English Corner

My skills
Capacità al centro

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Female Entrepreneurship: A Leadership Lesson

An article published by *Forbes* in 2022 suggests investing in companies led by female entrepreneurs because evidence shows that women and entrepreneurship form a winning combination. But the 'entrepreneurship gap' illustrates a landscape in which women-led businesses are a small number than what we imagine after reading *Forbes'* quote. Let's start with some data.

Globally, according to Women's Entrepreneurship Report (2023), only one entrepreneur out of four is a woman. In Europe, where women in comparison to men are less likely by 25% to be the leader of a company, the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship are recorded. Even in Italy, female companies are a minority, they represent 22% of the total (Unioncamere 2023).

Despite the actions designed to fill this gap, rooted cultural factors slow down the access to entrepreneurship by women. Indeed, gender stereotypes do not allow an instant association of the female image to the entrepreneurial figure. This leads women, for example, to barely express their entrepreneurial intent. According to OECD and European Union (2023), men are 1.72 times more likely to be self-employed than a woman (in 2013 this data corresponded to 1.82). Another consequence of stereotypes is connected to the higher responsibility of women towards family and domestic care. This explains how during crisis, for example during the Covid pandemic, the closure rate of female enterprises was 40% more than male enterprises.

However, scientific research demonstrates that the exercise of leadership styles, essential in entrepreneurial activities, requires a set of efficient behaviours. These behaviours transcend gender observations and go beyond traditional stereotypes that associate specific behaviours with women rather than men. Nevertheless, studies that focalize on leadership styles and on the skills required to guide organizations of women enterprises are still a few.

With the collaboration of the Chamber of Commerce of Treviso and Belluno, Ca' Foscari Competency Centre's team conducted research on this topic. The research involved 30 female entrepreneurs from Treviso and Belluno that work in sectors characterized by traditional male connotations, such as mechanics, wood and transports, that during the pandemic observed a positive economic performance.

The research highlighted the complexity of the skill profile and the complementarity of leadership styles used by the interviewed entrepreneurs. In particular, skills such as self-awareness (values, strengths and weaknesses) and self-confidence appeared distinctive, but also the relational skill expressed by empathy and behaviours related to innovation (visionary thinking, change orientation, observation, result orientation) emerged. In the analysis, the inspiring style, the aggregate style and the supportive style are those mainly associated with a successful entrepreneurial profile. These styles express leadership with the goal to commit team members toward a shared vision of the future, but also to promote a caring workplace culture and to support people's professional growth.

The results of this study represent an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of the entrepreneurial role, regardless of gender, and can inspire educational interventions and policies aimed at spreading a culture that promotes female entrepreneurship. The results of this research were presented during the conference *Donne e Imprenditorialità: Costruire la leadership del futuro*, held at the Chamber of Commerce of Treviso on 26 January 2024. The research, realized with the scientific contribution of Ca' Foscari Competency Centre of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, is the result of a collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce of Treviso-Belluno, Osservatorio Economico e Sociale (Economic and Social Observatory) and Comitato Imprenditoria Femminile di Treviso-Belluno (Female Entrepreneurship Committee of Treviso-Belluno).

The conference represented an opportunity to deepen the entrepreneurial path of some women who took part in the research.[1]

Wannabe Her
Da grande vorrei essere Lei

Ilaria Da Col
Ca' Foscari Progetto Lei

in conversation with
Costanza Angelini
Project Coordinator, UBISOFT Milan

Wannabe Her is a column dedicated to discovering and promoting innovative, 'out of the ordinary', or hard-to-access professional roles in fields that may interest Ca' Foscari students.
In this issue, we delve into an area still relatively unknown in the Italian job market but whose strategic importance is growing exponentially: the gaming sector, which involves a plethora of professional figures, including that of project coordinator, currently held by Costanza Angelini at UBISOFT Milan.

Introduction
The video game industry represents one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, with economic potential surpassing many other entertainment fields. In 2023, its market value reached 180.3 billion dollars, with projections to grow to 256.97 billion dollars by 2025. This expansion is driven by a combination of factors, including increased demand for digital entertainment, technological innovation, and the growing penetration of the internet and mobile devices. Amidst this exponential growth, Italy is playing an increasingly significant role. Although the Italian video game market constitutes only a fraction of the global total, its dynamism has notably increased in recent years, generating revenues exceeding 2 billion euros in 2022 (+16.3% compared to 2021). Additionally, the sector is opening up to female participation: a traditionally male-dominated industry is finally beginning to recognize and value the contributions of women, not only as players but also as developers and leaders. According to IIDEA data, the percentage of female gamers has surpassed that of male gamers both nationally and globally (51% versus 49%). In Italy, the number of women employed in the gaming industry is on the rise, thanks in part to initiatives like Women in Games Italia, which are fostering a supportive and mentoring community for female professionals, promoting a more equitable environment rich with economically interesting opportunities, even for recent graduates embarking on their first experiences.
The professions within the video game world do not necessarily require technical knowledge and/or a passion for video games: we explore what seems to be a paradox with Costanza Angelini, Project Coordinator at UBISOFT Milan.

Project Coordinator: Duties
Given the dynamic nature of the job, involving a multitude of actors and tasks, no two days are the same. Generally, the crucial role of the project coordinator is to ensure that video game development projects are completed efficiently and on time, ensuring the quality of the final work alongside the well-being of the Game Designer team. To achieve this, the profession typically includes activities such as:
planning and organising project goals, deadlines, and deliverables, as well as activities, with detailed timelines of the various completion milestones;
resource management, which includes the allocation and optimization of the budget, personnel, and equipment;
coordinating and supporting the team, which involves assigning tasks based on each member's inclinations, skills, and availability, providing operational assistance, motivating the team, facilitating workflow and internal, inter-departmental, and stakeholder communications to ensure collective alignment with project goals;
monitoring project progress using project management tools (such as Jira, Trello, or Asana) and regularly drafting reports;
proactively identifying potential risks or obstacles to smooth project progression, timely reporting, managing, and resolving issues, often in collaboration with team members;
creating and updating project documentation;
engaging with stakeholders, which includes regular status meetings to discuss project progress and address any questions, as well as collecting and potentially integrating their feedback into the project.

