

Miami Virtue and the Ulmer Tapes,
Gregory L. Ulmer and the Florida
Research Ensemble, 2012

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As an undergraduate and master's student of English in the late 1990s, I studied under [Gregory L. Ulmer](#), whose work I found to be obtuse in the Barthesian sense, prescient in the way one might understand Jean Baudrillard's pronouncements regarding simulacra and simulation, and historically and theoretically proficient as one might expect from Michel Foucault. Each semester with Ulmer brought for me new formulations and insights, where we started with a concept like the [mystory](#), applied that concept to a system of inquiry like the [popcycle](#), and then embarked on a self-exploratory journey of that system through internet-based assignments and practices. Each semester, the system of inquiry and concept might have changed, but the knowledge we produced was both personal and collective. That is, I understood myself as being rooted in history, in relation to the Other, but I understood that my literate self would be(come) a transformative one in an electrated society. Ulmer coined the term "electracy" to mark the shift from print

culture to an electronic one, which would produce fundamental changes in the way we view ourselves and others. Creating [projects](#) using hypertext markup language (HTML), replete with animated graphics, frames, and multiple cross-referential links, was both fulfilling and time-consuming. Many of us willingly and enthusiastically spent countless hours in the media lab trying to outdo ourselves. For Ulmer, though—and this is where I struggled to understand his methodology fully—the point of these projects was not only to establish our own stories in a creative way. He argued that eventually our stories, told through these electrated apparatuses as a form of [testimonial](#), might lead to changes in public policy. Despite the number of classes I had taken with him or my commitment to his methodology in general, I could rarely trace a direct correlation between the work I had been doing in the various courses, and the link between that work and public policy was even less discernible.

Roughly fifteen years later, I am now seeing the culmination of those various systems of inquiry and the potential for change in policy in *Miami Virtue and the Ulmer Tapes*, a collaborative effort by Ulmer and members of the [Florida Research Ensemble](#) (FRE). The FRE, established in the late 1980s at the University of Florida,

originated when a number of colleagues interested in digital media proposed an alternative to the traditional “reading group” approach to collaboration. [Cris Carter](#) explains one of the goals of the group:

Instead of suggesting immediate ways to fix social problems, the FRE attempts to describe the psychological undercurrents of those problems through experimental text and interactive imagery. The Internet, which represents the FRE's fundamental research area, serves both as the circulator of sublimated cultural drives and the medium for rendering those drives accessible to critical intervention.

Miami Virtue is the result of several years of research and consultancy, or “emerAgency,” Ulmer’s term for the virtual consultancy that conceives of cultural emergencies as the effects of common psychological repressions. The strength of the text, however, lies not only with the “experimental text and interactive imagery,” but also in how the text combines past, present, and future. If the modernists stood on the shoulders of

giants, and if postmodernists summarily questioned the existence of such “giants,” this new electrated practice or invention humbly concedes to the giants in the way that Bashō sought to pay tribute to his elders: “Not to follow in the footsteps of the masters, but to seek what they sought.”

The invocation of the *I-Ching* initiates this practice in *Miami Virtue*, serving tangentially as a way to organize the text and performatively as the tenor through which the text operates. A divination system dating back to the second or third millennium BC in China, the *I-Ching* is comprised of a series of oracular statements known as hexagrams, six lines or two trigrams of either unbroken, solid lines (yang) or broken, open lines (yin). With eight possible combinations for the trigram, there are a total of 64 possible hexagram combinations. In order to cast a hexagram, one would toss three coins, which replaced the yarrow stalk method during the Han Dynasty. *Miami Virtue*, in a way, represents the *I-Ching* as relay, a widely used term in Ulmer’s lexicon that I have always understood in both a literal and figurative sense. One event or text acts upon another, often continuously, to produce a third position. Another term for relay that Ulmer uses is “[avatar](#),” which one might translate as “descent” or “incarnation,” whereby every civilization witnesses an historical instance of some

thing or event. In the case of *Miami Virtue*, the person casting the hexagram is the FRE, Barbara Jo Revelle specifically, and the trigrams of the text are represented not by lines, but by categories/sections. The text is divided into three sections (“Miami: Image,” “Myami: Narrative,” and “Miautre: Oracle,” each consisting of five subsections. In “Miami: Image,” we are made aware of context: Occasion, Place, Situation, Encounter, and Memory. Generally, one might associate Cuban immigration with Miami, but the FRE instead focuses on immigrants from Haiti, a culture known for its own divination system of voodoo. The second part of the text, “Myami: Narrative,” applies Ulmer’s popcycle (Family, Entertainment, History, and Theory) to the Haitian context, starting with the function of Allegory. The text concludes with five threads that initiate the relay: Reading, Invention, Jazz, Vortex, and Choramancy. In this section, we are oriented to a number of the various theories at work in the service of the relay.

