FEMINIST UNBOXING WORKSHEET–
An approach to consciously and critically examining the technologies and designers involved in our work.

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INTRODUCING FEMINIST UNBOXING –

An approach to a conscious and critical examination of the technologies and designers we involve in our work.

ABOUT FEMINIST UNBOXING

The idea of feminist unboxing was first introduced to me by my colleague and collaborator Jacque Wernimont, who currently sits as the Distinguished Chair of Digital Humanities and Social Engagement at Dartmouth College. The purpose of this process is to slow down and take the time to document your personal experiences receiving, unboxing, setting up, and finally using a new tech device or software platform for the first time. This included looking at the product website before opening the item and reading the privacy statement before creating an account. These activities do a few things:

1. Unveils possible risks incurred when engaging with the technology so that we may build awareness and have a chance to voice objections to its use.
2. Cultivates a preliminary critical analysis of the item, its designers, and the communication strategies used to entice potential users.
3. Provides a method for introducing new technologies into a group setting and fosters dialogue about any issues and concerns.
4. Cultivates generative tension between dancers and technology before and during the creative process.
5. Situates a technology within one's own lived experience and amplifies the role of the technology and its designers in limiting the choices afforded by the software or hardware in question.

PREPARING FOR THE UNBOXING PROCESS

As with any sort of 'phenomenological' process that asks us to heighten our awareness of a given activity, paying attention to what surfaces is paramount. With that being said, our practice of unboxing comes from the work of humanist scholars with a particular focus on feminist, anti-racist techno-critique. It is absolutely acceptable (and perhaps one might say critical) to maintain conscious awareness of how a given technology is socially constructed. In addition to this, noting your emotional responses, sensorial experiences, movement and flow of activity, is also important. These suggestions are not here to ensure that you "tick all the boxes," but to open the door to possible ways of witnessing your unboxing process. Above all, the most important thing is to situate your observations in *your* lived experience. If you're working in a group, allowing your personal observations to flow in and through the group to shape a collective awareness of the same technology is always welcome. Groups may want to discuss how they wish to share their observations before beginning. If strategies aren't working, you can always modify or redirect and try something new.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Something to document your process and ample time. Everyone takes notes differently, so find a documentation process that serves you. Think about a method of documenting that won't distract you from what you're doing. If handwritten notes are best, great. If you want to create an audio recording, lovely. It can also be useful to take pictures and/or screenshots as you go. These can be really useful in combination with any annotated notes for future use. Other than that, it's strongly recommended you give yourself ample time. Setting aside 90 – 120 minutes may sound like a lot, but giving plenty of time ensures you won't rush the process. You can always stop and resume later, but holding onto those initial experiences becomes more difficult over time.

WHAT ELSE TO KNOW AND REMEMBER

- You can always 'opt out' and stop your process at any moment.
- The technology you unbox is likely designed to function within a capitalist market economy.
- Remember that *people* make technologies and thusly bring all their subjective experiences into the design process.
- While technologies may presume a default or optimal user, the feminist unboxing process does not. You are exactly as you should be.
- There are things that this process will stir up. Be aware of what comes up. Hold onto what works and let go of what doesn't serve you. You'll know what best what that is.

THE FEMINIST UNBOXING PROCESS –

Below are suggested steps in order.

SUMMARY OF STEPS:

- Review Online Materials
- Hold the Packaged Item or Go to the Software Download Page
- Open Up the Item
- Setup the Item
- Use the Item
- Close Out
- Conclusion
- Future Use

REVIEW ONLINE MATERIALS:

Before handling or opening the identified technology, review some of the public information about it. This may include looking at the company website, reviewing any marketing materials such as videos or images, reading the company or product mission statement, and reviewing the privacy policy if you can find it before opening the item. You may stumble across 3rd-party reviews or articles by people not directly related to the tech company. It's recommended you leave those for later. This way, you begin by working only with what the company has directly produced. Some questions you might ask:

- Who is the imagined audience for this technology?
- Who are the people who made this technology?
- What is the overall mood or aesthetics of the online content?
- Do any words or phrases repeat?
- If there are images of people, who are they?
- How do I feel (in)visible within these materials?
- How are the online materials organized – what is easy/difficult to find?

