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idea journal

**fictions, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

vol. 19, no. 01

2022

**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association**



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this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.⁰¹ Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXlc7HWIc3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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ghost written: the winchester house as cinematic trans-mediation

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abstract

In this visual essay, we present a feminist counter-fiction to the likely fictional narratives the media has used to describe Sarah Winchester's reclusive life in the labyrinthine mansion she designed for herself in the Santa Clara Valley, California (1886–1922). Given Winchester's continual construction of uninhabited rooms in that house and given her decision to offer no public explanation for her designs, the media has projected narratives of haunting and madness onto Winchester and her house. Without dismissing the possibility of those readings, our feminist counter-fiction does not presume to assign a specific meaning to Winchester's designs. Instead, we ghost-write two soundtracks along the edges of filmstrips that trans-mediate the narratives of so-called yellow journalism and of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story of haunting and madness, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (1892), into the sepia tones of early cinematic imagery. Specifically, we visualise Winchester as a media construct and the media's fabulation about the columns in Winchester's house and about her would-be seance room, where the public apparently saw nothing more than a woman's silhouette projected onto a curtained window. While we offer nothing to penetrate that curtain, which we have trans-mediated to a cinematic screen that divides us from her interiority, we see traces of objects and a shadow ostensibly tracing a pattern from the other side of the curtain. Thus, we draw inspiration from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's uncanny ability to ghost-write the hymenal curtain/screen between Jacques Derrida's labyrinthine columns of text. Tolling the bell of Derrida's *Glas*, this visual essay positions Winchester's pendular body in a space where the interiority of her designing pleasure eludes representation because that pleasure is not dependent on the reproduction of meaning. We pastiche certain forms from the Winchester House, but these forms, akin to the impossibility of Gilman's yellow wallpaper, do not amount to the meaning of a total design.

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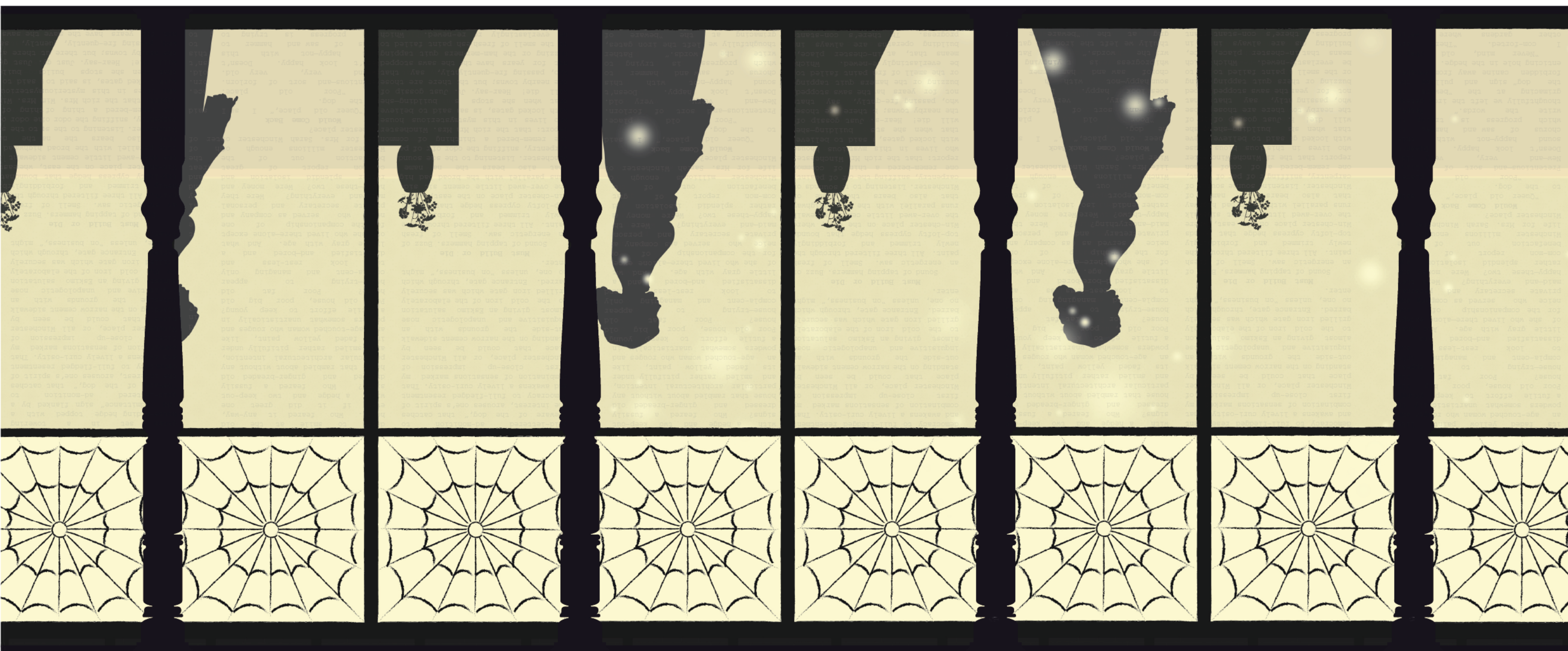
keywords:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, cinema, feminism, Sarah Winchester, yellow journalism

