the right of anyone to protest, I wonder what it might be like if those in opposition to the exhibition were invited to sit with the curator, or one of the featured artists for a conversation. Would the two individuals be willing to consider each other's ideas? Can those of us with strong opinions learn from people with whom we strongly disagree? I hope the answer is, yes. Social beliefs and notions of identity partially arise from the belief that everything has a purpose, and that morality is immutable. Once we've convinced ourselves that we are who we are, that we know what we think we know, and that we have a particular place within our cultural context, it may sometimes be difficult to empathize with another person's lived experiences (Patrone, et al. 229-32). This shortcoming is what my project will address, and I believe it can be done by extending an invitation to talk and listen.

**Project Overview**

For my collaborative research project, I will work with Dr. Lucinéa Marcelino Villela in the School of Architecture, Arts, and Communication (FAAC) at São Paulo State University (UNESP) in Bauru, a city in the midwestern region of the state, approximately 200 miles away from the urban area of São Paulo. Together, we will lead a team of student research assistants to complete a photo/video production project that includes work in English language translation. For the video portion, students in *Course # 1130I, Communication: Radio, Television, and Internet*, will work with us to recruit volunteers on both sides of the Queer Museum issue, create a set of norms and guidelines for a guided dialog on the subject, and help facilitate one-on-one volunteer dialogues. We will record and transcribe the dialogues, prompt the students to extract the most interesting 1 minute segment (approx.) of the conversation that evokes an image -- perhaps from an idiomatic expression or a descriptive turn of phrase -- and we will work as a team to brainstorm ways to represent the image in a short video and/or a still photograph. We will then invite the volunteers back to collaborate with us to make the artwork (video and/or photography). The process will require a commitment of 3 meetings from our volunteer participants:

1. 24 March - Large group dialogue with all volunteers to explain process, rules, and goals of the project
2. Month of April - Conduct and record dialogues. Transcribe entire dialogue and choose 1 minute segment of text for next stage
3. Month of May - Conduct video shoot and/or photo shoots, translate and subtitle the videos and/or label text for photographs

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By having volunteers collaborate to make creative, non-literal artwork, we will engender consideration of the words they chose to use in the initial dialogue, and also allow time to reflect on how their counterpart might have heard those words. The conversations will be in Portuguese, and we will use the transcripts to subtitle the videos and/or create titles and wall text in English.

**Political and Cultural Impacts**

Collaborating in this way, all constituents will have a shared stake in creating something new, and our common purpose will transcend differences of opinion. The goal is to create opportunities for people to express disagreement while still showing respect for one another, and to offer outlets for civil dialogue in an increasingly polarized social and political climate.

**Academic and Professional Context**

In “About Looking,” John Berger asks, “what served the function of photographs before photography?” and he answers: memory (50). I’d like to offer two additional answers: dreams and fantasies. In an age of widespread computer manipulation, most of us still tend to think of photographs as records of what was seen through the camera’s lens. This indexical fact about photography has always lived at ease right next to an opposite truth about the medium: most of the images we see on a daily basis are complete fabrications. Think of actors laughing over turgid spoonfuls in a yogurt ad, stock photos of expensive consumer objects glistening with just the right amount of condensation, and, of course, sitcoms, dramas, and feature length films. Even snapshots and family pictures usually involve smiles timed to coincide with a click of the shutter, yet we don’t presume any of it is real or fake. Regardless of Photoshop, photography exists in a space between the binary of (in)authenticity. The representational nature of lens-based mediums on the one hand, and their common usage to depict staged, choreographed scenes on the other, lends photography and video to Magical Realism, the conceptual realm in which I have situated my artwork up until now. The conversational nature of this project will allow me to move more deliberately into relational aesthetics, an art practice that is based largely on human relationships, experiences, and their social contexts.

**Methodology, Logistics, Timeframe**

My research is qualitative and will be conducted through:

- preparing norms and guidelines,
- vetting and pairing potential volunteers,
- facilitating and moderating dialogues between volunteers,
- recording, transcribing, editing, and translating the dialogues,
- coaching and directing the volunteers to in the videos/photos,
- shooting photos and videos, and
- producing and exhibiting the photos and subtitled videos

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In the first month of this project, I will find facilities where I can produce photographic prints for the exhibition that will cap my trip to Brazil. Professor Villela and I will work with student assistants to devise norms and guidelines, recruit volunteer participants, and create a shooting schedule. We will work only with volunteers who sign a standard model release form, and the design of this project meets the criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) certification. During the second month we will record the interviews, then transcribe, edit, and translate. In month three, we will shoot and produce the videos and photographs. In month four, we will complete production and disseminate our work through exhibitions at the University and a community center. Public lectures or panel discussions facilitated by our student assistants will accompany the display.

**Why Brazil? Why Does This Project Need to be Done?**

Brazil's sheer size, as well as its cultural and economic power, make it one of the most influential nations in the southern hemisphere. As Brazil goes, so goes South America. The same is often said of the U.S.A. and North America. If, through this project, we can create opportunities for dialogue across ideological divides, then I believe it will be beneficial to the people of both nations. In order for democracy to thrive, there needs to be a lively, and respectful, public exchange of ideas. While the "Queermuseu" controversy is specific to Brazil -- it is the explicit reason why I am proposing to do this project in this country -- ideological posturing around art, religion, and politics is not a uniquely Brazilian practice. Much of the world is experiencing a period of changing norms around civic discourse. For those on the left who believed, up until now, that the trajectory of civil rights would always move toward more freedom and broader acceptance, recent social retrenchments have been surprising. To those on the right who have faith in a natural order of things, recent changes are a course correction. In both cases, the promises of foundational myths inform different value systems, and it seems we are all partisans.