Hard Skills and Soft Skills Required
It is interesting to note that for someone starting a career as a project coordinator, whether in the gaming sector or elsewhere, soft skills are more strategic than technical ones. While familiarity with video game development processes and experience with project management software such as Jira, Trello, Asana, or Microsoft Project are highly valued, what truly makes a difference are the skills that can be directly tested in the field. This is why the selection process for this role often involves multiple interviews and practical tests. Specifically, organisational skills, excellent communication abilities to interact with internal and external teams, leadership to guide and motivate them, and empathy to understand their needs, characters, and difficulties are crucial. Time management skills are essential – though there's a bit of a reprieve here, as the experience at Ca' Foscari and organising exam sessions provide significant training in this area. Additionally, the ability to work under pressure and maintain composure, learning to view deadlines positively and 'amicably'; foresight regarding potential delays or issues that might arise with a project (for example, meeting an unrealistic deadline previously set by company executives); and finally, problem-solving skills to address such situations, are all required.

Required Educational Background
What has been stated so far might suggest that to pursue a career in this field, an economic-informatics path, with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science, Computer Engineering, or Business Management, followed by a master's degree or a gaming-related master's program, is strongly recommended (if not compulsory). Indeed, understanding the technical and computer aspects of the gaming world can be helpful, and universities are equipping themselves accordingly with a series of new degree courses and training programs in game design and video game development. Nonetheless, the highly innovative nature of this sector, combined with the cross-functional role of the project coordinator, allows individuals from very different and more 'creative' backgrounds to approach it. This includes degrees in Marketing, Foreign Languages (such as Costanza's case), History, and Psychology.

How has your educational background supported your career? What gaps did you have to fill?
Certainly, my experience at Ca' Foscari has helped me understand how to manage and optimise my time to the fullest because individual study leaves a lot of room for personal responsibility – and this is neither a trivial nor a common aspect across all universities. Additionally, I have always combined my studies with the development of my numerous personal projects. What could be further developed is the integration with the job market: for example, it would be great if there were more professionalising Minors aligned with industry trends (in the case of Japanese, for instance, localization for gaming and the tourism sector). Furthermore, intensifying campus conferences would greatly help in understanding which path to take and broadening one's horizons, similar to the activities offered by the Lei Project. As for my gaps, I am fortunate to have training included in my contract, with dedicated, paid, and incentivized hours; I have supervisors who are always willing to help and answer my questions, and I study through the ULearn platform, which is partnered with the company, making training even simpler. I believe continuous training plays an essential role, alongside on-the-job experience, and nowadays it is even easier to fill any gaps through online courses, workshops, and seminars in game development and project management to stay updated on the latest trends and methodologies. Additionally, courses offering specific certifications are highly valuable.

How do you view the gaming sector in terms of opportunities for university students in Italy?
In Italy, I believe it is a sector that will experience significant growth in the coming years. Many small, independent studios are emerging, and they will increasingly seek staff, while more people will want to delve into video game studies. Thus, it is an industry on the rise, even abroad, although it has suffered from mass layoffs due to an excessive increase in staff to respond to the sector's boom during Covid. In Italy, there is undoubtedly potential for growth and career opportunities for young people, especially since the Ministry of education and culture is opening up to the gaming world as a pedagogical tool through gamification. We are seeing more and more video games applied in museums, educational institutions, and corporate environments (Barilla, for example, has its own video game to entertain users while they wait for an order and to train its employees). In reality, we are constantly immersed in 'play': for instance, the fact that the Zoom call button is in a particular place is because clicking it activates attention, making it engaging, and everything that involves engagement between a user and something IT-related is essentially a video game. The opportunities are there and they are numerous; it's just a matter of seizing them.

How should one approach this world?
Perhaps the biggest challenge lies in finding junior positions, as many are senior or mid-level; but there is always the possibility to gain experience through university. For example, Ca' Foscari offers many internship opportunities abroad, including a placement with Keywords, a major video game translation company in Madrid. Alternatively, one can simply scour LinkedIn for opportunities and find companies like Nintendo in Germany offering work experiences to university students. Naturally, a passion for the gaming world is required, and having done some related activities (even small personal projects) shows your genuine commitment to working in the sector.

You are the spokesperson of a demographic, women, that is currently underrepresented in your industry. In what way do you think a woman can add value and make a difference in the gaming sector?
Firstly, from a social standpoint: in the past, if you played video games, you were considered a 'tomboy', almost stigmatised. The paradigm shift that is happening is crucial to overcoming the gender concept linked to the sector. From a more technical perspective, women's perception leads them to notice aspects and subtleties, even related to a more inclusive user experience, that men might not immediately see. It is proven that the way women experience a video game is different from that of men, just as every individual has a different experience; women have more peripheral vision, while men prefer the central elements on the screen. Therefore, adding women to your team means having the opportunity to fine-tune a product, making it more appealing and inclusive than it already is.

What advice would you give to a recent graduate or someone still studying who is at the beginning of their career and aspires to hold a role like yours?
The first piece of advice that comes to mind is: if you realise at some point that you want to do something, it doesn't matter where you start, but you need to begin; take advantage of every opportunity, as every experience can be professionally useful. It is also important to cultivate your passions – soft skills are strategic – and try to combine them with a career if possible; work hard, participate in as many initiatives and projects as possible without sacrificing your social life, but consciously defining your priorities repeatedly over time (because, naturally, they change as we change). Keep your eyes open to capture trends and seize opportunities, and do networking, create relationships with contacts who might remember you or whom you might need in the future. Sometimes getting a 25 in an exam instead of your 30 with honours, to favour an interview or an outing to meet people in the sector, is much more valuable strategically. Accept rejection, especially at the beginning, and persevere; be proactive in asking for feedback after a job interview: at worst, they won't respond, but at best, they will not only give you useful advice but also remember you. Have the humility to acknowledge your mistakes, the courage to change paths if you realise you've taken the wrong one, and the perseverance to do everything possible to achieve your goals, listening but not being overly influenced by others' opinions. Learn to say yes to new proposals, opportunities, and connections, but also to say no, rejecting internship or job offers that do not reasonably recognize the professionalism you have acquired, or renegotiating the terms.

