

Spring 2023

## Tucson House: Visual Echoes

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### Recommended Citation

Paur, Stephen (2023) "Tucson House: Visual Echoes," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol17/iss2/15>

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## Tucson House: Visual Echoes

*Stephen Paur*

### *Reflection*

“Afterimage,” noun: “The enduring impression of a vivid sensation after the initial stimulus has ceased.” Like glimpsing the sun, then scrunching your eyes defensively only to find it re-inscribed on your retinas. Like watching a movie and, after the final scene cuts to black, still being haunted by the power of that last frame, still feeling it in your stomach, on your nerve endings.

Likewise, this image — a digital composite — is an afterimage, of sorts. I composed it after-the-fact using still frames from a short documentary video about Tucson House, a 17-story public housing building in southern Arizona for the elderly, disabled, and formerly unhoused. The title of the video, like the still frames themselves, lingers: “Status Update: COVID-19 & the Politics of Disposability.”

Produced during the early months of the pandemic, in 2020, the video ([bit.ly/3LPLz07](https://bit.ly/3LPLz07)) features voiceovers by three residents who report on their experiences. They describe their own afterimages, evoking what they’ve heard, felt, and been witness to so far. The fear, confusion, tedium, vulnerability. The stubborn optimism.

At the center of it all—figuratively, but also, in this composite image, literally—is a stealthy, sinister pathogen. Microscopic, normally unseen, it’s made visible here. But that visibility, like anything, has a shelf life. It’s there until you look away.

Or will we still see it? Still carry it with us? Still carry *them* with us, those too often made to carry unshouderable burdens on their own?

Afterimages refuse the prevailing logics of disposability that allow us—encourage us, even—to treat empathy and awareness like single-use plastics. Often, we indulge in them as long as it makes us feel good, then throw them away, forgetting our abiding interdependence, ignoring the fact that, as MLK, Jr. memorably put it, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Afterimages invite us to directly confront the indirectness of our embeddedness. They ask us to find common cause with those whose pain and struggles are no less real for being distant or hidden. They ask us to reflect on just where, exactly, this “away” is to which we throw things and consign people.

My apartment is two blocks from Tucson House, a towering structure that looms over the neighborhood. It’s impossible to ignore it. Still, I often find myself looking in another direction. Even someone like me, with the building staring down at him matter-of-factly, morning to night, can’t win the staring contest. I always get distracted. I always blink.

This composite image was part of a conscious effort to try—for a few more moments, at least—to hold it, the building and what it represents, in my hand. To familiarize myself more memorably with its distinctive, angular contours, their repetitions,

their inversions. To ask just what it (and the people inside) seemed to be asking of me. To try not to blink.



*Author Bio*

Stephen Paur is a writing teacher and Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona. His research areas are the rhetoric of climate change, the politics of language and literacy, and the history of writing technologies.