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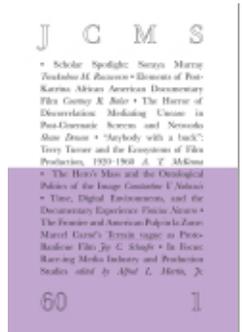
## Scholar Spotlight: Soraya Murray

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Interview by TreaAndrea M. Russworm

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**Figure 1**  
Soraya Murray (Derek Conrad Murray, 2020).

Soraya Murray is an interdisciplinary scholar who focuses on contemporary visual culture with particular interest in art, film, and video games. An associate professor in the Film + Digital Media Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Murray's first book, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), examines how post-9/11 era mainstream games mirror and are constitutive of larger societal fears, dreams, hopes, and even complex struggles for recognition. In recent years, her writings have focused on both methodological and ethical considerations of critical

game studies as well as modeling intersectional approaches that consider race, gender, class, nation, and sociopolitical context.

**TreaAndrea M. Russworm:** *In relation to your work as a whole, how do you perceive the audience(s) for your work?*

**Soraya Murray:** I write for visual studies and cultural studies scholars and students, for those interested in mass media, and really for anyone who looks at video games—or, more generally, visual cultures of technology—and wants a humanistic

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framework for understanding them. My work is a delivery device for theoretical consideration of the advanced technological culture in which we live today, refracted through approachable visual forms like films and video games. There is a persisting failure of the imagination regarding the futures we envision for ourselves and who belongs in them. I would describe what I'm doing as a project of inclusive reframing, of revisionist intervention, or an opening up of possibilities.

**Russworm:** *Can you say a little about your interests as a scholar and teacher and what brought you to study art and games?*

**Murray:** My interest in visual culture came from visiting museums all over the world, something my parents insisted on when we traveled. I was first socialized into advanced technology through my access to home console video games and later through grade school programs in Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code (BASIC) programming. Also, my parents met on a blind date at a party celebrating Neil Armstrong's first moon walk in 1969. Somehow my fate feels tied up in that utopian promise of the space race.

In terms of pursuing academia, I always respected and venerated the educators in my life. As a kid, I used to beg to go to the bookstore, like other kids beg for the toy store. I was captivated by screens. I loved films that were extremely heady and, in retrospect, conventionally inappropriate for my age. The signs were there from the start, but it was a long and twisty path to find my way to academia as a profession. Some people seem to know from very early on exactly what they should be doing in life; I had to see past other people's expectations, to follow my instincts and proclivities.

**Russworm:** *Please reflect on what it means to you to play, study, and teach video games in a technical and cultural climate that has so often promoted racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory practices. Have these realities influenced your work or experiences with video games?*

**Murray:** The encoding of technology as the domain of white male genius has been manufactured in the US context over a long period of time and with concerted effort. These perceptions around who can be the authentic innovator and who is relegated to the consumer have been shored up in education, mass culture, and the workplace. The promotion of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory practices is a sign of weakness in the industry, not strength. Being in Silicon Valley, I see that the constant flow of people who make these innovations possible is extremely diverse—it is literally like living in an international airport terminal. But this is quite discontinuous with the ideology and the public-facing image of innovation. Having a historical understanding of how these ideologies have come into being helps me to keep perspective that the friction that I may experience in the classroom or in professional circumstances is a by-product of long social programming. That said, I hold people responsible for their actions but with the objective of teaching with empathy.

**Russworm:** *Do you have any advice for scholars new to the field, especially women of color who are simultaneously trying to navigate the academy, games, and interacting with a public digital culture?*

**Murray:** Unexpected allies come from unexpected places. Unexpected and innovative directions in research come from unexpected discoveries, so I try not to be too sure about what I believe I know.

Usually I can get to the bottom of negativity or hostility I may encounter not by immediately responding in kind but by asking myself what interests might be at play. People may try to weaponize your well-founded, righteous anger against you—but this is just a trap.

Despite the ideal of intellectual freedom, there's actually a lot of peer pressure in academia to tow the party line, even within the ranks of people who might seem to be on your side. Say what you have to say. Study what you want to study, how you want to study it. You'll embolden others to do the same.

**Russworm:** *Since academic work often fuses the pleasurable with the productive either intentionally and overtly or not, can you reflect here on any complicated dynamics of pleasure and joy for you when it comes to teaching, researching, and writing?*

Murray: Ironically, my productivity often comes from what bothers me about what I'm seeing rather than a pleasurable relation to the object of study. That is to say, I rarely write from a position of fandom and am even slightly suspicious of myself if my work starts tilting in that direction. For example, my next research project requires, among other things, that I play quite a few military shooter games—which happens not to be my favorite genre. But I have some important things to say that require it. The pleasure comes later in contemplating and writing from a knowledgeable and rigorous position, made possible through a sustained engagement with these difficult objects of study.

**Russworm:** *When you think about SCMS as a community for sharing your work, what makes this space different from other professional communities for presenting on games?*

**Murray:** Many established professional organizations have been slow to integrate serious consideration of video games into their publications and conferences. And while things are changing, the scholarly discourse of games predominately tended toward a highly formalist approach. In recent years, the SCMS community has embraced critical game studies and contributed to a robust intellectual flourishing of that field. Some of the best work in this area is coming from a new generation of scholars who have been able to earn PhDs, get their first academic positions, and write their first books in game studies. Unlike many of the more traditional spaces in which I move, SCMS has made room for emerging scholars in this area who are cracking open new possibilities. It is institutional support which provides the traction necessary for these intellectual discussions to thrive.