Biography
Costanza Angelini currently works as a producer in the video game industry. Always passionate about video games, she enrolled in the degree course in Languages, Cultures, and Societies of Asia and North Africa, with a focus on Japanese studies. In 2018, she launched her 'PodCost' in collaboration with Radio Ca' Foscari, a geek-themed podcast where she interviews prominent figures from the industry. During the same period, she joined the online editorial team of 'Clorogaming', working as an article writer and proofreader, combining her love for writing with video game reviews. After spending time in Tokyo in 2022 and earning her degree, she secured an internship as a video game localiser at Wabbit Translations. Shortly thereafter, she obtained a position as a Brand Marketing Intern at Electronic Arts in Milan. This internship allowed her to independently manage various marketing launch campaigns, solidifying her skills and acquiring new ones, while further expanding her network of contacts. During this time, she became acquainted with and eventually an ambassador for the Women in Games Italia association. In February 2024, she was hired by Ubisoft Milan as a project coordinator, where she is currently responsible for coordinating the artistic team in the development of various video game titles.

LEI & The World

Stephanie Lindsay
Student in Environmental Humanities, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

in conversation with
Dr. Lidia Guzy
Director of MA Anthropology and former Head of the Department of Religious Studies at University College Cork (UCC/ Ireland)

Lidia Guzy specialises in the study of the cultures of indigenous communities in Asia and South America, and their based the innovative theory of 'eco-cosmologies' in sustainability research.

Lidia, please tell us about your work with marginalised cultures in relation with your development of the theoretical concept of eco-cosmology.
I developed the eco-cosmology concept from long-term research on indigenous cultures and extensive fieldwork, based primarily in the Adivasi indigenous Indian context and during my post-doctoral research on endangered music and dance traditions, as well as indigenous museum concepts. The neo-animism turn in the study of religions and the ontological turn in anthropology inspired my personal grasp of eco-cosmological complexities.
Eco-cosmology is a critical term for a dualistic and anthropocentric perspective (of the colonial and post-colonial era), which is the common, scientific Western perception of the world or a positivistic understanding of the dualism between nature and culture. As an anthropologist, I do not accept that it's really objective to rely only on one logical principle or ra-

tionality. Eco-cosmology is an attempt to grasp other rationalities – non-human, non-empirical, and spiritual ones – and how they inform decisions about daily life and values. It is traditional within anthropology to value indigenous knowledge in this sense, but let's say it is my neologism, which for my work – relating the study of religions and anthropology, appreciating cosmo-visions and social structure – seemed the best for comparative tasks like comparing other cultures.

For the sake of comparison, the concept of 'sustainability', which is so embedded in 'global north' cultures and their discussions of environment, contrasts with the 'indigenous knowledge systems of sustainability' that your work addresses. What are the dangers of how this indigenous knowledge can be (mis)interpreted within a different framework like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or by the agencies implementing the SDGs in indigenous communities? How is it possible to navigate the gap between these knowledge systems of sustainability?
That gap is a very important point. The Global United Nations concept of sustainability is based on a particular vision of culture and a model of society that is intertwined with the history of colonization and domination. Whereas, indigenous knowledge systems, which are eco-cosmologies, are sustainable. Indigenous people do not need to be taught how they presumably should become sustainable. I'm very critical of this whole development discourse, which does not recognize the inherent values and knowledge systems of minority cultures. And this is why eco-cosmology, for me, is a critical term to all dominant cultures and their meaning systems.
So, eco-cosmology contains an appreciation or an attempt to revalue and acknowledge indigenous concepts of sustainability. Whereas ecology without cosmology, or the spiritual element, is related to many factors of dominant and capitalist cultures, such as corporations, the technologies they sell, and the concepts of hygiene that relate to a particular infrastructure of theirs.
With the concept of eco-cosmology, I want to strengthen the indigenous autonomy in relation to the management of resources and societal structures. It is a request for recognition of total indigenous independence from categorizations which always dominate the marginal, and particularly the indigenous. Many of the developmental discourses are patronizing, colonial discourses. They may be presented as a particular advancement in life, but ultimately, they are based on a devaluation of another perspective, which is namely a spiritual conceptualization of the world.

Based on your experience with ethnography, is there a specific event when you witnessed this? Maybe during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance in relation to hygienic or medicinal practices?
Illness is conceived, particularly in the Adivasi context, not merely as a physical ailment but also as a spiritual reaction or

agency. A major difference with the scientific conceptualization of illness is that it only considers the physical dimension. We know very well that this physical perception of wellbeing and health is limited, and that something inner, like the psychological, may enhance or deteriorate our physical conditions. Indigenous people have an enormous knowledge and pragmatics. Ritual specialists, for example, know very well that they need to differentiate between illnesses of the civilized urban world of the hospital and illnesses which they encounter within villages.
In the Koraput context of southern Odisha, the Desia Adivasi groups always associate the hospital with death because unfortunately, for indigenous people, it is mostly a fatal experience when they must go there. Understandably, indigenous people shy away from Western doctors, hospitals and medicine because they have a very bad experience with them, and those institutions treat them as numbered patients rather than with empathy and humanity.
It is not so easy to transgress this gap, or difference, between traditions. It is not easy to reconcile them. And there is not one model of the good life and wellbeing, as claimed by the discourse of dominant cultures and corporations. So, my work is a request within academia for a recognition of the minority culture for its own rationality.