HOLD THE PACKAGED ITEM OR GO TO THE SOFTWARE DOWNLOAD PAGE:

Before opening the item, take a moment to absorb this initial experience. Many tech designers think deeply about this initial moment. What are they communicating to you? If you're holding an object, how does it look and feel? If you're working with software, you may end up skipping this step if there's no "download" page or package where you access the software. If you are downloading through an app store, you might look at how the app is promoted in the store. What do you see and/or hear?

OPEN UP THE ITEM:

This is the moment where you literally "unbox" the technology. If working with a physical device,

take note of the item's packaging and your process of opening it. Look out for any instructions or written languages embedded within the packaging itself. If you're working with a software platform, this step might include the initial installation instructions, or it might fold into the next step of setting up the item. Some questions you might ask:

- What sort of care did the designers put into the packaging or installation process?
- Are the designers communicating through the packaging materials? If so, what are they saying? Does it reflect what I saw in the online materials?
- How would I describe my movements as I unbox the device?

SETUP THE ITEM:

Once you have the device opened or software installed, you'll go through the setup process. Pay particular note to how the designers communicate with you through this process. Try to go through all the suggested steps and note them. If/when the privacy and security information is provided, read it before accepting any agreement. It's sometimes interesting to pay particular attention to what you might customarily skip in the setup process. Being aware of this can help prevent rushing through processes that you might otherwise avoid, such as reviewing the privacy statement or reading detailed instructions. This is also a moment where the technology might ask you for personal information to customize your experience. If this happens, pay particular attention to what you're asked for and how you're asked for it. If the item doesn't have a choreographed setup process, you might look at the afforded settings once the software is open. What settings do you first see? Some questions you might ask:

- As I setup, what do I first see?
- Who am I imagined to be in the setup process? Consider language and imagery.
- How are the aesthetics of the setup process related to the materials I've already encountered?
- What appears to matter to the company based on what they communicate and capture? How does this relate to me and what I desire to do with this item?

USE THE ITEM:

Once you've gone through the setup process, take some time to try it out. Note what comes easily and what doesn't. Once you've explored the initial setup for a while, check to see if there are additional setting options. If so, explore what they are and how the impact your experience. Some questions you might ask:

- What is this item's "default settings?" What is my experience when using them? Who is supported in the default?
- What settings are offered to me? What is my experience finding them and changing them?
- When I change or customize my settings, what happens?
- What prior experience or knowledge do I appear to need so that I may easily or effectively work with this technology?
- What does this technology want of me, and what am I doing?

CLOSE OUT:

Before you finish the unboxing process, go through the steps to close or power down the technology. Document your steps and consider if any aspect of your item remains active even when *you've* closed it down. Take a moment to sit with this experience. Note how you feel and what you remember from your experience. Jot any last notes down. If you plan to move your work into another phase of creative exploration or dialogue, perhaps take a moment to review your notes.

CONCLUSION:

As you finish your process, there are many things you can do next. Much of this depends on where, how, and with whom you're unboxing the technology. If you're working by yourself, closing out might be enough. If you're working with others, you may wish to have a group discussion to collectively synthesize the process, or you might take it directly into the creative process. The choice is really up to you. Regardless, it can be really helpful for people to have an opportunity to express their feelings about working with the technology before moving forward. Giving space for people to fully or partially 'opt out' is really important, particularly if you're imagining that this technology will be used repeatedly over time. With that said, if you are facilitating a group process and have plans to use the technology moving forward, it can be useful to give yourself time to modify use options for everyone involved before jumping into the next steps of your process. If the technology you're engaging does not afford flexible use, then consider creative alternative solutions. Sometimes unintended use is just as interesting.

FUTURE USE:

As you continue to use the technology, you may find moments that you wish to document using some of the steps and approaches offered here. Some relevant moments to document include changes to your methodological approach or technology use, managing software or privacy updates, discovering new settings or features, etc. This is purely optional, but it can be useful to note how your relationship with the technology evolves over time.

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UNBOXING ZOOM
The following section takes you through unboxing Zoom.

