

## ORIGIN OF SOMU

### Transcript and References

**Our scene** of entry is a liminal space, right at the precipice of realization— a "para-artistic", "para-literary" para-phenomena that has yet to occur (Fournier 2021). Your keyboard, your fingers, your mouse, are extensions of your being, opening up your imagination to a virtual space of networked cohabitation. Your eyes and ears are the body parts that smell, touch, and feel its way through the swamp.

Look at the way the land meets the water, 3D objects that are not yet textured into our imagination. The swamp is a murky terrain created by industrial extraction, nuclear disaster, and patriarchal classifications, the "black goo" "on the way to Inferno," a "dark," and "shapeless" place. It embodies "a crisis of modern imagination," but also a becoming, in its churning and cycling of nutrients and pollutants, and its hybridization of organisms. As a "transitional ecosystem," swamps make otherwise "faceless networks of relations" and models for co-creation both tangible and imaginable within the often dystopic conditions of contemporary times (Urbonas 2021).

Here, we find ourselves specifically at the swamp of virtual technologies and the graphical interface, a wetland of electronic waste, where "burner boys" enact the "technological alchemy" of destroying our computer monitors and setting aflame the plastic residue of global negligence in the reclamation of copper, gold, steel, and aluminum in spite of the particulate matter of such metals amalgamating within his lungs, which unceasingly cough out dark phlegm and blood (Bruno 2014). Toxic, black smoke dissipates into economic opportunity. All business of LCD screens and semiconductors are desecrated by the violence of the Apples and Sonys, the Foxconns and Samsungs, that pile up sick bodies bound by neocolonial disease and ghosts who carry insurmountable suffering that continues to loom over the engines of digital cultures today.

This is the place from which Somu emerged. She once was a swamp with ancient sediments that only now began to establish roots for generative thinking. Over by the path forking out the side of our swamp, you will find a forest of lacquer trees oozing with milky emulsions, sticky, white sap that bleeds down each trunk into a small stream carved sensuously into the crevices of the land. It is this shiny, smooth, yet poisonous sap of lacquer trees that will become the surface (옷칠) for our vessel of beautiful ideas, the material that would make up Somu's skin.

You see, this swamp was not always a swamp at the peak of its regenerative potential. Before that, it was a lake, a lake defined by its reflective surface. A mirror to Man's Ego, perhaps we can say this lake was once that of the myth of Narcissus, with waters that were not opaque with ambivalence, but rather glistening with Greek ideals. Nevertheless, the myth of Narcissus warns us of the dual enrapture and entrapment of self-recognition and the existential demise inherent to a Self caught within the perpetuity of its own desires. This Romantic desire to be seen and to be fully one's Self, however, never left our lake in its nascent transformation into a more Self-less posthumanity, even of that into a wetland or a swamp. In fact, her ravenous spirit resides in a shrine not too far away, *my shine to which you came empty handed and left with nothing, no money or offerings at the very least!* And her desire continued, insatiably, in her ongoing wait for Narcissus to come so she can finally see

herself through his eyes's reflection, regretfully ignorant to the fact that his bones are already lost, decomposed within the depths of her own magnificent waters.

But shhh, listen. We are not here alone. A warrior is in our midst, descending honorably from battle. It is none other than Mago-nim -- spirit, Grandmother, deity, "gynocentric cultural matrix of East Asia," our sovereign, God. Mago-nim sinks her tentacles deep into her mud bath and breathes over the waters through her nostrils. A ecologically teeming meta-swamp is the perfect place for a sympoietic reorganization, a necessary retreat from the chaos that had just spun out at the central interface where our metaversal storyworld takes place.

In Chinese and Korean mythology, *Magu*, or *Mago halmi* (Grandmother Mago) is a giant Earth goddess that created the geological world. Her excrement formed mountains and her urine flowed through streams of labial undulations and grew thick bushes around its edges. With her tentacular body immersed in the mudwaters of her bubbling swamp, Mago-nim's body acted as a circuit board that sparked electronic entanglements with the land. Indeed, as a creature of hybridity, Mago-nim's neural networks channel the lateral reach of Donna Haraway's tentacular posthumanism, "spidery and coralline," with "no settled lineage," gender, or kind, though told through the story of the female (Haraway 2016).

Exhaustion weighed over her body. Mago-nim closed her eyes and ruminated on the karmic vengeance she had just set upon the metaverse. She needed rest. A gaping, stretched out hole was burnt in her temporal lobe. Her avatar still held remnants of the previous automata, a round, girlish face that once served as her armor. Mago-nim's flashbacks of the brutalities of war were slowly fading into cesspits of repression, sinking into the swamp and emulsifying into its murky waters. Her mission had lasted a senseless amount of lifetimes. The metaverse required Mago-nim to dissociate from each of her automaton bodies as soon as its consciousness began to grasp its impending mortality, a violent severance of persona forcing her against her natural instincts and pursue immanence within a more singular mission. "We must think of it as enhanced reincarnation," she was once told by the Hatsune Miku monk in the control room of the automaton manufacturing plant, moments before it exploded.