In relation to this aim, you founded the Marginalized and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC) at University College Cork?
Yes, the centre valorises cultures of orality and performativity along with their techniques of knowledge transmission which are enshrined in the body, rather than an external instrument. It promotes the emancipatory process of alternative cultures and supports indigenous students and research centres in becoming members and partners of academic institutions. Through the centre and through the MA of Anthropology program at University College Cork, indigenous students, such as Native American students from the U.S., can fulfil their desire to rediscover their indigenous heritage via an academic pathway. The centre also creates collaborations with indigenous groups and research centres, for instance in India.

When you mentioned "enshrined in the body" in relation to knowledge, your work about *Śakti*,[2] music, and dancing came to mind.
Yes, thank you for adding this topic to our discussion. A body as a shrine, altar, or archive of knowledge is related to my ethnographic experiences in vernacular Hindu India, which span over twenty years of research trips and visits to different cultural contexts there.
I've witnessed the importance of local goddess worship in Hindu traditions. As an assistant professor in South Asian religions, this particular worship is a very important element of my studies regarding the ontological concept that the female

body is sacred. And in a certain way, femininity is an abstract gendered concept related to joy, life, recreation, creation, and the appreciation of life. So, life as best enshrined in the female body is really interesting, and local Hindu goddess worship is both an abstract and a concrete veneration of this sexuality and mysticism of life. Life and the joy of life are venerated.
In a certain way, this fundamental source of life and knowledge is associated with the sacred power of the body, *Śakti*, which is the holy energy power of the body that transcends through a spiritual dimension. It is an alliance between spirituality and physicality. So, it is a non-dualistic perception of the world and a continuity in local and indigenous cultures throughout different regions. So that is really the difference between the indigenous and the so-called 'modern'.

When thinking about *Śakti* in terms of 'ecology' and the body's connection with the world, it collapses the notion of being outside of the environment or separate from nature?
So, of course, we are all modern. To clarify, by 'modern', I refer specifically here to a rational, material conceptualization of the human as a machine. It is a mechanistic rationality, which does not recognize the existence of another spiritual dimension. It is a particular worldview based on a division between nature and culture and on rational developments from the philosophical enlightenment.
A non-dualistic vision of the world connects the body with the cosmos and the spirits. It is a very rational, theoretical perspective but also spiritual. It is much more inclusive than the 'modern world' worldview, which is very impactful and powerful, but it is just rational. I think when it comes to ecology and understanding of the environmental crisis, we need another intelligence.
We do not understand all, and in a certain way, modern rationality is hubris in that it is a heuristic presumption to understand the world. Eco-cosmology theoretically reminds the academic world to broaden their rationality and understanding of the world by listening to indigenous perspectives, as they never reduce an explanation solely to a physical material or fact but also in relation to a spiritual dimension. I think this is a crucial lesson which could create a new understanding to solve, even to overcome, our current environmental, materialistic perspectives which objectify and rationalize the world but do not love the world. The world is not venerated or respected as a sacred entity in this worldview.

I recently encountered a lawyer who is working hard within the legal system to bridge the gap between the scientific knowledge of ecology and sacred indigenous worldviews. While she acknowledges the legal framework is grounded in the 'modern' ontology you just mentioned, she thinks more recent scientific findings make it possible for these disciplines to convey a worldview akin to non-dualistic, indigenous knowledge systems. The significant difference is they do not conceptually identify these

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2   The feminine form of divine energy

relations as sacred. I can see the dangers in doing so because the inferences carry a lot of assumptions.
Yes, thank you for mentioning this. You are pointing at a very important danger which surrounds the appropriation of indigenous rationality and knowledge into a legal structure and a particular disciplinary knowledge. So, let's say, if ecology were to represent itself as the voice of indigenous wisdom, then it can be really problematic. It is important to acknowledge the need for self-affirmation and anthropological rationality, which is different to the self-affirmation or the rationality of the observer, even the sympathizing observer. Instead, it is important to accept the rationality of the particular culture and listen to other voices, other structures but without incorporating them into a different framework. But this is exactly what always has been done in the name of the development of 'the best' for wellbeing. So, we know this, and we should learn how to avoid making the same mistakes.

Yes, give indigenous people the platform. Allow them to articulate their own cases in their own way. That was my thinking.
Yes. And give them absolute credit. We need more respectful dialogues on the same level between different groups on the same topic. I think that our postmodern culture lacks the capacity for dialogues because we are not so oral anymore, not so performative. At least in academia, we can aim for the revitalization of a dialogical culture. Eco-cosmology is a dialogical worldview, which includes the dialogues between the physical and the empirically not graspable world. So, it is the non-empirical and empirical dialogue mediated through representatives. We need much more of that, and it is happening slowly.
We can try our best through educational experiments. For example, MEWSC has organized collaboration with local scholars in societies like India as well as in Columbia, where we organized music workshops with specialists from the indigenous local cultures. It is an idealistic project, but it remains hierarchical because it's not so easy for all people to travel around the world. Geopolitical issues are problematic as well.

In closing, I would love to discuss a current event that affects local Venetian culture – charging an entrance fee for visitors of historic Venice. It reminds me of the book you co-authored on 'museum islands' because it treats Venice like a museum island and dismisses the reality that it's actually a living island of people, birds and other beings.
Your association is interesting. Yes, in a certain way, the entry fee alters perception. That's a problem because it commodifies vitality and recreates the capitalist commodification and objectification model, rather than actually solving the problem of the overuse of resources and the disrespect towards natural resources. It is an unfortunate use of language as well.

Agreed! Thank you so much for talking with me today, Lidia.

Thank you very much, Stephanie, for this wonderful interview.