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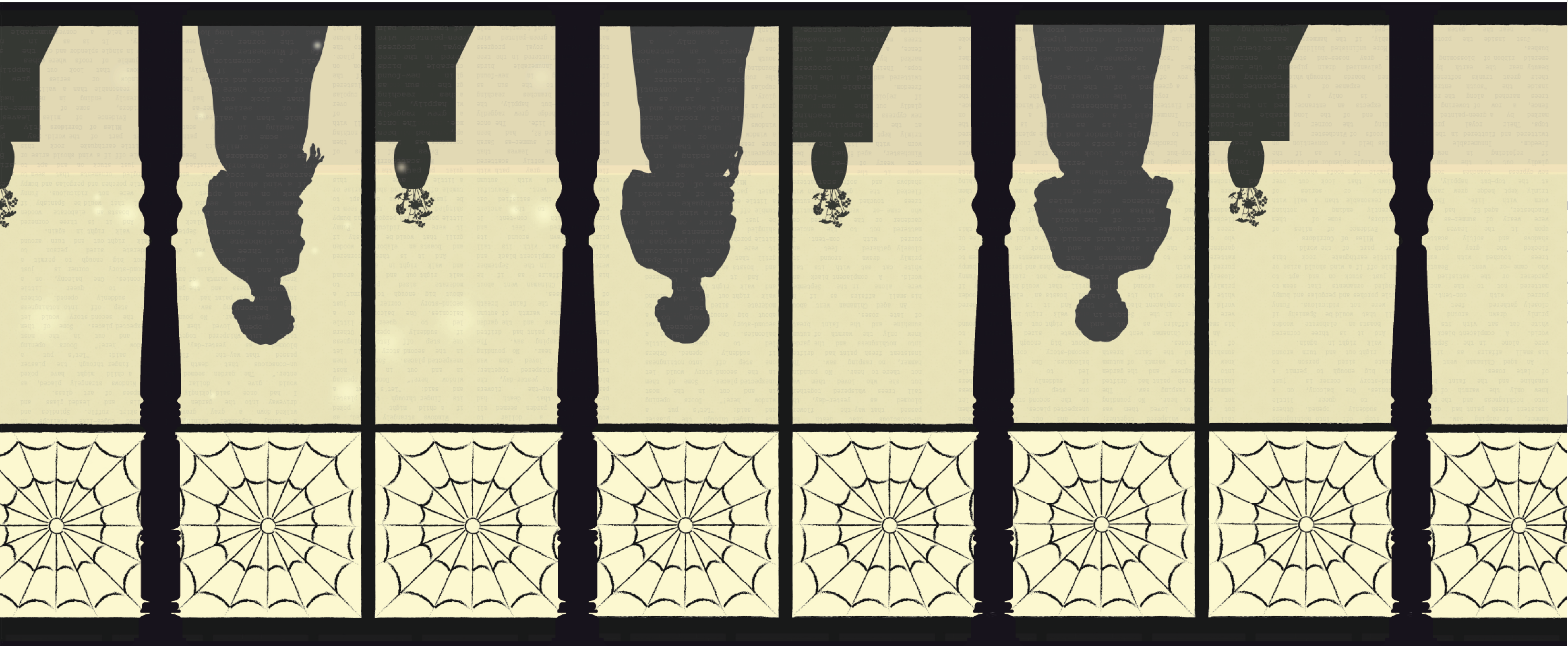
EXT. WINCHESTER HOUSE - MIDNIGHT (5 JULY 1903)

Fireworks are still erupting somewhere off in the mountains, echoing throughout the Santa Clara Valley like the reports of rapid-fire rifles. The explosions reflect as lurid lights in the glass of the Winchester House. All the house is dark except for a window diffusing a yellow light through white satin curtains. Between the light and the window, the projecting silhouette of a woman paces across our view, the stiffness of her Victorian mourning dress keeping her insomniac figure upright.

