Moonbit

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How does one make obsolete code interesting and worth engaging with? What possible value for the present could be found in the antiquated syntax of 1960s computing? We take up a singular text, the source code of the Apollo 11 Command and Lunar Module (AGC), to explore the possibilities of historical code as resource for creative and critical reading. Our collaborative project puts forth the argument that the de-familiarized context of a long-obsolete programming language (Yul) can enable rather than limit interpretation. We locate our proposed presentation within two major traditions: experimental erasure poetry and critical code studies. We understand these two discourses as linked and informing each other within our project. Erasure poetry functions according to the logics of the remix or the deformation of the text, logics we put into practice in our collaborative presentation. We argue that critical commentaries and poetic deformations of historical code are the best way to interrupt the desire to stabilize or fix and thus re-instrumentalize code.

The AGC source code has been available to the general public for some time, first as scanned images and then embedded within an emulator, but it was only after two major events occurring in 2016 that this particular historical software project became a major object of attention. In the summer of 2016 the AGC code was uploaded to Github, a popular, community-based software repository. There has been much attention given to this body of code following its uploading and transformation into the easy-to-read form used by Github. Shortly after this re-production of the code, the principle software leader on the Apollo 11 Guidance Computer project, Margaret Hamilton, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by U.S. President Barack Obama for her work on the code. These two events make this body of a code an important interpretive object for scholars, creative workers, and hobbyists alike.

Dobson will first situate the code within its cultural moment and within the history of computing and scientific exploration, drawing out the affordances and limitations of mid-century computing and the range of politics that find expression within the text of the code. A series of close readings of the code enables him to draw attention to important formal and theoretical concepts that illustrate both the value of this particular code-as-text and the general practice of reading code. At the same time, he reads other contemporary texts and objects alongside the code to historicize what remains unsaid or inexpressible within the limits of natural and technological language. Through a series of close, interpretive readings of code segments, Dobson will examine the formal aspects of the AGC code while drawing out the theoretical dimensions of the type of writing known as code. He does so by unpacking a line of argument concerning the role of execution and interpretation of computer code that runs through recent arguments made by Wendy Chun, Lev Manovich, and Alexander Galloway.

Mosteirin will then present several of her erasure poems that she produced from the AGC code. We understand erasure poetry as one of the most important ways in which poets can draw out new poetic possibilities from the rich source language of other textual objects. Drawing on the wide range of experiment erasure work found in Tom Phillips's A Humument, Ronald Johnson's Radi os, M. NourbeSe Phillips's Zong, and Jen Bervin's Nets, Mosteirin finds her language and resources in the code, metadata, and comments that make up the body of Apollo Guidance

Computer text. In understanding her poetic practice not as a total break or split with the original object but a reworking, Mosteirin follows Brian McHale's understanding of erasure as a subtle art of subtraction that gestures toward what is already there, in this case, within the body of the source code. The stakes of any erasure project involve a claim on the part of the poet for the source text as an object worthy of poetic attention. Mosteirin's erasure project originated in her realization that humans were only able to get to the moon by writing our way there.