Dr. Lidia Guzy, an internationally trained social anthropologist and scholar of religions, currently serves as Director of MA Anthropology and Lecturer in Contemporary South Asian Religions at University College Cork, Ireland. She is director of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC) as well as a global educator working in the areas of culture, globalisation, indigeneity, art, representation, religion and society, marginalised and endangered worldviews and societies. Maylis de Kerangal is the author of fifteen novels and stories, mainly published by Éditions Verticales/ Gallimard. Among them, she wrote *Corniche Kennedy* in 2008, *Birth of a Bridge* in 2010 (Prix Médicis, Prix Franz Hessel e Premio Von Rezzori 2014) – the narrative of a construction site in an imaginary city –, and *The Heart* in 2014, the story of a heart transplant that won many prizes including Prix de Étudiants France-Culture Télérama and Grand Prix RTL-Lire. This book is available in about 40 languages and was adapted to cinema and theatre, winning the Wellcome Book Prize and Premio Letterario Merck. *Lampedusa, a story of Mediterraen Shipwreck*, was published in 2014 by Éditions Guérine and in 2016 won the Prix Boccace. In 2018, Maylis published *Painting Time*, a coming-of-age novel on painting and creation. She also wrote books characterized by a documentary intent, such as *Un chemin de table* (Seuil, 2016) and *Kiruna* (La Contre-Allée, 2019). In 2022, for Inculte/ Dernière marge she wrote *Seyvoz* – the story of a village destroyed by a hydro-reservoir – in collaboration with Joy Sorman. Her work is characterized by geography, the influence of spaces and landscape-related themes. She is also interested in the future of the young generation and in the job market. In May 2021 she published *Canoe*, a collection of stories that explores the human voice. In 2024 she received the award Prix Henri-Gall from Académie Française for her work. Her last novel *Jour de ressac* will be published in August 2024.

Lei & The World

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**in conversation with
Maylis de Kerangal**
Writer

Maylis de Kerangal was a guest at the 2024 edition of *Incroci di civiltà*.

How did your interest in writing begin?
I think my interest in writing is linked to my interest in reading. I've been reading since I was a child, I was passionate about the stories hidden in books. I've been reading forever. For me, reading and writing are closely linked. Writing demands me to read, reading leads me to write. Like the front/back of the same practice.

When did you decide to follow your passion? Were there any particular people or situations that pushed you to make this choice?
I think it is a matter of events in my life. In fact, firstly, I was an editor of a collection of travel guides. So, when I started my career, I was 22-23 years old. I quit my studies – philosophy, history, ethnology – to start working on a collection dedicated to travel guides, but in an encyclopedic way. Our purpose was to enter deeply in a territory in terms of architecture, ecosystems, arts, literature, landscapes, memory. I was involved and passionate, I worked at it for ten years, before switching to non-fiction books for children. As a matter of fact, I was used to reading and writing at the same time; sometimes I had to work with more than 50 authors, so I had to edit texts, rewrite and recompose. Then I had to quit because of life and family. I lived in Colorado, USA, and for the first time in years, I had no job and much time, and I felt something different could happen there. I started writing a novel, perhaps only to give that new life a shape. Or perhaps it was a natural consequence of the job I used to do. But that time, I was writing a fiction. I started little by little, day by day, and immersed in the world of fiction. I felt something deep and intense, and enigmatic, so I dedicated myself fully to it.

What is your relationship with writing and with books?
I consider that all the genres of literature are my field of work. I discovered that being a writer was not only about writing

books. Being a writer means that you have a secret part of your work, and for me, it's thinking, dreaming, connecting, imagining. And sometimes you just feel a path, perhaps characters, and you begin dreaming of a book.
Then you write, and it's a learning situation. You have to be alone. But after that, when your book is ready, you have to participate in what we call the literary world. I mean, you go to a festival to present your book, to meet other writers and read their books. I think that when I started writing, I was a classic reader. I mean, I knew authors who were very famous. But now, I know very precisely every publishing house and even small publishers. Connecting authors and publishers, festivals and reviews is like entering another world. It's not about writing, but it's rather about being a writer. My dream was not to be a writer. My dream was and still is writing. The thing I understood is that writing allows you to go everywhere, it opens doors, it opens spaces. Writing a book can lead you everywhere – hospital, castle, jail – in secret places and forbidden sites. For example, I went in a mine above the polar cap, or in a O.R. to see a heart transplant, or in movie studios to see how sets were built. When I discovered that, I thought it was very interesting. In my previous job, I think I was used to explore, go and see for myself, and I think I have kept that feeling. There is something I love about that. For example, when I came to Venice for *Incroci di Civiltà*, I only knew the town as a tourist, because I presented a film at Mostra del Cinema and a book, but also when I was younger, I visited Venice with my parents as a tourist. But in fact, I realized that you have to enter in connection with the town. It's an emotional process, and you can feel lost, indeed Venice is a labyrinth. It is a feeling, a process, an emotion that I love a lot.
The career of an author is not only about writing books and being successful. It's also about maintaining your curiosity, your sensibility, looking around you with attention. I like writing with attention and precision, even when it is fiction. And I also like being at my table writing alone. I think it's a joy to have the possibility of going everywhere and set you on. You need your little computer, and you can work from anywhere.
The job has both a lonely part and a social part; speaking of the latter, I think you are also very lucky, for example, to go somewhere and people are waiting for you.

When you have a passion, the key is to make it a job. How did you manage to turn your passion into a job?
It is not easy. In France, many writers have another job, because it's difficult to live with the rights and royalties of your books. It's something very few writers can do. For me, Making this a job it's about commitment. You have to commit yourself because if you want to be a writer, you have to dedicate yourself totally in this strange story of writing. And I think it's difficult. As I said, at the beginning of my career I had two jobs and I was an editor for ten years. But I felt that the desire of writing was growing inside of me, and I had to give it some space. I published a

book that was not really noticed by readers but it was by critics, and I was asked to present it in some places. It was not a popular success, but it still was something. I was proposed to go to a residency in a college in France and I spent one year there, working with teenagers. During this residency you receive a salary; it is not a lot, but at least you can live with it. After that, I wrote *Birth of a bridge* and it won prizes in France and Italy, and it has been translated in ten or twelve languages. After that, I was no more a 'nobody'; it took me ten years from the publication of my first novel published in 2000 to win this prize in 2010.

