

MATERIALS

Rehearsals of Release

Benjamin Ross Nicholson

My name is Benjamin Ross Nicholson, and as a resident of Boulder, Colorado, I occupy the unceded lands of the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee, Shoshone, Sioux, and Ute Nations, peoples who were violently removed from these lands to make available resources and livelihoods for colonists. I am a settler and I have benefitted from that upon which I have no justifiable claim. I further recognize that I inhabit an intersection of identity categories that the majority of prevailing institutions in the United States and Canada have been systemically cultivated to serve, often at the explicit exclusion and diminishment of others: I present as an able, white, cis-male, heterosexual United States citizen who has had continual access to high-quality education and healthcare. Though I encounter struggles, I recognize that *I am recognized by power* as a viable candidate for the reproduction of white supremacy, neoliberalism, and colonialism, those dispossessive operations that perpetuate the elevation of a few at the cost of harm, violence, and death for many others. Though there is ample reason to be skeptical of my words, this writing is an attempt to accept the responsibilities of acknowledging the injustice of my position. It is an effort to leverage the relative ease with which I am afforded life-sustaining resources in order to turn myself—and hopefully other settler readers interested in change-making praxis—away from ongoing acts of dispossession and toward what I consider to be a repertoire of *de-possession*.

To be clear, the “rehearsals of release” I will soon detail are primarily intended for those who are the present beneficiaries of settler colonial systems; this writing is an address to those (myself, as a white settler, included) who have long been enculturated to invest in and seek reward from performances of dispossession. Whether in the guise of career competition, the hoarding of wealth, or the maintenance of unjust hierarchies, such performances erect, in aggregate, a world in which success is rivalrous; my importance is delivered through acquisition that denies access to others. This is not only a call to recognize the white settler tendency toward the perpetuation of possessive individualism and the dispossession it feeds, but also a call for those invested in the regime of possession to *do the work* of undoing this tendency in their thoughts, actions, and relations. This de-possessive work is not for symbolic purposes of placation or self-flagellation, but rather to take responsibility for one’s contributions toward a world of immiseration and to redirect those performances toward a world of cooperative care. Such work, on its own, is not sufficient to eradicate those entities whose very existence is presently derived from dispossession (corporations, banks, nation states, and distributed systems of oppression), yet it is a necessary step in building a shared capacity for intervention; as long as so many remain seduced by the promises of possession and continue to contribute to its torrential flows, it will be difficult to assemble a critical mass of collaborators who might challenge the momentum of dispossession.

Indigenous peoples “have always done” the work of performing relational resurgence in resistance to colonial violence, as articulated by Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in her 2017 book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*: “It is

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not happenstance or luck that Indigenous peoples and our lands still exist after centuries of attack. This is our strategic brilliance. Our presence is our weapon, and this is visible to me at every protest, every mobilization, every time a Two Spirit person gifts us with a dance at our powwows, every time we speak our truths, every time we embody Indigenous life” (L. Simpson 2017, 6). And yet there remains a major impediment to the dissipation of the structural harms meted out to Indigenous peoples through the nexus of neoliberalism, colonialism, and white supremacy: too many of those inhabiting Western-possessed nations are normatively routed toward performances of dispossession as a virtue and, thus, reproduce the social structures of neoliberalism in every competitive performance. Attempts by equity seeking groups to refuse the mandates of neoliberalism are absolutely crucial in prefiguring a world of care and collaboration, demonstrating how communities can move and thrive against the overwhelming inertia that centuries of genocide, dispossession, and structural entrenchment have wrought. Neoliberalized settlers, that majority of Western peoples who appear to normatively benefit from neoliberal white supremacy, need to begin to do their part to engage in performances of *de-possession*. Should this occur, settlers may form coalitions of affinity with those who, often at tremendous risk given the systemic violence so readily levied upon them, have long struggled to undermine the world-ending extractions of our prevailing socioeconomic regime. The protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline provide a compelling glimpse of what Indigenous peoples and settler allies can accomplish in comradeship (Wallace 2017); when a critical mass of performances align against dispossession and toward cooperation, colossal systems of immiseration might be abolished.