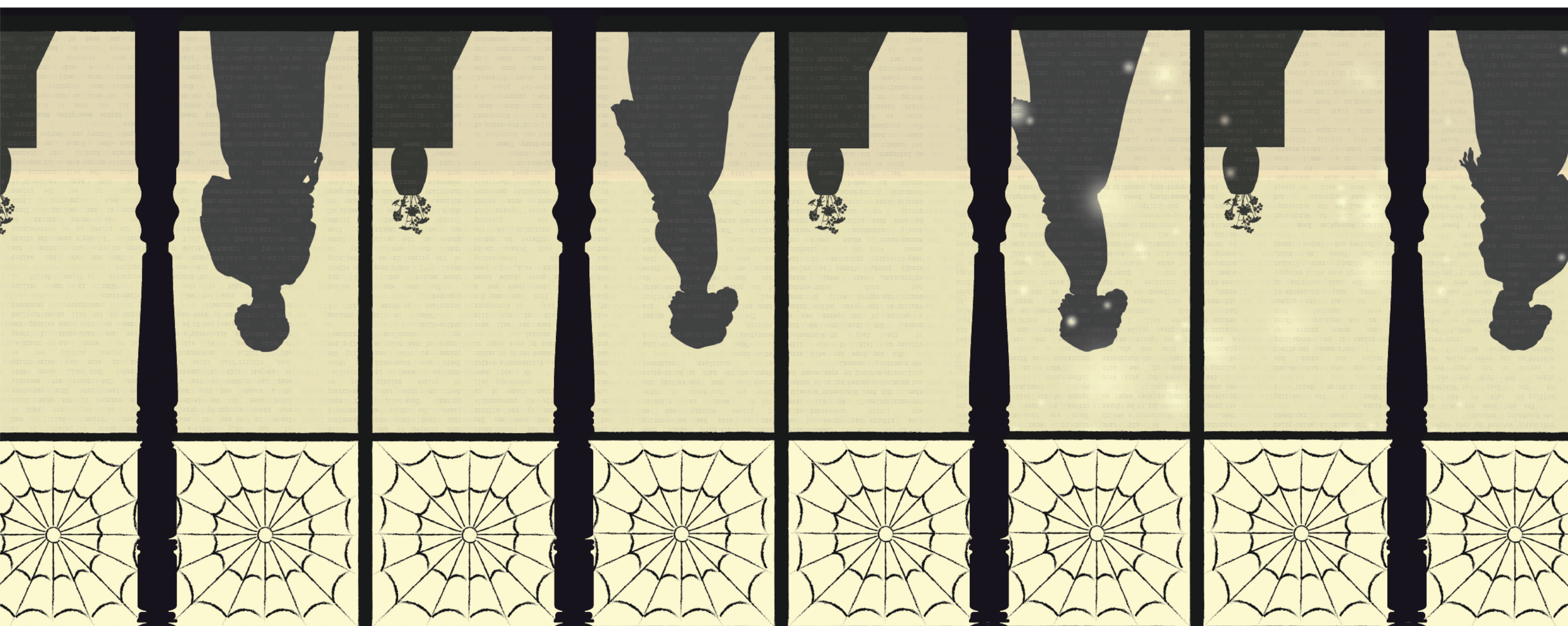


(V.O.)

when American interior designer Elsie de Wolfe signed the declaration, 'You will express yourself in your home, whether you want to or not', the pronominal 'you' was gender-specific: 'It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses.'¹ In this lingering Victorian firmament of womanly angels in their houses, the bourgeois divisions of public and private life reinforced domestic privacy as the sphere of women and thus interior design as the amateur-cum-professional expression of a woman's personality. The media has continually (re)presented Sarah Winchester (1839-1922), heiress to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company fortune, as one such amateur designer. A recent widower in 1885, Winchester moved from Connecticut to California, purchasing a small ranch house in the Santa Clara Valley the following year and then expanding it for decades, creating a labyrinthine mansion with well over a hundred rooms. Despite this spacious interiority, Winchester lived in near total seclusion and offered no public explanation for her design decisions, which included odd apertures between rooms, skylights between storeys, and stairs to nowhere. Few saw these interior details during her lifetime; at most, they might catch voyeuristic glimpses of her through the windows.



As Winchester was silent about her designs, local newspapers published presumably fictional narratives about her, claiming she continually built for fear that, if she stopped, she would die.² Teams of carpenters were said to have worked on the house day and night. Several of these narratives also claimed that Winchester held nightly seances at the house so that benevolent spirits could tell her how to extend the designs in ways that would confound the vengeful spirits of those murdered by the Winchester Repeating Rifle, the source of her fortune.³ Thus, because Winchester's designs did not abide by the expected social scripts of bourgeois women who expressed themselves in their homes (de Wolfe had no chapter on the placement of nowhere stairs, for example), the media assigned a personality to Winchester as eccentric as her work seems to have been.

