

Gestured Labor: A Review of *Proxies* (2021)

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Abstract

Dylan Mulvin's *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing In* (2021) argues that because proxies maintain a fiction of representativeness, we must be attentive both to their function as stand-ins and to the human labor and bodies that sustain their status.

My children are sick, and we are reading a funny but also very factual cartoon dinosaur book [Lowery 2019]. One multisyllabic -odon is a carnivore, with long serrated teeth for tearing flesh. A single tooth is almost a foot long! I demonstrate by holding up my own arm. This tooth of this once-living being, which was unearthed and dusted off and measured, and now has been jauntily drawn? It was as long as the span from my wrist to my elbow. Give or take. One foot. 1

How do I know how long a foot is? How do the scientists, who wielded those small brushes to dust off the teeth, know? And what does it mean to apply a measurement originally built around the span of an actual human foot, to a Jurassic-era creature? My children take in my gesture of measurement. They feel certain that the world rests upon clear and delineated knowledge. Readers of Dylan Mulvin's extraordinary monograph, *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing In*, observe the work that goes in to persisting this knowledge. We recognize that "... knowledge production relies on accessible representations of the world, and proxies are the people, artifacts, places, and moments invested with the authority to represent the world" [Mulvin 2021, 4]. As Mulvin, currently an Assistant Professor of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, describes it, proxies — and specifically the acts of delegation and representation performed through the use of proxies — demand continuous maintenance. Consider what went into passing down the span of a king's foot across centuries. Mulvin might observe my embodied gesture and note the transmission of indexical knowledge between generations, as part of the cultural and representational work that maintains communal understanding of measurements, standards, and stand-ins. He might see — as I certainly see — in this gesture support for his assertion that "[o]ur references shape who we are, how we think, how we communicate, and how we build shared worlds" [Mulvin 2021, 202]. 2

Mulvin anchors his chapters in case studies that tell the stories of proxies from the eighteenth century to the present, probing their origins and the labor that maintains their fiction of representativeness. Mulvin's narrative is lively and weaving, as well as laudably transparent in its debt to scholars whose work both informs and undergirds his theoretical framework. Each chapter offers an opportunity to delve into the distinctive set of concerns that surround particular proxies and reiterate the overarching argument of the monograph. *Proxies* invites excerpting at the chapter level; any one (or two) of these chapters would work well as a course assignment or standalone reading. Published as part of MIT Press's Infrastructures Series, edited by Geoffrey Bowker and Paul Edwards, *Proxies* is available both as an open access eBook and in paperback. 3

Chapter 1 introduces Mulvin's argument of proxies and positions the overall work while relating the story of Urban Target Complex (R-2301-West), a US Marine Corps training site designed in the aftermath of Mogadishu combat and intended to address the need for new proxies of urban battlegrounds. Chapter 2 delves into the ritualistic maintenance of the International Prototype Kilogram (IPK), looking expansively from its origins in the Enlightenment to its echoes in the data hygiene familiar to modern-day maintainers of datasets. Chapters 3 and 4 offer a roughly chronological two- 4

part scrutiny of the ubiquitous digital test image known fondly as Lena. Part One examines Lena's origins as Lenna Sjööblom, the November 1972 *Playboy* centerfold, and her/its evolution within the larger history of test images, which were used to calibrate image technologies, techniques, and instruments. Mulvin effectively contextualizes Lena and other test images of her era that assumed whiteness and objectified women as a prehistory of algorithmic biases and racialized surveillance technologies, a continuum of the “warped representation of skin” [Mulvin 2021, 8]. Part Two picks up in the 1990s with the ultimately triumphant challenges to Lena's continued use as a proxy, detailing objections from both *Playboy*, claiming copyright infringement, and those who drew a line between this objectifying test image and the “abuse, violence, and mistreatment” experienced by women in computer science and engineering [Mulvin 2021, 132]. Bridging out from models such as Lena, who labored as stand-ins “for a world of images, faces, and skin” [Mulvin 2021, 143], Chapter 5 turns to “living proxies”, the actors in standardized patient programs. Conceptualized as “human learning tools” or technologies [Mulvin 2021, 145], standardized patients are deployed in medical training programs to teach and test physicians' patient interactions. Examining the work of these proxies from their origins in the 1960s leads Mulvin through a discussion of pain and suffering, racialized violence, and the body as a controlled variable. Chapter 6 offers a methodological coda that ties proxies' spectacularity and concealment more emphatically to infrastructure.

Throughout these discussions, Mulvin expertly locates how proxies figure into a larger literature on measurement, standards, and boundary objects. Invoking a series of what he describes as “kindred ways of understanding how surrogate logics shape and bind disciplinary communities”, Mulvin describes Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's “working objects”; Thomas Kuhn's “exemplars”; and Michelle Murphy's “phantasmograms” [Mulvin 2021, 8–10]. He issues a gentle rejoinder to these works, arguing:

But these concepts risk placing too much emphasis on the “objects” of laboratories and classrooms and not enough emphasis on the labor and affective commitments that proxies inspire. They also risk displacing the ways that human bodies must carry the traces of this work, either through the repetitive use of a narrow set of exemplars or the psychological and physical toll that the work might take.[Mulvin 2021, 10]

Here, and throughout *Proxies*, Mulvin's methodology and perspective are most clearly identified with critical infrastructure studies, science and technology studies, and maintenance studies, but they are enriched by feminist and performance theory, disability studies, and persistently attentive to questions of race, equity, and labor. Mulvin states the goals of his project clearly and compellingly throughout. And while each chapter takes a particular proxy as its focus, Mulvin's analytic emphasis is, as his subtitle insists, on the “cultural work of standing in”, shifting away from the proxy itself and towards the “human bodies and human labor” that sustain it [Mulvin 2021, 8].

Mulvin demonstrates methodological flexibility and creativity as he investigates proxy stories, reading technical and training manuals, citation patterns for the *IEEE Transactions on Image Processing*, and standardized patient fee schedules alongside Lauren Berlant and Bruno Latour. If *Proxies* reads as an admirably communal account, with frequent expansive references to preceding scholarship, it also enacts its commitment to human bodies and labor by refusing to disappear its author. The volume is charmingly illustrated with artist interpretations by R. R. Mulvin, which prod at the idea of proxy as they recreate magazine covers, test images, and the IPK cleaning apparatus, among other subjects. Mulvin — or perhaps his postmodern authorial proxy — appears in the narrative as well, with the effect of a backstage tour that highlights the artificiality of the production and the disorienting routine of academic work, conjured in “the sad sandwich or premade burrito that we lug through humid Washington on our way to College Park, or the eerie loneliness of the picnic bench at the National Library of Medicine” [Mulvin 2021, 199]. We glimpse Dylan Mulvin in an image in the final chapter: he squats with arms extended, wielding a taut string over a length of cardboard, attempting to recreate a Marcel Duchamp piece. This image has stayed with me, showing, as it perhaps does, a commitment to trying things out and looking at them from all angles, to the embodied experiences that this volume both demands and describes.

Works Cited

Lowery 2019 Lowery, M. (2019) *Everything awesome about dinosaurs and other prehistoric beasts*. London: Orchard Books.

Mulvin 2021 Mulvin, D. (2021) *Proxies: The cultural work of standing in*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.



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