De-possession is a performance movement with two simultaneous aims. First, de-possession seeks to deprogram lifetimes of indoctrination that lead neoliberal subjects to presuppose that significance is granted through a “having” that deprives others of the same; neoliberal performances must be recognized for the harms they produce and there must be a *desire* to mitigate those harms. Second, de-possession must offer a program of possible performances that would *affirm* practitioners and instantiate alternative, viable models of meaning making in the absence of virtuous dispossession, performances that allow for communion between those long-involved in anti-oppressive work and those just beginning. Given that the neoliberalized are psychologically devoted to efficiency, attempts to guide nascent practitioners toward de-possession would be aided by suggesting concrete performances that can be materially and apparently realized relatively quickly and with abilities most practitioners are likely to have on hand; these gateway activities might then encourage learning and a gathering of capacities that would enable practitioners to engage in more complex, subtle, and thorough performances of de-possession.

Those who wish to initiate or further develop capacities for dissolving neoliberal, colonial, and white supremacist tendencies *for the sake of cultivating healing affinities* would do well to receive the already-shared wisdom of Indigenous peoples who have persisted despite colonial dispossessions. Such wisdom can inform new approaches to confronting the insidious entrenchment of dispossessive performances in the social repertoires of white settlers. For example, in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (of the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou Nations) collects accounts of twenty-five “Indigenous Projects,” efforts toward “cultural survival, self-determination, healing, restoration and social justice” that serve as a helpful starting point for imagining possible de-possessive performances (Smith 2008, 142). Projects identified by Smith include: *intervening*, “literally the process of being proactive and of becoming involved as an interested worker for [structural and cultural] change” (147); *connecting*, “position[ing] individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment. . . . To be connected is to be whole” (148); and *creating*, “transcending the basic survival mode through using a resource or

capability which every indigenous community has retained throughout colonization. . . . [Imagination] fosters inventions and discoveries [and] facilitates simple improvements to people's lives" (158). Each of these projects suggests a simultaneous recognition of ongoing harms and a horizon of possible alternative worlds in which such harms are mitigated; the spirit of this epistemological disposition can help ground decolonial endeavours while also orienting them toward healing.

We might further draw on the work of other Indigenous scholars to inspire the design of new performance practices that could lessen practitioners' alignment with possessive individualism. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's notion of "grounded normativity" ("relat[ing] to land through connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear *relationship*" [L. Simpson 2017, 43]) suggests that one ought not to *occupy* a place so much as *inhabit* it, to be in continuity with space rather than territorializing it. Anthropologist and citizen of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation Audra Simpson's "interruption" (refusal of "the story that settler-colonial nation-states tend to tell about themselves . . . that they are new; they are beneficent; they have successfully 'settled' all issues prior to their beginning" [A. Simpson 2014, 177]) compels vigilance for and retellings of narratives that foreclose emergence and change, narratives that insist upon the essential fixity of dispossessive systems. And xwélmexw artist and writer Dylan Robinson's call to relinquish "hungry listening" (the settler practice of *consuming* audio content as a kind of instrumental data rather than *listening* to sound as an affective experience [Robinson 2020, 38]) elevates the body's encounters with the world and legitimizes one's experience of those encounters as *coextensive* with thought rather than separate and subordinate. With respect for this wisdom, I propose a set of performances in the style of *rehearsal*, what Black studies and performance scholar Fred Moten describes as "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice" and as "being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session" (Harney and Moten 2013, 110). In rehearsal, practitioners can be given a structure to their de-possessive acts without prohibitive pressures of "mastery," encouraging performances to become habitual and iterative. In time, a coinciding emergence of de-possessive intuition might generate a more pervasive movement toward total de-possession as practitioners come to recognize acute flows of dispossession in their own milieus and how to respond to them longitudinally. I call these performances *rehearsals of release*, and they go a little something like this.

