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Let's Talk: Conversation as a Defining Moment for the Communication Discipline

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author makes the case that a defining moment for the communication discipline is to encourage increased uptake of embodied conversation. The essay shares illustrative examples and reviews research on issues such as loneliness, anxiety, social comparison, empathy, compassion, social media, electronic medical records, facial mimicry and more. It then describes various strategies that the communication discipline might employ in their research and pedagogy that motivate the practice of embodied conversation. The essay concludes with an invitation to communication scholars from a wide range of focus areas and generations to join in (re)creating “conversation as cool.”

As I flipped my attention back and forth from my phone to the television this morning, I overheard Dr. Oz on the Today Show talking about today's greatest health risk. I looked it up later that day. Sure enough, for those living in the United States, the greatest health risk is not obesity and lack of exercise. It's not drug or alcohol use, or unsafe sex. Nope, the research seems to support the idea that today's biggest health threat is an epidemic of stress and loneliness. Indeed, according to a comprehensive meta-analytic review, people lacking social connections are at a much higher risk (29% to be exact) for premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015).

Meanwhile...

The ability for people to empathically connect with one another is plummeting. Among college students, empathy has declined 40% in the past three decades (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Elementary teachers report that school children increasingly do not seem to realize the hurt they cause when they isolate or bully other children. When social media scholar Sherry Turkle (2016) asked about this phenomenon, one teacher explained, “They are not developing that way of relating where they listen and learn how to look at each other and hear each other” (p. 164).

Meanwhile...

In medical appointments, doctors are becoming so focused on their glowing electronic medical record monitors that they have trouble conversationally connecting with patients and their needs (Verghese, 2008). Although the use of electronic medical records in doctor-patient communication results in more effective information sharing, their use negatively impacts patient-centeredness and physician-patient relationships (Shachak & Reis, 2009).

Meanwhile...

Screen time is connected to a host of physical and psychological problems. An entire industry has grown up around

products such as ergonomic chairs, standing desks, and blue-light-blocking glasses that supposedly reduce the negative effect of screen glow on our circadian rhythm (Mitroff, 2019). But it is more than a little eye strain or bad posture. About 48% of teens who spend five or more hours a day on their phones are more likely to think about and plan for suicide (compared to 28% of teens that spend an hour or less on their phone) (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018).

Meanwhile...

More people are seeking medical treatment for social anxiety than at any time in history (T. Newman, 2018). Social anxiety especially plagues wealthy countries like the United States. Contributing factors include a focus on extrinsic goals such as materialism which serve as a distraction from more fulfilling intrinsic activities such as community and affiliation. They also include overwork, multi-tasking, and living alone. And, they include a reliance on social media.

Meanwhile...

The use of social media continues to increase, with more than two-thirds of Americans on Facebook, and significant increases in the use of Snapchat and Instagram among young people (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Heavy social media use is connected to lower self-esteem, higher anxiety, and depression (T. Newman, 2018), especially when users engage in “upward social comparisons” to people they perceive as having more friends or healthier habits (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). These comparisons are especially insidious among heavy Instagram users (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018). As one might imagine, it is nearly impossible to be simultaneously envious and happy.

Meanwhile...

People who take time off from Facebook report better moods and more embodied human interaction (Carey, 2019).

I am struck by all these meanwhiles.

I mean “struck” (p. 85) in the phenomenological sense (Wittgenstein, 1980). People can be struck from a comment, an event, or even a sense of anxiety or upset (Vince, 1998). Being struck may result in an “aha!” moment where we suddenly discover something and are moved to transform ways of talking and acting (Cunliffe, 2004). The same set of issues or concepts, from a social constructionist and phenomenological standpoint, will strike people differently based upon their history and current circumstances.