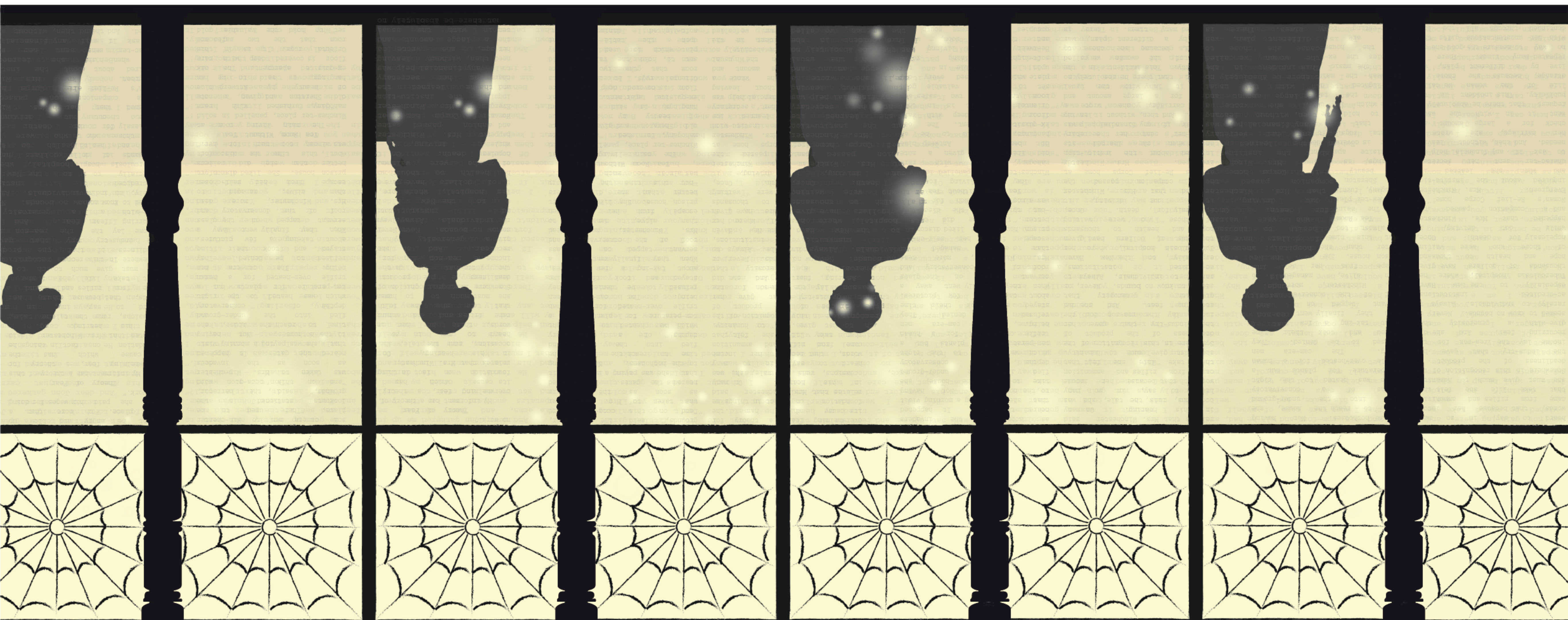


(V.O.)

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once. But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.⁴

The lives of designer Sarah Winchester and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) are curiously doubled. Both were Connecticut-born New Englanders who abandoned the East Coast for California after their marriages had ended. William Winchester died in 1881, a few years before Sarah's cross-country journey to the Santa Clara Valley. Gilman separated from her first husband in 1888, venturing to nearby Oakland. Both Winchester and Gilman may also have sought California for therapeutic reasons. In her scant correspondence, Winchester noted her enduring struggles with rheumatoid arthritis, especially in her hands, perhaps hoping that the warm, dry weather of the valley would relieve the inflammation.⁵ And Gilman soothed herself in the 'steady peace' of the Golden State's climate after years of post-partum depression and of physicians' failed efforts to end her depression with a rest cure.⁶ Finally, both came home to Connecticut in September 1922. Gilman and her second husband moved to Norwichtown; Winchester's remains were brought to New Haven, where she was interred beside her husband and their infant daughter.