Rehearsals of Release

A rehearsal of release relates three elements in a unified gesture: it *responds* to an extant performance of dispossession, it *replaces* that performance with a performance of cooperative circulation, and it iteratively *repeats* in the day-to-day doings of its practitioner. It is not sufficient for each of these elements to be executed by rote, for without an intrinsic motivation, a performance is hardly sustainable, particularly if it is to be enacted not through coercion but by election; a rehearsal of release ought to fulfill some *desire* if it is to become habitual. Thus, a rehearsal of release must emerge from the performer's recognition that some ongoing performance (the anti-sociality of careerist competition, the extractions of unconscious consumerism, or the telling of stories that justify white supremacy/neoliberalism, for example) is actively harmful, offer an alternative to that performance that is meaningfully affirming *to the performer*, and seem materially and psychologically manageable. While these criteria create challenges, one must remember that rehearsals of release are an attempt to intervene in a performance repertoire that is normatively given, that is "common

sense,” under neoliberalism; this isn’t going to be easy, which is why rehearsals of release must be joyful if they are to have a chance of persisting.

Activist and performance theorist Augusto Boal offers a framework that encourages the intermingling of pleasure and radical political performance, what he calls “Theatre of the Oppressed”: “In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for—to become what we have the potential to be” (Boal 2002, 6). Though communicated in the language of theatre, Boal’s approach is intended both to offer greater access to experimentation with emancipatory performance (“we all are theatre, even if we don’t make theatre”) and to enable the *prefiguration* of a possible alternative future (“let us, we and they, create [a new world] first in the theatre, in fiction, to be better prepared to create it outside afterwards, to extrapolate into our real life”; 17). By presenting a set of exercises, games, and techniques that are couched in the guise of rehearsal, Boal helps to lower the stakes of social intervention for those who have been convinced neoliberalism is “too big to fail,” promoting playful experimentation with the possibility of *otherwise* that ultimately deconstructs those psychic barriers. In that so many white settlers automatically reproduce neoliberalism and white supremacy in their daily performances, it is important to provide frameworks for performance in which white settlers can practise departures from ingrained habits. For Boal, a crucial principle of Theatre of the Oppressed is that it doesn’t presuppose a strict hierarchy between actors and spectators, but rather assumes the continual interchange of action and witnessing in which everyone is a “spect-actor”:

When an actor carries out an act of liberation in a normal play where intervention by the audience is not allowed, he or she does it in *place* of the spectator, which . . . is thus, for the audience, a catharsis. But when a *spect-actor* occupies the stage and carries out the same act there, he or she does it in the name of all the other spectators, because they know that, if they don’t agree, they themselves can invade the stage and show their opinion—and the event is thus for them not a *catharsis* but a *dynamization*.
(25)

In this way, rehearsals of release are designed not to be private experiences or unidirectional broadcasts but social exchanges that lead to the further exploration, elaboration, and emergence of the eventuation of otherwise.

The first rehearsal of release that I would like to suggest is one that I call “de-owning.” For the sake of the visceral, I will address you directly, reader, in hopes you may imagine taking part in rehearsal yourself. To engage in a performance of de-owning (as a response extractive performances of “consumption”), examine some subset of the place you inhabit: assuming this is some kind of normative sedentary homestead, this might be a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, or a closet. With a notepad and pencil in hand, generate a written catalogue of all the individual items *you would claim to own* that are contained within the region you’ve selected. While this may become a lengthy exercise depending on the space to which you’re responding, the time it takes to generate a full account of that which is contained will potentially reinforce the breadth and depth of your possessions. For example, as I begin to examine the room from which I am presently writing, I already notice a clock radio, a guitar, a potted plant, a framed photo of me and my partner, a Wi-Fi router, a rug, a bathrobe, a white dresser I painted brown, dozens of books, and my sickly dog curled up beside me (oblivious). Though a full list would exacerbate the length of this writing beyond tedium, I can assure you there are many more items that I have acquired, purchased, found, or been given over many years that I would catalogue. This record making might be an intervention unto itself for those

who rarely consider the mass of accumulation that is expected under capitalism, yet I will compel you to further your efforts through a social performance of sharing.