This is how all the meanwhiles strike me:

I am struck that the defining moment for today’s communication scholars is to engage in scholarship that results in the uptake of embodied face-to-face conversation and a decrease in mediated communication. I am moved to go beyond studying, analyzing, creating theories, and providing explanations about the differences between various modes of communication. Embracing the power of social science for creating phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001), I feel compelled to engage in scholarship that motivates an uptake of embodied conversation.

And, I hope others will join me.

Let me emphasize that this is not about right or wrong, morality or immorality. It is about workability, social connection, and wellbeing. I am struck that the amount and quality of our embodied communication relates to the quality of our physical and mental health, the strength of relationships, the vibrancy of organizations, and the happiness of communities. I am also struck by how Western countries like the United States are “leaders” in terms of their social media use and should arguably take a lion’s share of responsibility for engaging in research and practice that might ameliorate its negative repercussions.

Across cultures, social connections are key to wellbeing (K. Newman, 2018). The happiest and healthiest people in the world seek social connections with others (Rohrer, Richter, Brümmer, Wagner, & Schmukle, 2018) – which means connectivity through verbal and nonverbal communication. They surround themselves with friends and family, regularly. And by surround, I mean that they are in each other’s presence. They see each other’s eyes crinkle as they laugh or well up with tears of joy, nostalgia, or grief. They hear the burps, the farts, the giggles, and the uncertainty in each other’s voices when they explain their point of view. They smell their aunt’s lingering perfume, their teammates’ sweat, their granddaughter’s baby scent (or dirty diaper).

Meanwhile, on social media, people are more likely to encounter photoshopped pictures and staged lives. The script. The cleaned-up version. The edited. The idealized. The envy-producing. And, if they are lucky, every so often they will see glimpses of vulnerability.

Over my last 20 years of teaching communication, I have seen students decreasingly interact with one another face-to-face in real-time. In the early 2000s, I engaged in dramatic methods such as playing music and dimming the lights to quiet the buzzing conversation before class. Such measures are no longer needed. Typically, the classroom is already quiet. Students sit silently with eyes donned to tiny glowing screens – some with headphone-stuffed ears. Incoming communication is self-controlled and even fleeting moments of boredom become intolerable.

One of my honors students confided in me last year that when ordering pizza for delivery or pick-up, she avoids venues where she must talk to someone on the phone. Instead, she specifically chooses pizza joints that accommodate online menu requests. She wants to avoid the hassle and stress of human interaction.

She’s not alone. Even a small real-time conversation is anxiety producing for many college-age students, especially when the stakes are higher – say with a potential romantic partner (Turkle, 2016). How will they know what to say to a potential suitor in real time? It’s preferable, they say, to be able to have time to write it all out. To get input from their friends on what to say. To seek advice, for example, on manliness websites like “The Red Pill.” There, a young man can search out tips on the best timing of when to respond to his potential hook-up so that he is viewed as strong and not as weak and pussy-whipped (Eddington, 2017).

People are more engrossed than ever in their pocket-sized dopamine-hitters. It is telling that tech giants Bill Gates and Steven Jobs severely limited their children’s use of technology (Stillman, 2017). The buzzes and beeps are physically addictive, causing an immediate response, but lack the happiness-producing hormone, serotonin (Alter, 2017).

Additionally, reliance on social media may inadvertently discourage people from envisioning their recipients or crafting a message that is context and audience specific. In introductory communication classes, students learn that competent communication is context and audience-specific (Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2007). The way people should develop a speech for an audience who agrees with our viewpoint is different than the one we would make to a hostile audience. McEwan and Mease (2013) suggest that social media posters, however, typically envision a single primary audience rather than considering how their message will hit an entire range of people who find themselves in very different contexts, lives, times of day, and states of being.

Imagine this scenario: over time, a communication professor might only think of her colleagues when she crafts multiple social media messages that use jargon and are focused on academic concerns. And then, she is surprised and saddened when a family member that lacks a college degree unfriends her and says, “We obviously have nothing in common.” This scenario is not hypothetical. In this case, my lack of focus and awareness of the range of audiences in my Facebook feed inadvertently weakened a relationship that was very important to me.