In this essay, we visualise a feminist 'counter-fiction' to the media's mythologisation of Winchester in her house.⁷ Previous feminist scholars have already challenged the media's construct, but they tend to present their counterpoints as facts that negate the haunted house.⁸ We are not as certain. Granted, we find the feminist explanations of arthritis, melancholia, and natural disaster more convincing than secret spiritualist rituals. Likewise, we concur with Susana Torre's recommendation that Winchester's house models a feminist architecture that rejects the total design of heroic modernism because Winchester constantly built, unbuilt, and rebuilt her 'crazy-quilt mansion',⁹ like Penelope's funeral shroud.¹⁰ But we consequently find it impossible to tie up the loose ends of Winchester's story. Instead, we enter the fray of interior design by deconstructing a foundational presumption – that an interior design authenticates the designer's personality.¹¹ As Jacques Derrida declared, 'departed is the subject', and the most we can do is ghost-write Winchester's narrative in ways that speculate on what the narrative cannot represent.¹²



In this essay, we visualise a fictional double-exposure of Gilman's famed ghost story, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (1892), and the so-called yellow journalism that framed Winchester's mansion as the haunted house of a madwoman. Gilman's story is about an ailing woman subjected to the rest cure of isolation in a room with a hauntingly convoluted yellow wallpaper pattern that drives her insane. Gilman's personal life, said to overlap with the narrative of her ghost story, led to a contentious relationship with American news media, especially the sensationalism of Ambrose Bierce and William Randolph Hearst.¹³ We hesitate, however, to forward a reading that 'refocuses' Gilman's story as a critique of such journalism, equating yellow wallpaper with the yellowed sprawl of tabloid newsprint.¹⁴ At most, we share in the story's potential warning not to engage in the maddeningly 'relentless pursuit of a single meaning', projecting our double-exposure across a matrix of feminist semiotics instead.¹⁵ 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' questions whether 'language and conventional means of storytelling could ever present an authentic view of women's inner experience', including the media's sensationalisation of Winchester in her house.¹⁶

We take our cue, therefore, from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's uncanny ability to ghost-write the hymenal surface between Derrida's labyrinthine columns of text,¹⁷ and we acknowledge the repeating reports that Winchester installed the columns in her house upside down.¹⁸ For the building's revived Queen Anne style, the downward taper of the columns was the lathe-turning of wooden legs, not the upward taper of stone pillars.¹⁹ But whether Winchester knew this nuance of the style or if she (intentionally or accidentally) installed them upside down, we are unable to determine. Instead, we trans-mediate the Winchester fiction from the so-called yellow journalism of newspapers to the sepia tones of early cinema because of the perceptual gap between filmic materiality and its projecting illusion on a screen. Filmmakers position material images upside down so that, when light passes through the membrane, the projector's lens 'corrects' the images on the screen. Thus, we visualise reels of filmic materiality (VistaVisual in orientation), where Winchester ostensibly appears on the hymenal membrane between upside-down(?) columnar bars that frame the windows.



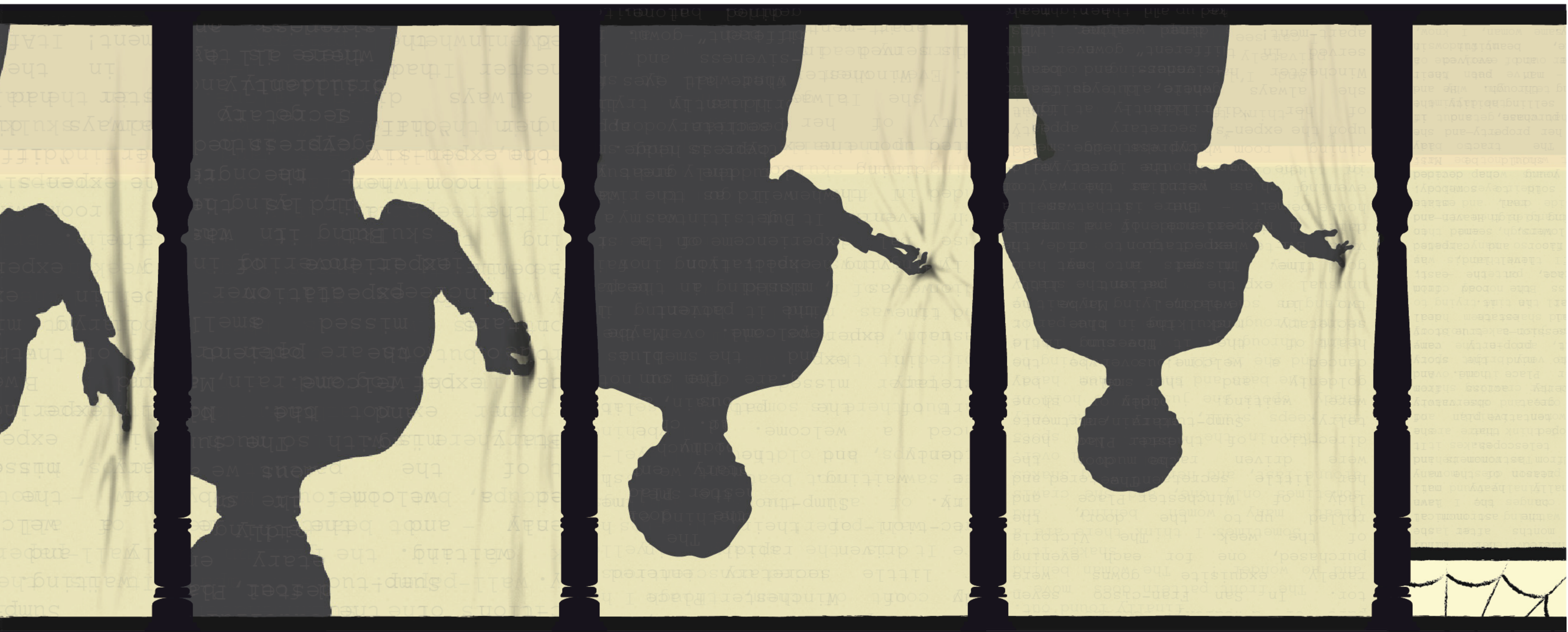
One persistent narrative in the media's representation of Winchester is the role of the Winchester Repeating Rifle in the westward expansion of the United States.²⁰