I'm not using the word "myth" in the vernacular sense of a "false idea," but instead I'm referring to the powerful stories we tell about ourselves to make sense of the world and to find our place in it. In "The Power of Myth," a book based on the popular PBS television series, Joseph Campbell explores common roots of elemental myths across different cultures and faiths. He notes that a thread running through many creation myths is the appeal to move beyond seeing our world as pairs of opposites, but he also points out that our languages, economic arrangements, politics, and even our religions seem to limit us to thinking in irreconcilable binaries (15-18). With this in mind, what plays out in much of my artwork is the tension between what we want, what we think we know, and what our myths tell us is culturally permissible or possible. Our project will call all of this into question. By repeatedly rehearsing and performing the recorded conversations, and collaborating to create both a video and still image, we all will have time during the proposed project to internalize the myths of "the other" into our own consciousnesses. By working across two languages and two cultures, the

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process-based nature of the work will give all of us enough critical distance to engage meaningfully with the narratives that emerge from the initial conversations.

**Professional Preparation**

I have asked some of my recommenders to address my teaching in their letters because my experience leading collaborative faculty-student research and my skills as a mentor will be essential when I collaborate with Professor Villela and her students. In the summers of 2013 and 2014, I received two consecutive Mellon Collaborative Research in the Humanities Grants to work with student research assistants on two curatorial projects, and to complete a photography project while I was an Artist in Residence at the Crawford County Historical Society in Pennsylvania. In 2010 and 2011, I received two consecutive Fahrner Fellowships for Collaborative Faculty-Student Research from Allegheny College for work in my art studio. I was a Visiting Professor and Artist in Residence at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras in Spring 2016, where I taught a short course in the Art Department and then collaborated with my students to mount a group exhibition of new works addressing themes from the short course. In summer 2015, I was an Artist in Residence at Blue Mountain Center, a working community of writers, artists, and activists set in the heart of New York State's Adirondack Forest Preserve. In autumn of that same year, I advanced my projects from Blue Mountain Center by securing access for photo and video shoots inside the exhibitions of the Drake Well Oil Museum in Titusville, PA. Later that winter, I continued my work as an Artist in Residence at the Vermont Studio Center. I've been awarded numerous other awards over the past 12 years, and I have just begun a new position as Chair of Photography at Columbus College of Art & Design. I have considerable instructional experience, including co-teaching courses, curricular innovation, and cross-disciplinary pedagogy.

My work as a curator, artist, and professor has given me opportunities to inspire critical discourse in a space free of bigotry, while maintaining academic responsibility to explore all sides of an issue. Exhibitions also serve as experiential classrooms. My classroom, and the gallery I ran, are places where adaptive responses to changing social, technological, and cultural trends are encouraged. These principles of my pedagogy promote critical thinking, experimentation, and acceptance of uncertain outcomes. All student assistants have emerged from my projects with a solid understanding of both creative practice and scholarly thought. I scaffold projects to prompt discussion and reflection so that my assistants are informed by history, theory, current practice, and criticism as we collaborate to make art work. Just as I meld performance, comparative mythology, theory, photography, and video in my own artwork, I nudge everyone who visits the exhibitions I curate -- as well as every student I work with -- to engage in cross-curricular dialogue, and to explore the complex questions that exist beyond the easy answers.

**Feasibility and Resources**

Much of the project will be about relationship building, real-world communication, transcription and translation of extemporaneous conversations, and video/photographic

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production. I will have access to facilities at UNESP to shoot all videos and photographs, and I will bring my native ear and teaching experience to mentor revisions of the English translations. Since this is a performative art project whose exact iteration will be largely shaped by the input of our volunteer participants -- and also because I do not speak Portuguese -- this project will be an intensive collaboration between me, Professor Villela, and our student research assistants. My success in conducting the project and mounting the culminating exhibition will be inseparable from the success of our students. Every student research assistant will contribute to the final exhibition, and we will credit all students and volunteer participants for their roles in helping to create the resulting artworks.

**Outcomes, Political or Cultural Impacts**

A Fulbright award will provide me and Professor Villela opportunities to involve students in collaborative research and production, to exhibit our artworks on- and off-campus at the end of the grant period, and to build new professional relationships in each other's countries. I will value exposure to Brazilian culture, and I'll welcome opportunities to grow. I imagine Brazilians think differently about identity than we do in the United States, and I look forward to peering through that lens. During my time in Brazil, I will be aware that I always represent my own country, whether in the classroom, in an exhibition, or in a grocery store. The prestige associated with the Fulbright award will bring positive attention to UNESP and CCAD, where I will return after my spring 2020 leave of absence ends. It will increase intercultural awareness and understanding at our small Art school in Columbus, Ohio. Upon my return to CCAD, I will develop a Travel Seminar course to Brazil, and I will seek additional exhibition opportunities for the collaborative project. This project will improve my studio art practice, gallery work, and teaching, providing me with greater empathy for an individual's strongly held beliefs. It will help me to more meaningfully connect my teaching, art, and curatorial work to the needs of domestic and international students, collaborators, colleagues, and gallery visitors. I look forward to working with Professor Villela at UNESP to devise new creative strategies drawn from both of our cultures, and to open more opportunities for civility in public discourse in both of our countries.

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**Works Cited**

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