The attention to screens affects the ability to notice suffering nearby. Sure, mediated suffering is consumed via “Go Fund Me” social media pleas, the television news, and heart-breaking animal neglect commercials. However, the channel is easily flipped, a webpage clicked through, and the suffering suddenly disappears.

Even for those who are open to being with mediated suffering, messages of upset and vulnerability are much more invisible in mediated communication. When people use emojis or emoticons to express their emotions online, they are much less likely to use them to express sadness. And, emojis do not have the same effect as direct eye contact, which spurs a whole range of prosocial effects, such as feelings of love, acceptance, empathy, and understanding (Dadds et al., 2012; Murphy, 2014).

Spectating people as they ignore embodied suffering right beside them is even more poignant. I have stood in the ASU school of communication elevator and seen people so engrossed with their phones that they did not notice the sadness of someone right beside them. On busy urban streets, those focused on their screens do not see, and occasionally even trip over, homeless people who are reaching out for attention and help.

And the thing is, compassion and empathy begin with noticing and recognizing the upset around us. Compassion is a three-step process of recognizing suffering, relating empathically and vulnerably to that suffering, and (re)acting to help respond or provide support (Tracy & Huffman, 2017; Way & Tracy, 2012). When people stand in a mediated bubble, they are constrained in recognizing the emotional cues of those who could use their immediate embodied support.

Recognizing and responding to suffering, like recognizing and responding to any emotion, are skills that are cultivated over a lifetime. Social media has stunted this practice of social responsiveness and empathy – not only for giving it, but receiving it. A series of experiments reaching back to the 1970s suggest that when mothers face their infants but remain facially unresponsive, their babies react with intense wariness, upset, and eventual withdrawal (Adamson & Frick, 2003). They call this phenomenon “still face”, and it’s heartbreaking to see it in action (Tronick, 2009). Whereas the 1970s “still face” is seemingly preposterous (as it seems unlikely that parents would purposefully stare blankly at their infant for a long period of time), today many babies regularly compete with screens, trying to catch the eye of caregivers who instead gaze impassively at their phones. “Still face” is now “phone face.” And it is normal. I challenge anyone to watch the homemade still face/phone face experiments on YouTube and not get a lump in their throat.

Meanwhile, children turn to their own screens for entertainment. They grow up with years of fewer practice in recognizing and responding to others in real-time. What will be the effects of this over the long term? Will tomorrow’s nurses be significantly less able to recognize when an uncommunicative patient is hurting? Will police officers increasingly misread suffering as violent intent? Will romantic partners be less able to constructively deal with the conflict?

Empathy requires a variety of functions to work. One is the ability to mimic another. The facial feedback hypothesis suggests that we are able to feel others’ emotions not because we simply visually identify their emotions. Rather, peoples’ faces go through a series of muscular gymnastics by mimicking the facial expressions of those around us, and then our mimicked facial muscles provide feedback to our brain about what others are feeling (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). When our faces do not mimic others’ emotions, empathy is impaired. Such is the case for those whose facial muscles are paralyzed due to injury or use of Botox (Neal & Chartrand, 2011). This also happens when we cannot visualize others’ range of micro-expressions because we are not looking at them or are viewing them as a static photoshopped image.

Indeed, even mimicking with our voice is connected to being able to enter the emotional world of others. Neuroscience research demonstrates that for people to accurately comprehend *what* others are saying, they must also have access to *how* they are

saying it, through nonverbal aspects such as intonation (Burlinson, 2011). Access to a rich range of nonverbal cues serves to trigger humans’ neurological systems so that we are better able to mentalize and enter others’ emotional world. This type of mirroring prompts the individual, at least momentarily, to adopt another’s way of thinking (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). Without mimicry, we are less able to understand *why* someone else said or did something (Spunt, 2013). Given the difficulty in mediated communication of understanding why someone said something, it is no wonder misunderstandings happen so frequently.

