**PANEL INTRO**

**What Border?: Crossing Invisible Lines**

Rather than observe neatly drawn boundaries, this panel seeks to contest the notion of “border” altogether. Taken together, each speaker examines a moment when borderlines - which may not have been noticeable before - are suddenly necessary, unwelcomed, unknown, or redrawn. Our first presenter considers the case of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden and the fine line he walks, in the public eye, between ‘hero’ and ‘traitor’ and, in his personal view, as a nationalist. Our second paper further examines instances similar to Snowden and the PRISM program by trying to understand ‘the unknown document’, or a piece of top-secret writing that borders on ‘existence.’ Our next presenter looks at the Battle in Seattle, specifically the redistricting, and thus criminalizing, zone in which protests took place. Our final presenter interrogates how digital spaces appear public, free, and borderless, but in fact they are strictly controlled spaces of private property.

**Bordering an Unknown Space: On the Non-Existent Text**

Referring to the fact that we *cannot* know what we *do* *not* know, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfield infamously exclaimed: “Reports that say there's -- that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.” Of course, there are things we do not know (some of us less than others), but how do we talk about the things about which we don’t know, about things that don’t exist because they haven’t been realized, things which we don’t know exist, or even aren’t supposed to exist. As an easy example, take, for instance, Wikileaks and Edward Snowden’s whistleblowing news about NSA surveillance. Such an event typifies the “unknown unknown.” It is not the fact that such documents have been (or have tried to be) suppressed, but it is actually that their existence was never supposed to *be* in the first place. The PRISM program, one of the main documents released by The Guardian (to whom Snowden “came out”) – you all might remember the amazing PowerPoints that accompanied the document – these programs were not supposed to be recognized, not supposed to “exist” beyond the clichéd “need to know basis.” Just the other day, the new app Onionshare was released that allows individuals to send large files anonymously, a service trying to avoid the corruption of some of Snowden files. Such a service heightens the possibility of secret texts becoming public. But Rumsfield and Snowden, albeit implicitly unrelated, suggest an interesting reboot toward a rhetorical reinvention of Gorgias’ *On the Nonexistent*. Even though such “non-existent” documentation actually does exist, its secrecy and, as many argue, our nation’s security pushes it into non-existence. Additionally, this presentation will interrogate the complex teleology of these texts, prompting questions about the nature of means and ends of non-existent texts especially when the means are not supposed to lead to any end in the first place.

So, how do we talk about things that really aren’t supposed to be here? Can we experience something that does not exist? Admittedly such questions are slippery slopes into various ideas of memory, forgetting, affect, and even philosophy writ large. These are not new questions in philosophy, and I will not sidestep that scholarship. This paper, however, interrogates the complex ways we write and talk about texts that either do not exist or are not supposed to exist. Taking examples from government documents, digital writing spaces, and contemporary art, this presentation challenges not only what it means for a text to exist, but also expands on the philosophical idea of fictionalism to define a vocabulary we can use to discuss non-existent texts. My interest, however, involves the text itself--can we talk about texts that are not supposed to exist in the first place? Does merely mentioning them bring them into existence? And how are we supposed to define the border of texts that are not supposed to exist?

Now for a fun example. A little over a year ago, NFL linebacker Manti Te’o (who at the time was playing for Notre Dame) revealed that his girlfriend, over whom he had gushed to the media about their intense love affair, was fake. More specifically, she didn’t exist at all. It wasn’t a matter of someone pretending to be someone who was an actual person (think: Cyrano de Bergerac for the 21st century); instead, someone had created a persona and faked the relationship between Lennay Kekua and Te’o. Now, I’ll get to the academic stuff in a minute, but this example is a nice introduction to the types of “existence” I’ll be discussing in this presentation. The relationship Te’o thought he was having was real to him. It was not, of course, real to anyone else, and especially not his presumed girlfriend. It was later revealed that the interloper was family acquaintance, Ronaiah Tuiasosopo.

To Te’o, Kekua existed only because the electronic communication between them supported the idea of the relationship. He, allegedly, never met “her”, but their communication was enough to create an emotional bond (albeit one-way). But wait, there’s more! Lennay Kekua also died of leukemia on the exact same day as Te’o’s (real life) grandmother. Te’o mourned these two women publicly, but one of those women never existed to begin with.

For Te’o, Lennay existed—existed in the way we meet people online and believe they’re actually the person who they claim—and assuming we’re not “catfished” as the popular TV show suggests. However, we do this all the time without thinking about it. Consider the most recent novel you read—you probably imagined one or more of the characters and can have vivid conversations about them. I say “Sherlock Holmes” and you probably know who I’m talking about. But, he does not exist, right? R.M. Sainsbury refers to this notion as “intentionality”: “a feature of the mind, exemplified by thinking about. The distinctive feature is that one can think about things that do not exist” (212). These intentions are not just individual episodes, but rather extend throughout the entire story mixing with other “intentions” causing “a fictive intention”—something that will never exist (fiction) but does in our thoughts.

In a similar vein, disappearance or absence function closely to “non-existent”. Things disappear all the time--we lose our keys, our phones, our perspective. There’s a challenge in identifying the point at which something actually disappears the process of it even existing at all. To disappear implies existence, something we cannot say for sealed texts a la Mark Cuban’s Cyber Dust or SnapChats. There will be a need to clarify how we make these texts appear--we have to argue for their existence just like Watson and Crick had to argue for the existence of the double-helix. No one could see it, but they had to prove it through rhetoric alone. There is a difference between proving something exists when we know it exists and denying existence when we know something isn’t supposed to exist.

