



By Erin Garcia

Transmedia Collage is a two-year intergenerational program that aims to rethink the economic, political, and social structures that present long-term challenges for Chicago's South Side community and its residents, especially young people.

Led by [Ci3's Transmedia Story Lab](#) and University of Illinois at Chicago's (UIC) [History Moves](#), the project engaged high school students, arts and humanities scholars, practicing artists, and storytellers. Together they explored how systemic problems affect the health and wellbeing of black and brown teens and the communities in which they live on Chicago's South Side.

The project's young participants created speculative objects grounded in exploring their neighborhoods' pasts and imagining their communities' futures. The resulting stories, collages, and speculative objects are now showcased at University of Chicago's Arts + Public Life's [South Side Speculations exhibition](#) at Arts Incubator until March 1. It will then move to UIC's African American Cultural Center.

We sat down with [Patrick Jagoda](#), Co-Founder of Ci3's Transmedia Story Lab and Associate Professor of Cinema & Media Studies and English at UChicago, and [Ireashia Bennett](#), Co-Curator and Production Lead of *South Side Speculations* and A/V Production Manager of Ci3's Transmedia Story Lab, to discuss why the project explored the impact of structural violence on health and how young people investigating the histories of their communities while imagining more just futures can create models of healthier neighborhoods.



Young participants conceptualized The Protective Mask Suit, a wearable technology that protects citizens from police brutality and other forms of physical violence.

**Ci3: As co-lead of Transmedia Collage, how did the program evolve, and why was it important to explore the impact of structural violence on health?**

**Patrick:** Transmedia Collage was a two-year project that addressed the health and well-being of African American and Latinx adolescents on Chicago's South Side. Instead of giving additional attention to cases of interpersonal violence – a type of representation that happens frequently and excessively in both local and national news coverage of Chicago – we turned our attention to structural violence. Structural

violence isn't an aggressive act committed by one person against another. The concept signals systemic and infrastructural inequalities that further disenfranchise already marginalized people. In thinking about structural inequalities more broadly, we discussed poverty, low quality health care, underfunded schools, transportation difficulties, and minimal access to healthy foods. Research demonstrates that continuous exposure to uncertainty and insecurity as a result of such structural elements can ultimately lead to poor health.

Transmedia Collage began with an exploration of the historical impact of structural violence. For [the first year](#), the young people in our program conducted oral histories with adults from South Side neighborhoods, such as Englewood, Greater Grand Crossing, North Lawndale, Washington Park, and Woodlawn. We also explored activist movements that pushed back against racism, sexism, and other forms of hateful violence in Chicago. However, this historical investigation was only the beginning. In the second year, we built on these historical interviews. The participating youth used transmedia tools to create speculative narratives about possible futures of their neighborhoods. Overall, the program was committed to the idea that by better understanding the past and present, we can more effectively imagine alternative, and hopefully better, futures.

### **Ci3: What was your proudest moment from the Transmedia Collage program and how has it influenced your work?**

**Ireashia:** My proudest moment was during the second year, at the end of the program, when young people shared how the program inspired them to explore the different methodologies we used such as oral history, architecture, filmmaking, photography, and acting.

Hearing them reflect took me back to sophomore year in college when I took an ethnography class that focused on the Hijra community in India. I had never been introduced to that methodology before, and I was unaware how transgender people from around the world formed communities. The class instructor encouraged me to study ethnography and oral history as result of my strong interest, and when I graduated, I did ethnographic research on the socio-economic climate in Jamaica as an independent scholar.

What I felt when my class instructor encouraged me to pursue a new discipline is similar to what I felt during the program's second year; all it takes to expand someone's perception of possibilities is one nugget of inspiration and one person saying, "Yes, you can do it, too! Here's how."

This influences my presence when I lead and participate in Ci3-led youth workshops. My visibility could shift how a young Black, genderqueer, disabled person views themselves and their future.

### **Ci3: How did high school students participate in this two-year program, and why was it important for them to collaborate with arts and humanities scholars, practicing artists, and storytellers?**

**Patrick:** While the faculty, staff, and graduate students from the University of Chicago and University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) planned the program, the high school students gave the program its identity. They conducted oral history interviews, contributed knowledge about their neighborhoods, created collages, and helped create short films that imagined different futures for Chicago, 20-30 years into the future. Along the way, they learned historical methods and media-making skills. I also saw them developing additional curiosity about the adults and elders in their own neighborhoods. **These young people, who were a joy to work with**, weren't just students in a program but also active collaborators. **Some of their work ultimately appeared in the *South Side Speculations* exhibition.**



**Ci3: As co-curator of *South Side Speculations*, what did you enjoy most in conceptualizing the showcase for public audiences?**