Research on communication accommodation suggests that mimicry not only helps people empathize and understand others but that mirroring communicative behavior is also likely to make people more likeable and persuasive to others (Iacoboni, 2009). Converging speech to match another in terms of accent, dialect, and speech rate makes it more likely that others will perceive us as competent, attractive, warm, and cooperative (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005). In terms of health benefits, the nonverbal mirroring available through embodied communication makes us more likeable to those who are hurting. As a result, those who are suffering may avoid resistance and instead accept help that may improve their well-being (Tracy & Huffman, 2017).

So, how do we go about motivating an uptake in embodied communication?

A key aspect of creating conversation is through purposefully designing for and creating “dialogic spaces” (Rule, 2004) in which people are motivated to interact and turn toward one another with the intention of establishing a mutual relationship (Buber, 1964).

At Arizona State University, colleagues in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication have engaged in several structured activities that encourage embodied conversation and dialogue, including Free Listening, Storyscope, and Civil Dialogue® (Tracy, Razzante, Hanna, *Forthcoming*). Free listening asks people to stand in public and hold hand-crafted cardboard signs that read “free listening.” When passers-by approach and want to talk, the free listener drops their sign, asks them what they want to talk about, and listens. This activity has been successfully incorporated into a range of different courses and for different purposes such as cultivating listening skills, connection, empathy, and compassion. And, early research suggests that free listening results in people doing more to critically reflect on their assumptions and communicative practices (Tietsort & Hanners, 2019). Full details and recommendations for the safe practice of Free Listening are available at (<https://urbanconfessional.org>).

Story circles are another activity that encourages embodied synchronous interaction. Colleagues at ASU have coordinated “Storyscope” in which a certain topic is chosen for the session (e.g., “change”), participants pull their chairs into a circle, and share brief stories related to the night’s topic (Storyscope, 2018). By including people from various walks of life, Storyscope provides possibilities for connection with those whom people might typically feel anxious, shy, or unfamiliar; “the things we have in common, as well as real differences, are brought to light” (Human Communication, 2018).

The goal of Civil Dialogue® is to bring diverse groups of people together to “sit down and cogently share ideas of

disagreement, express themselves passionately, while really working to understand why those who hold differing, perhaps even opposite opinions, may well be as deeply convicted as themselves” (Genette, Olson, & Linde, 2018, p. 5). Civil Dialogue® is structured by a trained facilitator revealing a provocative statement (e.g., the United States should build more border walls), and five participants are invited to take a stand about the statement – ranging from agree strongly to disagree strongly. With the help of the facilitator, and with contributions from a spectating audience, the participants civilly talk through their standpoints with one another, and vulnerably share the ways in which the dialogue may (or may not) have influenced their point of view.

I have led courses at the graduate and undergraduate level in which student assignments are based upon crafting conversations and social interactions with one another. These include “Communication and The Art of Happiness” and “Being a Leader” (course syllabi available at www.SarahJTracy.com). In the happiness course, student conversations include those focused on gratitude, forgiveness, and savoring conversation. In the leadership course, students share a series of conversations with those who will help them to create a “future that was not going to happen anyway that fulfills the needs of the relevant parties.” Along the way, they have assignments in which they make requests, promises, and invitations—and must authentically listen to key parties to understand what will motivate them to join in the leadership project. Early research suggests that, when compared to students in a conventional leadership course focused on learning and applying leadership theories, students in the conversation-focused leadership course not only self-report better results, but are also seen as more “hireable” by human resource personnel (Adame et al., 2019).

What all these activities have in common are aspects of an OPPT-in approach—which stands for ontological, phenomenological, phronetic, and transformative. OPPT-in scholarship is focused on motivating the “being” of desired behaviors – behaviors like leadership, compassion, and listening (Tracy, Franks, Brooks, & Hoffman, 2015). It focuses on experiential learning and practice of specific types of interaction in real-time with the people with whom we already have or want to develop authentic relationships (Tracy & Donovan, 2018). Such an approach stands in sharp contrast to the push toward online learning where students never embody interaction with one another and can accomplish their assignments without ever communicating synchronously with others face-to-face.