As another example of a digital text, I want to turn briefly to sexting (yeah, I know strange connection). Sexting is all referential--there’s usually no action (nothing that leads directly to actual sex). There’s a narrative about sex that’s implicit in the sexts, but there’s no action beyond reply. We’re talking about what the body can do but only through a narrative of the non-existing sexual encounter. In the case of sexting, the “non-existent” text I’m interested in is the actual sexual encounter. The sex act doesn’t need to happen (or doesn’t need to happen together)—the sext is enough to represent it. Similarly, the same is true with the Instagram feed “satiregram”. These are descriptions of well-worn images--we might even say “image tropes” because they’re so recognizable in verbal form only. For example, “My Starbucks coffee in the cupholder of my car. I’m ready for the day” or “here’s another picture of the sushi rolls I’m having for dinner.” There’s no misunderstanding about what images these descriptions are referring to--we’ve all seen them. Like the sext, the encounter or the production of the image doesn’t need to exist—we’re persuaded of its being even without the product coming to be.

For my final example, I turn to a collection of celebrity portraits by photographer Chris Buck titled *Presence.* In today’s media landscape, photographs, video and other commentary on celebrity are not altogether uncommon, and, in this sense, *Presence*, a collection of 50 celebrity “portraits,” is something of an expected artifact; except, that is, for one intriguing twist: the celebrities are *completely* hidden from view. In stark contrast to the annals of TMZ, *People* magazine, and other publications bent on showing celebrity everywhere, the celebrities featured in Buck’s portraits (including the likes of Chuck Close, David Lynch, Jay Leno, Michael Stipe, and Snoop Dogg/Lion, to name a few) are conspicuously absent. Although this genre is in no way new, its most immediate corollaries being Henry Holiday’s “Hidden Face of the Baker” (1876), Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s “Portrait of Rudolf II” (circa 1590), and the more recent genre of painting models into a backdrop, Buck’s *Presence* offers an interesting intervention: the subject is impossible to detect; no lurking figure in the shadows; no subtle shift(s) in light, color, or texture; no celebrity, whatsoever. Instead, the viewer is left to assume Chuck Close is hiding around a corner; Jay Leno behind one of his vehicles; What is Snoop doing in that shed? The celebrities are in the frame and out at the same time. In fact, for those skeptical that said celebrity was *there* at all, Buck offers little more than a witness statement verifying the “presence” of each celebrity at the shoot. And still, despite these careful attempts to extricate the celebrity’s body from the fold, we look.

Like Schrodinger’s cat whose “observation *causes* it to be either alive or dead,” Buck’s portraits cause us to apply our knowledge of a supposedly photographed individual, thus allowing our view of the portrait to both represent and deny the celebrity’s presence. Because the subjects are hidden, the mere knowledge that the celebrity is actually in the portrait isn’t enough proof for the viewer to confirm his/her presence. As an audience, we can only assume that the subject simultaneously is and is not in the portrait. It is only because a name is actually attached to each photo that the suggestion of the celebrity’s presence seems probable, even tangible. Rather than taking in the entire portrait, we are looking for evidence of the celebrity. Buck acknowledges that our desire to find clues is a tongue-in-cheek reference to our culture’s obsession with celebrity. But, unlike Arcimboldo’s famous “All is Vanity,” no vain figure (a famous one at that!) emerges. *Presence* is not a measure of commitment, whereby the longer you stare the more a celebrity’s defining characteristics become tangible. And yet, we’re still looking. If Schrodinger’s experiment remains a telling artifact for rhetoricians and media theorists alike, and a useful analogy for making sense of Buck’s *Presence*, it is because Schrodinger’s explanation relies on a theory of media that seems increasingly relevant today.

From the standpoint of artistic production, there is much to say about what’s missing in Buck’s portraits. To start with, these artifacts challenge existing frameworks for making sense of how audiences connect with media. It seems fair to suggest, that is, that artifacts like *Presence* complicate our sense of how viewer identification works, and how this figures in the creative process. As teachers of English, we often find ourselves repeating the mantra: “Think about your audience.” We ask our students to consider the expectations of their respective audiences; to try to imagine how readers/viewers will identify with the objects that they are creating: “Imagine a world where this object will be used; or live.” In fact, much of our work in the humanities in general is predicated on this kind of move. But, although this context-centric approach to textual and visual production still rings true with regard for *Presence*--Buck is clearly aware of how his (American) audience values celebrity--it remains difficult to discern how audiences are actually connecting with these photographs. In part, this is because *Presence* internalizes viewer experience in ways that make the reading process uncomfortable. These portraits accost us at both atomic and macroscopic levels; they play to the mutual indeterminacy of referent and reference; what is stuck there, in the frame (gesture at the image on screen), and not at the same time (the interstitial quality of the frame). As much as Buck’s portraits tell us that what is not there is important to consider, so is what is there.

To close, Buck’s photographs and the other examples seem to comment on more than just our unhealthy obsession with celebrity and want more generally. Related to the first point, Buck’s photographs foreground a mode of viewing, a process so to speak, as opposed to a functional endpoint. In denying what we want as viewers, Buck forces us to sit with these still photographs for an uncomfortable period of time. Sexts and satiregram entice us to imagine the non-existent text (the sex act or the image). Wikileaks and other secret government documents place us in an uncomfortable position: we know (kinda) that these exist, but we are left wondering if they do and what they actually say. Thinking about the non-existent forces us through stages of acceptance: We want. We can’t have. Why do we want? We’re not sure. When will it happen? Perhaps never. Perhaps it already has.

Thank you!