In your novel *Canoe* the protagonists are eight women, each with a different story and a voice that wants to be heard. How did the idea for *Canoe* come about? Who or what inspired you?
I wanted to speak about voice, human voices, which is not easy at all. It's a metaphysical and technical subject, but it is also a poetical one. I wanted to catch the voice by its melody. I was very inspired by humans in general, but I decided to write about women because we are in a time, in a period where women's voices are present and can be heard by everyone. Women are vulnerable or powerful but at different stages of their life. And for me, it was like creating a tribute to them.
I wanted to explore the specificity of the feminine human voice. After being gendered and discriminated too much, now it's changing, and I thought it would be beautiful to talk about that.
I think there is mystery in each human voice, because you cannot hear your own voice, but it is heard by the others. It's also what we can call a data of identity, like DNA.

In some of your novels you talk about entering the world of work and precariousness that young people can experience, especially those pursuing a career in the artistic field.
I'm very interested by these transitions between different periods of life, especially between childhood and teenage years. I wrote several books on this momentum as *Corniche Kennedy*, or *Painting time*. It's a captivating pattern in terms of literature. A movement linked to desire and freedom, to emancipation. We call it a *rite de passage* (rite of passage). Another transition, between teenager and adult life, happens when you quit your family home, when you have your job, and you earn your first salary you are considered an adult. I'm very focused on that kind of periods of transition and these passages.

What advice would you give to those students who would like to become writers?
I have no concrete advice to give. I would say that you have to give in to your obsessions, work a lot, face loneliness, distance. Sometimes you are involved in your own project and others seem far from you, but you have to trust your imaginary. I think many young writers are confronted to discouragement, because they think that their own imagination, their own writing, their own sensibilities, their own stories

are not interesting. You should not care about other people's opinion, but you should follow your own path.

Furthermore, I think that a book is a collective object because it links two people, a reader and a writer, but it's also a lonely practice. You also have to invent your own rules to write, you have to follow them and learn to fail. Always remember that you never write the novel you wanted to write. It's always something unexpected that appears, even for you. It's always a matter of failing, failing in the best possible way.

How can success influence and impact life and work of a writer?
It's a beautiful thing, but success can also be something difficult. Time for work and writing can lack and must be kept as the most precious thing. You have to ignore the rules of marketing: a novel is not a recipe. Today the pressure of the market is very high, and you have to keep alive your writing, your identity, your art. There is an uniformization of the writing, of the imaginaries and everyone is following the same explorations. For me, the most important thing is to keep publishing new books as if it was my first book. The power of social media is also growing and it's a problem. You have to be careful. When I started writing it was not important, it changed a lot compared to 5/6 years ago; every author wants to be on social media and promote himself or herself. So, you become a promoter of your books. I've never been on social media, sometimes I regret it because I think that on Instagram, for example, there are things that would interest me. But I prefer keeping my distance, my space and my time.

What is the role of a writer today, in your opinion?
I think that writers have a special place in the world as observers, as filters, as hearers and as someone who can also give a form of our contemporary chaotic and mixed world, take his own part in it. In a political way, I mean. I defend an attentive writing, a writing of attention. Writers have to be aware and accurate of what happens and to be able to give a representation of that. So, in this sense, it's essential for me to be considered as a writer of today, a contemporary writer.

Maylis de Kerangal is the author of fifteen novels and stories, mainly published by Éditions Verticales/Gallimard. Among them, she wrote *Corniche Kennedy* in 2008, *Birth of a Bridge* in 2010 (Prix Médicis, Prix Franz Hessel e Premio Von Rezzori 2010) – the narrative of a construction site in an imaginary city –, and *The Heart* in 2014, the story of a heart transplant that won many prizes including Prix de Étudiants France-Culture Télérama and Grand Prix RTL-Lire. This book is available in about 40 languages and was adapted to cinema and theatre, winning the Wellcome Book Prize and Premio Letterario Merck. *Lampedusa, a story of Mediterraen Shipwreck*, was published in 2014 by Éditions Guérine and in 2016 won the Prix Boccace. In 2018, Maylis published *Painting Time*, a coming-of-age novel on painting and creation. She also wrote books characterized by a documentary

intent, such as *Un chemin de table* (Seuil, 2016) and *Kiruna* (La Contre-Allée, 2019). In 2022, for Inculte/Dernière marge she wrote *Seyvoz* – the story of a village destroyed by a hydro-reservoir – in collaboration with Joy Sorman. Her work is characterized by geography, the influence of spaces and landscape-related themes. She is also interested in the future of the young generation and in the job market. In May 2021 she published *Canoe*, a collection of stories that explores the human voice. In 2024 she received the award Prix Henri-Gall from Académie Française for her work. Her last novel *Jour de ressac* will be published in August 2024.

LEI & Science

Michela Signoretto
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Federica Menegazzo
Associate Professor of Industrial Chemistry, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

in conversation with
Mor Harcol-Balter
Professor of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University of Pittsburgh and Chair of ACM SIGMETRICS

Mor Harchol-Balter is the Bruce J. Nelson Professor of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon. She received her Ph.D. from UC Berkeley in 1996 under the direction of Manuel Blum. She joined CMU in 1999, and served as the Head of the PhD program from 2008-11. She is the SIG Chair for ACM SIGMETRICS. She is a Fellow of both ACM and IEEE, a recipient of the NSF CAREER award, and several teaching awards, including the Herbert A. Simon Award and Spira Teaching Award. Mor's work focuses on designing new resource allocation policies, including load balancing policies, power management policies, and scheduling policies, for distributed systems. Mor is heavily involved in the SIGMETRICS/PERFORMANCE/INFORMS research community where she has received a dozen paper awards. She is the author of two popular textbooks, both published by Cambridge University Press: *Performance Analysis and Design of Computer Systems*, which bridges Operations Research and Computer Science, and *Introduction to Probability for Computing*. She is also a recipient of dozens of Industrial Faculty Awards including multiple awards from Google, Microsoft, IBM, EMC, Face-

book, Intel, Yahoo!, Seagate. Mor is best known for her enthusiastic keynote talks and her many PhD students, almost all of whom are professors at top academic institutions.