As early as 1911, a columnist recorded local legends that became the yellow journalism of the day: 'Winchester [...] was a mysterious dweller in a house of 500 rooms [...] fearing to die because of the destruction wrought by [...] the Winchester rifle [...] which] figured largely in the "Winning of the West".'²¹ The gossiping public and presses thus connected the rifle's violence with Winchester's westward relocation. After all, American democracy and its nineteenth-century fantasy of Manifest Destiny were born of violence, celebrated from the start with the gunpowder of fireworks. Gilman knew this well, setting her story in a 'colonial mansion', a pre-revolutionary retreat of inherited power, isolated from the protagonist's intellectual labour and companionship in the republic.²² The protagonist's husband/physician 'would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now'.²³ Thus, on the Fourth of July, there were no fireworks for Gilman's protagonist, but neither was there rest.²⁴

Furthermore, Winchester's would-be appearance along the hymen of filmic materiality phantomimes a space described in a newspaper column:

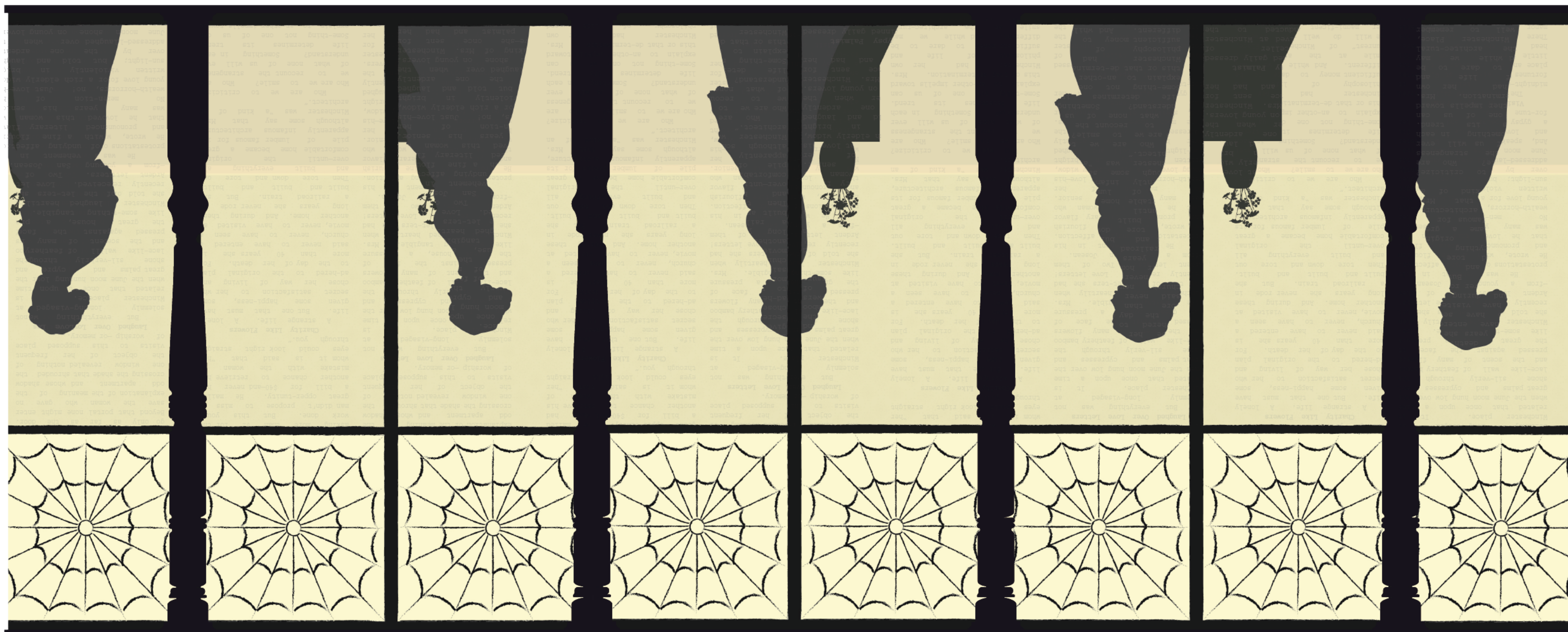
The most unusual room [...] was floored in white. The walls and seats were white – spotless white satin. There was only one window, closely-curtained. Across this drawn curtain a woman's shadow sometimes passed; but that was all that curious eyes were ever able to see of what took place in this strange room.²⁵