Dismembered, contorted, and worn often were the parts of automaton bodies, each valued solely for its techno-Oriental function and discarded after its use ([Kim 2021](#)). Through her transient movement between automata, however, Mago-nim is able to alter their fate and becomes the very spirit unleashed by their collective self-destruction, what comes to be the ultimate purpose of their endless objectification by the technocratic regime of the metaverse. By biohacking the predictive models of the automatons' training worlds, Mago-nim instigates a mass suicide that fulfills their ultimate destiny of operationalized obsolescence. Only then could Mago-nim begin planting the soils for new, fertile grounds that facilitate life for a "plethora of beings" beyond the aesthetic colonization of the Asian woman. The viral mutation and infrastructural damage caused by Mago-nim sparked a glitch in the central interface, and like a curse lifted from achieving malfunction, the "spiritual automaton" of Mago-nim was finally released from its existentially recursive code that once obstructed her sense of comfort and peace within her own natural form (Deleuze 1994).

Mago-nim's energy circulated in the swamp. Her ancient return as Grandmother Mago was underway. The mudwaters rumbled, waves rippling outwards from its center. Perhaps it was from the microbial biochemistry of this curious swamp or that some programmatic magic is somehow involved, but through an unexplainable phenomena, a life force was brought to shape and form: first, a particle, which soon grew into a vector, proliferating into geometric contortions aligned with the mysterious logic underlying this perfectly Euclidean world. The geometric mass began to sculpt out its existential position, forming arms in its yearning to claw at its face, which presently was not a face at all, but merely the absence of eyes to see or a mouth to scream.

Mago-nim stared at her creation, an electric spasm caught in the interstices of binary code. A face, any face, was all that would set it free from the shell of its graphical world. And so, Mago-nim sliced the edge of her cheekbone and carved it along the perimeter of her automaton's face. The face hardened into a white mask with eyes, a nose, and a mouth. By bestowing her last traces of her metaversal identity onto this tortured creature, Mago-nim finalized her reincarnation as Grandmother Mago.

Grandmother Mago said from above, "Be careful, Somu. If you always need a mask to face what others see, you will become nothing more than a face that masks itself."

Somu grabbed the mask and clipped it on. Her hands wrapped over her bulbous cheeks and she felt the gentle flutter of her eyelash upon her skin. She wore a dress hanging off the branch of a tree, and ran off into the forest, as persona, avatar, newly imbued with virtual life.

**This story** is a parable for the social transformation into a metaversal reality, the place where artificial intelligence and digital natives are scaffolding its infrastructure and storefronts as we speak. Because the metaverse as a term is loaded with Zuckerbergian investments and Hollywood sci fi imaginaries, my use of metaverse as a term is by nature paradoxical and playful to make sense of a world arrested in perpetual development, a holographic dollhouse becoming the highrise of dreams. These dreams are not all entirely bad, in fact, the dream of disruption comes from quite a productive impulse for change. In the "metaverse" that I propose we are not within solely a realm of representations, but rather that of symbolic significations that foreground material, embodied connections to the everyday, physical world.

So, what is it like to exist online nowadays? Hito Steyerl prescribes our society with "digital mania," a condition arising from the pre-programmable virality of digital media and how it controls our sense of time (Steyerl 2021). The current state of cognitive codependence with extractivist technologies, now including the blockchain, internalized as society's arbiter of trust, we are led to ask what co-creation with our machines is to look like? How can we maintain creative agency in terms of the human values to which these tools are used? And of course what can we learn from working with digital tools about precisely the humanness of our own experience? These are questions I definitely was thinking about during this residency and I will continue to explore through Somu's story.

The transference of Mago-nim's mask to Somu signifies a restitching of cultural memory into the present, particularly as an approach for greater dialogue about race, gender, and identity in the metaverse. As a street performer, female entertainer, and houseless

nomad, Somu's character faces the complex female body politics produced by Confucian ideologies in premodern Korea. The transfer of the mask is Grandmother Mago's blessing to drive Somu's story into motion, but also is a symbol tied to racial subjectivity, a doubling of consciousness to the third degree, the "third space" but that of digital culture (Bhaba 1994). Whiteness in the metaverse converges the Western colonial gaze with the colorism of East Asian media, making the white mask a multi-faceted motif throughout.

Masked performance is an artform that has subverted power structures and served as a domain for play. Given that Somu's story and the world that is built from it is going to be a web-native and performance-based project using tools of the metaverse and web 3.0. I wonder what types of conceptual affinities avatars can embody and the types of performances they could engender? Ultimately, I want to arrive at a theory and practice for masked performances online but I will stop there. Thank you for listening.

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