Lest I should appear to have reductively summarized the text, I might add that if the *I-Ching* offers 64 possible combinations in its oracular consultancy, *Miami Virtue and the Ulmer Tapes* suggests at least 125 ways of understanding Miami and the Haitian experience along the Miami River, through the consultation of Revelle and the FRE. The image for this

exchange is the mattress, upon which a certain “categorical” power has been bestowed. Acting as a metonym for “crossroads,” the mattress (*topos*) pulls together a number of theoretical threads including but certainly not limited to Ezra Pound’s vortex, Giorgio Agamben’s *Whatever (quodlibet)*, Roland Barthes’ *punctum*, Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses, Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein* and attunement, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* and study of Franz Kafka, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s reading of Kant, Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive notion of aporia, Plato’s *chora*, Georges Bataille’s engagement with the concept of allegory, Jacques Lacan’s Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, William Blake’s “London,” Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*, James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. In addition to understanding the theoretical design of the text, readers must also make culture connections: New Orleans (the crossroads where Haitian voodoo and jazz meet), the samba style of Brazil (the rhythms of another diasporic African culture), George Bush and the cowboy (frontier) mythology (one might note in the significance of the documentary *Cocaine Cowboys* at this juncture), and the television show *Miami Vice* (an obvious counterpoint to the text). Rounding out the richness of the text are nearly 40 (YouTube) links to various

segments of an interview with Ulmer; hundreds of images taken along the river of and by Revelle; transcriptions of interviews with Haitian traders and with Revelle, who talks about her relationship with the Haitians and the strain that the consultation put on her relationship with her boyfriend; and journal entries by Revelle. According to Ulmer,

The book is composed as a systematic unpacking (unfolding) of one photograph—“Crossroads”—promoted from its anonymous condition of one still among the hundreds taken by Revelle, a passing moment within the hours of video tapes recorded during the drift through the River zone, to become a metonym with categorial power. The book takes a “documentary” approach: it is argued in a literate way, but draws on the bricolage of image categories by including substantial citations not only from Revelle’s field work but from theoretical and scholarly sources as well, one purpose of the book being to serve as a

resource for the design of other choras in other cities. . . . *Miami Virtue* stands on its own as a theory and pedagogy, but the proof of what it claims requires electrated, not literate, means.

Indeed, understanding the way that the project operates requires a modest orientation to Ulmer’s work. The project is ambitious and marks the first time I have encountered Ulmer’s outreach toward and connection with subjects for whom he has advocated in the past. Historically, we are aware of the discrimination that Haitians have endured along the shores of the United States. An ineffectual government and natural disasters have consistently exacted a stifling blow to the tiny island of ten million, and the story of Rudy Eugene in May 2012 did very little to improve the country’s image. From a pedagogical point of view, raising awareness about the plight of Haitians might prove challenging, to say the least. For the Southern Poverty Law Center, empathetic educators might have two options: “bursting the bubble,” or breaking down the perceptive boundaries that isolate the privileged on the basis of race and class, and “disturbing the comfortable,” challenging those who are generally comfortable talking about race and class to rethink the extent of their

knowledge about contemporary social issues. Remaining true to Barthes' notion of "obtuse meaning," that new, rare practice of writing that emerges against the majority practice of writing (signification), *Miami Virtue and the Ulmer Tapes* presents itself as a viable third option. If our lives are constantly organized through binaries—black and white, Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, the Self and the Other—Ulmer seems inclined to argue for an alternative, one that neither disavows nor negates. The third option acknowledges, affirms, and at times attracts. And if, as Ulmer suggests, there is "no attraction without repulsion," this book successfully brings to bear those impulses, and

In suggesting that unconscious repulsion intensifies rather than undermines desire, the emerAgency complicates enormously the process of social healing. Problems resist instrumental fixes because we misrecognize the impulses behind them. By more carefully theorizing those impulses, the FRE makes possible not a rapid exorcism but a critical awareness of the underside of desire. Such

awareness can potentially lead to renewed ways of acting and interacting, new social policies, and more sophisticated approaches to the cultural "emergency."
([Carter](#))

The agents of emerAgency declare that "Problems B Us," where the B denotes the border or crossroads in every person's biography. B also seems to suggest the B-theory of time, in which time is not ordered in terms of past, present, and future (A-theory), but in terms of metaphysical and epistemological continuity. Indeed, the problems that existed fifteen years ago when I was first introduced to Ulmer and his work are no less real than they are today. And if *Miami Virtue and the Ulmer Tapes* presupposes Derrida's notion of justice, whose arrival that we cannot anticipate, then this text could not have come at a more perfect time.