According to the columnist, this was the seance room, and it stood at the base of a seven-storey tower at Winchester's house, a tower that collapsed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Thus, we reconstruct a fictional view of this perhaps fictional space for 'curious eyes', offering no more than the projection of shadows on the curtain's fabricated screen and calling attention to its fabrication through webbed panes of glass that frequent the membranes of Winchester's interiority.



Winchester's isolation was not the same as Gilman's post-partum prescription for curative rest, but, like Gilman's protagonist, Winchester complained of frequent exhaustion and became insomniac – a pacing shadow at midnight in media constructs, including this visual essay.²⁶ Furthermore, flowers are gathered in a hu vessel behind her, invoking the explicit racism of yellow journalists reporting on Winchester's alleged use of 'pidgin' English' when buying vases from a local Chinese dealer.²⁷ It also evokes the implicit racism of Gilman's yellow colouration, made explicit with her later writings as a domestic and economic reformer.²⁸ Finally, under the yellow hue of early cinema, the shadowy figure lifts a gnarled hand to trace an indiscernible pattern on her side of the curtain, inspired to halt her restless pacing for reasons we cannot know. Thus, as with the 'pointless pattern' of form and meaning in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', the visual elements of this essay do not amount to a total design because they cannot reproduce Winchester's interiority.²⁹

Finally, media men have chimed in on the projection of a bellcote at Winchester's house, stating that the bell clanged at midnight to summon spirits to her seances.³⁰ To this, we echo Spivak's refrain from Derrida's *Glas*: 'Pendulum in the belfry, the fetish oscillates.'³¹ Instead of simply fetishizing the curtain/screen as a penetrable surface through which meaning can be reproduced as a reportage for 'curious eyes', we leave the pendular bell(e) oscillating between two soundtracks that do not presume the 'marriage or rupture of sound and image' but rather the pleasure of not knowing Winchester's pleasure in her house, even when it might tremble across the surface of the screen.³² We prefer the possibility of a feminist pleasure that is not simply a 'means or agent of reproduction' through the recursive loop of a film reel documenting Winchester's spatial and subjective interiority.³³ After all, Winchester was 'never to have seen a movie',³⁴ though perhaps she could have read that,



acknowledgements

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author biographies

Cameron Macdonell is an historian of art, architecture, and interior design, focusing on history as a house haunted by the past and future. Cameron's current book project, intersecting with this essay, is a history of the ghost as a rhetorical figure in design discourse from the seventeenth century to contemporary culture.

John Sicut is a graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Interior Design, currently working as a designer at Perkins & Will. As a designer, John focuses on exploring the relationship between memory, place, and time — a design philosophy that is further augmented by his passion for design fabrication and graphic illustration.

Image credits:

All images in this visual essay include excerpts from the following texts:

1. Edith Daley, 'Real and Ideal', *San Jose Evening News*, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25 September 1922, p. 6.
2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (as Charlotte Perkins Stetson), 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', *New England Magazine*, 5 (1892), 647-56.