With your list in hand, circle each of those items that you imagine could bring joy, pleasure, sustenance, amusement, or well-being to someone who does not presently claim to own said items. For each item you've circled, pencil in the name of a person you know and to whom you have some proximate access who you believe would benefit from that item (you may attach the same person to multiple items). For each person you've identified, reach out to them in whichever manner seems most likely to be received and ask them, in your preferred vernacular: "Would you like to help me to steward this item?" To the degree that your comrade is interested and willing, offer to bring that item to the space they inhabit; arrange a time when the item might be further shared with a confidante of your comrade; invite others to partake in the movement and enjoyment of those things you once hoarded; confound easy assertions of ownership by allowing the matter of your life to circulate in and out of your hands.

Referring to the *respond/replace/repeat* paradigm that undergirds rehearsals of release, de-owning is a performance that acknowledges harms of accumulative settler tendencies, routes practitioners toward friendly acts of sharing, and requires very little logistic effort to initiate. Through de-owning, you become responsive to a lifelong compulsion to acquire and store materials away from others, recognizing your contribution to the world-rending economics of accelerating production/consumption. Further, you begin to replace assumptions of fixed private ownership with the possibility of performing care for those around you, finding well-being in the joy of others rather than the lonely cultivation of your private collection; your relationship to objects becomes explicitly socialized rather than solipsistic. Finally, de-owning does not require the mandates and energies for material growth that neoliberalism promotes, instead offering a far more repeatable repertoire of letting go of objects in lieu of clutching tight; there is often less exertion in sharing than in hoarding.

As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's notes in her considerations of grounded normativity, pressures to consume can override imaginaries of making: "Colonized life is so intensely about consumption that the idea of making is reserved for artists at best and hobbies at worst. Making is not seen as the material basis for experiencing and influencing the world" (L. Simpson 2017, 23); transforming your possessions into generative gestures of care allows you see the matters around you not as commodities to take inward but opportunities for creative acts that you emit outward, into the social. By periodically rehearsing this performance, you may come to uproot the possessive hierarchies that seem to organize the world around you and begin to imagine that all those forms you have aggregated are not *proper to you* but rather can exist in innumerable configurations of the material/social; de-owning suggests that you are not the sum of your amassed possessions, but rather you and all other forms gain meaning and significance from the provisional relations through which they flow.

The second rehearsal of release I will introduce is "de-trashing." While de-owning concerns those matters you hold dear, de-trashing is an address to the *refuse* you generate, those things you extradite to landfills and incinerators. For this rehearsal, return to the place you reside and begin with one of the following: approach the nearest trash bin and remove the item closest to the top (don't worry if it's dirty or, perhaps, is dirt); look around the room you presently occupy and home in on an item that you no longer desire; approach a closet, cabinet, or drawer you rarely open and delve into its deepest reaches, removing whatever item you find there. Take the item you've obtained and bring it

to a well-lit and uncluttered location. To the extent it is physiologically safe to do so, probe the item, rotate it, observe its surfaces and the pathways to its interior; smell it, shake it, manipulate it in any way that you believe would grant you some kind of access to the nuances of its form.

Once you feel you have intuited something previously unknown about the item, first ask: in this item's present or prospectively rehabilitated state, could it be of help to someone else? If you respond in the affirmative, determine who might appreciate the item's receipt; give the item to this person and tell them that you rescued it from the exclusion of waste and it now finds them in a moment of care. If, however, the item seems beyond the socially acceptable bounds of use, proceed to disassemble the item into any constitutive parts of which it may be comprised. For example, I've just lifted an old pair of scratched reading glasses from the drawer of my nightstand; I've popped out the cheap lenses, removed the metal screws holding the temples to the black plastic frame, and have sorted these elements into small piles on the counter in my kitchen. It has now become your responsibility to determine the material content of the various elements of your dismembered item (in my case, what kinds of plastics compose the temples and frame?; what metals compose the screws?; what glass-like composite composes the marred lenses)? There is a possibility that you will not find this information immediately forthcoming; don't give up! Ask friends and neighbours, pursue experts, call the manufacturer, exhaust every avenue of discovery until you understand your item's manner of being.