REVIEW ONLINE MATERIALS: HTTPS://ZOOM.US/

Notice what's on the homepage. Even if you have been here before, pay attention to what information is made readily available. What is first listed and what does this tell you about the platform? Additionally, here are some questions you might ask:

- Who is the imagined audience for this technology?
- Who are the people who made this technology?
- What is the overall mood and aesthetics?
- Do any words or phrases repeat?
- If there are images of people, who are they?
- How do I feel (in)visible within these materials?
- How are the online materials organized – what is easy/difficult to find?

As you navigate these questions, you might scroll to the bottom of the homepage, there are several links providing additional information about the company. Check out a few of the links to learn more about the company. Here are a few suggested links.

- About: https://explore.zoom.us/about
- Team: https://explore.zoom.us/team
- Resources: https://zoom.us/resources
- Support: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us
- Privacy and Security: https://explore.zoom.us/privacy-and-security

GO TO THE ZOOM DOWNLOAD PAGE:

Desktop: https://zoom.us/download
Phone/Tablet: Go to the device's app store and look at the Zoom app download page.

Let's journey back to when you first made the commitment to download Zoom, take a moment to absorb this initial experience. What are they communicating to you?
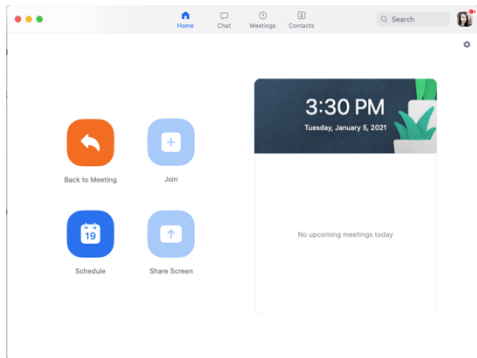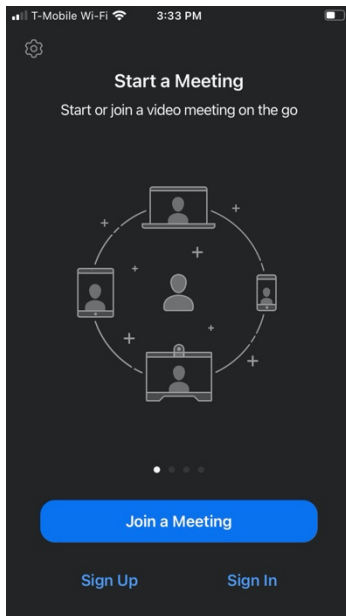
"OPEN UP" ZOOM:

If you're on a desktop computer, click on the Zoom icon. You'll see a home screen that looks something like this:
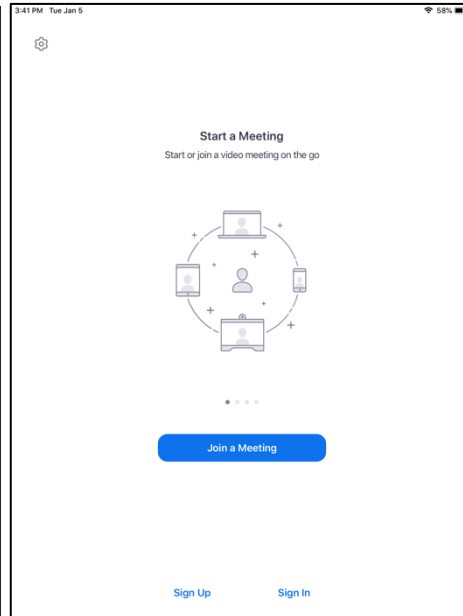

If you're on your phone or tablet, then you probably won't be able to see the home screen while on this Zoom call and may want to skip this step. For reference, it likely looks something like this:

PHONE   TABLET

Take a moment to absorb this opening experience. What do you see and what does it tell you about the platform's goals and intentions for use? Many tech designers think deeply about this initial moment. What are they communicating to you? If you use Zoom a lot, how much time do you spend in this home screen?

SETUP ZOOM:

For the sake of today's process, we'll be doing a bit of "pretending" here since you've already setup Zoom. Still, we can take a look at how Zoom communicates to us when we're in the main meeting room setup – or in this case your breakout room.