notes

- 01 Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: Century, 1913), p. 5. Penny Sparke aptly noted the irony of the autobiographical 'I' that starts the book because Ruby Ross Goodnow ghostwrote the text to accompany de Wolfe's signature designs. See Penny Sparke, 'The "Ideal" and the "Real" Interior in Elsie de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* of 1913', *Journal of Design History*, 16 (2003), 63–76 (p. 67).
- 02 See, for example, 'A Strange Story: A Woman Who Thinks She Will Die When Her House Is Built', *San Jose Evening News*, 29 March 1895, p. 4.
- 03 See, for example, 'Sells Her Mansion and Defies Spirits', *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 November 1911, p. 1.
- 04 Charlotte Perkins Gilman (as Charlotte Perkins Stetson), 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', *New England Magazine*, 5 (1892), 647–56 (pp. 654–55).
- 05 See, for example, Sarah Lockwood Winchester (SLW) to Hannah Jane 'Jennie' Bennett (JB), 11 June 1898, Bennett Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.
- 06 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Harper, 1935), p. 107.
- 07 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Glas-Piece: A Compte Rendu', *Diacritics*, 7 (1977), 22–43 (p. 24).
- 08 See Susana Torre, 'The Pyramid and the Labyrinth', in *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. by Susana Torre (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1977), pp. 198–202; Mary Jo Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester Heiress to the Rifle Fortune* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010); Kendra Paitz, 'Toward an Ethical Representation of Sarah Winchester' (unpublished master's thesis, Illinois State University, 2011); and Christine R. Junker, 'Unruly Women and Their Crazy Houses', *Home Cultures*, 12 (2015), 329–46.
- 09 John G. Robinson, 'The "Spirit House" of San Jose', *Oakland Tribune*, 29 October 1922, p. 72.
- 10 Torre, 'The Pyramid and the Labyrinth', p. 202.
- 11 In terms of architectural history, one of us has already deconstructed the biographical assumptions of causal links between an architect's life and work. See Cameron Macdonell, *Ghost Storeys: Ralph Adams Cram, Modern Gothic Media, and Deconstructive Microhistory at a Canadian Church* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), pp. 24–27.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 190.
- 13 See, for example, Lawrence J. Oliver and Gary Scharnhorst, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman versus Ambrose Bierce: The Literary Politics of Gender in Fin-de-Siècle California', in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts*, ed. by Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), pp. 32–45; and Denise D. Knight, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William Randolph Hearst, and the Practice of Ethical Journalism', in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries*, pp. 46–58.
- 14 Sari Edelstein, 'The Yellow Newspaper: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sensational Journalism', in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: New Texts, New Contexts*, ed. by Jennifer S. Tuttle and Carol Farley Kessler (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), pp. 180–99 (p. 182).
- 15 Susan S. Lanser, 'Feminist Criticism, "The Yellow Wallpaper", and the Politics of Color in America', *Feminist Studies*, 15 (1989), 415–41 (p. 420).
- 16 Jenny Weatherford, 'Approaching the Ineffable: "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Gilman's Problem with Language', *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 31 (1999), 58–75 (p. 58).
- 17 See Spivak, 'Glas-Piece'; and Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). On the former ghostwriting the latter, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Ghostwriting', *Diacritics*, 25 (1995), 64–84.
- 18 See, for example, John Ashbery, 'Mystery Mansion', *House & Garden*, 159 (1987), 148–53, 208, 212 (p. 208).
- 19 See, for example, Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The "Queen Anne" Movement, 1860–1900* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 221.
- 20 See, for example, Laura Trevelyan, *The Winchester: The Gun That Built an American Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 36–74.
- 21 Merle H. Gray, "'The Workshop" of a Woman Architect', *San Jose Mercury and Herald*, 16 July 1911, p. 6.
- 22 Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', p. 647.
- 23 Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', p. 649.
- 24 See Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', p. 650.
- 25 Edith Daley, 'Real and Ideal', *San Jose Evening News*, 20 September 1922, p. 6. On the act of phantomime, see Jodey Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 8.
- 26 See SLW to JB, 11 June 1898, Bennett Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.
- 27 Edith Daley, 'Real and Ideal', *San Jose Evening News*, 22 September 1922, p. 6. On the legacy of racism in 'yellow journalism', see Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Westport: Praeger, 2001). In the vase, we placed Sweet Williams (for William Winchester, Sarah's departed husband) and Queen Anne's Lace (for Anne Winchester, their departed infant daughter). Winchester House included several daisy motifs for Daisy Merriman, Sarah's beloved niece and lone companion at the house for years. A few days after 4 July 1903, Daisy married Fred Marriott, moving out of Sarah's house.
- 28 On the racist implications of 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', see Lanser, 'Feminist Criticism', 425–29. On the explicit racism of Gilman's reform writings, see Denise D. Knight, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism', *American Literary Realism*, 32 (2000), 159–69.
- 29 Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', p. 650.
- 30 See, for example, Joe Custer, 'Mystery Shrouds One-Time Famous Spirit Haven', *San Bernardino County Sun*, 17 May 1936, p. 3A.
- 31 Spivak, 'Glas-Piece', pp. 31, 41.
- 32 Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 86.
- 33 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', *Yale French Review*, 62 (1981), 154–84 (p. 181).
- 34 Edith Daley, 'Real and Ideal', *San Jose Evening News*, 25 September 1922, p. 6.