After having developed a strong sense of your item's material makeup, pursue one last line of inquiry: what must you do to distribute each of the item's elements to environments where they might become nutritive rather than "waste"? Again, while processes of production and consumption might occlude the possibility of your item's transformation into nourishment, the effort involved in unveiling your item's capacity for sharing its energies with other forms will draw you into communion with the world of *commodities* that capitalism would try to cleave from the realm of the *consumer*; de-trashing denies the atomization of the possessive individual and affirms your relational entanglement with all matter that appears to exceed the would-be boundaries of your body.

Though certainly more logistically elaborate than de-owning, de-trashing responds to the neoliberal settler error of believing that that which is no longer wanted can be simply "disappeared" without impacting the world from which it emerged, a blithe assumption that chokes life systems and creates further hordes of matter whose energies are prevented from returning to the earth. In removing the possibility of thoughtlessly discarding objects into a dumpster, de-trashing replaces a willful ignorance of the provenance/constitution/gifts of objects with an appreciation for and understanding of how the materials that arrive in so much consumer packaging might serve in the rejuvenation of a septic world. While the effort required to perform de-trashing is non-trivial, it is well suited to repeatability for those settlers who enjoy research and investigation (though applied to gaining an understanding of an object on hand rather than one to be purchased).

De-trashing takes its cues from Audra Simpson's idea of interruption, that which "happens when we refuse what all (presumably) 'sensible' people perceive as good things" (A. Simpson 2014, 1). Through an investment in a story of trash, settlers receive a convenient concept of disposability that abdicates the responsibility to care for matter. The cost of such a story is matter's inability to harmoniously reintegrate with the world; the story of trash piles over the truth of poison. The next time you move to banish an item to the trash bin, stop and consider: shall I perform the rehearsal of de-trashing? The enacting of this performance will give rise to at least two premises that counter neoliberal narratives: first, the treatment of matter as "trash" is a performance of harm that demeans

the particularity of matter and deprives the world of its necessary recirculation and, second, with conscientiousness and attention you can become a steward of the materials you encounter and assist them in their return to reservoirs of regeneration.

The last rehearsal of release suggested in these pages is potentially the most threatening to the logics of neoliberal dispossession and, thus, involves the greatest risk: I call this performance “de-occupying.” Logics of dispossession are heavily situated in the private possession of *land*, those surfaces above and beneath which resources may be pilfered and transformed into monuments to Man’s permanence. Observe the present circumstances of your habitat: Do you “live in” a house, an apartment, a mobile home, a hotel? Do you have a legal claim of ownership over this place, do you rent, do you squat? Do you have a tract of land covered in grass that collects dew in the morning? In brief, what are those *places* you consider to be *yours*? And, through your occupation, what ontological processes are stifled that might otherwise be nurtured?

Further still, in the establishment of your places of occupation, what others (human and non-human alike) had to be nudged to the periphery, coerced into departing, or forcibly eliminated in order for your proprietary presence to be possible? This is not to ask who has the greater claim to this property, but rather, how did this place exist prior to its rendering as possession? Is it still imaginable what such a place might have been like? Is there some archive that hints at stories of ongoingly negotiated access and use prior to exclusionary ownership?

With these questions floating in various states of answerability, ask yourself one more: of the spaces I currently enclose, could any of them be opened to be joyfully shared with others? While it might be logistically, materially, or legally infeasible to cede your territory in such a way that it would not be immediately reabsorbed by some other possessor, you can recognize the potential deprivation your occupation asserts and perform care for those excluded. Perhaps you occupy a small apartment that you rent from a landlord. Perhaps you presently keep the doors locked at night. Because it might present challenges to your well-being to offer this space and prepare additional resources for the embodied *stay* of another, consider how the resources situated within the bounds of the land you occupy might be made available to those outside. Let it be known to the neighbourhood that if anyone, housed and unhoused alike, would like to drink the water from your faucet, they can knock on your door and you will bring them a full cup; if they are cold, offer them a blanket from your closet; if they are hungry, retrieve for them an apple from your fridge. Whether it be running an extension cord out of your window to allow someone to charge their phone or setting up a lending library of books at your doorstep, rehearse a ceding of dominion over the materials of your territory and an offering of those materials to those who might be bereft.