You are a professor of Computer Science at the Carnegie Mellon University of Pittsburgh. Would you tell us briefly about your career path?
I completed my undergraduate degree at Brandeis University. I worked in a firm for a couple of years and then applied to UC Berkeley, where I received a PhD in Computer Science. I was then awarded the NSF Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Mathematical Sciences, which funded me to do a postdoc at MIT. After that I accepted an Assistant Professorship at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). I have been at CMU for 25 years, during which time I went from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor to Full Professor to Endowed Bruce Nelson Chaired Professor. I was also Director of the PhD program for four years during this time. During this period, I have advised about a dozen PhD students, almost all of whom are now professors at top universities.
My research is in performance modelling of computer systems. You can think of this as the mathematics behind how to make computer systems run faster or more efficiently, particularly data centres. I address problems like job scheduling – which jobs to run at what time; resource allocation – how to allocate resources between jobs; load balancing – how to balance jobs among servers; power management – how to reduce energy use in a data centre, and so on. My work uses a lot of general math, queueing theory, and stochastic optimization. My research community is the SIGMETRICS community, which deals with the modelling and analysis of computer systems. I am currently the Chair of ACM SIGMETRICS.

This field is not attractive, still nowadays, for the female gender. What was the main motivation that led you to pursue this career?
When I think back on how I got here, it feels like a series of lucky external pushes that propelled me forward.
The first push came when my 6th-grade math teacher, Mr. Horn, insisted that I be skipped to the 9th-grade math class. Neither my parents nor I were asked anything – I was just told to go to a new room for math.
The next push came when my father insisted that I major in Computer Science (CS). I had zero interest in computers. My high school classes that involved computers were made up of only boys. What I wanted to major in was chemistry and math. But my dad said that if I didn't study CS then he wouldn't pay for college, so I signed up for a bunch of CS classes; and it turned out that I liked them!
The next push came when I was applying for graduate school. I worked for a couple of years after college, but I found that my job didn't leave me enough room to explore and learn new things. So, I went back to my university and asked my undergraduate advisor, Marty Cohen, to

write me a letter of recommendation for graduate school. When he saw that my list of graduate programs did not include any of the top-4 PhD programs, he told me, "I refuse to write a letter for you unless you apply to all four of the top-4 programs". So, I did, and was accepted to all of them. Once I was at UC Berkeley, I was well on the path to a top CS academic position.
I think these stories show something. When you're young and starting out, you don't have the confidence or knowledge to advocate for yourself. It sometimes takes others advocating for you to get you to where you belong. This is why it's so important to mentor others!

What would you suggest to young people, and especially young females, who are approaching Computer Science?
The first thing that I tell all young people who are considering Computer Science (CS) is that many areas of CS are almost entirely math, and most of the undergraduate curriculum is heavily math-based. At my university, we have often noted that students who like math find CS very beautiful, while those who are not mathematically inclined often find CS to be very difficult.
Many students in my classes often tell me that they love the elegance of computer science, but they worry that they are not as smart as the other students, so they maybe should find another program. What students don't realize is that most of the students actually feel this way. There are always going to be some students who are better than you at math or better than you at programming. There will be people who started doing it at a much younger age, so they have a big head start.
I myself felt this way when I started out at UC Berkeley. As an undergraduate I was the best of my class, but as a PhD student I was surrounded by brilliant students who had competed in Math Olympiads, and I knew I could never catch up. There are two things that I learned that helped me a lot. First, I had a friend, Hal Wasserman, who said to me, "If you just stick to one area, and keep working on it, then eventually you will become the world expert in that one area". I thought about this remark every time that I felt I was not good enough to continue. From early on in graduate school, I became interested in how queueing theory could be used to improve today's computer systems. I loved the math, and I loved the applications, so I kept working in the area. Still I would never have believed that one day I would write a textbook on this topic. My book, *Performance Modeling and Design of Computer Systems: Queueing Theory in Action* published by Cambridge University Press in 2013, is now being taught in 100 universities worldwide.
The second thing is something I figured out for myself: there is no one single definition of success which applies to all computer scientists. Just because you are not the best at something, does not mean that you won't be successful. For example, I have a colleague who is brilliant at math, but is terrible at explaining his work. This colleague is considered 'successful' because of his brilliance, while other colleagues are 'successful' because they are

able to explain their work to others and get their algorithms adopted into real products. Still other colleagues are 'successful' because they are fantastic at envisioning new applications, while others are 'successful' because they excel at teaching and mentoring and thus are able to create future generations of computer scientists. The bottom line is that being successful is not a competition with others. Just figure out what you're good at, and then do that very well.

Women specializing in Computer Science, or more generally in science and innovation technology, are rare. The skills required in these fields are considered to be more connected to the male universe. Is this due to an innate predisposition or does culture play an important role? Indeed, in some regions of the world, due to culture, learning methods differ between female children and male children. Could you give us some examples?
I do not believe that men have an innate predisposition for science or for innovation. But I think that the societal pressures and expectations are so immense that it often feels like boys are just born better at math and science.
Some of the ways that society gives boys an advantage is that boys are encouraged to be loud, to show off, to try things, to take chances and not be embarrassed. On the other hand, girls are taught from birth to be quiet, thin, kind, and, above all, humble. They are taught to feel embarrassment. (I acknowledge that this might be changing some today, but this was certainly the attitude when I was growing up). These traits all work to the disadvantage of women when it comes to doing well in math and science. How can you possibly do good work when you are afraid to speak up and constantly starving so you can look good?
Here is a concrete example. For the past 20 years, I have been teaching an undergraduate class at CMU called Probability and Computing (PnC). At first, my classes consisted of 80% men and 20% women. In this environment, women never spoke. Every time I would ask students a question, a bunch of hands would go up – all males. The men were loud and confident. They often got the answers wrong, but they didn't care. They enjoyed being boisterous, teasing each other, and racing to answer first. Because the men were so involved in the lectures, they also did better than women on the tests. However, over the last 5-10 years, our demographic changed a lot – mostly due to the work of my terrific colleague Lenore Blum. Lenore claimed that the only way to see the real brilliance of women is to create an environment where they are not outnumbered. Now my classes are almost half women. Women are still more cautious about talking – they will only answer questions if they are sure they're correct – however women do talk a lot more than before. Furthermore, because women are now much more engaged, their test scores have gone up. Specifically, I give our chocolate boxes to anyone who scores 100% on my exam. Over the last five exams, I have given out equal numbers of