In addition to these structured activities at ASU, another key way of promoting conversation is when organizations specifically design their workplaces to promote conversation. As synthesized by Turkle (2016):

- Google has found the perfect amount of time for people to stand in a cafeteria line so that they talk with one another – and it is three to 4 minutes.
- Yahoo executive Marissa Mayor radically reduced the amount of telecommuting in order to promote productivity and creativity.
- Some of the most innovative companies are building all-day cafeterias, stand-up meetings for quick huddles,

agenda-less breakfast meetings, and interactive company outings to promote conversation.

Despite these efforts, just designing for conversation does not automatically equate with more embodied interaction. The reliance on digital connectedness has a strong influence, and many employees (even when offered opportunities for conversation) view “real work” as returning emails and attending to their mediated connections. It is imperative that senior colleagues model conversation and provide the space and time to make it happen (Turkle, 2016).

So, embodied connection could be accomplished by a variety of activities – such as Free Listening, Storyscope, Civil Dialogue®, conversation-focused courses, designing for conversation at work, and an OPPT-in approach. These are just some ideas – not the only ones or the best ones. My hope is that, together as a discipline, we will identify, examine, and encourage more.

I do want to emphasize a unifying aspect that all these “conversational remedies” have in common: Namely, they are focused on *motivating* conversation rather than *slamming* mediated interaction. I do not believe that the answer to loneliness, social anxiety, or a less than perfect circadian rhythm lies in critique or shame. We should not bash Millennials and Gen Z-ers for engaging in behavior that is as typical to them as dialing a telephone was to the Gen X-ers. We should not shame mothers for checking their email when their baby is nursing. Doing so suggests that people who use technology are engaged in unthoughtful, immoral behavior. It suggests that THEY – the people – are the problem, rather than our infrastructure, our habits, our routines. In line with dialectical theories, the need for *both* mediated and embodied communication is not a “problem” to be solved, but rather is a “tension” to be managed.

What’s more, a person can be struck by the need for increased embodied communication while simultaneously embracing the benefits technology provides. Mediated communication can provide a relational lifeline, for example, to those who are homebound or geographically removed. To be clear, my concern did not begin with the technology. Rather, my concern began with issues of psychological, social, and physical wellness, and how our discipline might motivate types of communication that encourage empathy, connection, and care – at home, at work, and in the community.

Now is a defining moment for communication scholarship. We have the transdisciplinary power to examine and encourage conversation at all levels of interaction. Indeed, it is entirely feasible that we create “conversation courses” so that they are as groundbreaking and ubiquitous as “computer-mediated-communication” courses were 30 years ago. Perhaps conversation courses should even eclipse today’s public speaking courses.

To make this happen, my hope is that the issues outlined in this essay are taken up by a range of communication scholars across focus areas and generations. No matter my personal interest in this topic (as a middle-aged Gen X’er), “conversation as cool” will only happen when digital natives like Gen Z’ers jump on board. An elder’s wag of the finger will not do the trick, regardless of how well-intentioned.

I close with a staged photo (Figure 1) superimposed with stanzas from Gary Turk’s short film, “Look Up” – a viral