**Ireashia:** I really enjoyed assisting with conceptualizing the experience that audiences will walk away with after viewing the showcase and the different stations of engagement. There are many areas in *South Side Speculations* that you can literally get lost in and sit with for a while. In the exhibition, there's a center table that has historical and research literature which served as primary sources for the collages made by young people in the first year of the Transmedia Collage program. As you're reading through these selected books, you are able to simultaneously listen to excerpts from the oral histories that were conducted between younger and older generation of South Side residents. The exhibition also allows the community to view short films centering speculative objects, made by young participants, in action. These stations bring the exhibition together and dismantle the "you can't touch" atmosphere most showcases have.

**Ci3: *South Side Speculations* grew out of the Transmedia Collage program, and is currently being hosted by University of Chicago's Arts + Public Life. Starting in March, the exhibit is moving onto UIC where many others will have an opportunity to view the various speculative design and oral history visuals. How might the showcase promote further community dialogue around structural violence and health?**

**Patrick:** From the beginning, we never wanted this program to be restricted to university campuses. *South Side Speculations* was, exactly as you're suggesting, not an outward-facing exhibition but rather a dynamic attempt to engage in ongoing dialogue with the South Side community. We wanted to share our thinking and artworks but we also wanted to see what further ideas it spurred for people who had not been part of the program. For about six weeks, we've organized panels of scholars, activists, and artists who have entered into dialogues with our youth. For example, last week, Gary Kafer, a PhD student in Cinema & Media Studies at UChicago, moderated a panel that included Ytasha Womack, a fantastic filmmaker and writer, and a group of young people. They had a rich conversation about the challenges and affordances of imagining alternative futures. A large part of the conversation focused on Afrofuturism and the concept of "cognitive estrangement." "Speculating the Now: A Panel on Healing Justice" is the **last panel that will take place on Friday, February 28** at Arts Incubator. You can visit UChicago's Arts + Public Life [Facebook page for more information](#).

Community members in the audience joined the dialogue, celebrating futures that are grounded in Black histories and imaginaries drawn from the past. Together, we discussed versions of the future that might be less individualistic; more collective. It was powerful, for me, to see this intense and rich public conversation happening across generational lines. Though I was one of the organizers, I'm certain I learned more from the occasion, the questions and open exchanges, than what we put into it.

As the Transmedia Collage program comes to a close in the next few weeks, I hope we can build on this energy in future projects - and projects about futures.





Young participants conceptualized The Protective Mask Suit, a wearable technology that protects citizens from police brutality and other forms of physical violence.

**C13: University of Chicago's Arts + Public Life hosted a panel series that coincided with the exhibition. Can you tell us a little bit about the speculative design workshop you led with community participants?**

**Ireashia:** On February 9th, I led a speculative design workshop that gave community participants an opportunity to conceptualize and prototype objects that address social, political, and climate issues in Chicago. I provided a brief introduction to what speculative design is and then showed examples from film, popular culture, and architecture. Participants created eye-opening objects in such a small amount of time. My favorite object created during this workshop was a *Fitbit*-like application that assisted folks who are living with drug addiction. The application would track a person's vitals and ensure that their health isn't at risk. If their vitals become too high or too low, the app will send a direct alert to the nearest hospital and the person will receive immediate assistance. The app can be integrated into a person's phone or watch and intends to be discreet to not shame or 'out' anyone. The thought-process behind this object and its social and health-related impact could really shift how society views and treats people living with drug addiction. This work truly excites me - witnessing how expansive and creative a person can think within a speculative design process. The panel had a great turnout with a wide-range of people attending, from teens to middle-aged community members!

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**South Side Speculations: Created and produced by our high school participants, the following videos introduce their speculative design concepts and how they identify these community-based solutions for a healthier future.**

"Community Healing Pair" is a short advertisement introducing wearable technology that addresses community harm, accountability, and healing. "Blui Health Drone" is a short advertisement that introduces the mobile health drone, Blui. Blui assists Chicago patients in rural or hard-to-reach areas by delivering medical help during crises.

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"Home Pod" is a short advertisement that promotes a modular housing system that ensures equitable housing access for all Chicago South and West Side residents. "Saiyan Woods Answers Woodlawn" is a short political campaign for Saiyan Woods, a drone safety advocate. Set in 2048, drones are widely used throughout Chicago. However, some drone corporations target marginalized communities like Woodlawn and distribute faulty and unstable drones that ultimately harm residents.

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"Police Brutality: Clones and Protective Wear" is a short narrative following a scientist father and his son. The father creates a clone machine to create clones that will defend and protect his son from police brutality.

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