chocolate boxes to women and men.
I feel like I could go on for hours on the many ways that society disadvantages women in the sciences, but I'll just give one more example. One thing that I was particularly sensitive about was my textbooks. I am someone who has always loved textbooks. My mom often talks about how I would always walk around carrying a math book. However, my books rarely had any pictures in them. The only pictures were an occasional photo of some very old white man with a long beard who had invented the theorem in the chapter. Why is it necessary to include these pictures? Looking at these books, I just assumed that only old white men can do math. The examples in the books are equally discouraging. Since all these textbooks are written by men, all the examples involve hitting a ball with a bat, or playing poker, or waiting until two trains smash into each other. These examples have never appealed to me and I'm sure they don't appeal to other women. In my most recent textbook, the examples are very different. The book is titled, *Introduction to Probability for Computing* published by Cambridge University Press in 2024. Although this is a math book, my examples include shopping for shoes, the Markov chain of love, social networks on the web, students at a party, and queues of fashion models. All the pictures are in colour and include a broad range of diversity. You can check out the book online – it's available for free on my web page. There are no old white men in the book.

Gender stereotypes can be obvious, deceptive or even so common to the point that they are not identified as stereotypes. In your experience, what were the main gender stereotypes that you encountered in the science field?
My initial reaction to this question was "I don't think I've been affected by stereotypes". I think we're all told repeatedly that there is no bias against women, so it's hard to believe it's there. But when I think back to some of my experiences, they are in fact examples of bias in the form of stereotypes.
The first example that I remember clearly was in my freshman honours physics class in college. I was the only girl in a class of 50 boys. Because of this, I never dared to speak in class. I don't think the professor realized that I had the highest total score in the class, because I was so quiet. Towards the end of the class, we were studying 'torque'. I was having trouble visualizing this concept, so I went to the professor and asked him for help. He asked me if I'd ever hit a ball with a bat (I said no), if I'd ever lifted a car with an axle (I again said no), and if I'd ever used a screwdriver (again a no). At that point, he said that there's no way I'd ever understand torque. I got an A+ in the class, but never took another physics class again because I assumed I was hopeless. Looking back, the behaviour of the professor was likely driven by an implicit stereotype of being unable to imagine a girl being good at physics.
A later example of more explicit stereotyping occurred during my postdoc. I asked to develop and teach my own class

on queueing theory for undergraduates and graduate students. I was told by the department head that he wouldn't support me because "women never do well teaching our undergraduates". He explained that the undergraduate boys give female instructors a hard time. I stated that I was confident that I could hold my own, but he still wouldn't fund me, so I got funding from my postdoc advisor, and I taught the class. The class received the highest reviews of all 136 computer science classes that semester, and I was offered a job – which I did not accept. Instead, I went to CMU.
When I first got to CMU, I continued to face stereotyping, this time from the graduate students. At CMU, incoming PhD students have five weeks to choose a graduate advisor. What I have found is that both male and female PhD students are most drawn to the older male professors. Somehow, they have this internal image (stereotype) of a good PhD advisor as being someone who is old, white, male, and probably with a beard (maybe it's those textbook pictures I mentioned earlier!). Given that I was young and female, most incoming students were uninterested in working with me. Fortunately, this issue has resolved itself over the years. As I have both gotten older and also have accrued more accomplishments, I am less risky to new PhD students and hence less affected by stereotypes.

What could we do to help women develop a passion for STEM? What are the actions that we could carry out?
Any activity that gives you an opportunity to tell a woman that she is smart/talented is worthwhile. As you can see from my own stories, my whole career path was driven by others determining for me that I belong in Computer Science (CS). I never thought that I could get accepted to a top-4 PhD program, so I didn't want to apply – but my advisor stating that he wouldn't write a letter for me if I didn't apply to all these programs, made me look at myself through different eyes.
The particular activity could be anything. But I would recommend that it involve some challenge and learning. I also recommend that your activity be collaborative in some way. For example, the attendees could be divided into teams that work together to solve a problem, or where their scores get combined. Most importantly, any activity should involve more women than men. Almost all STEM environments have many more men than women, and this is not a great environment for women to be their best.

According to data, only 23 women won a Nobel Prize in the scientific field (4 in Physics, 7 in Chemistry, 12 in Medicine) from 1901 until today, whereas over 600 men won it. How would you interpret this data?
My interpretation of this data is that there has been a lot of bias against women since 1901, and, while conditions are improving, we're not where we need to be yet. In fact, one of the recent female Nobel Prize winners from 2023, Katalin Karikó, was not supported by her university, which demoted her, denied her tenure, and said

she was "not of faculty quality".
In addition to bias, it's important to acknowledge that obtaining a Nobel Prize requires a huge amount of uninterrupted concentrated work. Most women are not in a position to put in these kinds of hours. The responsibility for childcare, housework, homemaking, and support of elderly parents and in-laws still disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women. Even if a woman has no children, no house, no parents, and no spouse, society takes a negative view of a woman who spends all her time at work. By contrast, a man who spends all his time at work is often viewed as ambitious or driven or just a genius (think for example about Andrew Wiles who proved Fermat's Last Theorem). It is also well-known that women are tasked with a disproportionate amount of 'service work' within their departments. As a result of all these factors, women are less likely than men to be able to put in the uninterrupted time needed to get to the point of winning a Nobel Prize.
As societal expectations become more balanced, I believe that the proportion of Nobel prizes going to women will likewise increase.