Look at your Zoom meeting screen (this is what you see when you're in the breakout room). Pay particular note to how the designers communicate with you here.

Some questions you might ask:
- Who am I imagined to be? Consider language and imagery.
- How are the aesthetics related to the materials I've already encountered in this unboxing process?
- What appears to matter to the company based on what they communicate and capture? How does this relate to me and what I desire to do with Zoom?
- Do I notice anything new about Zoom's setup?
- Remember, Zoom provides different controls to meeting attendees and meeting hosts. You are currently in "attendee" mode. What do you notice about this role, and if you've operated Zoom as a host, what's different?

USE ZOOM:

Now is when you can take some time to play with Zoom itself. Note what comes easily and what doesn't. You may have explored Zoom's main setup before, so check out the additional setting options and how they impact your experience. If you're on a phone or tablet, the in-app setting options are limited, so you may skip and go straight to the Zoom Settings Webpage. https://zoom.us/profile *Note – You may have to sign into Zoom online before you can access the web-based setting controls.* Here are some other recommendations:

If using a laptop or desktop computer, you can look at the main Video Settings and Audio Settings. Click on the "^" symbol next to the microphone or camera icon and look at all the options listed.

You can also select the "audio settings" or "video settings" text as highlighted below to open up more options:
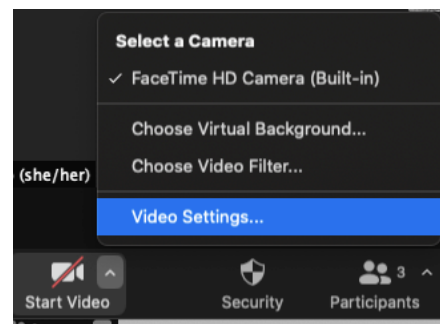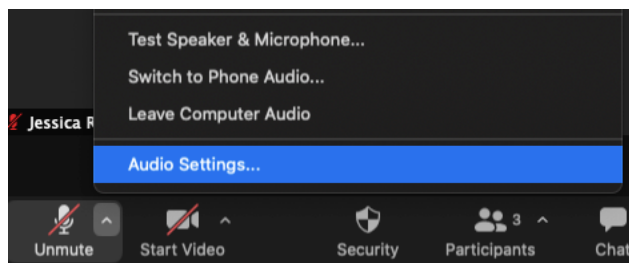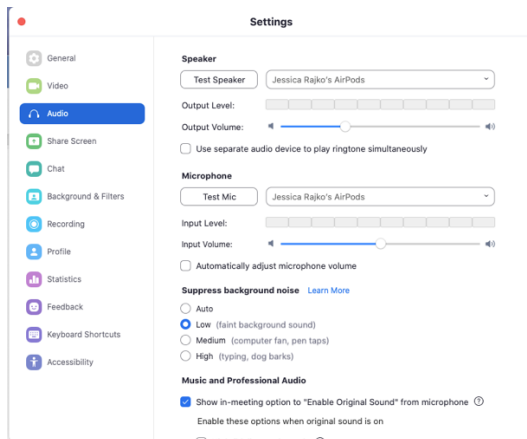
Once in this settings window, you can also review other settings options by clicking through icons the left menu bar.

If you click on the "General" button in the top/left corner and then click "View More Settings," it takes you to your settings webpage where you can explore more settings. A link to this page is also provided above.

Some questions you might ask:
- What is Zoom's "default settings?" What is my experience when using the default?
- What settings are offered to me? What is my experience finding them and changing them?
- When I change or customize my settings, what happens?
- What prior experience or knowledge am I presumed to have?
- What does Zoom want of me, and what am I doing?

CLOSE OUT:

Before you finish the unboxing process, go through the steps to close out any windows or tabs you've opened. Document your steps and consider if any aspect of your item remains active even when *you've* closed it down. (Note: In the typical unboxing process you'd completely shut down the device or software, but since we're in a Zoom workshop, this is not possible.) Take a moment to sit with this experience. Note how you feel and what you remember from your experience. Jot any last notes down. If you plan to move this into another phase of creative exploration or dialogue using what you've learned, perhaps take a moment to review your notes.