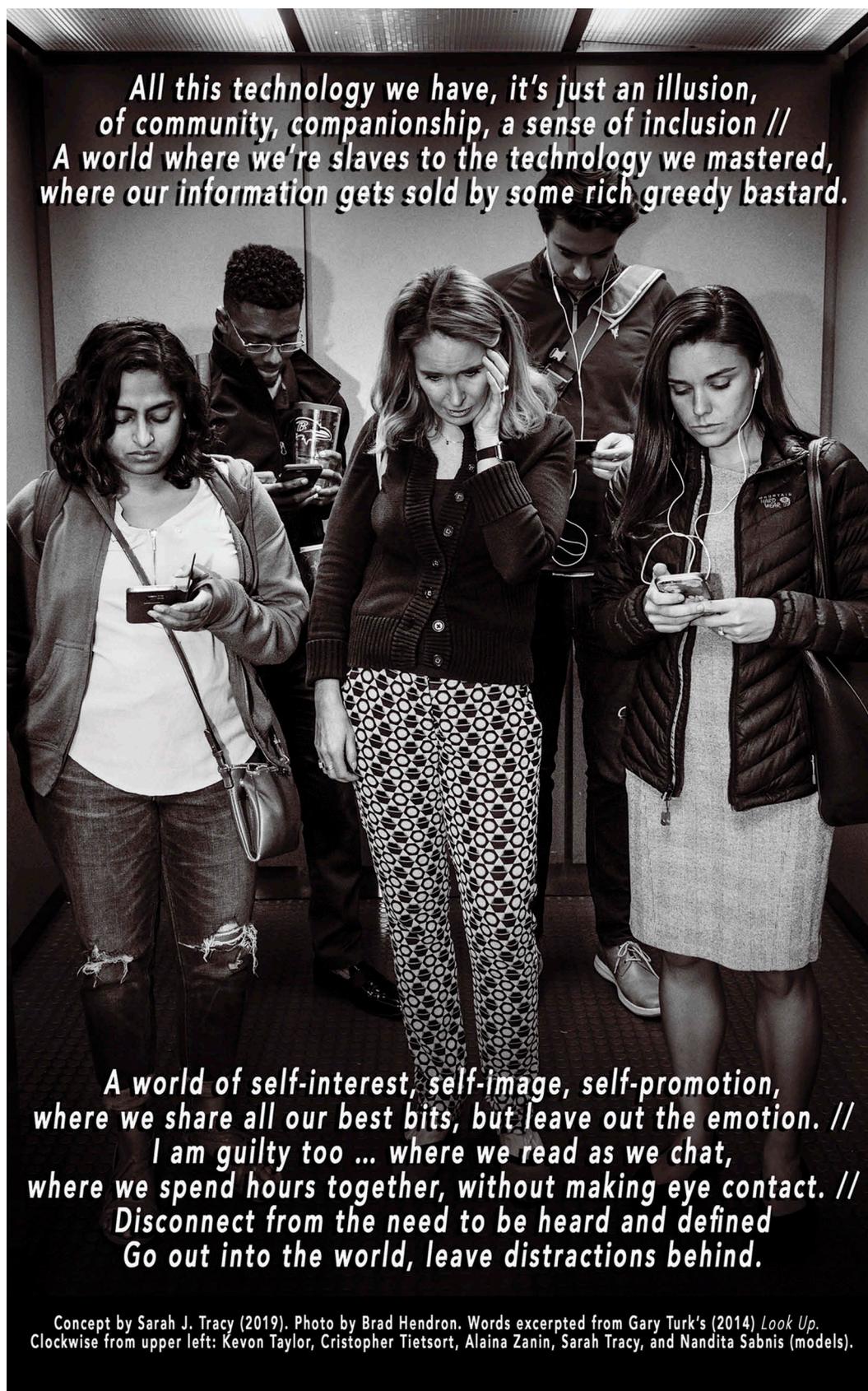


Figure 1. "Connected and attached. Disconnected and unattached." Concept by Sarah Tracy; Photo courtesy of Brad Hendron; Words excerpted from Gary Turk's (2014) *Look Up*. Clockwise from upper left: Kevon Taylor, Cristopher Tietsort, Alaina Zanin, Sarah Tracy, Nandita Sabnis (models).

sensation that has more than 61 million YouTube views since its release (Turk, 2014). My hope is that this essay might spark a conversation that has a fraction of that kind of impact. If you are interested, let's talk.

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