While de-occupying might simultaneously seem like a small gesture (in that it cannot, on its own, dismantle systems of dispossession) and a non-normative risk (as the “privacy of home” is meant to be a sacrosanct ward against the presence of others who, at times, have the potential to inflict harm), this rehearsal and the performances of resource reallocation it requires chafe harshly against the foundational premise that one’s relationship to place is rivalrous, that it must be wrought from the eviction of those outside the legal circle of the registered “household.” Releasing your vice grip on the benefits of your home while welcoming access to those benefits to others allows you to initiate the emergence of a world where occupation is replaced by offering.

In adopting this rehearsal of de-occupying, it is possible to unlearn the knee-jerk fear of “trespass” and to cultivate a more sophisticated and conscientious regard for those beyond the sphere of

privacy. The complete atomization that accompanies turning one's sites of occupation into doomsday bunkers systematically prevents flows of material support from reaching those most in need, generating desperation and despair. If we can invert the prevailing social logic that places distrust before good will, we can develop capacious intuitions for how to *be with* those outside our homes and increasingly experience that tendency in people which accompanies ongoing performances of care, what we might call love.

“My” Shall Be Released

Given the centuries of social reproduction that have contributed to our contemporary white settler neoliberalism and the challenges of sustaining performances that would reverse flows of dispossession, I do not claim that these rehearsals of release will in themselves bring about a de-possessive social reality. The movement toward de-possession must not be rendered in terms of Silicon Valley's “problem/solution” paradigm, but rather as an attempt at *de-calcification*, an initial softening and erosion of hard edges, in the face of what appears to be an intractable system of harm. While none of these rehearsals are likely to eradicate white settler neoliberalism on their own, they permit practitioners to meaningfully engage with decoloniality in material, experiential, and intuitive ways. Further, such rehearsals encourage the emergence of a shared consciousness that turns away from one-way flows of dispossession and toward the circulation of care.

Further, much of neoliberalism's narrative involves corporations, banks, and governments sloughing off responsibility for their instantiation of systemic immiseration and placing onus upon workers and the dysselected to “own” their difficulties via *personal responsibility*; my invocation to perform de-possessive rehearsals comes from, instead, a desire to transform the sensibilities of those presently oriented by possessive individualism away from private competition and toward impulses of collective action. Rehearsals of release are intended to meet burgeoning decolonialists between their present habits of atomized consumption and a possible sociality of circulation. I've studied, with gratitude, approaches and premises developed by Indigenous peoples who have long resisted dispossession with survival and thriving; I've also leveraged an awareness of my own neoliberalization to conjure performances that would seem a mixture of meaningful intervention, feasibility, and fulfillment, performances that would appeal to those steeped in neoliberal logics and yet begin to dissolve those logics in the same gesture. To the extent the specific rehearsals I've enumerated do not feel responsive to *your* feelings of neoliberal entrapment, I invite you to craft and share others; rehearsals of release are not precious things; rather, they are grounded measures to encourage social motion against the lonely torpor of possessive individualism.

As you are released from this text, I propose an additional micro-rehearsal you might carry with you: as you hope to communicate to another in English, allow yourself a small cognitive hiccup whenever you are about to inscribe or intone the word “my”; does this word come to your mind from a place of jealousy, fear, avarice, exclusion, or rivalry? If so, consider freeing the word from enunciation and letting it fall silent, unsaid. Or, if the matter at hand permits, allow a different word to fall from your lips, your fingers, your pen: speak “our,” imagining that band of belonging to extend beyond the mappable geography of your home, your town, your county, your country, until it recedes beyond all horizons. Any day now, we shall release.

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