CONCLUSION:

As you finish your process, there are many things you can do next. Much of this depends on where, how, and with whom you're unboxing the technology. Since you're working with others, you may wish to have a group discussion and collectively synthesize the process. If you discussed your observations as you went through the process, then you might take what you've experienced directly into movement generation or improvisation, talk about how your observations could inform future Zoom use, or revisit any of the Zoom settings explore them in a compositional process. The choice is really up to you. Regardless, it can be really helpful for people to have an opportunity to share observations before moving forward.

FEMINIST UNBOXING – THOUGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS

Things to remember and consider if you use this process again.

ALWAYS LEAVE THE OPTION TO "OPT OUT." –

Even the most seemingly benign technologies can feel hostile at times. Leaving space for yourself or others to opt out during any part of unboxing the process is important. For example, you or someone else might read a part of the privacy statement and realize that the company is collecting sensitive data you don't want captured. If you're working with this technology as part of a class or creative process, this may mean strategizing around alternative modes of working for students who feel uncomfortable. Opting out is not a failure, and there is much to be learned in this choice.

GIVE YOURSELF TIME –

There is an implicit tension between the perceived temporality of technology (very fast) and the actual temporal pacing of setting it up – particularly in this unboxing process (fairly slow). Attending to this process in the way you might work in a studio or through a somatic experience is useful here. Slowing down, witnessing the emotions, sensations, and movements of your process. Giving yourself time to witness rather than barreling through the process. As with any tech setup experience, you might find yourself rushing or going through the motions. These are great learning moments. Take small breaks if needed. Working with a group is helpful here too. Sometimes having a group with which to voice observations and even frustrations can help keep the process generative.

KEEP THE DESIGNERS PRESENT –

The first step of looking at the product website and online materials is important, as this makes the people who've designed and developed the technology present throughout the unboxing process. I've found that as we lose sight of the other humans present within the technology, we tend to internalize our experiences. Keeping designers present emphasizes the relationship we're cultivating with those designers during the process. As a facilitator, I find it important to emphasize the subjective nature of design. All technologies are imbued with the subjectivity of those who make it. By learning more about the people who create what we use, we learn more about how their subjectivity speaks through the things they create. With this, choosing to "opt out" is then less about admitting some sort of defeat and is instead about ending a relationship with the designers or refusing to interact with a particular set of subjective biases.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WHERE TO USE FEMINIST UNBOXING

IN THE CLASSROOM

Unboxing can be a useful tool if you're introducing a new technology in a class setting. I've found that unboxing helps students acknowledge and process the frustrations of feeling uncomfortable and unfamiliar with how a new device or software platform functions. Rather than internalizing their frustrations as being attributed to a personal lack of ability or tenacity, they learn a bit about why these technologies can be hard to setup and use. Attributing a new technology to a group of people who built it for a particular use helps students see how the technology acts as a relational tool between themselves and the designer. Putting people at the forefront of the unboxing experience also helps students identify any potential designer biases or assumptions imbued within the tech itself. Furthermore, unboxing helps students identify how we as artists often use technologies in ways not intended by the designers. This helps students place their discomfort in the tension between different modes of making and creating, rather than taking things personally.

IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

As someone who uses new tech quite often within the creative process, I find feminist unboxing to be a powerful and generative tool for integrating tech into new work. Whether the purpose of integrating technology is to make it the focus of the work or to use it as a "tool," unboxing can help everyone acknowledge its presence and consequential impacts upon the creative process, both individually and collectively. I've used this process to generate movement, determine boundaries and parameters for collective, generative use, and identify pathways for continued research. Feminist unboxing opens the door to ongoing discussion about how the technology is impacting the creative process as it evolves, which has been important. By introducing a technology through feminist unboxing, I've found it sets up a conscientious relationship between artists that gives people space to acknowledge, ask questions, and challenge its use throughout the process – not just in the initial setup.

IN SUPPORT OF SCHOLARLY WORK

I have found feminist unboxing to be a helpful tool for integrating or reanalyzing a piece of technology for to purposes of writing about it. As with a creative process, I've used feminist unboxing in the early stages of researching a technology to identify pathways for continued research. What I write in the unboxing process is often integrated into my final written work.